



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

St. Paul's Church
National Historic Site
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To Save the Parish?: The Restoration of St. Paul's Church

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2009*

St. Paul's Church was dying; there was no doubt in the mind of the new rector, the Rev. Harold T. Weigle, Jr., as he faced his shrinking congregation in 1929. For hundreds of years a stable residential community, this section of the old town of Eastchester -- incorporated into the City of Mt. Vernon in 1892 -- had become a backwater. The parish and the church edifice had suffered as aging colonial homes were supplanted by large gas tanks, small machine shops and factories not conducive to supporting a church. Could St. Paul's be revived — and how? This need to rescue the parish, along with a popular cultural phenomenon called the Colonial Revival movement and perhaps Rev. Weigle's desire for recognition, shaped the decision in the 1940s to restore the interior of St. Paul's to its original 1787 configuration.

This was not Rev. Weigle's first assignment. A graduate of Cornell University, Weigle in the 1930s performed missionary work in China as a Presbyterian and then a converted Episcopalian. He and his family returned to the United States where he became Chaplain of the Episcopal Actors' Guild, and curate of the Church of the Transfiguration in Manhattan, known as "The Little Church Around the Corner." Appointed by the Episcopal Bishop to lead the small parish of St. Paul's, Rev. Weigle promptly declared it his mission to revive the church that he found to be, "musty, dirty, and full of cobwebs." Rev. Weigle developed a strong interest in the place of St. Paul's in the country's formative history, focusing on the famous Election of 1733 on the village green, which he understood as a decisive moment in the origins of freedom of the press. He was determined to secure the church's recognition as a national historic shrine to the freedoms embodied in the Bill of Rights.

After considering plans for outdoor monuments and new buildings on the grounds, Rev. Weigle and the church vestry settled on what seemed a more achievable goal of restoring the interior of the edifice to its original 1787 appearance. While this approach did little to commemorate the Election of 1733, it recalled the church's 18th-century origins, and perhaps more importantly, it seemed an initiative that might produce broader support. It also followed the recently realized model of the restoration of Bruton Parish Church in Colonial Williamsburg, Va., under the sponsorship of the Rockefeller family.

To generate support for the project, Rev. Weigle inaugurated an annual Descendants' Day Service highlighted by the presence of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, governor of New

York and already a national political figure. A scion of both the famed Puritan religious rebel Anne Hutchinson, who briefly lived near St. Paul's in the 1640s, and of Jacobus Roosevelt, an original St. Paul's pew holder and early vestryman, Roosevelt delivered the keynote address at the descendant's event on Flag Day, June 14, 1931, emphasizing the historical importance of St. Paul's. **(See image at right, F.D.R., escorted by his son-in-law, walks through lines of the Old Guard of New York City, at St. Paul's, June 14, 1931.)** Additionally, Roosevelt's mother Sara Delano Roosevelt joined the Restoration Committee and later accepted the role of chairperson, leading the nationwide drive to raise the necessary funds. President Roosevelt, financier Bernard Baruch, Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Pell family were among the donors who contributed to the successful campaign.



In their zeal to rescue St. Paul's, Rev. Weigle and the vestry chose the architectural firm of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn that was developing Colonial Williamsburg. These projects were part of a popular architectural trend called the Colonial Revival Movement. Begun in the 1880s and reaching its peak by the 1930s, the movement aimed to restore and preserve a particular time in American history: the design, art, and architecture of the 18th Century, and, in this instance, the simplicity of the original St. Paul's.

Because of changes in religious practices and technology, especially the advent of heating systems, the interior arrangement of St. Paul's by the 1930s was quite different from the 1787 design. In the restoration, Perry, Shaw and Hepburn recommended following the original 18th-century plans and specifications, still in the possession of the church. Enthusiastic and optimistic, Rev. Weigle approved the idea, hoping that St. Paul's would become the "Williamsburg of the North." The restoration proceeded over the objections of some longtime parishioners who claimed the transformation was more historic than spiritual and which, they feared, would disrupt their established patterns of worship.



The church closed in 1940 to begin reconstruction, and on May 3, 1942, the restored St. Paul's was rededicated. In this last and final phase, the pulpit was returned to the south wall opposite the entrance, and the high boxed pews inscribed with the names of the original owners once more faced the pulpit with an aisle down the center. The Communion table, now the altar, was on the East side. The walls were plain white plaster; the windows clear. Upon completion of the project, St. Paul's was declared a national historic site on July 5, 1943.

The project generated enormous interest and led to a series of public events commemorating the early history of the nation and of St. Paul's, but the anticipated

growth in the congregation did not materialize. By the time Weigle departed in 1949, signs of continued decline of the parish were evident, and in the long run, his vision of reviving an earlier era as a means to creating a national shrine and saving St. Paul's as a house of worship could not compete with the forces of historic change. The increasing industrialization of the area eventually led to the end of the parish in the late 1970s, and the beginning of St. Paul's as a unit of the National Park Service.