National Historic Landmark Nomination
"United Congregational Church: John La Farge Interior"
La Farge Restoration Fund
October 2013
Preservation Consultant: Ned Connors

Newport Congregational Church, c. 1899

LOCATION AND SETTING

Completed in 1857, the United Congregational Church, designed in a Lombard Romanesque style by architect Joseph C. Wells of New York, is an expression of a mid-19th-century sentiment within American Congregationalism to embrace Romanesque architectural forms associated with early Christianity as a component of religious renewal. Especially in rising urban economic or cultural centers, the traditional austere box of the "New England Meeting House" was perceived by younger congregants to be at odds with the growing urbanity of Christian religious expression. While the architectural significance of this building does not rise to the level of the best of Wells' work or more highly-regarded examples of Romanesque church design, it maintains an imposing presence within and contributes to the Newport National Landmark Historic District (1968), a densely settled, predominantly residential 18th- and 19th-century neighborhood overlooking Thames Street and Newport Harbor. The United Congregational Church is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places (1970)

Present and Historic Physical Appearance: Original Construction

The United Congregational Church, as designed by Joseph Wells and completed in 1857, comprised a rectangular sanctuary on a raised basement with vestibule and an attached, frame, Sunday School building. Built primarily of Connecticut brownstone, the church exterior combines randomly-coursed masonry with ashlar quoining. The basic rectangular, gabled form of this building derives from the simple "meeting houses" of early American Congregationalism. To this essential form was added the exterior treatments of two relatively ornate, asymmetrical towers flanking the three-door front entrance; a pronounced beltcourse at the gallery level; modillioned cornices on the main block and towers; and Romanesque hood moldings and engaged columns surrounding the doors and windows. The exterior appearance of the church as built was lightened considerably by the elegant curves of the slate-surfaced tower roofs lost in a major hurricane in the fall of 1938 and never replaced. These are now capped with flat panels.

The roughly 60' x 80' sanctuary has a high, main ceiling divided into five flat panels by four bracketed transverse beams. The lower, flanking gallery ceilings are similarly divided. This five-bay ceiling is derived from the sequence of octagonal section columns and five Romanesque arches that form the nave. The visual focus of the church sanctuary is a shallow, 18'-wide recessed arch rising to a height of approximately 30'. This serves as a backdrop to a wide and ornate reading desk. This east arch is echoed by one of similar dimension at the rear (west end) of the church. The organ loft is set within this arch. The Hook and Hastings organ was not installed until about ten years after the church was dedicated. At that time, the organ loft was not enclosed as it is now and the three tall stained glass windows centered on the church's gable front supplied ample natural light to the sanctuary. The play of this western light on the sanctuary figured prominently in La Farge's later mural and stained glass program.

The church provides a roughly 60' x 80' sanctuary and a shallow narthex providing five arched interior doors to this space. Two similar arched doors flanking the reading desk open to the attached parish house. This parish house was considerably more modest in size in 1857 (changes to this building are discussed below). Galleries with paneled parapets run the full length of the sanctuary. These galleries provide pitched seating, which is reflected in the pitch of the ceilings at floor level in the north and south aisles. Providing seating for 1,000 congregants, the ground floor of the sanctuary has a central row of pews, two side rows below the galleries, and pews aligned perpendicularly on both sides of the reading desk. These pews, as well as the reading desk, were painted a yellow oak faux grain. Although darkened with age, these original surfaces are in generally good condition. The gallery parapets were also given this treatment but were overpainted with pale blue in the mid-20th-century. This combination of yellow oak coupled with the green of the existing carpeting determined the dominant olive coloration for what La Farge described in 1887 as his "green church."

Wells set paired windows centered in each bay as defined by the five arches of the nave. This placement is carried over into the galleries. These windows were set in a deep, angled recess

with moldings that allowed La Farge to carefully use color to mediate between the stark flat white of the walls and the relative intensity of the light coming through the glass. While a few examples of Wells' original stained glass windows survive on the front (west) elevation and within the towers, the type of windows originally installed in the twenty openings of the nave and galleries is unknown. The plain stucco of the interior was scribed in a roughly 3' x 1' pattern to suggest ashlar masonry. To the raw stucco surface was applied a distemper paint, serving to mimic the varied surface and beige-pink coloration of natural stone. This original wall treatment survives in the two towers and hallway to the organ loft. This distemper substrate provides the foundation for the encaustic mural decoration applied by La Farge a generation later.

The faux yellow oak grain of the pews, dating to the original Wells design, survives in generally good condition. The green rug and pew cushions installed before La Farge began his work were replaced in the 20th century with red.

The La Farge Decorative Program (1880-81): MURALS

As discussed below in the *Significance* section, La Farge saw mural programs as an opportunity to remedy architectural defects, both structural and atmospheric. At United Congregational, he drew from his familiarity with medieval church architecture to create a decorative program suggestive of the green marble of Lombardic churches combined with Romanesque and Byzantine ornament. Seeking to draw attention away from the furnishings and coloration (which he considered ugly) predominating on the ground floor, he applied no wall decoration along the aisles below the galleries. Applied to the lower nave were areas of solid olive green confined to the columns and outside the arches of the east and west walls. Thus, the eye would be drawn upward to richer ornament, to the remarkably detailed design of the main and gallery ceiling panels, and forward to the shallow arch behind the reading desk, which he saw as the suggestion of an apse.

This upper-level mural begins at a point corresponding to the height of the column capitals and, in the form of a roughly 30"-high ribbon motif, wraps around the church galleries where it traverses the front (east) arch. Within this arch, the focal point of the church, La Farge painted an elaborate, pedimented design with columns suggestive of a temple entrance, effectively creating an angular visual counterpoint to the roundness of the arch. Through the use of advancing and receding colors illuminated by the carefully controlled light of the opalescent glass windows, La Farge transformed the plain, but generous spaces of this Romanesque church into what architectural historian Ron Onorato has called "a highly elaborate ensemble of color and light."

