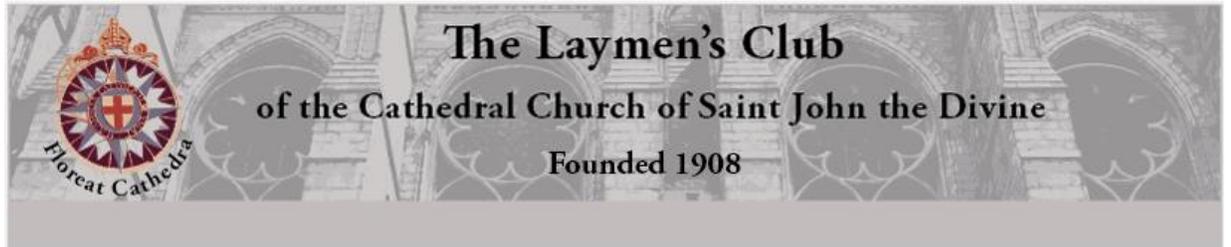




The Cathedral  
Church of **Saint John**  
**the Divine**

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**A History of the Cathedral's Architecture and Construction, Compiled by the Laymen's Club**

The last four decades of the nineteenth century constituted a period of mass immigration into the United States, most of it into the port of New York. Much was made of the slogan that America was the "melting pot" of the world. Based on this ideology, all the progenitors of the new Cathedral insisted that it be built as a "house of prayer for all nations." It was a magnificent concept at the time, and is even more significant today. The location in New York of the United Nations, in 1946, underscored the importance of the idea.

In 1888, the Board of Trustees initiated a contest for the Cathedral's design. The firm of Heins & Lafarge won the contract with a Romanesque, Byzantine design. Their plan called for a cathedral 520 feet in length crowned at the crossing by a towering conical spire. It would be built in the customary cathedral shape -- that of a cross.

The next challenge was finding a site for this extraordinary house of worship. One spring day in 1887, a devoted layman, George Macculloch Miller, glanced west on 111th Street while walking up Fifth Avenue. Within a few days, Mr. Miller had shown the site to Bishop Henry Codman Potter. Both perceived the heights rising above Morningside Avenue as a potential acropolis. The thirteen heavily wooded acres were the site of the Leake and Watts Orphan Asylum. The property was purchased for \$850,000.

On December 27, 1892, St. John's Day, Bishop Potter laid the corner stone of the Cathedral. Bishop Potter struck the massive stone three times with a large wooden mallet, "Other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid which is Jesus Christ."

Construction immediately ran into foundation problems, but Bishop Potter refused to change locations. J.P. Morgan, the financier, who was a trustee of the Cathedral, gave \$500,000 "to get us out of the hole."

By 1911, the choir and the crossing with its four immense arches were completed. The renowned mason Rafael Guastavino built a dome of tile, 162 feet high at the apex, to cover the crossing. The original plans called for the dome to be replaced by a spire, but the Guastavino dome is still there today.



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### **Phase Two**

In 1907, Heins, of Heins & Lafarge, passed away. The firm was released from the contract. A new firm was selected. A rising Boston architect, Ralph Adams Cram, was chosen to complete the Cathedral.

Unlike Heins & Lafarge, Cram was a Gothic architect. He had to use what had previously been built, but he began to implement a Gothic style. In order to achieve his Gothic design, the length of the nave was changed from 520 to 601 feet. Ground was broken for the Nave in 1916 and the entire foundation laid.

The press gave immense impetus to the drive for funds. The "Communications Bay" in the Nave is a well-deserved tribute to the media which has done much toward the building of the Cathedral. Few questioned the validity of the undertaking. A model for the completed Cathedral stood in the north balcony of Grand Central station in 1921, a symbol of civic pride. Although World War I and the Great Depression occupied much of people's time, the Cathedral's construction continued.

By 1918, the seven Chapels of the Tongues, around the Choir and High Altar were completed. Each chapel is dedicated to a different immigrant group. Images and descriptions of all seven chapels are available from the Chapels page.

The Nave was virtually completed in less than ten years. Bishop William Thomas Manning, Episcopal Bishop from 1921-1946 oversaw the construction of the Nave, the West Front, the Baptistry, and part of the North Transept.

