



A LABOR OF

LOVE

After Watch Listing in 2004, a historic Nova Scotia church is reborn.

by ROBERT HIRTLE

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS of November 1, 2001, Lunenburg firefighters responded to what would be their 23rd and final call on one of the most hectic Halloween nights in the town's history. While their other calls that evening were to extinguish small spot fires deliberately set in various areas of the town by youthful pranksters, this last

one was far different. St. John's Anglican Church, one of three national historic sites in the UNESCO World Heritage-designated town—and a hallowed hall of worship for nearly 250 years—was on fire. It was just after midnight when parishioner Andrew Eisenhauer was awakened by a call from Richard Knickle, chairman of the church's property committee, who informed him of the tragedy. "I got here pronto and saw what it was and started calling people," Eisenhauer recalled. One of those on his phone list was fellow parishioner Ed Jordan, who days later would join him as co-chairmen of a committee that was formed to oversee the restoration of the historic structure, which—despite the valiant



efforts of 16 volunteer fire departments—was almost completely destroyed.

Later that same evening, with the lights of emergency vehicles still illuminating the night sky and the acrid smell of smoke permeating the air, 500 parishioners and townspeople crammed into the church's parish hall for what was originally scheduled to be an All Saint's Day service.

Instead, Diocesan Bishop and former St. John's pastor Fred Hiltz led a service of healing in which he told the assembly that, despite their loss, they must reaffirm their trust and confidence "in the goodness and mercy and the exuberance of God." "We have lost a beautiful building. The nation has lost a piece of heritage," he said. "But perhaps most significantly, you have lost a place which you call your spiritual home."

Rev. Hiltz's words, spoken from the scorched altar that had been miraculously rescued from the burning church earlier that day and painstakingly cleaned by a group of boys from a neighboring Lutheran parish, offered solace and some hope to members of the congregation. However, Jordan said for several days they couldn't think of doing anything. "They thought that the insurance company was going to do everything for them, which it couldn't," he explained. "So the first thing we did was get a fence around it... and then we started salvaging things."

In the days that followed the fire, as people of all ages pitched in to lend a hand in the clean-up operation, Eisenhauer, Jordan, and other members of what would soon become known as simply the restoration committee, began devising various scenarios which would outline what course of action they should pursue with regards to the church's future.

In late November, the committee presented the congregation with four alternatives through which they could proceed. The first and cheapest option was to simply do nothing and turn the site into a park and a cemetery. The second alternative was to build a new, modern building, while the third was to construct a replica of the original structure.

"The fourth one was to restore based on what we still had," Jordan said. "We had ballpark, pulled-out-of-the-air prices for each of these [alternatives] and we presented those to the parish."

On December 3, a secret ballot was held including all members of the congregation, "whether they were terribly active or not," to decide which way to proceed. "The vote was an overwhelming 91 percent for restoration," Jordan recalled.

After getting reassurance from Parks Canada that enough of the original structure remained so that a restored St. John's would still qualify as a National Historic Site, the committee forged on. One of their first orders of business was to hire Ron Cahoon, a project manager for Halifax-based Dora Construction, who had worked on numerous restoration projects in Canada, including the rebuilding of St. George's Anglican Church in Halifax that was severely damaged by fire in 1994.

As with other restorations he has been involved with, Cahoon's goal from the beginning was to utilize the services of local contractors and artisans wherever possible, and that choice served him well, considering the 250-year shipbuilding

history of the local community. Securing the site from the elements also became a major priority, one which was accomplished through the purchase of a giant barn-like metal frame and plastic cover which in the ensuing days became affectionately known as "the dome." Unfortunately, it wasn't until the following June that the covering was put in place, and the site had to endure some substantial storms during that first winter.

"Again, volunteers from the congregation showed up, men and women, to shovel out the snow," Eisenhauer said. "There was a lot of volunteer labor in those early days. The committee was also fortunate that the church was located in close proximity to Sattler Stained Glass Studios, who were commissioned to re-create 22 of the 23 stained-glass windows that once graced St. John's but were destroyed by the fire.