STAINED GLASS

La Farge's stained glass production was confined to the twenty paired windows of the sanctuary. Below the galleries at floor level, each of the paired, roughly 12" x 51" windows is placed in its own deep recess. Above the galleries, the roughly 20" x 9' paired windows share a common recess and are surmounted by a small spandrel window. Adhering to the proscription of

figurative imagery in his contract, La Farge designed a series of windows of opalescent and translucent glass with geometric patterns drawn from patterns of Byzantine, Moorish and Persian tiles. La Farge painted the window surrounds or “embrasures” in a scheme of colors to mediate between the stark light color of the gallery and aisle walls and the intensity of light entering through the windows.

The integrity of the La Farge decorative program

Three major studies of the physical condition of the church building and the La Farge interior have been carried out since the 1980s (see *Bibliography*). The first of the three, carried out in two phases by Morgan Phillips of SPNEA from 1984 to 1989, provided an exhaustive look at the condition and stability of the La Farge decoration as well as recommendations for restoration and cleaning. While significant challenges present themselves in the various states of preservation of the mural design, particularly La Farge’s application of encaustic paint over Wells’ original distemper coating, this study presents, based on technologies and best practices of the period, a strong case for successful restoration.

In the spring of 1996 Julie Sloan carried out a study of the condition of the twenty La Farge stained glass windows of the church sanctuary. Combining meticulous analysis of existing conditions with study of church archives, Sloan documented the artist’s original work as well as subsequent repairs, replacements, and apparent removal of original windows to wall openings other than those intended by La Farge. The most significant event with respect to the windows was a major hail and windstorm in July of 1894 that seriously damaged windows on the north elevation. Although La Farge’s company bid on these repairs, the contract was given to the low bidder, a company in Providence. Sloan estimates that due to the storm damage and window repairs carried out in the twentieth century, about 55-60% of the north balcony windows and about 80% of the lower aisle windows are original. She also suggested the possibility that there was some degree of storm damage to the windows of the south wall as well. It also appears that windows originally placed by La Farge on the north or south walls to address the relative difference in light intensity, may have been interchanged over the years.

A June 2010 *Existing Conditions Report* prepared by Newport Collaborative Architects provides detail on the general condition of the church building as well as the current state of the La Farge decorative program. Introduction of water by way of the roof, window surrounds and masonry has damaged some interior surfaces, including areas of solid as well as decorated encaustic paint.

Interior alterations 1857-present

The following significant alterations have been made to the church and La Farge interior:

- Electric lighting, first considered in 1897, was completed in 1902. This innovation can be seen in the incandescent bulbs arrayed on the column capitals, encircling the clerestory ventilators and the Tiffany-designed pendant lantern over the reading desk.

- Damage from the 1894 hailstorm required the repair of most of the north elevation windows. The contractor made repairs with a poor understanding of the original design. Window repairs were carried out until as recently as 1980. As a result of successive rebuilding and additions to the parish house (discussed below), two pairs of La Farge exterior south wall lancets (one in the gallery, one in the aisle) are now interior windows.

- Efforts to restore or repair parts of the La Farge murals were made as early as 1903, and continued occasionally into the late 20th century.

- In a move to address heat loss in 1949, the organ loft on the west (Spring St.) wall was enclosed, blocking the ample light that had bathed the nave. This significantly changed the general illumination of the interior and altered the lighting scheme as conceived by La Farge in his mural and stained glass program.

- A major hurricane in the fall of 1938 destroyed the tower spires, which were subsequently recapped and never reconstructed.

- The solid, deep olive ground of the mural panels of the clerestory, upper gallery, columns and organ loft was overpainted in blue in a mid-1990's effort to brighten the church. Blue paint was also applied to painted panels outside of the main arch at the reading desk.

- Four of the south gallery paired windows have been removed and stored for safekeeping. Replacements are plain lights w/ applied, translucent patterns suggestive of stained glass.

A note on the parish house. The parish house is a 2½-story, gabled, frame structure that wraps around the entire east elevation and a small part of the south elevation of the church. It is natural shingled with rectangular, multi-pane windows. While there is documentary reference to an attached chapel in this location in the original Wells design, the earliest Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (1884) shows a 1½-story, *L*-shaped, roughly 50' x 44' frame structure wrapping around part of the east and south walls and labeled as a *Sunday School*. This building likely served as a vestry as well. By 1891 the parish house, still extending along only a part of the east wall, was described as 2½ stories. This building appears to have been replaced by the current, 2½-story parish house in 1908. At that time the footprint of the parish house was extended to the entire east elevation of the church with an entrance at Pelham Street. At present, the first floor provides a church office, bathrooms, a parish hall, and a kitchen. Most of the second floor is rented out for professional space.

Additional Material: The United Congregational Church

The following article was in the Newport Mercury*, June 12, 1880. It is included here because of its importance as a remarkably detailed document of La Farge's original painting scheme.*

The improvements to the United Congregational Church, which have been in progress for the past four months, are now nearing the end, and it is expected to occupy the church for worship on Sunday. The repairs to the roof, finished sometime since, render the covering of the church complete and sound. The interior repairs have been under the direction of Mr. John Lafarge, the artist, and his work justifies the wisdom of securing his services. The decorations cover the walls and ceiling, and new windows are to be put in throughout except in the organ loft. A part of the new windows are already in place, and they are exceedingly handsome. Each couplet of windows is different from all the others, so that the church will contain twenty designs of windows. The patterns are very fine and thoroughly artistic. The designs are in flowers, worked in appropriate colors. The windows on the south side are less transparent than those on the opposite side, where there is less light than on the south side. By this device the light is perfectly modulated, and the decorations are shown off to the best advantage. Utility and beauty are very happily united in the new windows.

