

## *The Wanamaker Memorial Tower at Falls of the Schuylkill: Exploring one of Rodman Wanamaker's great artworks—and its uncertain future*

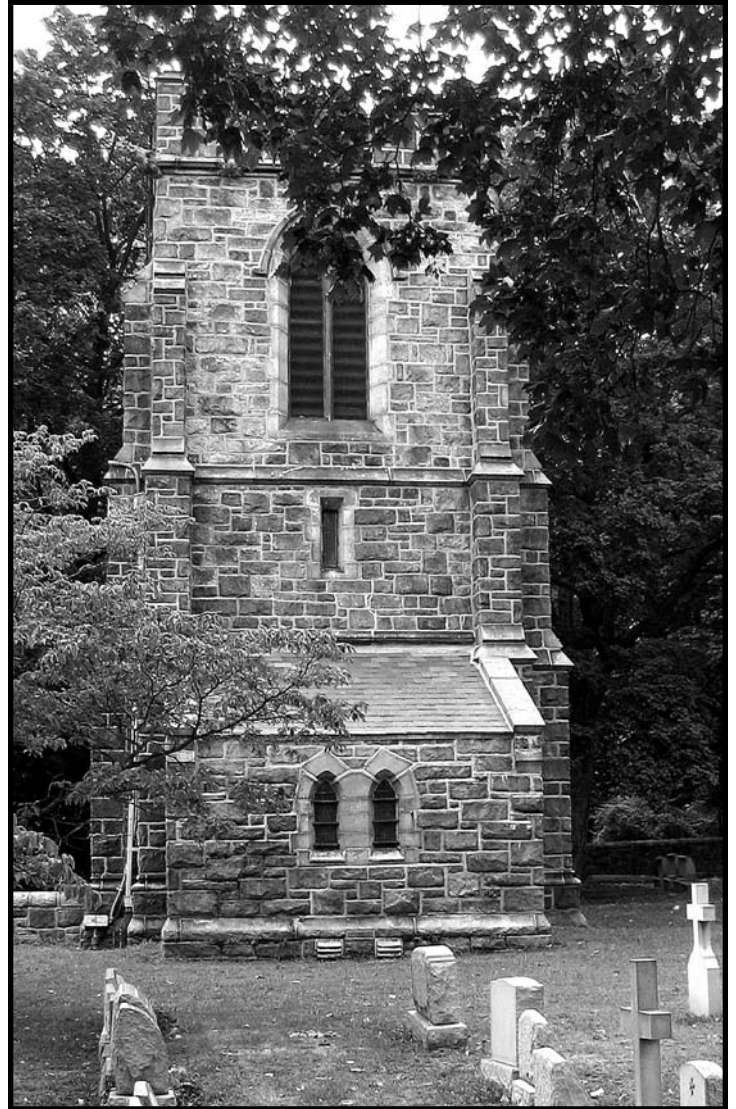
● *Scholar Katherine Verone's Masters Thesis on the tower (University of Pennsylvania, 2010) explores its rich history and "precarious" physical condition. There are insights into the creative forces that brought it into being and the natural forces slowly tearing it apart*

A few years back we ran a series called "Who Owns John Wanamaker's Tomb," spotlighting a now-resolved property dispute between the Philadelphia parish of St. James the Less and the Diocese of Pennsylvania. The case, costing untold thousands of dollars, was carried to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. That court held that the vestry was responsible for the property, but must administer it in favor of the diocese. Following the ruling, however, all parishioners instead elected to vacate the parish, which was by then depleted of funds.

Since that time, the property has been administered by St. Mark's Church in Philadelphia, (where Rodman Wanamaker's first wife, Fernanda, rests beneath the recently restored Lady Chapel). St. Mark's has re-opened the St. James the Less school, and holds occasional week-day church services. A thesis on the tower was recently prepared by scholar Katherine Verone to fulfill a requirement for her Master's Degree in Historic Preservation.

