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# Streetscapes/141st Street and Convent Avenue; 1892 Church for a Congregation That Moved Uptown

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE scaffolding around the 1892 St. Luke's Church, at 141st Street and Convent Avenue, is just the first part of an extensive series of repairs the impressive Romanesque structure needs, both inside and out. The pastor, the Rev. Johan Johnson, has no funds right now for the rest of the work, but he does have an unusual idea of how to accomplish it.

In 1820, homeowners in the West Village, including Don Alonzo Cushman, a developer who built much of Chelsea, and Clement Clarke Moore, another prominent landowner, known as the author of "A Visit From St. Nicholas" -- though his authorship has been questioned -- established St. Luke's Church to serve the new neighborhood. In 1822 they built the simple brick house of worship that still survives at 485 Hudson Street, near Barrow Street -- it is now known as the Church of St. Luke-in-the-Fields.

By the 1880's the Village was no longer an area of elite private houses. Tenements full of immigrants were encroaching on all sides. But St. Luke's remained an elite Episcopal parish.

The vestry received a shock in 1887 when Trinity Church, at Wall Street and Broadway, notified St. Luke's that it would soon be building a new complex to serve the immigrant population, on land it owned on the east side of Hudson Street between St. Luke's Place and Clarkson Street, just a few blocks south.

The Trinity complex was never built, but at the time St. Luke's felt that the plan would effectively extinguish its own existence, in part because Trinity subsidized St. Luke's, and that subsidy would soon end. After a protest, Trinity offered to pay St. Luke's \$150,000 for its property, according to Penelope Tuttle's 1927 book, "History of St. Luke's Church."

St. Luke's accepted, and the church decided to move, she wrote, "far enough north to be sure of peace for at least a good long term of years." This turned out to be the northeast corner of 141st Street and

Convent Avenue, at the edge of a high plateau with an emerging stock of sizable row houses.

In 1889, St. Luke's held its first uptown service, not in its present church but in the 1802 house of Alexander Hamilton on the next lot up, just north of 141st Street -- it had moved the Hamilton house from 143rd Street and Convent Avenue to make way for more row houses.

The vestry was struggling for cash and seriously considered building only a basement on the steeply sloping 141st Street site. But in 1891 the architect Robert H. Robertson designed an ambitious new church, which opened the next year. Robertson had become prominent in the 1880's for his deft, vigorous modeling of the Romanesque style, often in rock-faced brownstone, for church and other designs, including the Young Women's Christian Association building at 7 East 15th Street. Historians talk of him as New York's H. H. Richardson, the architect of Trinity Church in Boston.

Apparently because of continuing financial difficulties, St. Luke's had to cut back on its plans, leaving until a later time much of the stone carving and a tall, square corner tower. (Some carving was eventually done, but the corner tower was never built.) Writing in *The Architectural Record* in 1896, the critic Montgomery Schuyler praised the church and noted that the uncarved ornament contributed to the impressive severity of the design. But he did remark that the finished building "suffers from the absence of the tower designed for it."

The completed church, mostly in deep red brownstone, presents a broad porch facing Convent Avenue. A side elevation of multiple arcades on 141st Street, which drops steeply to the east, reveals the broad rear facade. The architectural historian Andrew Dolkart calls this perspective "one of the most powerful architectural statements in New York."

It appears the church has never been cleaned, and its patina is the architectural equivalent of the rich golden burnish of a Victorian cabinet of oak or maple.

By the 1920's, African-Americans were moving into Harlem, and in 1922 the church established the St. Luke's Episcopal Mission for Negroes in an old row house at 28 Edgecombe Avenue, near 136th Street, creating a chapel seating 300. Michael Adams, an architectural historian who specializes in Harlem buildings, said that the mission was probably an effort to keep African-Americans segregated from the regular parish.

In 1942 *The New York Times* reported that St. Luke's was merging with "St. Martin's, a Negro church" at 122nd Street and Lenox Avenue that was headed by the Rev. Dr. John H. Johnson. In 1961 his son, the Rev. David Johnson, succeeded his father as rector of the combined parish.

In 1998, the Rev. Johan Johnson succeeded his brother as rector, and he has begun a \$100,000 repair program, a project of the Upper Manhattan Historic Preservation Fund, which is financed by the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone -- a federal, state and city economic development program -- and administered by the New York Landmarks Conservancy, a nonprofit preservation group.

The architectural firm of Cutsogeorge & Tooman has designed a new asphalt shingle roof -- the original curved roof tile disappeared long ago. The work also includes gutter repair and the stabilization of some stonework.

Daniel Allen, an associate with the firm, said that a full-scale exterior restoration of the church would easily cost more than \$1.5 million.

What such a restoration would include forms an interesting preservation question. Johan Johnson said that St. Luke's needs new wiring, extensive stained-glass window repair -- many panes are loose in their frames -- and an organ overhaul. There is also the uncarved ornament on the exterior of the church -- the thousands of little chase marks on the raw column capitals look like a plowed field from three miles up, not what Robertson intended but still severe and striking.

On the inside, the unfinished character of the work from 1892 is much more evident. The spare-looking giant hall is lined with columns; one capital is fully carved, but the others are raw.

Mr. Johnson said that with a congregation of 250, the parish can barely keep up with regular maintenance. But he does have an unusual plan. He has been working for the last eight months with a group, the Friends of Harlem Episcopal School, an outgrowth of the church's Saturday tutoring program, and hopes to establish a private school with that name in the St. Luke's building, with a kindergarten as the first class, as soon as next fall.

At first, lower grades would take space in the church's expansive basement. But he expects that within several years, the enrollment and rising classes would need additional space, and the firm Perkins Eastman Architects is doing studies for the expansion of the school upstairs -- into the sanctuary, which seats 1,200.

"However good I am, I don't pack that many people in," said Mr. Johnson, who estimates that on a typical Sunday between 80 and 100 people attend.

Reducing the seating in the nave to 300 or 400 would yield space for several classrooms and still preserve part of the sanctuary for Sunday services -- as well as a chapel for the school.

"It would take millions of dollars," Mr. Johnson said, but the result would be a much more extensive preservation program for the church. More developed plans for the project are being presented to the church's governing board and other interested groups this month and next.

Photos: The 1802 home of Alexander Hamilton, far left, next to St. Luke's Church, in the 1890's. Above, the church today; a \$100,000 repair program has begun. (New-York Historical Society); (Ruby Washington/The New York Times)