The decorations have been put on with the most painstaking care by experienced workmen under the frequent personal supervision of Mr. Lafarge. The ceiling of the nave of the church is decorated in large panels of 15 x 33 feet, each panel occupying the space between the transverse beams. The design is of the Byzantine style, and has an air rich and decorative. Beginning with the outside, is a narrow line of blue against the molding. Then comes a scroll in a flower pattern of green and yellow upon a back ground of red. Next is a row of pearls in yellow; then a leaf pattern in green and red on a dark ground; then fret-work of red on dark blue; then a second line of pearls in yellow; then a leaf pattern similar to the first one; then a small scroll of violets; then a row of pearls; then a scroll of flower pattern larger than the first. This brings the eye to the center panel, which is of dark green with two circular leaf patterns at either end.

Above the panels in the gallery of the nave is a corresponding design, made up of a broad stencil In red, green, yellow and white, a line of green, a band of yellow, and the centre of dark green. The brackets adjoining those panels are finished in green and gold, with a red vine pattern. On the arch is a gold ribbon pattern. On each of the two beads is a chain pattern in gold, with blue between, and above is a vine pattern of green and yellow. The ceiling over the galleries of the church is finished in alternate panels of gold leaf and a rich looking Turkish pattern of dark, handsomely blended colors. The walls are finished in a broad border of red, yellow, green, gold bands, with a broad base of a vase and flower pattern. Then succeeds the dark green background, and below this is a band in flower pattern of yellow and red upon a background of black. Thee galleries of the church are painted in dark green, and the pillars in the same color. The styles above are continued around the whole church except at the pulpit, where the walls are decorated with a handsome and distinct pattern, representing the entrance to a temple. This is of rich colors, and handsome design, and fitly rounds out the decorations. On the sides are gold stars on a background of blue. The pilasters are in gold, supporting the pediment. Underneath is the arch of blue, gold and red, with light green below for groundwork. The design is Romanesque and exceedingly fine. It is flanked on either side by diamond shaped figures, also Romanesque, and in which red is the prominent color. The church in its interior is now as handsome as any church of its class in New England.

Significance

The murals and opalescent and stained glass windows of United Congregational Church (later, Newport Congregational Church), executed by American artist John La Farge between 1880 and 1881, represent the only comprehensive interior designed by the artist and the most complete synthesis of La Farge's mastery of media and design. This work, following the success of the murals furnished for Trinity Church, Boston (NHL 1970), in collaboration with Henry Hobson Richardson, represents the advent of the American mural movement, the zenith of La Farge's creative professional life, and a benchmark in the history of American decorative arts. This interior also represents an important advance in the technology and craft of American stained glass production. While completing the twenty windows for this commission, La Farge perfected and patented his technique for the manufacture of opalescent glass, the popularization of which in the last two decades of the 19th century brought about a revival of American stained glass and profoundly influenced the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany and other American glass artisans. At present, the United Congregational Church is individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places (1970) and a contributing resource in the Newport National Historic Landmark District (1968).

The national significance of this building lies not in its exterior qualities, but in its interior ornament. A generation after its completion, newly-installed pastor Henry Van Dyke broke with the austere architectural traditions of Congregationalism, commissioning American artist John La Farge in 1879 to execute a comprehensive mural and stained glass decorative program within the church's expansive sanctuary. In various states of preservation, the bulk of La Farge's original program survives. Most significantly, the highly elaborated mural design of the wall behind the reading desk and the detail applied to ceiling panels, remain essentially unchanged. Original solid olive encaustic paint along the galleries and organ loft lies beneath areas of blue mid-20th-century overpaint and most of La Farge's windows—important examples of the then-emergent technique of opalescent architectural glass—survive along the north and south elevations.

The La Farge decorative program at United Congregational Church was the third of six major ecclesiastical commissions carried out by the artist in the period from 1877 to 1889. These commissions included the execution of a comprehensive mural program with some stained glass at Trinity Church (Boston, 1877); chancel decoration consisting of Renaissance-inspired reredos paintings at St. Thomas Church (New York, 1877-8); a unified scheme of matched non-figurative mural painting and opalescent and stained glass at United Congregational Church (Newport, 1880-1), mural decoration at Brick Presbyterian Church (New York, 1883); an extensive, but never completed, decorative program for the Church of St. Paul the Apostle (New York, 1884-9); figurative chancel painting and ceiling decoration of the Church of the Incarnation (New York, 1885); and a High-Renaissance style mural painting for the chancel of the Church of the Ascension (New York, 1886-8). These commissions and their relation to the decorative program of United Congregational Church are discussed in chronological order below.

John La Farge (1835-1910)

Born in 1835 to a well-to-do French émigré family in New York City, John La Farge began his art training at an early age under his maternal grandfather, Louis Binisse de Saint Victor, along with a rigorous, bilingual education emphasizing European literature and culture. Maintaining an active interest in art throughout his childhood, La Farge studied English watercolor techniques and studied briefly with Regis-Francois Gignoux, a landscape painter associated with the Hudson River School. His exposure to the rendering of natural light in landscape painting occurred at a formative period in his development as an artist. La Farge graduated from Mount St. Mary's College (NY) in June 1853. Setting aside the idea of a profession in art, he chose in 1854 to study law as a primary vocation while continuing to pursue his interest in painting. This study exposed him to the landscape painters of the Barbizon School and likely introduced him to Michel-Eugène Chevreul's *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors*, a classic text on color theory published in English in 1854. During this period La Farge produced a self portrait, his first known oil painting.

Upon completion of his law studies in 1856, La Farge embarked on a European tour with his brothers Henry and Alphonse. While in Paris, he studied briefly with French muralist and painter Thomas Couture, who encouraged him to copy masterworks at the Louvre. La Farge's study with Couture coincided fortuitously with the completion of one of the artist's most important murals at the Church of Saint-Eustache.