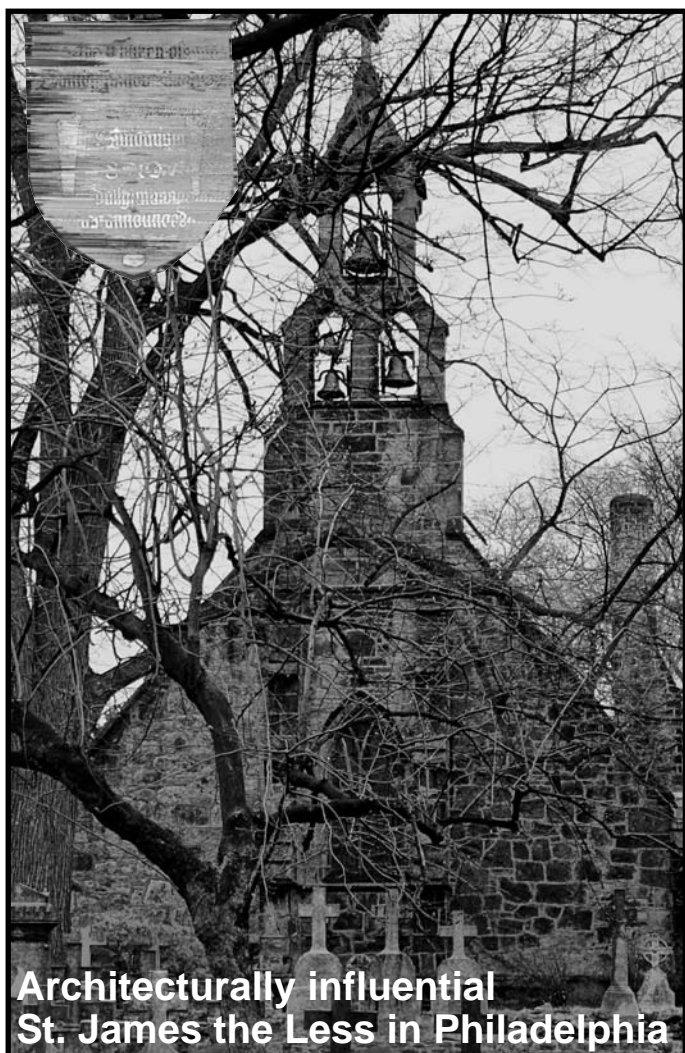
Located near Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, St. James the Less with its Wanamaker Tower is indeed an historic site. According to the National Park Service's Statement of Significance (1985), St. James "is the first example of the pure English Parish church style in America, and one of the best examples of a 19th-century American Gothic church for its coherence and authenticity of design. Its influence on the major architects of the Gothic Revival in the United States was profound."

That preeminence did not come about by happenstance. Pains were taken to have the church design approved by the England's Cambridge Camden Society so that the resulting house of worship could be as English Gothic as possible. The idea was to restore the piety of Medieval times by resurrecting its architecture. St. James was built to the actual plans of an historic English church.



**T**he Wanamaker Memorial Tower, which once was clad in ivy. Although a *New York Times* announcement said that the new tower was to house imported bells, those actually installed are by the American McShane foundry. Some of the tower's copper and bronze downspouts and grilles have been stripped by metal thieves.

The structure does not bear the name Wanamaker, perhaps to protect those interred inside. In 1876, grave robbers stole the body of merchant A.T. Stewart—whom John Wanamaker admired—from St. Mark's Church in New York's Bowery. A \$20,000 ransom was successfully obtained. Although the recovered remains were never positively identified, they were re-buried at Long Island's Cathedral of the Incarnation, where Peter Richard Conte began his musical pursuits. A legend there states that the church bells are wired to ring if Stewart's tomb is again targeted.



Architecturally influential  
St. James the Less in Philadelphia

**P**HILADELPHIA'S ST. JAMES THE LESS bristles in Britishness down to its tombstones. From all appearances, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* might have been inspired by its features. The Episcopal parish, built in 1846, was the first American adoptee of the medieval aesthetic promoted by Britain's Cambridge Camden Society, an influential artistic movement that Rodman Wanamaker furthered on a heroic scale in the church memorials he commissioned.

The Cambridge Camden society was dedicated to the belief that historic Gothic architecture exerted a direct spiritual influence, promoting piety. Churches with boxed-in pews (such as found in Philadelphia's Colonial churches) were frowned on. The construction of a chancel in front of the nave with East-facing altar was restored to "architecturally correct" parish-church design—with that space being the proper place for the choir and organ. So universally accepted were the society's aesthetic goals by leading architects that there was no longer a need for a Society by the 1860s.

The thesis goes into considerable detail on the history of the tower, noting that the untimely 1908 death of Thomas B. Wanamaker in Paris led his brother Rodman Wanamaker to propose that a combination tomb and bell-and-chime tower be built for St. James the Less. The architect was John T. Windrim, who was designing the new Lindenhurst mansion for the family (see the Fall issue for details). Windrim is perhaps best known for several monumental power plants and phone-company buildings that rose from his drafting board. He also designed Philadelphia's Franklin Institute science museum.

Rodman was much in sympathy with the aesthetic of the Cambridge Camden Society. According to a *New York Times* article uncovered by historian Rick Seifert, Rodman paid \$150,000 to have this tomb and bell tower erected, using a harmonizing Gothic design. At that time, average workers at Wanamaker's earned about \$500 a year, while Rodman Wanamaker was making about a third of a million dollars annually, according to historian Herbert Ershkowitz. Rodman Wanamaker inherited much of Thomas B. Wanamaker's estate (after prevailing in a protracted probate-court fight with his brother's widow).

#### THE ARCHITECTURAL BACKGROUND

**T**he Vestry of St. James the Less hired a consultant, the well know Boston architect Henry Vaughan, an English Gothic specialist. Concern was expressed that the new stonework would clash if the tower was incorporated into the weathered church, so various outlying sites were suggested—including one that would have required it to be built to large scale to straddle the auto entrance. That scheme was rejected, and construction began about 1909 with the tower situated alongside the entrance road. Rodman Wanamaker's deed of gift specified that if the tower ever needed to be moved, the vestry was legally obligated to precisely rebuild it.

The Wanamaker Tower was built like the new Philadelphia Store, with a granite exterior and marble interior. As with most things Rodman Wanamaker undertook, art was intertwined with utility. The tower forms a pedestrian gateway to the churchyard, with enclosed private side chapels on either side of the walkway that runs through the tower. Each chapel is flanked on each side by three catacombs. The tombs were reserved for parents John and Mary Wanamaker and their lineal descendants.

John Wanamaker's family monument was surprisingly Catholic in spirit for a shrine that would house the mortal remains of a leading Presbyterian layman from a denomination that didn't regard prayers for the dead as Biblical. The medieval idea of the chantry chapel, where priests were paid to say perpetual Masses for the departed from endowment income, was visually echoed here. Both of the above-ground chapels have, at their front, a marble altar-like affair with decorated carvings and panels, stained-glass windows, and a crucifix at

Narrative continues on Page 12. Pictures follow.

TOWER CLOCK STRIKING MELODY - S. JAMES THE LESS, PHILA., PA

ON THE HOUR I, II, III & IV  
 I suppose that the following arrangement was used for  
 1st quarter = I 3d quarter = I, II, & III  
 2d quarter = I & II

RICK SEIFERT

ABOVE: Name that tune! The melody that is written out above was played from the Deagan Chimes, but the tune's origins are a mystery. Reader insight is sought.

RIGHT: The St. James the Less School invited people to "Spend a Morning with John Wanamaker" in this 2012 fund-raiser. The Friends contributed some door prizes for the event. The school caters to under-resourced youth in the neighborhood, and is run by Philadelphia's St. Mark's Church on Locust Street.

BELOW: The Bells and Deagan tower chimes as viewed looking up. John Wanamaker was said to have loved chimes. A St. James the Less vestry record said there were to be as many bells as Trinity, Rittenhouse Square.

RICK SEIFERT



SPEND A MORNING WITH JOHN WANAMAKER AND FAMOUS PHILADELPHIANS PAST!

**CHURCH and Cemetery of ST. JAMES THE LESS**

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27\***  
 3201 West Clearfield Street • Philadelphia, PA 19132  
 Corner of Hunting Park Avenue and Clearfield Street just off Kelly Drive

**9:30 - 11:00am**  
 \$30 per person

ONLY 16 SPOTS AVAILABLE • RSVP TODAY!  
 mnewman@stjamesphila.org or (215) 226-1276  
 Live refreshments will be served • \*RAIN-DATE: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28

**EXCLUSIVE EVENT—ONE DAY ONLY!**

SEE THE FINAL RESTING PLACE OF RETAIL SHOPPING PIONEER JOHN WANAMAKER

Come to see some of the most celebrated Philadelphians interred in one of the city's historic churchyards. The tour includes an intimate look inside the one-of-a-kind Wanamaker Tower, the final resting place for retail magnate John Wanamaker and his beloved family, will end this special tour led by Susan Sklaroff, docent and historian.

Churchyard tour presented by **ST. JAMES SCHOOL**  
 ENTER TO LEARN. GO FORTH TO SERVE.

RICK SEIFERT



# THE SENTOR

WILLIAM ZULKER



**A**BOVE: Dr. William Zulker, author of *John Wanamaker, King of Merchants*, stands in the north mausoleum. John Wanamaker's tomb is at his feet, Rodman Wanamaker's is above, and above that lies Rodman's son, Captain John Wanamaker.

On the opposite side from bottom to top are the tombs of Mary Brown (Mrs. John) Wanamaker, son Thomas B. Wanamaker and daughter Elizabeth "Lillie" Wanamaker McLeod. The tombs are aesthetically patterned after medieval chantry chapels. Note the spectacularly carved prayer desk at right.

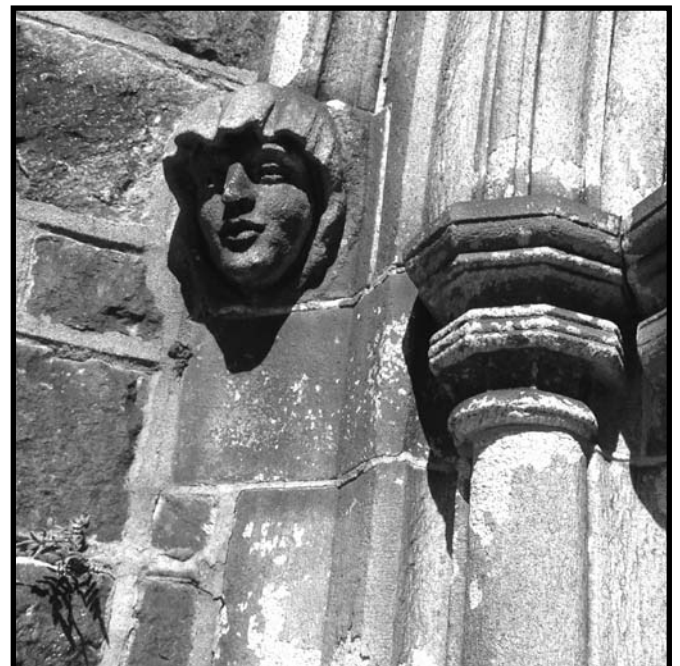
Beautiful, English-inspired windows framed with a crocketed arch headed by carved angels complete the chapel-like experience, and at one time the chamber was graced with an American flag near the Founder's tomb. It is said that John Wanamaker loved chimes, and provisions in the compact made with the church specified that if the tomb needed to be removed, it was incumbent to rebuild it as designed, and with the chimes and bells retained. In former times Wanamaker cadets used to pay homage on significant occasions.



WILLIAM ZULKER

**T**his urn of bronze, iron and gold, by famed Alsatian metalworker Edgar Brandt, was laid at Rodman Wanamaker's tomb four months after his death. It was a gift from France and contains soil from three historic sites in France: from Picpus Cemetery, where Lafayette is buried; from the battlefield near Luneville, where the first U.S. soldiers fell in France during the Great War; and from Ver-sur-Mer on the coast of France, where Commander Byrd and his companions made their rough water landing after crossing the Atlantic and circling fogbound Paris in the Wanamaker aircraft *America*.

**BELOW:** A carved face at an entrance arch evokes the spirit of the Middle Ages.





**THE WANAMAKER MEMORIAL TOWER** is distinguished by beautiful forged metalwork attributed to master blacksmith Samuel Yellen, the “devil with a hammer in his hand.” The narrow door at center opens to spiral stairs for the bell-ringing room above and catacombs below. The door at right, originally shielded by bronze grilles, leads to the visitation area depicted on the opposite page. During college years, this writer liked to bicycle through Fairmount Park. Reaching the Wanamaker Tower was a somewhat dangerous and spooky experience as one had to pedal quickly up the curved concrete canyon of an automobile viaduct that cut through the middle of Laurel Hill Cemetery. There was no sidewalk so cars had to slow down—if they could see you. Classical monuments and mausoleums spread in every direction. The Wanamaker Tower was at the top of the climb. As one rested in the solitude, slowly soaking in the sensation of being utterly alone, suddenly the crash of Deagan Tower Chimes—mere feet away—would shatter the silence.

St. James the Less was once a rural church, and the surrounding stretches of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park owe their openness more for water purity than recreation. The city absorbed the Schuylkill river farms to keep industry from tainting its water supply. A few of these estates became vast 19th-century garden cemeteries. Their beautiful monuments and tomb-temples brought the consolation of dignity to death and set a movement that spread across Victorian America.



the center. A prayer desk faces these features. The shallow “altars,” also had a practical function, however, as fresh-air vents ran behind them, connecting basement passages to the exterior.

Outside these chapels, in the entrance-way, a narrow doorway leads to a medieval-style stone spiral staircase running up and down the tower. Going down, one arrives at catacombs, arranged in the same footprint as above. Two walls running directly below the entryway arches have three additional catacombs each, making space for 30 family members in total. A slab in the middle of the tower walkway, marked with a bronze cross, is removable for burial access. According to the thesis, only three persons have elected to be interred below (an area where one printed source mentions the presence of deceased servants). The last burial was descendant Rosemary [Warburton Gaynor] Chisholm in 1974. Other Wanamakers have chosen to be interred in a terrestrial tomb in the churchyard, and the thesis alludes to a lack of family interest in tower preservation.

