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Preserving the Yellow Church on the Square

The landmark yellow church with columns and steeple has graced Lafayette Square for so many years

that most people assume the church was built the way it looks today. Recalling symmetrical 16th-century Italian Palladian buildings, with their simplified details of classical Greek architecture, St. John's Episcopal Church at 1525 H St., N.W., has long been considered an outstanding beauty.

"The Church of the Presidents," however, was designed by Benjamin Latrobe as a small structure in the shape of a cross. After he finished the church in 1815, Latrobe wrote to his son that "I have just completed a church that will make many Washingtonians religious who have not been religious before."

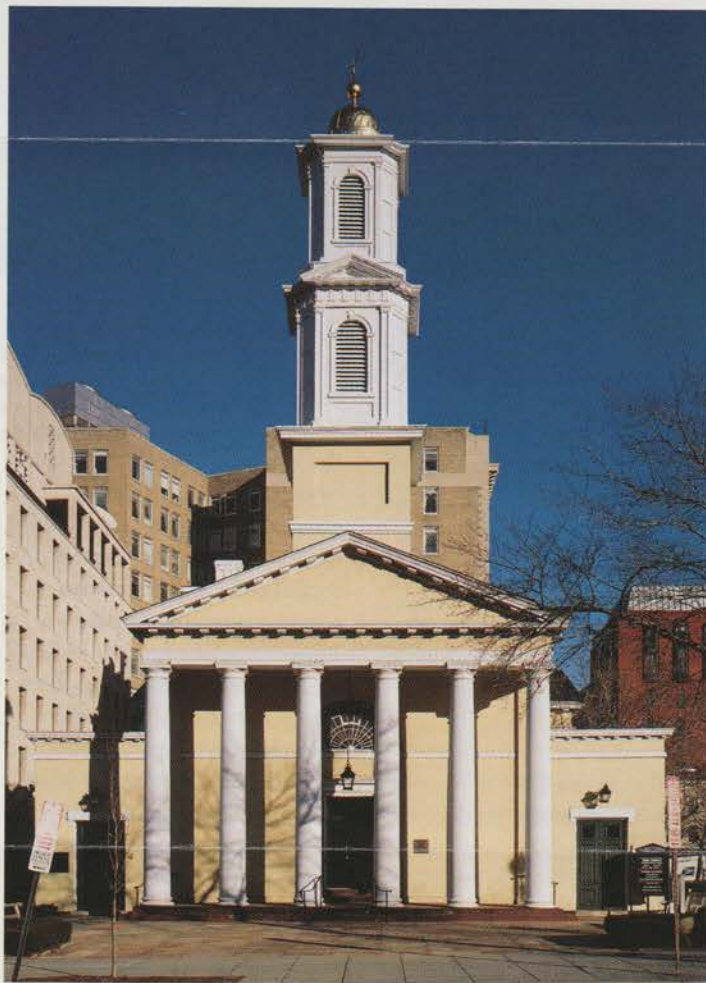
It's unclear whether he was referring to occupants of the White House across the Square, since the church was organized for presidents and their families. James Madison, in office in 1815, was a communicant, and every chief executive since then

has attended regular or occasional services. Pew 54 is the traditional President's Pew.

Just five years after construction, the church was enlarged—to the disgust of the architect's son, who, after his father's death in 1820, declared that "some dull fellow made a Roman cross out of a Greek one, stuck on a stupid, nondescript portico and an abominable pretext for a tower."

Latrobe's Greek-cross design still can be seen in the center of the church, with the hipped roof covering the central crossing and the delicately detailed cupola. But most of the simple arched windows and doors are gone, and the church now reflects several styles and architectural periods.

Today, St. John's is not only a national architectural treasure, but also an active parish with 900 members from throughout the metropolitan area. Last year, under the direction of Rector Luis León, parishioners approved major capital expenditures for long-overdue exterior work on the church and adjoining parish house, including



CAROL M. HIGHSMITH

Every U.S. president since James Madison has attended services at St. John's Episcopal Church on Lafayette Square. Wagner recently completed roof and gutter work on the 1815 structure and neighboring parish house.

extensive exterior painting, roof repairs and replacement of copper gutters and downspouts.

The exteriors of the church and parish house were painted in the summer and fall of 2000—in the historically correct tone of yellow paint. "As the painting progressed,"

recalls Mary L. McCarty, chair of the Properties Committee, "it was evident that all the gutters were deteriorated and needed replacement."

Wagner Roofing was selected to perform the roof and gutter work. "That wasn't a difficult decision," says David J. Baker,

Churches: A Wagner Specialty

These are just a few of the many congregations in the metropolitan area that have selected Wagner to renovate or restore their churches or other facilities. For more information or to obtain additional church references, please contact Chuck or Sheila Wagner or go to www.wagnerroofing.com and click on the Wagner logo.