During this period he was exposed to the Romanticist work of Eugene Delacroix and Theodore Chasseriau. Before his return to New York, while on a stop in England, he discovered the work of the Pre-Raphaelite painters Gabriel Dante Rossetti and John Everett Millais at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition. While in Belgium, La Farge was introduced to encaustic mural painting in the work of muralist Henry Le Strange. Later he would utilize this durable mixture of wax melted with turpentine and alcohol in the murals completed for Trinity and United Congregational Churches.

In 1858 La Farge settled in New York City and likely practiced law for a brief period while renting space in the 10th Street Studio Building. His stint in the practice of law was short-lived. While at 10th Street he formed a friendship with the building's architect, Richard Morris Hunt, who encouraged him to relocate to Newport and continue art training with his brother, William Morris Hunt, who had also studied with Couture.

The following year La Farge relocated to Newport to study painting in Hunt's Church St. studio. While in this Rhode Island seacoast city, he painted actively, with a particular interest in landscapes painted *en plein air*. In these works he applied Chevreul's color theories and demonstrated a remarkable ability to render in oil the effects of light on his subject. La Farge's masterpiece, *Paradise Valley* (1866-68), depicting the seacoast area of Middletown of the same name, is considered by some scholars to be the first example of Impressionism painted on

American soil. In terms of future engagements, it is worth noting that an early and relatively modest mural project, executed in 1865 for the Charles Freedland house in Boston, brought La Farge's work to the attention of architect Henry Hobson Richardson.

The decoration of Trinity Church

In June 1872 H.H. Richardson received the commissioned to design Trinity Church at Copley Square in Boston's Back Bay. This building, Richardson's first major work, established his international reputation and inaugurated the style known as Richardsonian Romanesque. With the intent to integrate architecture and a decorative program into a unified whole, Trinity was a stunning success, recognized as the most significant building in America in a vote taken by architects in 1885. Few buildings can lay claim to such early and enduring acclaim.

Four years into Trinity's construction, Richardson engaged La Farge to produce his first large-scale decorative program for the church's interior. Despite limitations in time and funds, his work with Richardson, completed in a remarkable five month period, included complete decoration of the 21,500 square feet of interior surfaces. Cost and time restraints required that La Farge and his artisan crew use the same scaffolding as the construction workers.

Virginia Chieffo Raguin has summarized the importance of La Farge's work at Trinity:

The pictorial decoration of Trinity Church serves as a landmark in nineteenth century American art at a time when places of worship attracted the most progressive architectural and artistic expression…. The murals and stained glass present a program that influenced the progress of ecclesiastical work for a generation.

La Farge demonstrated a mastery of the application of color and the manipulation of light to address the architectural strengths as well as the inherent limitations of a building. He recognized "…architecture as sculpting space in the same way that color and form sculpture space in painting" and found in the interior expanses of Trinity the opportunity to create a universe with paint and light:

…Trinity offered unusual freedom for the painter. It was conceived as a barnlike "preaching box," which could focus attention on [Reverend] Philips Brooks, the most charismatic preacher of the day. The entire interior consisted of bare plaster walls, modeled on those of early Christian basilicas, almost unadorned by moldings or architectural protuberances. If left undecorated, in fact, the interior would have been quite grim. La Farge's murals, however, transformed the space into an Arabian Nights fairyland.

Drawing on his extensive background in color theory, La Farge, speaking to a group of young architects in 1892, described the architectural application of color as "a manner of construction":

Color represents what the painters call values—surfaces of a certain density or stability,

to denote either the principal parts of a construction or the secondary parts. They are to us somewhat as stones might be to you: they have the same seriousness of office. You wish a hard or a soft-looking stone according to place…Colors are modulations of shadows, and therefore are like your mouldings. Colors can be made to look hard or soft, to represent plane surfaces or suggest retreating ones.

Despite the acclaim attendant to the completion of Trinity Church, La Farge addressed the potential for tension between the demands of the "mere architect" and those of the muralist and stained glass artist.

Richardson supported me usually, but sometimes he exacted concessions to disguise what he thought his own mistakes, which variations, being made to please him, seemed yet to me to be unsuitable and inadequate; while certain concessions had to be made for merely temporary reasons—reasons no longer existing when the work was completed. Our driving hurry, increased by the necessity insisted upon by the architect of never appearing undecided, might excuse almost anything. Still, there were many simple points in which for outside reasons one had to yield to the architect, whose theories and practice were limited. It will always be difficult, for instance, to have a mere architect understand that the placing of stained glass windows in a building must largely modify color, so that a hue which is violent in out-of-door light may become very quiet within…

Commenting on La Farge's experience at Trinity and the opportunity to execute a fully coordinated program at United Congregational, James Yarnall has noted that

John La Farge's enthusiasm to decorate the interior of Newport's Congregational Church stemmed in part from an earlier disappointment. In 1876 his plans for ornamental stained glass to illuminate his new murals at Trinity were rejected by Trinity's building committee. La Farge never got over the feeling that the resulting mélange of pictorial windows by various artists was an insult to his carefully planned interior.

St. Thomas Church

While undertaking the painting of the nave panels at Trinity in 1877, La Farge received a commission for decoration of the chancel of St. Thomas Church in New York. This neo-Gothic church, designed by Richard Upjohn at the end of his career, was essentially complete and in use by the fall of 1870. Decoration of the chancel, however, was delayed until the receipt of a memorial bequest in early 1877. As was the case with Trinity, La Farge was required to work within the constraints of an existing decorative scheme and--unlike Trinity-- without the benefit of collaboration with the architect. La Farge's work consisted of figurative, Renaissance-inspired reredos paintings for the five panels of the church's polygonal apse. La Farge incorporated an existing Bishop's chair and a tall Latin cross into the design of the center panel of the apse. Said H. Barbara Weinberg:

Bound by physical and iconographical requirements, La Farge exploited the pentagonal form of the apse for an effect reminiscent of an early Renaissance altarpiece. In the central section, above the Bishop's chair, he set the cross in a relief panel of adoring angels, …enframed the panel with carved and inlaid pilasters, and … hung a heavy, ornate crown above it. The "wings" of the "altarpiece" illustrated the texts selected by the Rector, the *Noli Me Tangere* (John 20:17) in two panels at the left, and the *Visit of the Three Maries to the Tomb* (Luke 24:1-4) at the right.