Company founder Norbert Sattler was actually in New York installing a window on November 1 when he first heard about the tragedy. However, he rushed home and he and his staff were on the scene the day after the blaze, crawling through the debris and picking up shards of broken stained glass with the help of volunteers from the congregation.

"The first thing I told Eisenhauer was that we had to collect all the pieces on the ground," he recalled, adding that analyzing them enabled him to learn details about the painting, colors, and origins of the windows that would prove vital to the restoration process.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS WORK TO SAVE WHAT THEY CAN OF THE CHURCH. REPLACEMENT PILLARS FOR THE CHURCH INTERIOR WERE CRAFTED BY LOCAL ARTISANS FROM SCOTIA TRAWLER'S SHIPYARD. NORBERT SATTLER HAD THE TASK OF RECREATING THE 22 STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS DESTROYED IN THE BLAZE.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIGHTHOUSE PUBLISHING LTD.

NORBERT SATTLER



As much glass as possible was salvaged from each window and placed in its own box, then taken to the company's studio and painstakingly put back together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Sattler said that because the windows were originally produced at different times and by different companies, "you have different painters and each painter has a different style." Because the studios were also technically different in the manner in which the windows were originally produced, artist Sue Obata had to know which layer of paint came first before she could begin recreating the images on the glass. For that reason, a window may have looked like the original when it was first painted, but once it was fired the appearance changed, "and it was not right, so you would have to do it again until it appeared the same."

Chimer Peter Allen, on the other hand, was about to embark on a two-year odyssey of his own. He knew something major was on fire as he dressed for work that fateful morning, and initially thought the blaze was not that serious as he approached the church. "But once it started to break out through the [bell] tower and the tower started to lean and give way, the initial feeling that I had and most people had was the church was lost," he recalled.

The most crushing blow for Allen, who had spent two decades ringing the chimes at St. John's, was when the tower finally collapsed and his beloved bells came crashing to the ground. "That's not something you ever think you are going to see in a lifetime," he said.

Once the decision to restore the church was made, Allen took responsibility for overseeing not only the restoration of the bells, but the construction of a new cradle to hold them in the refurbished tower as well. He also single-handedly took on the challenge of re-creating a new chime stand for the church, the first step of which was to sort through the rubble of the fire, trying to salvage whatever he could that resembled pieces of the original platform. Investigation into finding a company capable of refurbishing the church's ten bells led Allen to the Meeks and Watson Foundry in Georgetown, Ohio. On November 16, 2002, 100 years to the day from their original dedication and a year after the tragic fire, the bells of St. John's left Lunenburg on a flat bed truck, bound for the Meeks and Watson Foundry where, over the next 12 months three would be totally recast and seven others refurbished.

On November 6, 2003, with a large crowd gathered and under the watchful eye of Allen, the ten bells were bolted into the new cradle and gently lowered into place by a giant crane. Later that same day, after the final section of the church's new tower was placed over the cradle, Allen climbed to the top and, to the hearty cheers of the multitude gathered below, rang each bell, once, by hand.

"It was something I just did on the spur of the moment," he laughed. "I really didn't know if I was going to try it, but they were there and I was there and I just couldn't resist. It was great." Of course, without a funding plan capable of raising the estimated \$7.3 million necessary to complete the project, the restoration of St. John's Anglican church might never have gotten off the ground.

ONCE THE OUTER SHELL OF THE BUILDING WAS COMPLETED, ABOVE, WORKERS BEGAN THE METICULOUS TASK OF RESTORING THE INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH. TO SECURE THE CONSTRUCTION SITE, THE RESTORATION COMMITTEE AUTHORIZED THE ERECTION OF "THE DOME," A STEEL FRAME COVERED WITH PLASTIC THAT PROTECTED THE PROJECT FROM THE ELEMENTS.



