



Friends of Historic Second Church

THE HERALD



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ELECTRIC FIXTURES AND WILLY H. LAU *by Catherine Acosta*

On March 9, 1900, the Chicago Tribune printed an article entitled “Presbyterian Church Burns.” Other headlines that followed the article were “Only the Walls and Steeple of the Second Congregation’s Edifice Saved From Ruin. Leaking Gas Causes Fire.” A year and half later Howard Van Doren Shaw and Frederic Clay Bartlett’s \$100,000 renovation was unveiled (the equivalent of \$2.5 million today). Of course, the remodeled sanctuary was no longer illuminated by gas fixtures; it was now equipped with electric ones. The church records show that Willy H. Lau manufactured the new lighting fixtures and Shaw designed them. Unfortunately, no other information exists about the origins of the fixtures, or whether Lau was more involved with them.

During the 1880s there were several small electric companies in Chicago, though it was not until the 1890s that the industry became more streamlined. The Western Edison Light Co. was established in Chicago in 1882; it had become the Chicago Edison Co. by 1897. Electricity arrived on Prairie Avenue in 1882, making its debut at the John W. Doane mansion once located at 1827 S. Prairie Avenue (a six-minute walk from Second Presbyterian). In 1890, the Chicago Edison Company took

out an ad in the Chicago Tribune advertising to both its commercial and residential customers that the company was in the process of completing a new plant at 27th Street and Wabash, and could now provide service to “residents of the south side between 16th and 35th streets.”

The advent of electricity coincided with the aesthetic movement’s decorative sensibility of emphasizing “Art for Art’s Sake” and following the many revival styles that dominated the 19th century. This resulted in a hybrid of various styles for electric fixtures. Between the turn of the century and WWI, both Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts movement significantly influenced lighting design. These artistic periods, combined with lighting design’s new freedom from the limitations imposed by open-flame lighting, allowed for unlimited creativity in design. Flowers, animals, and female figures in particular adorn many types of fixtures from this period.

Second Presbyterian’s most notable lighting fixtures are the electroliers suspended from angel brackets in the sanctuary. The overall form of the electroliers resembles a crown and the lowest bulbs are framed with pieces of cast brass made



Photo by James Caulfield

to imitate angels’ wings. Three bulbs continue up the main chain of the fixtures and are also framed with identical brass wings, while the rest of the bulbs are set to resemble candles and are surrounded by semi-opaque glass reflectors. Glass is used in most of the fixtures within the sanctuary.

The low ceiling fixtures under the balconies feature a pomegranate motif. The glass used to depict the stylized pomegranates is adorned with several small round glass pieces connected by thin wire suggesting seeds. Many of the fixtures in the church have exposed bulbs. This is a

common feature of early lighting design, given the utilitarian function of electric lighting and the low wattage of the bulbs at that time (even much lower than in the reproduction bulbs that are currently used in the fixtures today). The candelabras at the pulpit, with their decoration of pomegranates and grapes and leaded glass panels over the bulbs (pictured on page 1), and the simple Arts and Crafts ceiling fixtures in the narthex are other great examples of the era's lighting fixtures.

Willy H. Lau is listed in several Chicago business directories from 1893-1923. The listings suggest Lau had begun his career in architectural metal work and lighting design in his early twenties. In 1900, the same year Lau was commissioned for Second Presbyterian Church, he also produced fixtures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the B. Harley Bradley House in Kankakee, Illinois. In 1905, Lau incorporated his company with Conrad H. Poppenhusen and Joseph A. Mack, creating the Willy H. Lau Company of Chicago. During this time he had a factory at 93 East Indiana Street (what is known today as 53rd Street).

In 1906 Lau participated in the 19th Annual Exhibition of the Chicago Architectural Club and presented an exhibit of "bronze electroliers in L'Art Nouveau." He was also listed as a patron who "generously subscribed toward the Expense Fund" of the exhibition, along with "Howard Shaw," Louis H. Sullivan, and The Tobey Furniture Company. Shaw also exhibited that year at the

Chicago Architectural Club. Lau maintained a showroom in the Pullman Building until 1907, when he relocated to 26-28 E. Lake Street; a 1907 ad of his in the Chicago Tribune stated: "I am combining the factory and display rooms to better accommodate my patrons." The following year he participated in the 3rd Annual Chicago Electrical Show and in 1910 is listed under the gas and electric category in the city's business directory. A 1912 Chicago Tribune ad announced that the company's entire stock of electric lighting fixtures were "at fifty cents on the dollar" because they were relocating. The ad also shows the diversity of styles and fixtures the company produced with illustrations of art glass table lamps, a Prairie-style bracket lamp, and a Louis XV side candle bracket.

