

Washington Heights Universalist Church

The construction of the new church in New York City, on West 178th street and Wadsworth avenue, marks the triumphant struggle and consecrated devotion of a group of people which has worked for five years to materialize its vision and faith.

No church was ever built in this state which represents more hard work, persistent, patient effort and unshaken faith. In 1916, Rev. Frank Herbert Billington preached in a hall on the Heights, and helped to establish the church in its own property which represented much daring and farsightedness. The first members and organizers who are still faithfully serving the society as trustees are: Gerard A. Fudger, Mrs. Frank R. Whitten, Herbert E. Lawson, and president Frank R. Whitten, whose determination to build a church on the Heights, even though he "would have to preach and his daughter lead the music and the services be held in how own parlor" has never wavered for a moment.

Rev. Clarence J. Harris, who entered the Universalist ministry from the Congregational church, in 1902, took up the work here in 1918 while he was then engaged as supervisor of welfare in the Aircraft Division of the Army and Navy. At the close of the war, he became installed as pastor.

The new pastor shared the optimism of the little group of workers and lead [led] off with determination to help build a house of worship. The financial struggle endured tested the spirit of all concerned. Services were maintained in the dance hall which the society owned, but which was burdened with a heavy mortgage. At times it seemed as though every possible obstacle confronted the struggling organization.

Realizing that the church could never be built up in a dance hall and in the locality then occupied, negotiations were begun to sell the property. Real estate was at its lowest mark, and the prospect was poor for a sale, but President Whitten, with his own wits and genius handled that sale in a startling manner. For eight months negotiations went on, until the offer of \$20,000 was brought up to \$32,000 and accepted.

This society bought and paid for its new lot, a beautiful corner lot, in the heart of the best section, and convenient to about 20 traffic lines, including subways, buses and street cars. Aside from paying for the lot, the church has raised several thousand dollars, and is pledged to add to what it has raised, another thousand.

Mr. Louis Annin Ames has been the strong force back of the struggling society, whose council [counsel] and inspiration has been one of the greatest factors in the success. The General Convention and the State Convention, together with the Board of the Eternal Hope Organization, have been generous, and whole hearted in their support.

The Church will be a beautiful structure, Spanish Renaissance throughout. A beautiful chancel, completely furnished is to be built by Mrs. Sarah D.

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Cooper, in memory of her beloved husband. A church organ has been given by Mrs. Allott, of the Divine Paternity [Fourth Universalist] church. A large memorial window will be built in memory of Mrs. Persus Foster, one of the faithful workers of the society, whose death was the first break in the group of women workers.

The society has maintained its work under most trying circumstances during the past year and a half. Without a home, it has used the parlor of the Fort Washington Synagogue, and other halls and homes for other activities. Some of the auxiliaries have been compelled to discontinue their activities. Rev. Mr. Harris, who gained a standing in the community work, has an elaborate work among boys. Three Scout troops, numbering 125 boys. A Camp Club of 55 boys. Meetings are held in the public school building close by the former meeting place. The Campfire Girls and Bluebirds have met about in the homes. Mrs. Gerard A. Fudger organized this work and proved a most unusual leader. The Ladies' Aid Society has never wavered in its work, and is successfully led by Mrs. Frank R. Whitten, president.

It is expected that the new church will be completed in June. Among those who will aid in its dedication, aside from the General Convention, will be the Metropolitan Woman's Alliance. This body of women have from the beginning stood back of this movement with their encouragement and financial assistance. Contributions have been made yearly for the work. In January, the Alliance celebrated its 25th anniversary by giving a luncheon in the Divine Paternity Church, for the benefit of this church. Three hundred dollars was presented to the pastor of the building fund.

Empire State Universalist, Carthage NY, March 1922

Transcribed on 10 Mar 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY