



F.D.R. and St. Paul's

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A funny thing happened on the way to the White House: Franklin D. Roosevelt visited St. Paul's Church. Serving his second two-year term as Governor of New York, Roosevelt came to Mt. Vernon on June 14, 1931 to participate in an important descendant's day event, which turned out to be one of the largest gatherings in the centuries-long history of the parish.

The Democratic Governor from Hyde Park who visited St. Paul's on Flag Day was a political leader in transition. By then, he had completed the hiatus from government that followed the contracting of polio in 1921, returning to office as governor of the nation's largest state in 1928. When he visited the historic village green that spring day, Roosevelt was also emerging as a national leader with his sights set on higher office. F.D.R.'s public works projects in the Empire State, attempting to create employment and stabilize the economy in the face of the Great Depression, had drawn wide attention, strengthening his position as a contender for his party's 1932 Presidential nomination to face a vulnerable Republican incumbent, Herbert Hoover.

The 49-year-old governor was invited to give the keynote speech at the celebration, and he was also one of the descendants of early worshippers at the historic church that was honored that day. F.D.R. was descended from a cousin of Jacobus Roosevelt, who worshipped at St. Paul's in the late 18th century. Displaying his customary wit, the governor pointed out that he came "not as a direct descendant of the Jacobus Roosevelt, one of the original pew holders in this congregation, but as a descendant from a cousin of the pew holder, another Jacobus. Sometimes I think it is a pity we have not continued the old names like Jacobus."

But, perhaps more importantly, F.D.R. understood the importance of linking his political profile with the compelling combination of religion, heritage and history that was on display at St. Paul's. Pageants depicting significant local episodes from colonial and Revolutionary times were performed by dozens of costumed volunteers. F.D.R. was especially pleased with a presentation about his ancestor Anne Hutchinson, the famed religious dissenter who lived near the church in the 1640s. The event was also the start of a broad campaign to achieve national historic site designation for St. Paul's and to raise funds to restore the interior of the church to its original 1787 appearance.

"In honoring this place we are doing honor to a spirit which made this nation what it is," the Governor told a crowd of more than 7,000 people who packed the area around the church, "not simply honoring Eastchester, Westchester County, or New York State, but

the whole country. There are thousands of persons descended from those who had something to do with this very spot. But it is not because of their time alone that we honor these pioneers. It is because they were prudent, decent human beings who helped to make this country possible for us. So I hope as years go by that St. Paul's will be recognized as a symbol in America in all the years to come. Not just those in charge today but to those of all faiths and creeds -- something which will lead us to be better Americans."