Washington National Cathedral, 3001 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.
Georgetown Lutheran Church, 1556 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.
Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ,
One Westmoreland Circle, Bethesda, Md.
Foundry United Methodist Church, 1500 16th St., N.W.
Mormon Temple, 9900 Stoneybrook Dr., Kensington, Md.
Christ Memorial Presbyterian Church, 6145 Sinbad Pl., Columbia, Md.
Langley Hill Friends Meeting, 6410 Georgetown Pike, McLean, Va.
Greater Mount Zion Church, 609 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Arlington Forest United Methodist Church, 4701 Arlington Blvd., Arlington, Va.
Capitol Hill Seventh Day Adventist Church, 914 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.
Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament, 6001 Western Ave., N.W.
Church of the Holy City, 1611 16th St., N.W.

church administrator. "Wagner has renovated many area churches and they came highly recommended by other congregations."

Wagner replaced gutters on the parish house last fall, and on the church early this year. The copper-lined wood gutters were rotting from moisture trapped between the two layers, explains Baker. "As we lifted the copper, the wood underneath crumbled. Wagner replaced all of it with new wood, and most of the copper has been replaced, along with new downspouts."

The project involved replacing some wood roof framing and many roof slates. Also, one area of the church roof is flat, and water often stands for days, weakening the structure. Wagner is rebuilding that part of the roof with a slight slope to allow proper drainage.

Baker reports that the project has gone smoothly: "When you're repairing an historic

structure like St. John's, you must enlist a reliable, experienced roofer such as Wagner. You can't risk further damage in the course of repairs by people who are unknowledgeable about the requirements of old buildings." Wagner recently signed a three-year roof maintenance agreement with St. John's.

Looking to the future, the Vestry has created a Capital Improvement Exploratory Committee to determine what kinds of additional improvements are needed to ensure that these historic buildings will continue to serve parishioners and the local community—and that a unique reminder of the nation's past will be preserved for future generations. ●

Much of the architectural history for this article was drawn from a series of sermons by former St. John's rector, the Rev. John C. Harper, D.D., in June 1981.

Wagner at Folklife and Building Arts Festivals

Visitors to two major festivals in downtown Washington can see Wagner roofers and sheet-metal workers in action.

During this summer's 35th Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall, Wagner employees will demonstrate techniques used in slate and copper roofing, built-in gutters, cornices and finials for the million-plus people expected to attend. Wagner Roofing owners Chuck and Sheila Wagner, slate specialists Bob and Jeff Wooldridge and sheet-metal workers Randy and Louie Herald will staff the Wagner exhibit.

The Smithsonian invited Wagner to participate in the festival's Masters of the Building Arts program, one of three major programs highlighting various cultural groups. The 2001 festival also features the cultural traditions of New York City and Bermuda. Wagner's tent will be open June 27 to July 1; the Festival continues through July 8.

The Festival of Building Arts at the National Building Museum has asked Wagner Roofing to make an encore appearance Thursday, September 13. Wagner's roofing team was a hit at previous events, where they demonstrated slate, copper and shingle roofing. ●

Bob Wooldridge Is Finalist for MVP Award

Bob Wooldridge, a slate-roof specialist and long-time Wagner employee, was a finalist, Mid-Atlantic region, for the roofing industry's first annual Most Valuable Player Award. The award was presented by the National Roofing Contractors Association and the Roofing Industry Alliance for Progress.

The judges—contractors, manufacturers and other suppliers in the roofing industry—acknowledged Wooldridge's "noteworthy achievements as a role model for our industry."

In submitting the nomination, Chuck Wagner highlighted Wooldridge's work ethic, craftsmanship and ability to analyze and solve problems on the job, calling him a "natural teacher and leader." ●

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Modern Offices with Historic Character

When you step from the elevator onto the fourth floor of the Folger Building at 725 15th St., N.W., it's easy to imagine that you're visiting your stockbroker in the early days of the 20th century. Although the gaslights are long gone and contemporary exit signs mark the stairwell, your first impression is that the Folger's hallways and offices haven't changed much.

The historic authenticity is deliberate, explains Denise Berti, Wagner Roofing's project manager for the fourth and ninth floor interior renovations. "We were careful to maintain the integrity of the building—one of the few remaining Beaux Arts structures in downtown Washington, D.C." Original molding was salvaged, restored and reused wherever possible. In other areas, new molding was created to simulate the old. And nonworking windows were removed and restored to their original operating condition.

The Folger's complete exterior restoration and interior renovation were initiated when Frank Verheul, building engineer, alerted the owner to the building's rapidly deteriorating condition. "On my second day on the job, rain was predicted, and I was told it was time to



CAROL M. HIGHSMITH

Architectural critic Benjamin Forgey once wrote that the Folger Building had "perhaps the best mansard roof in Washington." Wagner has restored the Folger's 1907 exterior and is general contractor for interior renovations. Wagner also is repairing the facade of the Playhouse Theatre Building (left of Folger).

check the buckets in the attic. I found holes in the roof big enough to throw golfballs and oranges through. The water ran from the roof through the attic all the way to the basement."

After restoring the Folger's exterior—including repairing and cleaning the marble facade, pointing stone and brickwork, installing new slate and copper roofs, painting windows and birdproofing the building—Wagner was asked to renovate the fourth-floor bonds office of Folger Nolan Fleming Douglas, Inc., owner of the 1907 structure since 1953.

