

# How One Old Photo Brought New Life to our Nave: *The Historic Stenciling Project 2014 at Trinity Episcopal Church on the New Haven Green (built 1814-1816)*

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*The Nave & Chancel of Trinity on the Green, New Haven, CT, sepia photo print, ca. 1885 (Photo by MJ Chambers)*

It has only been three years since the History Ministry at Trinity Episcopal Church on the New Haven, CT Green has been in existence, but two late 19th century photographs (one of which is shown above) of Trinity's nave had always been on top of one of the several piles of historical documents and artifacts awaiting attention in the former church office. Moving to a new office shortly after the arrival of our new rector in 2011 brought new interest in these two fine artifacts. As both an architect and an architectural historian, I wanted to know more about the re-finishing campaign that produced this wonderful series of floral-based stencils in these photos.

With some sleuthing into our bound 19th century hand-written Church Records, then a 1906 article in the "New Haven Chronicle" on the Centennial Celebrations for our building and finally our history of Trinity, Here Will I Dwell, written and published in 1972 by deceased parishioner Edward Getlein, the context that brought about this decorative campaign became clearer. All the stencil painting as well as the addition of the chancel and stained glass in the windows of both nave and chancel had taken place during the tenure of the Rev. Dr. Edwin Harwood (1859-1895).

Rev. Edwin Harwood was well-loved for his preaching and pastoral care. He was also a leader in the Broad Church Movement centered in the Diocese of New York. Simultaneously, he was engaged in the precepts of the Oxford Movement to the extent that liturgical revival went hand in hand with sacred space renewal. Our first thought was that Rev. Harwood, who travelled abroad frequently, had been impressed by the nave at William Butterfield's All Saints, Margaret Street, London, designed in 1850 and completed in 1859. (See below.) No surface is left untouched at All Saints!

At Trinity on the Green, New Haven, we have recognized for some time that our nave will soon need refurbishment, but we are also aware of the potential costs involved. While many of us in the History Ministry were becoming ever more aware of the history of our 200 year old building, the photograph of Harwood's nave continued to 'speak,' and I set about imagining how we might discern the pattern repeat on the lowest band of stenciling, directly above the original wood wainscot running around the nave. Were we to uncover this repeat, determine the colors therein, have stencils made for each color's pattern, we might be able to re-create the stencil band ourselves!

Convinced there would be a way to shape this idea into a positive project for the parish, I began to research possible granting agencies that by their matching monies could reduce by fifty percent the cost of doing this preservation project. It would only be truly effective if the project engaged the parish in the process of discovery and in the actual stenciling.

We are blessed in Connecticut to have among us a nationally recognized award winning painting restoration and preservation firm, John Canning & Company Ltd. Their estimate was



*The Nave & Chancel of All Saints, Margaret Street, London, UK, 1850-1859*  
(Photo off web Images)



*Parishioner at Work*  
(Photo by MJ Chambers)

included in one of two grants regarding this project, an application to Connecticut's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Also included in this grant was the intent to involve parishioners in Saturday workshops during the summer of 2014 where they would be introduced to a brief history of the five major nave re-finishing campaigns since the church building was consecrated in 1816, taught how to use the stencils and then let to paint the stencil patterns on the nave wall. The grant was approved.

A second, dovetailing grant was made to the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) and focused on outreach to a magnet school very close to the New Haven Green, the Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School (the Co-op). Eight students from the high school would attend after school sessions in our nave for ten consecutive Thursday's during the fall of 2014. This grant was also approved. The approach was the same as with the parishioner workshops, but the fact that they applied stencil patterns each week over two and one half months meant they became quite skilled at the art of their newly-acquired craft.

Very important to the success of the work of both grants was my estab-

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lishment of what came to be called the Primary Stenciling Team, a dedicated group of four parishioners who learned, along with me, stenciling technique from David Riccio of John Canning & Company Ltd. in a three hour training session on site once the pattern repeat had been uncovered and the stencils fabricated. Members of this team were at every Saturday workshop helping me help our fellow parishioners. When the

Co-op students began their work in the fall, it was a Yale student/parishioner who had participated on three Saturdays during the summer who helped me with the high school students each week.

The story of the exposure of the original 1880-1884 stencil repeat is interesting insofar as the process of discovery took almost a full day of trying one wall area after another by carefully stripping away layers of paint until finding stencil figures. Where plaster repair had occurred, no evidence would be found. It is best thought of as a form of surface archaeology over the depth of 1/16.”