By March of 1915 Lau had filed for bankruptcy, finding the competition in the commercial field to be disastrous to his established trade. He also cited that the amount of building in the city that year to be extremely low. Lau was able to recover from his financial losses to some extent, and the last ad in the Tribune for his business appears in October of 1916, under the headline: "Willy H. Lau Original Designer."

WILLY H. LAU
Original Designer
Formerly located in the Pullman
and Fine Arts Buildings
Now Has His Studio in the
STEVENS BUILDING.
Central 7873. Shop 1028.

The ad also stated that he now had a studio located in the Stevens Building (17 N. State) and had formerly occupied both the Pullman Building and the Fine

Arts Building (Frederic Clay Bartlett too was once an occupant of the Fine Arts Building and a mural of his from 1910 is still on display there).

Lau died on May 22, 1933, at the age of 67. His obituary and a brief article mentioning the details of his funeral appeared in the Chicago Tribune two days later, calling him "a pioneer designer of electric lighting fixtures." The Tribune also mentioned that he had a studio at 1514 North Wells. The company vanished from the city's business directories in 1923 and afterward, one can only speculate about the type of work he did.

Today, Willy H. Lau's work is gaining recognition outside of Chicago. In 2013, Los Angeles Modern Auctions sold a ceiling fixture designed by well-known Prairie School architect George W. Maher for \$37,500. The piece is believed to be manufactured by Lau, who frequently collaborated with Maher. The Prairie-style leaded glass and bronze hanging lamp dates from 1907 and was custom designed for the dining room of the John Rath Residence in Chicago.

Stepping into Second Presbyterian Church today, while observing the fixtures, one would agree with *House Beautiful*, which in 1906 eloquently summarized the effect of Lau's work: "For dignified simplicity it would be hard to find anything better than the work of Willy H. Lau, a Chicago man of unusual ability."

Note: Information on early electrical service in the neighborhood courtesy of Glessner House Museum.

This month's cover story was written by Catherine Acosta, a docent at Clarke House, Glessner House Museum, and Second Presbyterian Church. Originally from Southern California, Catherine earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Mission Statement

The mission of Friends of Historic Second Church is to preserve and restore the art and architecture of Chicago's Landmark Second Presbyterian Church, educate a worldwide audience about its historical and cultural significance, and share those resources with the community.

FRIENDS FIRST WALKING TOUR A SUCCESS

On June 21, Friends held our first-ever public event away from Second Presbyterian Church, a walking tour of buildings designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. A sell-out crowd attended the tour led by Friends docent and board member, Nate Lielasus, AIA, and William Tyre, Friends board member and Executive Director and Curator of Glessner House Museum. The tour highlighted Howard Van Doren Shaw's residential and institutional commissions in Hyde Park and Kenwood neighborhoods, accompanied by the tour leaders' thorough research on Shaw's architectural influences and stylistic evolution over the course of his career. The tour concluded with refreshments held at the Howard Van Doren Shaw-designed Quadrangle Club, constructed in 1922. If you missed out on this tour, Friends is already planning a repeat of the tour, and making plans to add to our tour repertoire in the future. To stay informed of Friends' programs and events, follow us on Facebook and/or subscribe to our email list at: <http://www.2ndpresbyterianfriends.org/contact.html>



Second Presbyterian Public Tour Schedule:

Wednesdays
1:00-3:00pm

Saturdays
1:00-3:00pm

Sundays (after worship service)
12:15pm

ATTENTION ALL DOWNTON ABBEY FANS!

Friends' 2014 lecture series will conclude on October 23 when Debra Mancoff, Scholar-in-Residence at the Newberry Library in Chicago, will present her lecture, "What They Wore: Prairie Avenue Style," at Second Presbyterian Church. Ms. Mancoff's lecture will focus on the fashions worn by the ladies who resided in the Prairie Avenue neighborhood during its heyday. Like most fashionable women of their day, the women of Prairie Avenue changed their ensembles according to the events of their day. Ms. Mancoff will discuss not only the fashions of the Edwardian period, but the etiquette that dictated what women wore, and when and where. This lecture is co-sponsored by the Glessner House Museum. The lecture will be held at 7:00pm on Thursday, Oct. 23 at Second Presbyterian Church, with tours and a reception with light refreshments at 6:00pm. Suggested donation for the lecture is \$5.

