



## William H. Weigle: Developer of St. Paul's as a Historic Site

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William H. Weigle produced a bold religious and historical vision for St. Paul's from 1929 to 1949, overseeing the most extensive physical changes in the 300-year-history of the church and grounds, and leaving a lasting impact on the development of St. Paul Church's as a historic site.

Perhaps always in search of a lifetime achievement project, William Weigle was born in 1889 in Evans City, a small town in western Pennsylvania, and raised in his mother's Presbyterian faith. A good student, he graduated from Cornell University in 1916 and accepted a missionary appointment to teach animal husbandry at Nanking University in China. He had married Anna Keckman, a seminary graduate, and the first of their two children, Elizabeth, was born in China. More concerned with the students' spirituality than scientific knowledge, Weigle was appointed religious director at the college in 1918.

Two Episcopal missionaries also working at Nanking influenced Weigle's decision to adopt that Protestant denomination; in his later career as a churchman, he preferred the greater symbolism and ceremony of the Episcopal service. Weigle studied at the Virginia Theological Seminary, and returned to the Shanghai diocese where he was ordained an Episcopal priest. The young father remained in China undertaking missionary work through 1927, where, among other adventures, he narrowly escaped the dangers of interprovincial wars. According to his wife's account, Weigle enjoyed the religious and logistical challenges of his Chinese missionary years, a forecast of his subsequent enthusiasm to revitalize St. Paul's.

In a stark contrast to the rural settings of pre-industrial China, Weigle's next calling as a clergyman was on Broadway, serving as chaplain to the Episcopal Actors' Guild, located at the Church of the Transfiguration, nicknamed the Little Church Around the Corner, on Manhattan's west side. In addition to performing the ministerial rites of weddings and burials, he established connections with actors and actresses and probably acquired the dramatic proclivities which led to elaborate historic pageants he later staged at St. Paul's. In 1929, he

made the sojourn to Mt. Vernon and the small 18<sup>th</sup>-century church on South Columbus Avenue. Weigle took control of a parish rich in history, but fading in resources and strength of congregation, primarily



Father William H. Weigle at St. Paul's.

because of the encroachment of industry on the residential community that had sustained the church since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The rector really thought St. Paul's had undeveloped historical and religious significance which, if realized, would lead to increased appreciation of the grounds and give new life to the parish.

Amid the clacking pulse of nearby factories, under a haze of industrial fumes, Weigle developed a religious, historical plan for the church. A man of enormous energy, strategic instincts and political skill, his outlook focused on a few clear assumptions: that the burial yard and the church needed to align with a cultural outlook, usually called the Colonial Revival Movement, that esteemed early American history; that an election for an open seat in the colonial assembly held at St. Paul's in 1733 was the origins of civil liberties in America; that anybody who disagreed with him was ill-informed, misguided or even unpatriotic.

The ambitious priest's first project was the cemetery, transforming the five acre yard from a series of private family plots into a more coherent landscape, facilitating an appreciation of its historical character. To accomplish this, Weigle planned the removal



Laborers working on the St. Paul's cemetery, 1934.

of impediments to broad sight lines and casual strolls through the burial yard, and here the rector's instincts overlapped with an important broader development. Mired in the Great Depression, the Federal Government made available funds for public and private projects to employ people out of work. In 1934, the Civil Works Administration awarded the church \$30,000 (about \$480,000 in today's money), and dozens of local,

unemployed men were hired to work on the St. Paul's initiative. Mounds were leveled and graded; concrete barriers were removed. Gravestones were realigned in straighter rows. Numerous family plot enclosures, chains or low iron railings, were taken up, and corner posts were hammered into the ground.

Additionally, small footstones, located six feet behind the headstones, were unearthed and joined to the headstones. More controversial was Weigle's intention to turn back the clock back on the cemetery stones through a prohibition of granite monuments, which had emerged as more popular, durable gravestones since the 1880s, and were clearly in use at St. Paul's at the time of his arrival. Workmen re-set many granite grave markers, laying them flat or parallel to the ground, which also cleared a path for the religious processions Weigle enjoyed. Under Weigle's stewardship, marble burial stones were required -- more historic, in his outlook -- which adjusted the sequence of stones in the yard in comparison with other cemeteries.

Restoration of the interior of the church to its original appearance emerged as the cornerstone of his tenure. This rebuilding of the inside of the edifice was accomplished to

help St. Paul's achieve recognition as a national historic site, and to bolster the parish. Always an imaginative planner, Weigle considered plans for outdoor amphitheatres and altars, monuments, and new buildings on the grounds, before the rector and the church vestry settled on the more achievable goal of restoring the interior of the edifice to its original 1787 appearance. (Please see, **To Save the Parish? The Restoration of St. Paul's Church**, under History & Culture, Preservation, on the website for a more detailed description of the restoration.) Undertaken in 1941, the initiative also followed the recently realized model of the restoration of Bruton Parish Church at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia.