With Wagner as general contractor, the renovation included:

- converting a large, antiquated restroom into separate men's and women's rooms and creating a handicapped-accessible restroom;
- remodeling office space to reflect current use, with removal of large, walk-in safes;
- creating new work areas

and building a service room for heating and air conditioning equipment;

- remodeling the library as a conference room, removing bookshelves and adding a coat closet and computer workstation;
- installing conduits in new and existing walls and removing surface-mounted wiring; and
- remodeling remaining offices, installing new lights and ceilings, restoring or replacing wood molding and scraping and repainting painted surfaces.

Neil Folger, vice president, Capital Management, is pleased with the results. "We originally contacted Wagner because we had major roof problems, and we needed a company that understood the building's historical significance. When I learned Wagner also serves as a general contractor, we moved from the roof to the exterior to the interior. The process has worked wonderfully."

(continued on page 4)

In the Works

These jobs are in progress or recently completed. To discuss or visit these or other projects, call Chuck or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030 or go to www.wagnerroofing.com. (Unless otherwise noted, jobs are in Washington, D.C.)

Creative Designs, Building, Grenada, West Indies: New copper dome roof on vice chancellor's residence, St. George's University
Grunley Construction Co., Inc.—Main U.S. Treasury Building: Phase Two, lead-coated copper roofing on balconies
International Eastern Star Temple, 1618 New Hampshire Ave., N.W.: Restore skylights; paint vaulted ceiling
Renovations Unlimited, Inc.: Shand residence, 1901 Vermont Ave., N.W.: New slate mansard and modified bitumen roofing; copper built-in gutters
Tudor Place Historic House and Garden, 1644 31st St., N.W.: Restore decorative wood molding and maintenance on slate and metal roofs

General Contracting Jobs

Embassy of Romania, 1607 23rd St., N.W.: Painting, stucco repair, roofing
Opus Dei's Longlea Conference Center, Culpeper, Va.: New shingle roof on library; new slate on manor house

Our Customers Say...

"Wagner provided excellent craftsmanship and timely service. Their people are professional, and pleasant to work with."—Leslie Buhler, Executive Director, Tudor Place Historic House and Garden

"Students remained in Truth and Crandall halls while Wagner replaced the roof; this was the least disruptive repair of occupied space that we've undertaken."

—Paul Gathungu, Project Manager, Physical Facilities, Howard University

Repairing the **Playhouse Theater Building**

The front facades of the Folger and its neighboring building at 727 15th Street relate so well that people often mistakenly think the structures were designed as a unit in the early 1900s. So it's appropriate that, a century later, Wagner is undertaking restoration and repair work on both edifices in Washington, D.C.'s historic financial district.

The Folger was designed by J.H. de Sibour in the Beaux Arts style, using marble and limestone. The 10-story structure, topped by a mansard roof with projecting windows, was built in 1907 as the headquarters of W.B. Hibbs & Company, the first Washington-area member of the New York Stock Exchange. Wagner recently completely restored the exterior of the Folger.

The one-story Beaux Arts building at 727 was designed by Paul Pelz. According to David Maloney, an architect with the D.C. government's Historic Preservation Office of Planning, the firm of Smithmeyer & Pelz also designed the Library of Congress. The structure at 727 housed brokerage firms from 1908 until 1940, when it assumed a more colorful image as the Del Rio restaurant and then the Playhouse Theater, which specialized in adult entertainment. In 1985, an eight-floor office tower was added.

Airborne pollutants have caused the original front facade to severely deteriorate. Wagner will repoint the statues, power-wash the marble facade, repaint the entry and replace the failed caulking at the windows.

Both Folger and Verheul are enthusiastic about Berti's diligent management. "Denise has been here every morning, following up, paying attention to detail, coordinating work to avoid disrupting our operations," says Folger. "The project was completed in a very compact time period and at a good cost, too."

Verheul, who directed the exterior restoration and supervised work on the building's

internal systems, says that Berti's contributions exceeded her defined responsibilities: "The carpet wasn't part of Wagner's contract, but Denise oversaw carpet removal and floor patching."

Berti, who also was project manager on Wagner restorations at the Maryland State House, Gallaudet University's Chapel Hall and Woodhull House at George Washington University, says the Folger

revealed its secrets as the project progressed. "When we tore out the carpet, we could 'read' the mosaic-tile and wood floors. Placement of the old tile defined original corridors, closets and the location of offices."

The D.C. Government has designated the Folger a historic structure, and the building is located in the 15th Street Historic District. "That makes our job harder because of the constraints," she admits, "but we're up to that challenge. Chuck [Wagner] is passionate in his love for these old buildings that have been in continuous use—and so am I. We like to work on projects like this because we not only bring our dedication and expertise to the job, but we also have a roster of top-notch craftspeople who are restoration experts."

The challenge, adds Berti, is helping clients figure out how their historic buildings can remain functional, while retaining the original character. "In the long run, it's worth it," Berti believes, "even if it costs a little more. Once these old buildings are gone, we'll never get them back." ●

Who We Are

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