## PRESERVATION CHALLENGES

Building a work of art in the form of a medieval church tower rather than a conventional mausoleum seems to have been prompted by the belief that the parish would be in continual existence, and that worshippers would be committed to keeping up this chime tower as an enhancement of their services. Conventional above-ground tombs are built of interlocking solid granite slabs and require minimal maintenance. But these tower tombs are encased by a random-coursed ashlar stonework building, with marble interior panels that are anchored to the granite exterior by bronze wires. Everything is topped by regular building roofing. Such a structure requires much the same attention as any house or church. Because rain water has run freely between the granite and the interior marble, all sorts of structural problems have resulted.

Originally, the family did provide an endowment: \$4000 came from Rodman Wanamaker, and another

\$20,000 came from his children. These investments are said to have become exhausted while the parish was active, however, and income from the parish burial fund was tapped for occasional repairs. Verone’s thesis states that all parish funds have been depleted, and the church and chapel were essentially orphaned by 2010.

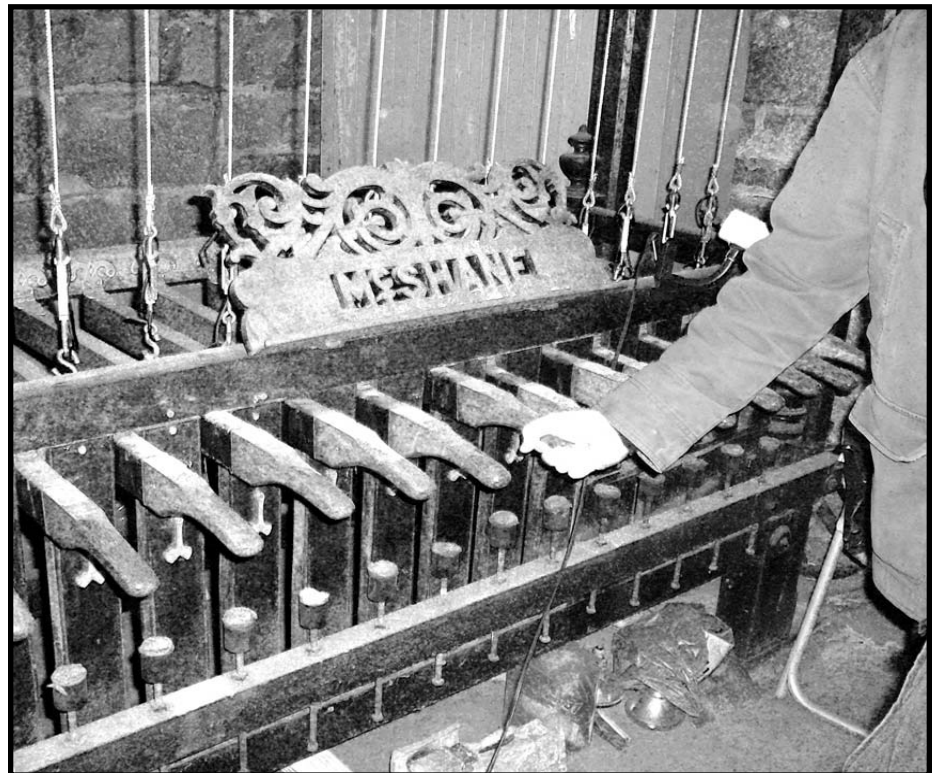
## SURVEYING THE FABRIC

As revealed in the study, much of the structure is in good condition, although roofing problems have led to worrisome deterioration. The author goes into precise detail on water staining, efflorescence, cracks in stone, bowing of marble and, in the basement, the complete separation, collapse and break-up of marble wall facings. Because the side panels help support the marble ceiling, and an additional side panel is in danger of collapse, a hazardous situation exists in the basement area that could cascade into ever bigger structural problems.

The thesis outlines a stabilization proposal and says that the vestry of St. Mark’s Church has a duty to make the tower and its plight more widely known. Some water mediation efforts had already been undertaken during the writing of the thesis.

The Diocese of Pennsylvania fought heroically for control of this property, which constitutes the last resting place of many prominent Americans. It is, of course, possible that the tower could some day be condemned and razed if deterioration and vandalism are allowed to continue.

Anyone interested in historic preservation would benefit from reading this study and following the thinking that goes into professional analysis. The study is available from the Internet and is linked from the Friends home page. In the meantime, proper stewardship for this landmark is a cause worthy of continued advocacy.



RICK SEIFERT

The bell-ringing keyboard in the tower’s upper chamber.