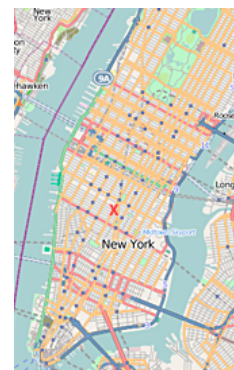


A Gazetteer of Our Christian Heritage

Church of the Transfiguration (The Little Church Around the Corner) New York, N. Y.



Beginnings The Reverend George Hendric Houghton founded The Church of the Transfiguration, 1 East 29th Street, New York City, in 1848. It was consecrated in 1849. The tower was added in 1852, the lych-gate designed by Frederick Clarke Withers was added in 1896, and the Lady Chapel and mortuary chapel in 1906 and 1908 respectively. Transfiguration was designated a New York City landmark in 1967 and in 1973 it was added to the National Registry of Historic Places.



How it became the Little Church Around the Corner. Rev. William T. Sabine, rector of the nearby Church of the Atonement, declined the request of actor Joseph Jefferson to hold a funeral service for actor George Holland. However, he made the suggestion that “There is a little church around the corner where it might be done.” From then on Transfiguration was known as “The Little Church Around the Corner.”

The Civil War Riots “Draft Week” (July 13-16, 1863) was a time of trouble in Lower Manhattan when working class men reacted violently to the law enacted by Congress to Draft men to fight in the Civil War. The Irish and African Americans were targeted. The Colored Orphan Asylum at 44th Street and Fifth Avenue was burned to the ground. Transfiguration was a sanctuary for African Americans who filled, sanctuary, vestry, library and schoolroom. Reverend Houghton, the founder, turned away rioters who threatened the church. The church was an Underground Railway stop.

The Actors’ Church P. G. Wodehouse, author, playwright and creator of Jeeves, was married here (1914). Lloyd Bridges chose Transfiguration for his marriage. Fred Astaire¹ was confirmed at LCAC (1912). Members of the theatrical Profession took the church to their hearts and it soon became known as The Actors’ Church.



The Actors Guild, a non-profit charitable organization to help needy actors held its first meeting here in December of 1924. In 1923 a group of actors met with the rector, Reverend Randolph Ray and church trustees to form the Episcopal Actors’ Guild, “as a social and artistic center” and to help those in need. It was from the first non-denominational. George Arliss was the first president of the Guild. Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Julia Marlowe were early guild leaders. Basil Rathbone, Tallulah Bankhead, Peggy Wood, Joan



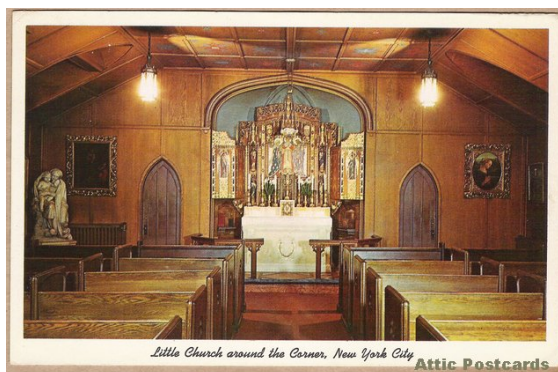
Fontaine, Rex Harrison (later Sir Rex), Bernard Hughes were officers or Council members of the Guild. Charleton Heston was president from 1971-1973. The producer Vinton Freedley served as president from the 1940's to 1968. Sam Waterston (Executive Assistant District Attorney

Jack McCoy, "Law and Order") served as president for two years.

In the 1970's the church hosted the Joseph Jefferson Theatre Company that fostered young talent, such as Armand Assante (René Benoit, "La Grenouille" to fans of NCIS).

A memorial service for King George VI was held at Transfiguration. Basil Rathbone and Brian Aherne read the lessons and Laurence Olivier (not yet knighted) gave the Eulogy.

Charitable Works The Guild helped actors in need and in the 1990's added an HIV/AIDS relief program. During the Great Depression, members of the Episcopal Actors Guild, using their own meager funds, handed out meal tickets for the first 100 persons who appeared in front of the church's lych-gate (Right). The hungry were able to get a fine meal for 20 cents at Beefsteak John's on 3rd Avenue.



The Church in Film, on Stage and in

TV The church was featured in a key scene of the 1925 silent film *The Street of Forgotten Men*, and in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). It was featured in the *Shades of Darkness* episode of the TV show *The Equalizer* in 1986. In literature it is alluded to twice in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. On stage, for the musical *Sally* (1920) starring Marilyn

Miller, P.G. Wodehouse together with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern wrote a song in tribute to The Little Church around the Corner.

For Everyone The Church has offered traditionally a weekly program of free musical performances. The men and boys choir offer special music for concerts and summer services. The garden continues to be a welcome haven for Manhattanites to escape into an English garden.

Memorials Memorials in the church include stained glass windows and wall plaques. Of the former the most memorable is that of Joseph Jefferson carrying the shrouded body of George Holland to the waiting Saviour. There are other memorials t Rex Harrison, Will Rogers, Gertrude Lawrence and Edwin Booth

Today The Church of the Transfiguration still presents itself as “Anglo-Catholic” and uses High Church ceremony, as it has for over a century. However, today it also fully subscribes to the liberal theology of the Episcopal Church of the USA.

Notes:

1. The Guild paid Astaire’s rent, and later, paid Fred’s and his sister Adele’s train fair to Hollywood. In recognition of this assistance Astaire made an annual donation to the Guild until his death.

See also: www.actorsguild.org

