

# Savior at Last

A NEWBURGH GROUP HAS BIG PLANS TO RESTORE A LANDMARK CHURCH

BY MAUREEN BELDEN



The Dutch Reformed Church in Newburgh, Orange County, has seen better days: it is boarded up and decrepit. But the people gathered on its steps on an unseasonably warm Saturday last November were in a buoyant mood. Among them were federal and state officials, local politicians, representatives of cultural organizations, and proud local citizens. They had gathered to celebrate the dedication of the building as a National Historic Landmark.

Erected from 1835 to 1837, the structure was designed by the renowned architect Alexander Jackson Davis and is the only Greek Revival church of his that remains intact. Although the building has suffered through years of abandonment and neglect, supporters are committed to its restoration. Its status as a National Historic Landmark, bestowed by the United States Department of the Interior and the National Park Service, will help with fund-raising for the project. So will the efforts of a new citizens group, the Dutch Reformed Church Restoration Committee (DRCRC), formed as an advisory board to the city. A historic symbol of Newburgh's pride — Davis himself viewed it as such — the church is also, its supporters believe, a potent symbol for its future.

All of this activity marks a new beginning for the Dutch Reformed Church — or *another* new beginning. The DRCRC is the latest in a series of groups formed to restore and utilize the church since 1967, when the original congregation left the building for a new location in the Town of Newburgh. None have been successful.

But James Hoekema, the DRCRC's president, is optimistic about the task this time. "The building will eventually be used once again for public assembly: meetings, theater, concerts," he says. "Its exact nature will be defined as part of the restoration process, and we plan to get community input and involvement." Stressing that the building's significance stretches beyond the city, he notes that his organization hopes to generate regional and national interest. To some extent, it already has: major architectural firms vied for the restoration job, which was awarded to Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker, an Albany-based company that has worked to restore Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and Montgomery Place in Dutchess County, among other historic sites.

The price tag for the project is high: according to Hoekema and Elizabeth McKean, city hall liaison for the project, estimates range from \$5 million to \$8 million; a more definitive estimate will emerge as the architects complete their study. National Historic Landmark status will better enable the group to seek federal funds and substantial grants, such as those offered by the Getty Foundation, Hoekema says. The group has also announced the First Column Fund, to raise money for an eye-catching start to the project, in



which one of the monumental columns in the church's portico will be restored. Hoekema calls it "a tangible symbolic gesture of what's to come."

"There are many great buildings in Newburgh, and many that are being restored, but this is really the jewel in the crown," Hoekema continues. "It was symbolic of the city's prosperity when it was built, and of the city's misfortunes in the last decades. Restoration would be of great value; it could be symbolic in crystallizing optimism for the city and area."

Though weather-beaten and in disrepair, the building has been stabilized at various points and, especially on the inside, is largely intact. The roof cornice and entablature are boarded, as are the 30-foot-tall windows; their glass will need to be replaced, to match as closely as possible the violet-hued Boston Crown glass of the originals, says McKean. Ornamental wood trim and other exterior details, like the column capitals, are in storage. There is some water damage; the plank floor, concealed beneath a linoleum-type covering, needs structural support; and flaked paint has floated onto the original, velvet-covered pew cushions. But it is still possible to envision the building's former grandeur.

In its day, the Dutch Reformed Church exemplified the finest in



Standing tall through three centuries: Newburgh's Dutch Reformed Church in 1859 (right), 1964 (far right), and 2001. Photograph above by Michael Gabor.



Splendid restraint: the church's interior is notable for its horseshoe gallery (above), coffered ceiling (right), and simple ornamentation. Photographs by Michael Gabor.

Greek Revival architecture, with its spare and elegant simplicity of style, symmetry of form and proportion, and understated ornamentation. Measuring 50 feet high, 50 feet wide, and 100 feet long, it is modeled, according to a manuscript by Davis at the New York Public Library, on two "acknowledged best examples of Athenian architecture: the temple on the Ilissus and the Erechtheion on the Acropolis."

Constructed primarily of fieldstone covered with stucco, with walls two and a half feet thick, it was originally colored a very light ocher, to resemble marble, and scored to suggest stone blocks. The soaring entrance is 30 feet high and 14 feet wide with a door (also boarded up) that originally had large iron-studded wooden panels

matching pocket doors below. Wooden fluted Ionic columns rise from red sandstone bases to a height of 40 feet (their capitals at the moment replaced by wood blocks). The building originally had a lantern-topped dome, visible in early renderings, which was removed in the 1840s. In 1867 the church was extended 20 feet in the rear, and low transepts were added. The alterations were made with great respect for the original design, scholars assert.

Inside, the main sanctuary is a grand open space with characteristically restrained ornamentation. A horseshoe-shaped gallery gracefully curves around the perimeter. Painted in a recess at the rear, where an organ once stood, is the Reformed Dutch Church coat of arms with its inscription "Eendracht Mmacht Mmacht" — Unity Makes Strength. Overhead arches a celestial blue plaster ceiling with deeply recessed coffers. The windows, four on each side, emit good light on a December afternoon, even in their boarded-up state; glazed, they would have filled the sanctuary with the sun's rays.