Coupled with the reredos painting, La Farge was deeply involved in creating the architectural mouldings (in some cases, personally carving) the embrasures surrounding the paintings. Although not hired to replace and create stained glass in the existing openings, La Farge resorted to a novel, if "makeshift," means of controlling the light entering through the apse windows: He received permission to paint over the existing windows to soften harsh light and mask undesired detail. He also produced a detailed color scheme for the ceiling of the apse and collaborated with sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens in the creation of plaster-molded reliefs framing the reredos. Sadly, this work survives only in period black and white photography. The Church of St. Thomas was destroyed by fire in August 1905.

The Decoration of United Congregational Church

La Farge's decoration for the United Congregational Church interior was carried out some twenty years after the dedication of the building in 1857. This Aquidneck Island assembly, dating to the 17th century, had occupied modest, frame church structures through various reorganizations, the last of which was a modest, Greek Revival meetinghouse at the corner of Spring and Pelham Streets. Under the pastorate of Reverend Thatcher Thayer during the years 1841-1873, the growth of the congregation necessitated a larger building. Drawing on recommendations from the *Book of Plans for Churches and Parsonages* published by the General Congregational Convention in 1853, the congregation commissioned New York architect Joseph C. Wells to design a church with seating for 1000 congregants. Constructed of Connecticut sandstone, the building was at the time of its dedication described variously as "Byzantine Romanesque" and "Lombardic Venetian." Church designs of Joseph C. Wells (1814-1860), a founding member of the American Institute of Architects, had been featured in the 1853 *Book of Plans* along with recommended designs from the work of architect Richard Upjohn and others. The interior of the church as completed was austere, with a scribed stucco surface coated with a monochrome distemper paint suggesting the natural color variations of stone masonry. A few of the generally plain, stained glass windows from the original construction survive on the front (west) elevation and in the two towers.

Acceding to the pastorate of the United Congregational Church in 1878, Henry van Dyke was a rising figure in American Protestantism and, later, an important literary and academic figure as well. Shortly before coming to Newport, Van Dyke had completed two years of theological study at the University of Berlin, and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in February 1879. As William Pierson pointed out in "Richardson's Trinity Church and the New England

Meetinghouse," two major American Protestant denominations addressed a romantic impulse for liturgical as well as architectural reform in the mid-19th-century. While the Ecclesiological movement of the Episcopalians embraced and adapted forms of medieval ritual and Gothic architecture as an appropriate architectural form, Congregationalists, in a contemporaneous Purification movement, found a more appropriate fit in the architectural traditions of the Romanesque. Importantly, this architectural preference was married to a continued adherence to the Congregationalist's understanding of the second commandment's prohibition against graven imagery—figurative art—in church decoration.

By the late 1870s, Wells' twenty-year old church was in need of extensive repair. In considering a thorough decorative program, the United Congregational building committee maintained the traditional proscription of graven imagery in their plans for the church sanctuary. Although the growing sophistication and rising social status of early gilded age Newport Congregationalists might have called for a reconsideration of the ancient prohibitions that had rendered such an austere interior a generation earlier, Henry van Dyke saw the possibility of an aesthetic compromise. The building committee was persuaded to adorn the interior with a comprehensive and robust decorative program provided that there be no figurative imagery. La Farge, who had recently completed his mural program at Trinity, was chosen to carry out the decorative program at United Congregational. The choice of La Farge can be attributed to a number of factors. Trinity Church, the first major expression of the Romanesque style associated with Richardson, was recognized immediately as an architectural and decorative *tour de force.* Van Dyke, a man of letters, was certainly aware of this success and knew of La Farge's growing stature as a major figure in American art as well as his long ties to Newport.

In February 1880, the same month he received the patent for his "Colored-Glass Window," La Farge received the commission for the decoration of United Congregational. With this contract to "paint and glaze the Congregational Church in Newport, R.I.," he commenced work on the first and only comprehensive decorative program for a church interior under his creative direction.

Mural design at United Congregational Church

La Farge discussed at length the mural program at the church in two interviews with Mary Gay Humphreys, published in successive issues of *The Art Amateur* in the summer of 1887. On the general architectural qualities of the church as he first saw it in February 1880, La Farge noted that Romanesque churches "favor large plain spaces connected with very rich ones."

> The center of the church rises higher than the sides, to an unbroken flat ceiling. At the [east] end of the church is a flat wall, with a slight sunken space arched at the top, back of the preacher. This gives an advantage at once in a reality of modeling, which, in a meager way, is the recall of an apse.

On the decision to base his decoration on Byzantine and Romanesque influences, La Farge drew his inspiration from Wells' wide reading desk, the visual predominance of the shallow round arch

behind it, and a familiarity with the ecclesiastical architecture of European antiquity.

In front stands the reading-desk, ugly in detail and color, but the general line of which is not bad, and suggests the ambo of Byzantine art. Now, on these two forms—the ambo and the arched recess behind—I base my decoration. As the church has pillars, with arches resting on them, behind which are the side galleries, there is sufficient recall of all early round arch buildings to make me lean to some Romanesque or Byzantine style. Of course, I can't follow one style, as the divisions of the church are not logical to either.

Mincing no words in assessing the qualities of the existing interior furnishings that he was required to integrate into his work, La Farge explained why he placed the richest decoration behind the reading desk and high above the congregation:

…it was determined to retain the wood-work—pews and that sort of thing—and that it was very ugly and poorly colored. Therefore, my decoration must be such that it will not call attention to this ugliness. Consequently, my large, plain spaces are placed near the wood, and my fine ornament goes higher up.