Once John Canning & Company Ltd. accomplished the exposure, care was taken by one of the studio employees to trace the stencil figures and take them back to convert them digitally with computer aided design (CAD) software. These CAD files were then plotted on Mylar to a laser cutting machine, resulting in several stencils of each of three figures in the pattern repeat.

The third important contribution by Canning's studios was the color analysis of the elements of the stencil pattern. Samples were taken thru the depth of the paint layers at all strategic points in the pattern and sent for stratigraphic assessment with an electron microscope.

While we had all been surprised by the geometric simplicity of the stencil pattern, the two-color palette further amazed us, producing clear contrast between a dark putty against a much lighter tan ground. So, all my Primary Stenciling Team and I had to do was paint the lines of the pattern repeat before the stencils could be applied. This preparation was always only one step ahead of each Saturday's Workshop or Thursday's Co-op class!

As summer moved into fall, and more and more of the stencil band was re-created, our work inspired considerable enthusiastic interest within the entire congregation. Even visitors, of whom we have many per day, would watch us at the wall and ask questions. The stencil band's quiet rhythms and light-toned background seemed, to no small degree, to be uplifting all who experienced it.

While everyone responded to the simplicity of the stencil band, the meaning inherent in its pattern repeat only made sense when it was considered as the base or plinth to the floral stencil patterns that had originally been above it. I began to see it as providing building blocks, abstracted Platonic forms, for the more detailed and Aristotelian expression of the natural world within the rest of the stencils in the 1880-1884 decorative campaign.

When I shared this idea with fellow Trinity History Ministry historian, Chris Janis, M.Div. she said it truly fits her growing understanding of Edwin's ecumenical approach. As Chris sees it, we need to understand Edwin Harwood (1822-1902) as a product of his having grown up in Philadelphia which in our New Republic still basked in the foment of the Declaration of Independence, two Continental Congresses and the Constitutional Convention. That so many of the chief participants were Episcopalians may have impressed young Calvinist Edwin. Perhaps he loved the image of Washington and Jefferson working all day at nation building and all evening at the writing of the new Episcopal Book of Common Prayer!

Edwin attended the University of Pennsylvania where he no doubt con-



*Co-op Students at Work, Thursday Class, Trinity Nave, November, 2014*  
(Photo by Ralph Stroup)

tinued to read and be influenced by the classics, and then went on to the denominationally splintered climate of Congregational Andover Theological Seminary, an experience that seems to have prompted a return to Philadelphia, a conversion to the Protestant Episcopal Church and matriculation at General Theological Seminary in New York City from 1842-44.

His early years in the priesthood were punctuated by friendship with the Rev. William A. Muhlenberg (1796-1877), and together they focused on the "divided and distracted state of our American Protestant Christianity" in the hope that the Episcopal Church would open a "wider door...broader and more comprehensive" to the "great moral and social necessities of the present day." (The Memorial Papers, 1853.) By the end of the Civil War, further Protestant splintering along north and south alignments must have proven to them both that much needed to happen to encourage proper education and reunification in the broad church.

Classically educated to Plato's love of beauty, as ethereal perfection, truth and goodness, and to Aristotle's real and logical earthly quests for potential moral and intellectual virtue, Edwin seems to have seen both outlooks as building blocks of liberality and munificence. We have every reason to understand our re-created stencil band at Trinity

on the Green, in the context of its relation to the nave's overall decoration from 1880-1884, as evidence of Edwin's renewed hope for educating his parishioners, indeed, all people. Unwittingly, the Historic Stenciling Project has reflected the Rev. Dr. Edwin Harwood's wish to reach out and educate.

Historic preservation is almost always about building in small steps based on faith in sound research and confidence in the ability to win over new converts to the cause! At Trinity on the Green, we are now poised to form a committee to discern a vision for our nave's refurbishment. Our hope is that we will be able eventually to present to the parish a medium range plan which will be sensitive to the full span of the history of our much-loved, National Historic Landmark church while also respecting the sensibilities of the current day.■

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*The author wishes to thank our rector, the Rev. Dr. Luk De Volder and the Wardens and Vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church on the New haven Green for their unwavering support for the Historic Stenciling Project. For more information on this Project, see the NEHA Clearinghouse issue of May 17, 2015. For more information on our Bicentennial celebrations, follow us on Facebook and on our parish website, <http://trinitynewhaven.org>.*

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