

THE DERBY MANSION HOUSE, OUR PARISH HALL

Ever take a close look at the Parish Hall? How many of us know that the Parish Hall is an historic treasure in its own right? It was built to house a family of prominent Newporters and was a dominant structure on Pelham Street, one of many large homes surrounding Touro Park. Situated at the front of the property like the house next door, it was an example of "board and batten" architecture, popular in early nineteenth-century America and considered an American innovation, its vertical lines complementing the Gothic Revival structures that were being built everywhere.

One of the fun things about being on the Property Committee is that it encourages me to look into the old documents we have stored and tucked away in cabinets and drawers in Channing House and elsewhere. Not long ago I found a type-written account (unsigned and undated) written by one of our forebears and entitled, "The Story of Mr. Derby's Mansion House." It was the product of someone's love and commitment, as well as considerable research.

To wit: Richard C. Derby, who died in 1840, gave his "mansion house" at 135 Pelham Street to his wife Louisa, the mother of their recently born son Richard C. Derby, Jr. (1840-1923). Young Richard grew to become an Annapolis graduate and after a Navy career returned to Newport to become a realtor. I must assume his parents' house was built in the early 1800's. If it was 1808, as one of our members believes, our Parish Hall is two hundred years old this year.

In 1879 Junior, his mother and the Eyres (Wilson and Louisa) sold the property to the Unitarian Congregational Church, which met around the corner on Mill Street. The Mansion House was moved to the back of the property, as far as possible, to make room for the building of Channing Memorial Church. Mrs. Louisa Derby remained very much in the picture (and still does so today in spirit) for her abiding interest in Touro Park. If you look at the plaque in the center of the park, you will see her name listed as one of the founders of this beautiful space across the street from her former property. The story of how the Revs. Schermerhorn and Brooks raised the funds and built the church is more familiar. But what happened to the Derby Mansion House?

It became the Parish Hall from the beginning. The foundation was not very stable, mostly dirt and brick, which has led to many of our recent problems with settling and moisture. Nevertheless, extensive renovations were completed. A center stairwell was removed to create the large meeting space we have today (actually it was larger, since there were no hallways

and classrooms at that time).

The Ladies' Reading Alliance (not to be confused with the Ladies' Sewing Alliance) added what we now call the Ladies' Parlor. There was also a kitchen, but it was where the RE classrooms are today.

Around 1911 The Unity Club (which produced theatrical events, among other things) erected a stage in the East area (RE rooms today) and this included a second story loft to store and shift scenery. Famous actors like Van Johnson (you'll remember him if you were born before 1970) played the Parish Hall. The Ladies' Reading Alliance was also famous for their Lobster Suppers, which attracted big crowds and raised funds.

Unfortunately, the hundredth-year anniversary of the purchase was marred by a big fire in the Parish Hall in 1979. Many of you remember this challenge. The present floor plan evolved out of the repairs from the catastrophe and the Parish Hall was re-dedicated in its new form the next year.

When the Master Plan is presented to the congregation later this year, you will see that the Parish Hall figures prominently. What is the highest and best use of this property? Is it in the best location? What are the best ways to preserve it and at the same time make it efficient and "green?" Discuss.

The Derby Mansion House has come a long way since 1808. We are fortunate to have the use of an architecturally significant home from a bygone age. This Summer it takes on a new role as our temporary spiritual home. What would we do without it? Thanks to all who worked so hard to preserve our Parish Hall, past and present. Maintaining a nineteenth-century building is never easy, but the challenges are rewarding. As always, your input and ideas are essential to our going forward.

Dennis Greene, Property Committee
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