Photo credit: Glessner House Museum



GRANTS RECEIVED FOR MURAL AND PLASTER WORK

The Service Club of Chicago has awarded Friends a grant in the amount of \$8,950 to support the preservation work desperately needed to repair the damaged plaster and delaminating mural in the southeast corner of the church balcony. Extensive damage to the plaster has resulted in the Bartlett mural, painted on canvas, beginning to peel away from the wall. The plaster damage is due to prior water infiltration which has now been remedied. The Service Club grant, along with a generous donation from Friends' member Christian Vinyard, enables Friends to undertake this critically needed work. Look for scaffolding to go up and the work to commence early this fall and stop by to see the work in progress. Plaster damage is evident in many areas throughout the sanctuary and narthex and donations to undertake further repairs are welcomed.



***Friends of Historic
Second Church
gratefully acknowledges
the following
memberships,
donations, and
contributions from
March 1, 2014 – July 15,
2014.***

\$10,000-\$24,999

Christian Vinyard

\$5,000-\$9,999

The Donnelley Foundation
The Service Club of Chicago

\$1,000-\$4,999

Linda & Jeff Miller

\$500-\$999

Rowena Rennie Balogun
Marshall Field V
Chad & Lorien Yonker

\$100-\$499

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Pauline Ferguson
Ann Fisher
Rhona & Julian Frazin
*in honor of Jeff Case &
Dale Olah*
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Elizabeth Greene
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in honor of Jeff Case
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Timothy &
Lauralyn Stuebner
Sharon Sylvester
Christina Welch
Holly Wells
Stephen &
Mary Kay Wysham

FUNDRAISING FOR EXTERIOR DOORS COMPLETED

Thanks to the donations we have received in response to our appeal to complete the restoration of the exterior doors, Friends is pleased to announce that the fundraising goal for the project has been met. With the funds in place, the exterior doors dating to architect James Renwick's original 1874 design for the church will be restored. The project will include the repair of historic wood ornamental details and repainting the doors in their original color. Friends extends special thanks to member Christian Vinyard for the generous gift which allowed us to reach our fundraising goal. Work on the doors will begin in late July.

Friends of Historic Second Church is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. All donations are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

All members receive the newsletter *The Herald* and are recognized as donors in the newsletter.

Tiffany Circle: \$40 Individual; \$55 Family; \$25 Student/Senior (62 yrs.+)

Benefits include: Free tours during regular tour hours, 25% discount on Friends' merchandise.

Arts & Crafts Circle: \$100 and above

Benefits include: Free tours during regular tour hours, 25% discount on Friends' merchandise, and invitations to special members-only tours and programs.

I/we wish to become a member of Friends of Historic Second Church or renew a current membership.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

Enclosed is my check for \$_____ for membership at the following level:

____ **Tiffany Circle:** \$40 Individual; \$55 Family; \$25 Student/Senior (62 yrs.+)

____ **Art & Crafts Circle:** \$100 and above

____ Yes ____ No You may acknowledge my contribution in Friends' publications.

____ Yes ____ No I prefer to receive my newsletter by e-mail.

____ Yes ____ No I am interested in volunteering for Friends' activities.

If you wish to discuss sponsoring a restoration project, contact Friends of Historic Second Church at 1-800-657-0687.

Please return completed form with check made payable to:

Friends of Historic Second Church 1936 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60616.

Or renew online at www.2ndpresbyterianfriends.org.



1936 S. Michigan Ave.

Chicago, IL 60616

Phone: 1-800-657-0687

E-mail: historic2ndchurch@yahoo.com

Web: www.2ndpresbyterianfriends.org

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Graphic Designer: Lisa Napoles

Contributors: Catherine Acosta, Ann Belletire,

Linda Miller, Lisa Napoles, and Bill Tyre.

A LARGE CROWD JOINS FRIENDS FOR "A LOOK BACK TO 1874"

On June 19th an enthusiastic crowd of 155 people joined Friends for a celebration of the 140th anniversary of the church at its present South Michigan Avenue location and a trip back in time to the year James Renwick's church was completed. William Tyre, Executive Director and Curator of Glessner House Museum and Friends' Board member, was the gatherings' guide to Chicago and the world of 1874. This was an era of incredible growth. Chicago was the fastest growing city in the world at the time. It was a time for flourishing in the arts. Organist Michael Shawgo played selections from the period including "The Grand March" from Verdi's Aida, performed in Chicago for the first time in 1874. Tyre brought the time alive for the audience and surprised us with details of Chicago's second fire. He presented details of many of the fine homes and buildings built during this period that no longer exist, thus highlighting the need for preservation of those buildings, like Historic Second Church, that still stand. Tyre's talk was followed by a reception, while tours were provided by Friends' docents.



Photo by Catherine Acosta