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All Souls Episcopal Church

Introduction

All Souls Episcopal church is located at 88 St. Nicholas Ave in South Harlem. This building was built in the year 1900. Its estimated cost was 50,000, and now the value of the church has become priceless seeing the astonishing impact it has on its community. This paper will examine three main issues, including background information on the building itself, its history, and the overall significance and possible improvements that will help benefit the church and the community.

About the Building

This neo-gothic style building was constructed in the year 1900. The building is five



Figure 1, Archival Photo of All Souls' Church Postcard

stories high with a basement and a projecting Gothic porch. As for the structure of the building, it is a load-bearing masonry with a wooden floor system. The asymmetric three bays are faced in clad Flemish bond brick and limestone gothic style, dripping all over the windows and doors. The asphalt roofing stands proud of the gable-pointed gothic roof, and in it lies a cropper bell. A cast-iron gate with gold spear accents encloses the property's perimeter.

The architect firm that worked on this building was Janes & Leo. This firm was formed in 1897 and specialized in apartment buildings and rowhouses designed predominantly in the Beaux-Arts style. Although we don't know much about Elisha Harris Janes and Richard Leopold Leo's lives, we do know they have created numerous buildings across Manhattan. These buildings include The Alimar on West End Ave, The Dorilton on West 71st Street, and The Manhasset at 2801 Broadway.

Right away, when looking at this building, we see that it doesn't resemble your average church; it seems more like an apartment complex. I decided to take a closer look to see if maybe the building was designed for other uses. My findings found that the church was initially built

for the Episcopalian church, but the goal of this building was not just to provide a place for prayer; it was also built as a "Neighborhood house" as stated by Bishop Henry C, Potter in *The New York Times* in 1901. He says in the article, "It is to be a 'neighborhood house,' and the people may use its rooms for political meetings, social gatherings – for any sort of reunion, that they may wish."¹ The diocese intent with this building was to provide a safe space for the community to come together and have meetings, social events, classes for men and women, and other gathering. They felt that there was a need in the area for a building to help build a



Figure 2, All Souls' Church, 2021

¹ "Up-Town People's Place, Church of the Archangel Moves into Permanent Quarters." *The New York Times* [New York], 29 April 1901.

stronger community. The architectural structure and purpose of every square inch of this church were very thought out and planned.

This plan consisted of a basement featuring the janitor's headquarters, a gymnasium, several club rooms, and a hall that seats 400 people. The basement level of the church was also intended to be open and used every evening. The first floor was the main entrance to the church itself, where the sanctuary is located. On this floor, was all of the offices, public and

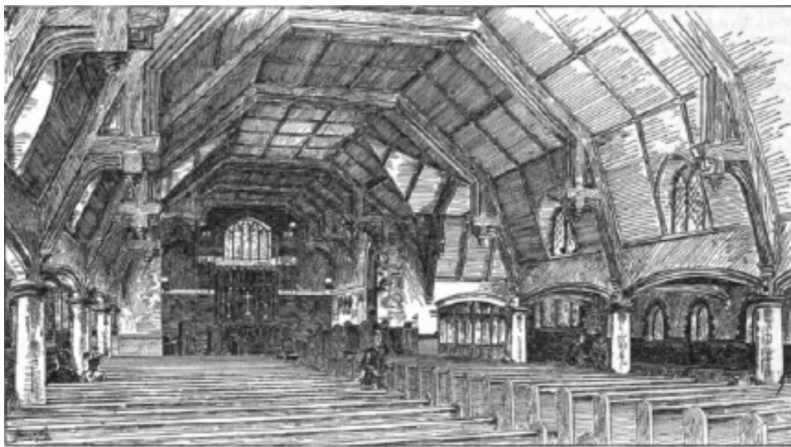


Figure 3, Archival drawing of church sanctuary

private hallways, and an auditorium that seats 700 people. The second and third floors have rooms for the rector's family, but the third floor had two extra rooms for the women's guild. The fourth floor has—classrooms and clubrooms for Sunday school and social

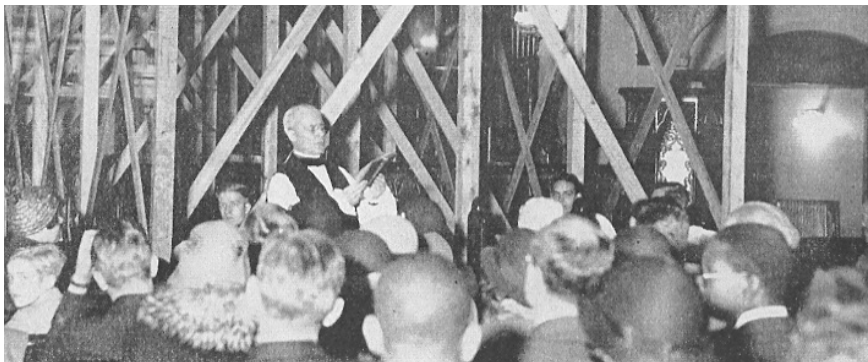
activities. Lastly, the fifth floor had spaces for the resident workers. This building available and open to the whole public, not just for the people of this church denomination. This building also provided night services. These night services consisted of someone available at the church incase someone in the community is in need of help.