Basing the design on a green ground, as opposed to the Pompeian red ground of Trinity, La Farge sought to evoke the green marble of southern Italian churches in the flat undecorated spaces of United Congregational. When asked by Humphreys about the possibility of applying a faux marble surface, La Farge responded directly:

I don't copy marbles, because I would never get any real richness in that way. The texture would always be poor and ridiculous. Anybody can laugh at that childishness, but nobody can laugh at a rich combination of colors, which would have much the same richness that an Eastern carpet has.

Serving as a focal point of the church decoration, La Farge created an exquisitely ornamented, pedimented portico set within the tall, shallow arch behind the reading desk. On the basis for this design, James Yarnall has noted that La Farge adapted Islamic ornament drawn from designs published by French orientalist Prisse D'Avennes a few years earlier. At the center of the portico he created a panel of flat color upon which would later be inscribed the Lord's Prayer. Extending from the frieze at the height of the column capitals is a wide ornamented band that is carried across the upper walls of the gallery, into the window recesses, and to the west arch at the organ loft. Above this band, La Farge created a system of painted panels, some richly ornamented, some relatively plain.

La Farge, addressing the particular challenge presented by the lower level of the church, explained that it was

…painted simply, partly for want of money, partly because it was liable to be rubbed, and partly because the ugly woodwork must melt into it;attention should not be drawn to its ugliness.

La Farge left the exterior walls and the pitched ceiling below the galleries painted a plain, light color to maximize reflected light from the paired lancet windows at floor level. Despite his assertion that the eye would be drawn to the elaborately decorated chancel and upward to the ceiling, he took great care in painting the deep window surrounds or "embrasures":

For real decoration [in the lower level of the church] I depended on my windows, which, fortunately, had deep embrasures. These I painted in distinct colors and made them part of the ornamental construction. The edges were given different colors. Two or three tints were introduced… Now all this color under the play of light coming in from the windows, rarely directly seen, but at an angle, was extremely effective. Another advantage of such an arrangement was that it could be used in connection with the stained glass, and together they made an ornamental panel of such richness that the eye was glad to rest on the plain wall spaces.

The main ceiling of United Congregational comprises five flat spaces defined by bracketed transverse beams rising from the columns. In keeping with his decision to draw the eye to the richest decoration at the highest elevation of the church, La Farge elaborated a design scheme for these five panels based on the design of an Islamic prayer rug that he had purchased at auction while working at Trinity a few years earlier. James Yarnall has recounted the difficulties this rug design later presented to the building committee:

This particular rug got La Farge into hot water. Some members of the congregation found its design reminiscent of a crucifix, one of the Christian symbols forbidden at the outset of the commission. The artist's son Oliver later recalled that, after La Farge finished the murals, payment was refused because he had introduced a cross. He was, however, very patient and went into a long explanation of the history of rugs, and finally convinced then that no serious harm would come to them.

H. Barbara Weinberg, in her 1987 essay, "John La Farge: Pioneer of the American Mural Movement," addressed the significance of La Farge's murals:

His murals were ambitious in scale, varied and sophisticated in subject matter, and experimental in technique. They were also absolutely unprecedented in the history of American art and remain among the most significant manifestations of the American mural movement.

"Painting with Colored Light"

Henry A. La Farge (1902-1985) thus described the work of his grandfather in integrating the principles of the interaction of color and light—refined through three decades of application in landscape painting—with the creation of architectural stained glass windows. It is important to note that when La Farge first considered the state of stained glass art in America in 1874, it had fallen into virtual obsolescence. There were no native suppliers of quality glass, few individuals trained in its production, and little from which to draw contemporary inspiration. La Farge's first

stained glass commission in 1874 was for a pair of windows at Harvard's recently-completed Memorial Hall. Finding severe limitations in the antique and cathedral glass then available, he experimented with a layering or "plating" process to create a wider range of tone and color. Dissatisfied with the immediate results, La Farge was, nonetheless, encouraged to continue his experimentation.

While executing the decorative program at Trinity, H.H. Richardson approached La Farge with the opportunity to design a set of windows for the William Watts Sherman House in Newport. These windows represent the first appearance alongside traditional transparent glass of several pieces of "opalescent glass," a milky, translucent glass the chemical impurities of which caused a degree of iridescence as well as the optical suggestion of complementary color. La Farge had been experimenting with plating and, later, opalescence in the years since his first work in stained glass four years earlier. The use of opalescent glass, an imitation of porcelain traditionally used for inexpensive tableware, as manufactured in sheet form was unprecedented in stained glass production.

La Farge's introduction to the possibility of modulating and controlling light through opalescent glass was serendipitous. The demanding physical circumstances of the work at Trinity found La Farge and his artisans working on scaffolds throughout the winter of 1877-8 in a cold construction site open to the weather. While recuperating from what may have been an associated illness, La Farge noticed the behavior of natural light as it passed through an opalescent glass object on his dresser. This unremarkable event led him to begin experimenting with the possibility of increasing dramatically the tonal range and modeling possibilities of stained glass.

During this experimental period La Farge sought the advice of Francis Thill, a Brooklyn glass artisan and proprietor of Thill's Flint Glass, who had been producing commercial items of flint glass, the trade term for opalescent glass. La Farge, examining glass rejected by Thill for inconsistency, offered to buy the lot for his window experiments. This rejected glass found its way into windows designed for the William Watts Sherman house (Newport) in 1878. His association with Thill also brought him into contact with Louis Heidt, another Brooklyn-based glass artisan, who provided him with glass for a window produced in 1879 for the Richard H. Derby house (Huntington, Long Island). This was La Farge's first predominantly opalescent glass window.