On Sunday November 30, 1941, the opening of the full length of the Cathedral was celebrated. The public could now see the full interior -- the greatest indoor length (601 feet) of any cathedral in existence. "Two football fields, end to end, with room left for the football," became the popular imagery of this magnificent length of uninterrupted space.

Alas, the joy was short lived. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred the very next week, December 7th, 1941.

### **Construction Stops**

With the onset of World War II, construction of the Cathedral screeched to a halt. The Pearl Harbor Arch, as it is called, shows incomplete masonry where a stonecarver did not return to his work.

For 32 years, all plans for completing the Cathedral were held in abeyance.

### **Third Phase**

Those interested in the Cathedral in 1941 had no idea that the effort to complete the Cathedral would have to be delayed for so long. But then nobody foresaw the unprecedented social upheavals which



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followed World War II. By the early 70's, New York City had barely moved back from the brink of bankruptcy. But the question was raised: While the Church concerns itself with particular human needs, must all artistic expressions of the love of God be laid aside.

The Very Rev. James Parks Morton, Dean at the time, pressed for a revival of the building program, but with a new emphasis. The Cathedral would hire and train the unemployed and underemployed from the neighborhood to do the work. He urged, "We will revive the art of stonemasonry ... and provide our city with a massive symbol of hope and rebirth."

The Stoneyard was dedicated on June 21, 1979, and on September 29, 1982, aerialist Philippe Petit crossed Amsterdam Avenue on a 150-foot high wire to deliver a silver trowel to Bishop Paul Moore, marking the start of the next phase of construction. Because stonemasonry was a moribund skill in the United States, professionals had to be brought from England to train the stonemasons. The great work was underway again. Blocks were cut, and both the North and South Towers progressed upward.

When Mayor Edward Koch addressed the festive gathering at the Stoneyard's dedication in 1979, he stated, "I am told that some of the great cathedrals took over five hundred years to build. But I would like to remind you that we are only in our first hundred years." The Cathedral is now in its second century, which has offered its own snags. In the early 1990's, The United States was lagging in an economic recession, and the work on the towers was again brought to a halt.

The only stonemasonry which continued was the carving of the Portal of Paradise, the central entrance of the Cathedral. Simon Verity, the master sculptor who trained the Stoneyard apprentices and won the international competition for the Portal Carving Project in 1988, now worked with stonemason Jean Claude Marchionni on completing the Portal's statuary. The statuary, comprised of 8-foot and 3-foot figures from the Old and New Testaments, was completed in the summer of 1997 and dedicated that fall. [Click here to learn more about the Portal of Paradise carvings.](#)

#### **Fourth Phase**

Hundreds spontaneously congregate at the Cathedral within hours of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In December, a 5-alarm fire destroys the Cathedral's north transept and the gift shop within it.

In 2002, The Very Reverend Dr. James A. Kowalski is installed as the 9th Dean of the Cathedral. He begins the process of addressing the Cathedral's financial situation. "A Time for Hope," a special exhibition of religious art treasures from Spain, attracts tens of thousands of visitors.

Cleaning and restoration after the fire begins in 2004; the Cathedral's Chorus, High Altar and Chapels (the East End) are closed to the public. Cleaning and restoration of the Cathedral's East End is



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completed in 2006. The Chorus, High Altar and Chapels are reopened to the public and the Nave is closed.

In the fall of 2007, scaffolding is removed from the Cathedral's south tower, illuminating the additional 50 feet of the tower built by the Stoneworks Project in the 1980s and 1990s.

Madeleine L'Engle, author and Cathedral librarian for many years, passes away and is memorialized in the Cathedral.

Restoration of the Nave is completed in the summer of 2008. The East End of the Cathedral is closed while the Great Organ is reinstalled.

On November 30, 2008, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine is to be rededicated as its entire interior is reopened to the public in November.

A frequently asked question is "When will the Cathedral be finished?" Although no new construction is planned for the immediate future, efforts have been underway to preserve the Cathedral and its auxiliary buildings for the enjoyment of New Yorkers and visitors from around the world for the centuries to come.

On November 30, 2008, The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine is to be Rededicated in honor of the reopening of the entire length of the Cathedral after a multi-year cleaning and restoration project.