

## Preservation Profile: The First Universalist Church, Southold, New York

"Yankee Ingenuity and Common Sense"



Figure 2. One of the old spires is lowered from the cupola on a rope trolley.

Several years ago, when we discovered that the steeple of our church was in danger of collapsing, we feared that we might lose a distinctive Long Island landmark. However, with the help of many talented and dedicated volunteers, whom we turned selectively to. With the application of large doses of Yankee ingenuity and common sense, the restoration of the First Universalist Church of Southold became a "loaves and fishes" story of success, in which we began with little and ended up with more than enough.

In 1835, forty free-thinking families came together to form a congregation that believed in the "salvation of all men." A year later the congregation began to build a church on a small rise just outside the 17th-century village of Southold, which is located on the North Fork of Long Island near the banks of Peconic Bay. The new church was a graceful creation in the Federal style, but with Gothic Revival arched windows and a distinctive, six-sided belfry. In accordance with the participatory character of rural life in the early 19th century, most of the labor to build this new church came from local residents, some of whom were members of the church. Even the architect, Richard Lathers, donated his time to the project.

Surprisingly, Richard Lathers called our attention to the dangerous condition of the building 150 years later. In 1985, during Hurricane Gloria, a wooden sphere surmounting one of the steeple's spires fell to the ground, along with some other pieces of woodwork. Upon inspection, we discovered that this sphere bore a molded face with a prominent mustache pinched out of glazing putty. Old photographs in the church archives revealed that the face on the sphere was a caricature of Richard Lathers devised by an anonymous workman during the construction of the church in 1836.

No major work had been done on our steeple since 1907, and few members of the church had ventured up the shaky ladder to examine it. When we decided to go up and have a look, we found conditions that confirmed everyone's worst fears: water soaked timbers and badly rotted exterior woodwork. The six spires and connecting railings surmounting the belfry were rickety, with many of the original details missing. Only one spire still retained its teetering wooden sphere, and the central mast carrying the weathervane swayed ominously in every passing breeze. The flat hexagonal belfry roof was collapsing in the middle, allowing rainwater to funnel into the belfry around the base of the central mast. Starlings and pigeons had gained access to the steeple through rotted and missing boards and had deposited a six-inch thick mat of droppings on the belfry floor.

We invited several professional steeplejacks to give written estimates for repairs. These ranged from \$69,000 to \$133,000. Most of them called for the demolition of the steeple and its replacement with a new structure built with pressure-treated timbers. For a church of less than a hundred active members (many elderly) and modest financial reserves, all of these estimates were financially out of reach.

Without the money to contract out the whole job, and lacking the prospect of raising it in the near future, we had to take a creative approach to the problem or else risk losing our steeple. We hired a consulting engineer to examine the steeple's structural condition. He discovered that while the condition of the steeple appeared, at first glance, to be extremely hazardous, the damage was not serious enough to warrant replacement of the entire structure. Despite extensive water damage, most of the structural timbers were still sound and many of the most glaring problems were cosmetic, rather than structural. In addition, because the belfry floor and roof were flat, and there was a protected walkway around the outside of the cupola, nearly the whole structure was accessible. No scaffolding or special rigging was needed. We determined that experienced volunteers

could perform much of the light carpentry, belfry cleaning and simple repairs. One of us, acting as general contractor, could supervise the volunteers, coordinate scheduling and oversee the hiring of local specialists, as they were required.

We concluded that if a local carpenter could build the church with volunteer help in 1836 (probably without special equipment), we ought to be able to restore the structure the same way. However, the key to the plan required taking a conservative approach to the existing structure, restoring elements whenever possible and replacing material only when absolutely necessary. Using this methodology, we estimated that the job could be done for approximately \$20,000, a fraction of the lowest bid of \$69,000. This seemed like a creative and practical plan that appealed both to our Yankee spirit and thin pocketbooks.

We then formed a "Steeple Committee" that was co-chaired by a structural expert and a financial wizard. The rest of the Committee was composed of those who had already volunteered to work or who had contributed fundraising ideas and were willing to see them through. A few friends of the church also joined in as consultants and workers. Even though not members of the congregation, they volunteered to work in the same spirit as the townspeople who helped build the church in 1836. As a result, the Committee was staffed by people who had broad experience in building trades, fine woodworking, heavy rigging, rope climbing and cave excavation, grant writing, photography, fundraising, financial management and even gold-leafing.