In the same year La Farge established his own stained glass manufacturing studio in New York. In November 1879 he applied for a patent for a "Colored-Glass Window," which was granted the following February. La Farge did not maintain in the patent application that he had invented opalescent glass; he claimed, rather, an innovation in its application in sheet form to the production of windows.

By experiment I have discovered that opalescent and iridescent effects may, in an eminent degree, be obtained for windows by the employment of that glass known as "opal

glass," it being commonly used for tableware and fancy articles, such as boxes, but never for windows.

As to the specific function of opalescent glass in window production, La Farge continued:

> The object of my invention is to obtain opalescent and iridescent effects in glass windows, to insure translucency of the glass used therein and lessen complete transparency, which is a great fault in ordinary glass windows, the transparency of the class of glass employed by me softening the light, and, by reason of its unevenness of structure and form, the direct passage of rays of light and the tendency of the said rays to focus are prevented.

In summary, La Farge's experimentation with opalescent and traditional glass in the period from 1874 to his patent approval in 1880 allowed him to greatly expand the possibilities of color, tone, light modulation, and modeling in stained glass. As noted by Julie L. Sloan and James Yarnall, "La Farge created a window with animated surface textures and saturation unprecedented in American art." Through the use of opalescence, plating, insertion of a wide variety of shaped and textured elements, and painting on glass, John La Farge initiated a renaissance in architectural stained glass that was to profoundly influence the work of a generation of artisans such as Louis Comfort Tiffany and D. Maitland Armstrong.

Stained glass at United Congregational

While working at Trinity La Farge had become intensely aware of the role that light transmitted through windows played on mural design. Able to address this only partially at Trinity, La Farge developed his window scheme at United Congregational as a carefully planned interplay of light and paint. As stated earlier, La Farge had received his patent for opalescent glass the same month that he accepted his commission at Newport. The ability to control interior illumination was of particular importance at this church, which received intense light from the windows of the south and west walls. La Farge described this challenge in the *Art Amateur*:

> In the lighting of the church I had another problem which helped me in my 'green church.' On the south side there was too much glare. This needed to be softened, at the same time I was warned not to lose too much light. The two sides inevitably had to be treated differently. On the south side I used blue, very solid blue glass, mingled with some neutral tints. But on the north side, where the light was all needed, I used a little blue to recall the impression of the windows of the opposite side, a little green and a large quantity of transparent glass of neutral tint. On my opal glass I depended for a certain amount of yellow, and this was introduced as a design on the open light space.

As he had done with the murals, La Farge in his window design also drew from Byzantine and Islamic motifs. These twenty windows, arrayed below and above the galleries, "…echoed and varied the mural motifs, and were rendered with thick, opaque glass suggestive of the pierced stone windows of Islamic mosques."

At the close of the second *Art Amateur* interview, La Farge reflected upon his transformation of an austere New England Congregational church:

> Now you have the church as it was furnished. It is a green church. It is the result of concessions and compromises. It has accepted all mistakes of structure, all that was unpleasing but permanent, and had endeavored to make it pleasing and permanent. Certainly it has unity, and, I think, an agreeable artistic unity.

Major Ecclesiastical Commissions after United Congregational Church

In the brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, John La Farge found anew an opportunity to redecorate a simple "meeting house" to suit the changing sensibilities of late century American Protestantism. Henry Van Dyke, who had served previously as pastor of United Congregational Church and was responsible for La Farge's non-figurative program there, was called to the Brick Church in 1883. Soon after his arrival the church he commissioned La Farge to transform the austere interior of this neo-classical church completed in 1858.

Drawing inspiration from the Byzantine and Turkish vocabulary of his previous ecclesiastical commission, La Farge reconceived the church sanctuary through a mural and mosaic program. Unlike his previous commission, the plain, shuttered glass windows of the Brick Presbyterian sanctuary remained untouched. A 1909 history of the congregation assessed the 1883 transformation:

> Instead of the old grays and whites of a New England meeting-house, which had been familiar to generations of Brick Church worshippers…the spacious interior now possessed some of the warmth and richness of color characteristic of the Byzantine churches of old world.

Just as an evolving sense of the role of beauty in Christian worship had permitted the transformation of this church interior in 1883, the twentieth century "…witnessed a reaction against the reattachment to European tradition which the late 19th century had avidly endorsed." The 1858 Brick Presbyterian Church was demolished in 1937, a victim of these changing sensibilities.

Three years after the completion of United Congregational Church, John La Farge planned a second comprehensive design scheme with the commission for decoration of the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City, the only Catholic church among his major ecclesiastical works. Unconstrained by any prohibition of figurative art, La Farge envisioned a unified scheme that would include a painted ceiling, stained and opalescent glass windows, and chancel decoration that featured a central mural. La Farge completed the painting of a Byzantine-inspired evening sky in 1884, the only part of the decoration completed at the time of the church's dedication the following January. Despite this auspicious start, La Farge's work, carried out over the next fifteen years, would be subject to much reconsideration due to design changes and

changing financial conditions. Although several large clerestory windows were produced and the painting of the chancel sidewalls completed, financial difficulties and artistic differences prevented painting of the planned central mural and production of some of the chancel and apse windows. La Farge disassociated himself from any further work at St. Paul in 1899, although decorative work under different artists continued into the early 20th century. Again, due to changing design sensibilities, the church removed most of its interior ornament in the late 1950s.