History of the Church

As mentioned previously, the church was built in 1900, but All Souls' Church did not make its way to that location until 1906. Before then, the Episcopal Church of Archangel started and built the church on 88 St. Nicholas. In 1859 the congregation of All Souls Church started and was located on West 48th Street. They eventually outgrew theirspace, so in 1902, they

moved to a more extensive building situated on 66th Street and Madison Avenue. As the years passed, the number of attendees started to decline drastically, leading to financial disruption to the church, causing the Vestry to make the hard decision to sell the property on 66th Street. All Souls' church wasn't the only one having financial troubles; the Church of Archangel was also experiencing monetary issues, trying to keep up with the beautiful neighborhood building they had built. So, in 1902 the diocese decided to merge the two churches. In a negotiation between the two churches, they agreed that they would give the name to the corporation of All Souls Church. The building at 88th St. Nicholas Avenue, which was the Church of the Archangel, would now be known as All Souls' Church.²

This building is a part of a substantial racial evictions that changed the community forever. In 1932, many Caribbean immigrants and African Americans from the south moved into the neighborhood³. At the time, the rector, Reverend Rollin Dodd, understood he could not retain the status of a "white church" especially since the ministry was intended for all people. Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with Rev. Dodd. The Vestry opposed, and out of anger, they withheld his salary, took his keys to the church away, and closed the church with a



padlock.⁴ Then the Vestry came out and stated they were closing the church down for repairs.

Figure 4, Archival Photo from Racial Outbreak, 1932

² "All Souls' Episcopal Church Parish Profile 1861-2003", St. John the Devine Archives

³ "All Souls' Episcopal Church Parish Profile 1861-2003", St. John the Devine Archives

⁴ "Bishop in Harlem", Unknown Newspaper clipping, St. John the Devine Archives

Reverend Dodd knew this was not true, so with this information, he petitioned this to the bishop at the time, Bishop William T. Manning, stating that this action was illegal and unchristian. The bishop bravely agreed. The Vestry and the congregation's heard what were happening with the rector and bishop's stance on keeping the church open for everyone of all races. This news caused chaos in the community leading people to write letters of protest. Multiple news articles expressed concern and empathy for what the white folk were going through, having their church closed due to the rejection of black people. Other articles saw the courageous act of both Rev. Dodd and Bishop Manning proceed to face. *The New York Amsterdam News*, called out the Vestry, saying, "Evidently, the Vestry thinks that the 'All Souls' in the name of the church does not include the souls of the colored people."⁵ The article then closes with a question stating, "Are these Vestrymen followers of Christ or followers the devil?"⁶ this question is illustrated in the cartoon attached to this article (Figure 5).



Figure 5, *The New York Amsterdam News* clipping, 1932

The continuation of negative feedback does not stop Rev. Dodd and Bishop Manning. Bishop Manning refuses to let the vestry's behavior slide any longer, so he had a locksmith cut open the church lock and allowed everyone inside, followed by a sermon on racial equality.

⁵ "...Call That Religion?" *The New York Amsterdam News* [New York], 20 July 1932

⁶ "...Call That Religion?" *The New York Amsterdam News* [New York], 20 July 1932

Ever after multiple threats were made to the Bishop and the rector, their courageous act led to a racial change in the church community. The following year, All Souls Church elected its first African American to be a Vestry member.

Significance and Improvements

Among my research, a few factors stood out to me, reflecting the importance and significance the church on 88 St. Nicholas Avenue.

The first was the huge racial movement that happened at the church's doors. During this time in Harlem, there had been a substantial demographic shift from a white neighborhood to a Black community. With the diocese being so powerful and robust, there was a possibility that the church could have stayed closed. With the tremendous act of bravery, changes happened that now positively affect Harlem today with racial justice.



Figure 6, Repointing plan, 2004



Figure 7, Repointing results, 2021

Reorganizing that this was a church in the beginning, that also doubles up as a neighborhood center shows the vital integrity of the building. Having a free safe space for everyone in the neighborhood to come and socialize is a wonderful idea and that should be acknowledged. Lastly, this building is architecturally unique, especially

compared to the apartments and rowhouses Janes & Leo designed.

As beautiful and unique as the church is, I believe that is possible room for improvement. Back in 2004, there was a repointing job done to the façade of the building (see figure 6). Unfortunately, the repointing wasn't done all that well (see figure 7). With a structure that holds such history and beauty, the repairs on it should be just as high of a standard. With this, I suggest that repointing the building would do it justice.

Most importantly, pointing out the idea that preservation is not just the physicality of the building; it is also the essence the structure holds. Unfortunately, the building is not being used as a community center any more. With that being said, I believe that it would be most beneficial for the church and community for the whole building to be "rebuilt" and used as a "neighborhood house," just like how this building was initially intended to be. Both community and the church would benefit so much from this by providing a home to those who need it and possibly receiving more income from donors who support the idea of having a communal center.

Conclusion

This church located at 88 St. Nicholas Avenue is not just a beautiful building that shows architectural significance. This building has history, a history that's rich in the idea of change and togetherness. Knowing the value of something so remarkable and bringing that knowledge to the sight of others can indeed have an impact on the community, and this church does just that.

Works Cited

"...Call That Religion?" *The New York Amsterdam News* [New York], 20 July 1932

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