Prevailing interpretations characterized the election of 1733 at St. Paul's as a significant development in colonial history, but the rector claimed that the election led to the birth of the freedoms enshrined in the first amendment to the Federal Constitution. The most important aspect of the story was extensive coverage of the election, held on the village green, in the inaugural issue of the New York Weekly Journal, launched by opponents of the heavy handed Royal Governor William Cosby. The account, written by an eyewitness supporter of victorious candidate and Cosby foe Lewis Morris, exposed the chicanery of the sheriff supervising the canvass, who employed a religious litmus test to exclude Quakers who supported Morris. The rector insisted that the election led directly to the celebrated trial and acquittal of the paper's printer John Peter Zenger and as a consequence to the origins of the free press and other liberties enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Weigle's analysis was advanced by some writers and shared by a number of contemporaries, but it was cited as an exaggeration by qualified historians. The rector may have discovered the story in a search for a singular historical episode grounded at the church, but he doubtless grew to believe that embellished assessment of the election's importance, and it underlay much of his crusade for St. Paul's.

His reaction to challenges to that view of the election reflects Weigle's approach to anybody who questioned his vision. Lyon Boston, a well regarded New York City lawyer and St. Paul's parishioner, was among Father Weigle's chief supporters on the vestry, but he favored a more modest interpretation of the election. Boston noted that it was more accurate to call St. Paul's "a" shrine to the Bill of Rights, and not "THE" birthplace of the bill of rights. He advanced an understanding of the events of 1733 as one of many developments that contributed to the tradition of political, press and religious freedoms in America. That more reserved interpretation, Boston argued, would attract increased support among informed people. But Weigle insisted that St. Paul's was uniquely the national birthplace of civil liberties, and eventually pushed Boston off the vestry and reduced his role in an organization created to fulfill the church's standing as the home of the Bill of Rights.

Similarly, most objections -- and there were many -- to Weigle's vision for the church were defeated. While the congregation was small when he arrived, it was not moribund,

and several of the families questioned, in vain, the restoration plans, claiming the existing setting and arrangement of the sanctuary satisfied their spiritual needs, and that the pew plan of 1787 was alien to them. The removal of burial plot iron work was also opposed, since families had paid for such enclosures, and Weigle's insistence on marble gravestones for historical resonance was grudgingly accepted by deed owners who realized that granite created the more durable monument to their departed family members. Parishioners recall Father Weigle maintaining that his plan was the only approach that could save the parish; several families left St. Paul's because of Weigle's policies and joined other Protestant churches. The rector, it seems, was a leader convinced of the correctness of his course and would not permit what he perceived as provincial, personal and unenlightened protests to stall the realization of that agenda.

Funding was always a concern. Upon arrival, Father Weigle, as the chief officer of the church corporation, inherited a debt of \$14,000, or perhaps \$170,000 in today's money, for bank loans secured for construction of the parish hall in 1925. During his tenure, funding through the Diocese declined and Weigle's salary was curtailed, indicative of a basic shift in the church's fortunes. Costs for maintaining the five acre burial yard were high, and, among other enterprises, he instituted a controversial program requiring families to pay annual fees for maintenance of their plots

Clearly, a parish struggling to cover basic operation costs could ill afford to fund Weigle's grand restoration scheme, drawing him into the broader world of influential and wealthy Americans. There was a renowned Descendant's Day event in June 1931, attended by Governor Franklin Roosevelt and about 7,000 spectators. While publicized as a launch for the campaign to restore the church and grounds, the event mostly served to place the initiative on the historic preservation map and draw the attention of Sara Roosevelt, Franklin's mother. Over the next ten years, with Weigle at the helm, assistance from Mrs. Roosevelt, the services of professional fund raisers and donation boxes in stores across the country, the restoration committee gathered \$42,000 (about \$600,000 in today's money) to support the transformation of the church interior.

Was he successful? The restoration of the church and overhaul of the cemetery landscape was a remarkable accomplishment, helping St. Paul's achieve recognition as a national historic site in 1943. While the project attracted wide interest and drew crowds for historical programs, regular church attendance remained modest, even declining. Disputes arose over Dr. Weigle's church salary (he earned the Doctor of Divinity degree in 1939 from Westminster College), and operating costs actually increased because of his preservation endeavors. Resources to effectively maintain the grounds were not available through the Diocese or the local government, eliminating opportunities for further expansion of the shrine he had envisioned. Weigle departed in 1949 deeply frustrated, accepting the pulpit at the Episcopal Church of Our Savior in New Lebanon, New York, near Albany. At a distance, in sometimes rambling public and private letters, the former rector remained critical of the lack of commitment to support the church, but he lived

long enough to attend a 1980 ceremony gifting the property from the Diocese to the Park Service, and died on August 14, 1981, at age 92.