The Church of the Incarnation, also in New York City, was designed in the English Gothic style by Emlin T. Littell in 1864. The circumstance of an 1882 fire and its serious damage to the chancel provoked a discussion of improvements to the building and a decorative program led by Rector Arthur Brooks (brother of Philips Brooks, who had presided over the construction and decoration of Trinity Church, Boston). Decorative possibilities arising from the deepening of the chancel (occasioned by the 1882 fire) led the clergy and congregation "toward a more formal liturgical attitude and an acceptance of beautiful surroundings for worship." To this end, John La Farge was commissioned in 1885 to paint two murals, the *Nativity of Christ* and *Adoration of the Magi* to be placed on either side of a central chancel panel. La Farge, among other stained glass artisans, had also produced windows for the nave. Several years later Henry Wynd Young, provided a mural scheme for the center panel. Although his work at the Church of the Incarnation was not part of a comprehensive program as carried out at United Congregational and unachieved at St. Paul the Apostle, H. Barbara Weinberg noted that his work there revealed "the development of La Farge's mature style of mural painting."

Richard Upjohn completed the Church of the Ascension, New York City, in 1841. In the late 1880s this church interior, described by the architect as being "of almost Puritan Austerity," underwent a redesign reflecting a changing understanding of the role of beauty in the physical surroundings of Protestant worship. This work under the architectural supervision of Stanford White, included a proposed deepening of the chancel and removal of the galleries on either side of the nave. Although the deepening of the chancel would have permitted the installation of a stained glass window in the chancel wall, this would have required the demolition of an adjoining rectory. For a number of reasons, this plan was rejected in favor of removal of the galleries and the installation behind the altar of a large Renaissance-inspired mural depicting the ascension of Christ. John La Farge in 1886 received the commission to execute this roughly 27' high x 37' wide painting behind the altar. La Farge was to erect a canvas in place, secured in the plaster of the shallow chancel wall. He began the painting in 1887 and completed it, to great acclaim, in late December 1888.

Although Weinberg has noted that the Ascension mural "climaxed the growth of La Farge's mature mural work," the work at Church of the Ascension was confined to this one chancel painting. No related mural or window program was contemplated.

A note on the rivalry between John La Farge and Louis Comfort Tiffany

The Tiffany-designed stained glass lantern, donated in the name of a parishioner, hung above the

reading desk at the church in 1902, serves as a discordant reminder of the relationship between these two artists. Until his death there remained a bitter division between La Farge and Charles Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) that touched upon patent disputes, business agreements, and artistic legacy.

At the time of his experiments with opalescent glass in 1879, La Farge, in his mid-forties, was an accomplished painter and muralist who had been working and experimenting with stained glass for about five years. In a privately published monograph written in 1893, La Farge recalled a visit from the younger Tiffany to his studio:

> I remember a window I had made mostly out of English [transparent] glass, some of the pieces of which I had taken out, to be replaced at will by the opalescent; and I remember Mr. Tiffany's pleasure at being shown the enormous change caused by these insertions.

La Farge's recollections appear in a privately printed 1893 monograph to address, among other things, an assertion made by Tiffany in an article distributed at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Although no space was made at the exposition for the showcasing of American stained glass, then enjoying remarkable popularity and aesthetic development, Tiffany secured space within that allotted for his father's jewelry emporium in New York. At the fair, Tiffany exhibited several of his own stained glass works and prepared, in conjunction with the exhibition, an article published in the July 1893 issue of *Forum*, "American Art Supreme in Stained Glass," in which he asserted that America's

> …marked advance was in the employment of opalescent glass of varying density, semi-transparency, and translucency. It is true that this glass had been used before in window work, but not to any great extent.

La Farge's response to this assertion was unambiguous. "The making of such [opalescent] glass seems to have been known for an indefinite period, though I cannot remember, as Mr. Tiffany seems to, that this glass had been used before in window work."

The decorous nature of this public disagreement belied a bitter patent dispute, played out in the early 1880s, that achieved resolution not through any intervention of the courts, but through the passage of time and an expansion of the art pioneered by these two men, that, ironically, rendered impossible any legal resolution of the dispute.

Although La Farge's "Colored-Glass Window" 1879 patent application made no claim to the invention of opalescent glass, it did claim primacy in its use in windows and addressed at some length the chemical composition and manufacture of this material. Tiffany may have felt compelled to apply for his own patent in the same name which dealt with the methods of assembly and, specifically, claimed an improvement in the methods of plating, or layering of glass to achieve a significant enhancement of optical effects. As Julie Sloan has pointed out:

Although the [La Farge] patent is not strictly for manufacture of the glass, the language describes in detail the manufacturing processes. It may have been construed by Tiffany to give La Farge exclusive rights to produce the glass.

Sloan summarizes the unsatisfying resolution to the patent conflict:

…La Farge's patent was for the use of the material, while Tiffany's was for its assembly. Both patents were important in theory: without permission to use La Farge's, Tiffany's was not possible, but without permission to use Tiffany's, La Farge could not assemble windows of opalescent glass.

Although documentary evidence suggests initial preparation of a lawsuit, the matter appears to have been resolved out of court by 1883. Market forces had created a new business climate that rendered the pursuit of legal relief impossible. The enthusiastic public response to the work of both men had led to an inevitable increase in practitioners of the art and a great increase in the number of glass suppliers. Both artists were free from that point on to pursue the use and assembly of opalescent glass in their respective works without fear of reprisal. La Farge continued to produce murals and stained glass into the first decade of the 20th century and Tiffany achieved spectacular success in the his design work as well as the marketing of a range of lower-priced consumer products that included lamps and candlesticks.

The La Farge Restoration Fund

The La Farge Restoration Fund at Newport Congregational Church is a 501c3 nonprofit charitable organization in Newport, Rhode Island. It was formed in 1995 under the name La Farge Heritage Foundation of Newport to support preservation of Newport Congregational Church and its unique comprehensive interior artwork and opalescent glass windows by internationally renowned American artist John La Farge.

John La Farge by Robert Wilton Lockwood, 1891

The Fund's mission is to raise funds to ensure that the church building is sound and to develop a program to ensure that the interior, uniquely integrated and designed, is preserved and accessible to the public as a valued educational and arts resource and a treasured part of the rich historical and cultural patrimony of old town Newport www.lafargerestorationfund.org).