At the initial meetings, we laid plans and divided tasks among the members. We carefully studied the engineer's report and examined the problem area's first-hand to decide what volunteers could do and what would have to be contracted out. We sought volunteers for work that could not easily be contracted locally, such as labor-intensive and dirty jobs, projects that required special rigging and tasks requiring special restoration techniques. As structural co-chairman, I was in charge of identifying tasks that could be done "in-house" and those that needed to be contracted, of identifying contractors willing to give firm estimates and of finding the appropriate volunteers willing and able to do the remaining jobs.

The combined knowledge and skills of the multi-talented people who served on the Committee made the project a success. For example, Ros Corey, a craftsman who had retired to Southold, offered to reproduce the six hexagonal spires and connecting railings that surmounted the belfry. With a few volunteers, including a certified cave rescuer and knowledgeable rope rigger, we set out to bring down the old spires on a rope trolley set up between the steeple mast and an old maple tree in the church yard. The spires glided down easily, as planned, impressing bystanders and press photographers (who gave us a full-page spread in the local papers). A week later, Ros, working from one of the dismantled rotten spires, presented us with a complete and perfectly accurate reproduction of one of the steeple spires, crowned with a cedar sphere. We quickly learned that his woodworking skill was matched only by his energy. He worked through the winter in his basement shop and completed all six spires and connecting rails that form a hexagonal crown atop the belfry. After finishing this task, he also volunteered to restore and gold leaf the weather vane.

Another friend, John Kuszyński, who is talented in furniture restoration and building renovation, replaced the belfry roof and ended up doing other work as well. His use of furniture-quality joinery techniques more than rivaled the original craftsmanship. Because of this experience in repairing antique furniture, he understood our conservative approach to the project and made repairs using wood inlays or wood consolidating epoxies so that original timbers and ornamental details were retained as much as possible. Where moldings were deteriorated beyond repair, we made exact replicas of the original molding from rot-resistant cedar. Such custom moldings were not available from building suppliers, and certainly would not have been within our budget if we had contracted the job.

Another daunting task that our small group of volunteers attacked was far below the steeple, in the crawl space underneath the church. In 1907, as a way to shore up the sagging steeple, two tree-sized wooden columns, which extend from footings in the crawl space, through the sanctuary, and into the attic, had been added to help carry the weight of the steeple. The inspecting engineer noted that one side of one of the roof trusses, the one carrying the steeple, had developed what appeared to be new stress cracks. These suggested that at least one of the columns was failing. The engineer did not examine the foundation of these columns because the space underneath the church was inaccessible to him. However, since the supporting column showed no obvious signs of stress above floor level, he suspected that the column's failure was due to problems below floor level, and he recommended that a portion of the floor be taken up to inspect the footings.

Because this would be both expensive and disruptive, a couple of us with caving experience, finding the crawl space to be easily greater than the thickness of our chest (the limiting factor in cave crawling), crawled into the space, inspected the columns and were able to confirm our engineer's hypothesis. The footings for each column consisted of a small pile of 6-9 inch round fieldstones resting directly on the dirt. And the base of one of the columns was extensively rotted.

Using coffee cans for shovels and a tray for shutting dirt out, we dug a hole and poured a reinforced concrete footing under the column. Later, using 15-ton hydraulic jacks and timbers, we raised the column and placed a solid support under it, thus averting a potential disaster.

Since most of the volunteer work cost very little, we made considerable progress during the first few months of the project. We reported to the congregation on Sundays and in the weekly newsletter. This stimulated enthusiasm and donations from church members. However, despite our savings from using volunteers, we realized that we still needed to raise about \$20,000 to complete the project. We canvassed the congregation requesting contributions, but \$20,000 was more than we could hope to raise from our small membership in such a short period. So we planned a variety of fund-raising efforts targeted towards those outside the church. We wrote to past members, friends and community people with an interest in historic preservation. We applied for and received a loan from the New York Universalist Society and a grant from the New York Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites and Properties Fund.

We carefully planned our project, and spent a great deal of time determining which jobs could be done with volunteer labor and which required contractors. We also relied on the judgment of our engineer and others experienced in building conservation to identify problems and help us determine the best ways to address them. Although much of the work on our building was done with volunteers, they were people with broad experience, and not a bunch of amateurs with no professional expertise. Most had a prior career, or at least a brief apprenticeship, in one or more crafts. A project of this scope and magnitude should not be undertaken without careful planning, experienced volunteers and some level of professional oversight.