STAR SEARCH

Artist J.J. Coolen was in the United States when she learned of the blaze that destroyed St. John's. Little did she know that just over a year later she would become an integral part of the building's resurrection—chosen to re-create the ornate celestial paintings that grace the ceiling of the chancel area of the church.

Unfortunately, she didn't have much to work with. "All we had were these old pictures from Parks Canada, which were incomplete," she recalled, suspecting it might be an actual starscape. Fortunately, Coolen's mother Margaret had a contact at the Canadian Astronomical Society, who put them in contact with David Turner, a professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax and former director of the Doran Planetarium at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario.

When shown the old photographs of the ceiling, his first impression was that the stars, which did not appear to be truly random, might represent something in the sky from the nineteenth century that was of interest to mariners, Turner recalled. "After about five minutes, however, I was able to convince myself that the paintings represented the familiar Northern Hemisphere constellation of Perseus," he explained.

"Since Perseus often appears in the eastern sky, I assumed that the stars were oriented as one would see them through the church rafters if the roof was not there." He said that while other constellations surrounding Perseus were "mostly there," they were often disguised by extra or missing stars. "But the pattern of Perseus sitting well above the eastern horizon struck me as peculiar. The orientation of the group was not as one would see it today."

Working on the theory that the image might have a connection to the first advent, Turner decided to go "backwards in time, 2000 years to be exact," and set the planetary software in his computer to December 25, A.D. 1. "I set the sky as it would appear at sunset, set the location for Lunenburg, and checked the eastern horizon," he said. "What I found was that I was looking at the stars as they appeared on the easternmost panel." With the identity of the image discovered, Turner made scaled replicas of the ceiling panels, containing small dots to represent each star.



ASTRONOMER DAVID TURNER AND ARTIST J.J. COOLEN ABOVE. ON NOVEMBER 6, 2003 THE CHURCH'S RESTORED AND REFURNISHED BELLS, ALONG WITH THE TOP SECTION OF THE TOWER THAT SUPPORTS THEM, WERE PUT IN PLACE, COMPLETING THE EXTERIOR STRUCTURAL WORK OF THE PROJECT.

Put in charge of that daunting task was local businessman Jim Eisenhauer, son of Andrew Eisenhauer, and a life-long member of the church. While the flow of contributions from parishoners started "before the cinders were cold," the enormity of raising millions of dollars for such a project would be challenging. Just two weeks after the fire, however, Canada's then Minister of Heritage and Culture Sheila Copps visited the site, offering a grant of \$100,000 to stabilize the structure and an additional \$900,000 in conditional funding. The church was also able to collect \$2.5 million from their insurer, enabling them to invest the money and earn an additional \$140,000 in interest before the principal was spent. Another benefactor was American Express, who, via the World Monuments Fund, provided \$80,000 to cover restoration of the decorative paintings within the church.

From the onset of the project, Eisenhauer made a case for raising funds, private or public, beyond what could be provided by the congregation. "It was really based on the fact that this project became as much or more about restoring a national historic site than it was about building a church for Anglicans in Lunenburg," he said. As devastating as the fire was, in the end it came as almost a blessing in disguise for the congregation. The newly restored church replaced a nearly 250-year-old building that—workers discovered as the project progressed—had been suffering from a number of serious structural problems, including a sinking foundation and unstable footings for the balcony and belltower, which had never really been attached to the building. "The farther we got along in the reconstruction," Andrew Eisenhauer added, "the more rot we found in various places. We found a whole litany of things that had to be corrected." Since then, those repairs coupled with more recent improvements to the electrical and heating systems, the installation of a new sprinkler system, fire-resistant insulation, better lighting and sound systems, and wheelchair accessible entrances made the restored St. John's not only more user friendly, but also a far superior structure than its predecessor. "If the original church lasted for 250 years, it should now last for 500," Eisenhauer said. The last element of the church to be restored, the organ, was inaugurated last June. ■



SUSAN CORRIU-GREEK

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