The Dutch Reformed Church was very similar in style to the Church of the French Protestants in New York City, which Davis designed in the early 1830s with his then-partner Ithiel Town. Davis and Town, who formed one of the earliest and most significant architectural partnerships in the nation, were leading interpreters of the Greek Revival style and influential in its spread throughout the country. As the predominant mid-19th century architectural style, Greek Revival represented America's proud ideals as a youthful democracy that looked to the classical past for political inspiration. (In his later work, often in col-

laboration with Newburgh's Andrew Jackson Downing, Davis turned to more romantic, Gothic Revival styles.)

The Dutch Reformed Church's grandeur also symbolized the Newburgh congregation's optimism for its recently settled community. Situated on a promontory and oriented south toward the Hudson Highlands, the structure served as a proud visual beacon to river traffic. Describing the building in 1835, Davis himself wrote in the *Newburgh Gazette*: "The edifice occupies a commanding situation...owing to the immediate and rapid descent of the ground east of the site...the full effect of its architecture may be seen while passing the town, and the gigantic portico, and lofty dome...will henceforth serve as a conspicuous and characteristic landmark, indicative of the taste, discrimination, and sense of classical beauty, of the inhabitants of Newburgh."

In the intervening century and a half, Newburgh, like many American cities, experienced social and economic turbulence, and the Dutch Reformed Church's glory faded with that of the once prosperous city. The building, vacated by the congregation, was neglected; during the city's urban renewal craze, it faced the prospect of demolition. Community members seeking to save the church were aided in their efforts by local press reports noting that a former brothel on a nearby block was to be spared. The church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 and was included again as part of Newburgh's East End Historic District in 1985.

In the late 1970s, the building's steward was the Hudson Valley Freedom Theater, a community-based performing arts group, which secured grants and made stabilizations and renovations with the aim of transforming the church into an arts center. The theater eventually lost the building in an ugly court fight with the city over misuse of funds. The city reclaimed the building in 1984. In the early 1990s, the Newburgh Center for the Arts (NCA) was formed, with the intention of restoring the building as an arts center that would welcome community participation. This group also obtained important grants for securement and stabilization: a \$125,000 grant from the White House Millennium Council, for example, followed a 1998 visit to Newburgh by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who spoke at the church during a "Save America's Treasures" tour of East Coast cities. But the NCA could not raise monies on the daunting scale required. (Still, McKean hails the center's work as the catalyst behind ongoing efforts to save the building.)

The DRCRC is sensitive to the hurdles

faced by these previous organizations, Hoekema says. His group plans to be open with information and is considering publishing its minutes and treasurer's reports. "Our group is different from others that have attempted restoration. We are completely dedicated to the building itself, rather than to the building as part of a larger agenda."

The DRCRC began to take shape last January, following an event at Washington's Headquarters in the city. A group headed over to the church for an impromptu tour led by Bill Krattinger, a Historic Preservation Specialist at the state Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation who had written the building's National Historic Landmark status nomination. Among the group standing awestruck inside the sanctuary that afternoon was Carla Decker, the immediate past president of the Historical Society of Newburgh Bay and the Highlands, who is well known locally as a tireless advocate for social and cultural causes. After surveying the interior, Krattinger posed a question to the group, in what Decker recalls vividly as a laying down of the gauntlet. "He said, 'What are you local people going to do about this building?'" Decker recalls. "Well, I couldn't just go home and eat my dinner that night. It was a rallying cry. So I started calling people."

The energetic Decker quickly pulled together a group of area citizens passionate about preservation and history. ("Krattinger is our prophet," says Hoekema. "He said, 'Where are the people?' and Carla Decker answered, 'We are here.'") The group allied itself with the Newburgh Preservation Association, produced literature, created a Web site, and helped orga-

nize the jubilant dedication at the church.

"This is a great group of people with good chemistry," says Krattinger, who is writing his dissertation on Davis for the University at Albany. "The work they're going to do will be to resurrect an icon of the city's prosperity. And I think they realize the urgency of the situation. This building has basically been teetering on the edge since the late 1960s, and it won't have too many more chances. And they see that the building can have a place and serve a function in the community."

In his nomination, Krattinger described the church's inspirational lure: "The most salient characteristic of the Dutch Reformed Church is its undiminished ability to convey a powerful sense of time and place...it remains a noble sentinel and touchstone to an earlier optimistic period in American culture, architecture, and history, sustaining outstanding power of feeling and association."

At the dedication ceremony, David Schuyler, a professor of American Studies at Franklin & Marshall College who is also a Newburgh native and biographer of A.J. Downing, cast the current mission to restore the Dutch Reformed Church as historic in itself. "This is a work of architecture of transcendent importance," he opined. "Its restoration could have a transformative effect on Newburgh. Historians could look back on this day as a turning point in the city's recovery." Hoekema and his fellow supporters are determined to make this so. As he exhorted the crowd that day: "We're really going to make a go of it this time." ■

For more information, call the DRCRC at 845-569-7393, or visit [newburghdrc.org](http://newburghdrc.org).

