

The Washington Post

A New Look for a New Era

Historic St. John's Episcopal Church Gets a Facelift Before Obama's Visit

By Jacqueline L. Salmon
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, January 17, 2009; B11
© 2009 The Washington Post Company

When Barack Obama arrives at St. John's Episcopal Church on the morning of his inauguration, he will find a historic church that has recently undergone an extensive renovation to honor its past -- and bring it into the 21st century.

From gleaming plank floors and shimmering stained-glass windows to repositioned pews that better accommodate longer-limbed modern Americans, the 193-year-old church is set to continue along its path through the religious lives of American presidents.

Since James Madison, every American president has worshiped at the church, located across Lafayette Square from the White House, at some point in their administrations. Some made it over only once, while others became regulars.

For a weary President Abraham Lincoln, the church was a refuge during the Civil War, church leaders said. The president frequently slipped into the rear pew for Sunday night Evensong services after they began, then left before the service was over, so as not to disturb worshippers.

More recently, President Bush attended the 7:45 a.m. service as often as twice a month, say church members, where he participated actively in the service. In the Exchange of Peace, where church members greet each other before Communion, Bush would emerge from his pew to shake the hands of those around him, church senior warden Elizabeth Danello said. He stood in line with everyone else (albeit with a contingent of Secret Service agents) for Communion.

Bush and his father attended worship services at St. John's on the morning of their inaugurations, as did Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan.

Roosevelt started the tradition of attending a worship service before taking the oath of office when he attended St. John's on a dreary March Sunday.

"I think a thought to God is the right way to start off my administration," he told an interviewer later. "A proper attitude toward religion, and belief in God, will in the end be the salvation of all peoples. For ourselves, it will be the means of bringing us out of the depths into which so many have apparently fallen."

Obama's worship service will be private, but church members have no doubt that he will be seated in pew 54, the "president's pew," in the middle of the congregation. That was Madison's seat and has been the seat of every president since then. Madison "wanted to feel part of the congregation," Danello said.

Last Wednesday, workers were putting the finishing touches on the sanctuary, which will be the scene for what could be the president-elect's last quiet moments before he plunges into a history-making day. The acrid smell of wood-stripping solution wafted through, while electric saws and vacuum cleaners roared.

For seven months during the height of the renovation, church members worshiped in the nearby U.S. Chamber of Commerce building, but they moved back into the church in December. The final step in the renovation, the \$1.2 million organ, will be installed in the next six weeks, they said.

Church leaders say the \$6.5 million renovation was meant to be subtle.

"The goal was to make it look like a 200-year-old church that had been well cared for," said Paul Barkett Jr., junior warden at the church. They are happy to be able to show it off to a high-profile new neighbor on his big day. "We're thrilled to host it," Danello said. "To be part of this historic inauguration -- it's a real honor."



St. John's Episcopal Church, Lafayette Square

Information from the parish website

History

From our organization as a parish in 1815 to today, St. John's Church has provided a powerful symbol of faith in the heart of our nation's capital. Known as "The Church of the Presidents" and registered as a national historic landmark, St. John's was designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe to serve a growing residential community in the neighborhoods in the western end of Washington, including those adjacent to Lafayette (then called President's or Federal) Square. James Madison and several early presidents after him were communicants, as were more recent chief executives.

St. John's first service was held in October 1816. From that time to the present, every person who has held the office of President of the United States has attended a regular or occasional service at St. John's. Pew 54 is the President's Pew, and is reserved for the chief executive's use when in attendance.

Yet the real power and prestige of St. John's emanates from the generations of faithful parishioners who, unflinching in Christian love, compassion, and generosity, have responded to the needs of their day, reaching across our city and around the globe in service to the world. From the founding of an orphanage in 1868 to serve children of the Civil War to modern-day ministry in Honduras, South Africa, New Orleans, and more, St. John's has an effect on our nation and our world. St. John's has about 1,000 members. Newcomers to the Washington area are invited to become members of the parish, and visitors are always welcome at services and parish activities.

Significant Features

The bell in St. John's steeple weighs nearly 1,000 pounds. It was cast by Paul Revere's son, Joseph, at his Boston foundry in August 1822 and installed at St. John's on November 30, 1822. President James Monroe authorized a \$100 contribution of public funds toward the purchase of this church bell, which also served as an alarm bell for the neighborhoods and public buildings in the vicinity of the church. St. John's bell is one of two Revere bells in Washington, both cast and installed in 1822. However, of the two, St. John's bell is the only one that has been in continuous service since its installation.

The Parish House adjoining the church at 1525 H Street, N.W., was once the British Legation. It was here in 1842 that Lord Alexander Baring Ashburton and U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster signed the treaty finalizing the border between the New England states and the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

Tours of the church are available on a regular basis following the 11:00 a.m. service (10:30 a.m. during the summer) on most Sundays. Special tours may be arranged by contacting the church office at 202.347.8766.

St. John's History—Architecture

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, considered by many to be our country's first professional architect because of his training in architecture and engineering, designed St. John's Church in 1815. He had emigrated from Great Britain in 1796, and in 1803 was appointed Surveyor of Public Buildings and Architect of the Capitol by President Thomas Jefferson. Latrobe was responsible for rebuilding the White House (then called the President's House) and the Capitol following the War of 1812.

The original church building was designed in the shape of a Greek cross with four arms. Neoclassical in style, it was the second building on the Lafayette Square after the White House. (Latrobe also designed the third structure, Decatur House, completed in 1818.) Latrobe took no fee for his design of St. John's. He composed the dedicatory hymn and played the organ at the consecration service on December 27, 1816.

Latrobe's simple yet elegant design for St. John's may be a reflection of his Moravian background. The circle of the dome and of the gallery that surrounded the sanctuary on three sides served to reinforce each other and the overall simplicity of the design. In the sanctuary, a pulpit was located in front of the chancel, with the space surrounding it and the altar cutting an arc into the central pews. Box pews, a center aisle, semicircular aisles on each side, a brick floor, and clear glass windows completed Latrobe's overall scheme. In the early 1820s, the nave was extended west, and a colonnaded portico and timber-frame steeple were constructed.

Over the years, other architectural changes to St. John's have continued to reflect both the growth of the congregation and the City of Washington. Removal of the box pews in the 1840s made way for additional seating. In the 1880s, under direction of architect James Renwick, the church was redecorated and the chancel was extended east with additions constructed to the north and south. This renovation provided additional space for an organ room, robing room, rector's study, and additional pews. The installation of stained glass in place of clear during the same period changed the interior look forever.

In 1919, the church embarked on a renovation campaign under the direction of the architectural firm McKim, Mead & White. The interior of the church was entirely redecorated, and a new lighting system was installed. The firm also oversaw the installation of marble in the chancel and the modification of the narthex. Windows were added and enlarged to bring more light into the church.

Today's church building and the Parish House reflect the continuing stewardship of an active and vibrant congregation during that past nearly two centuries.