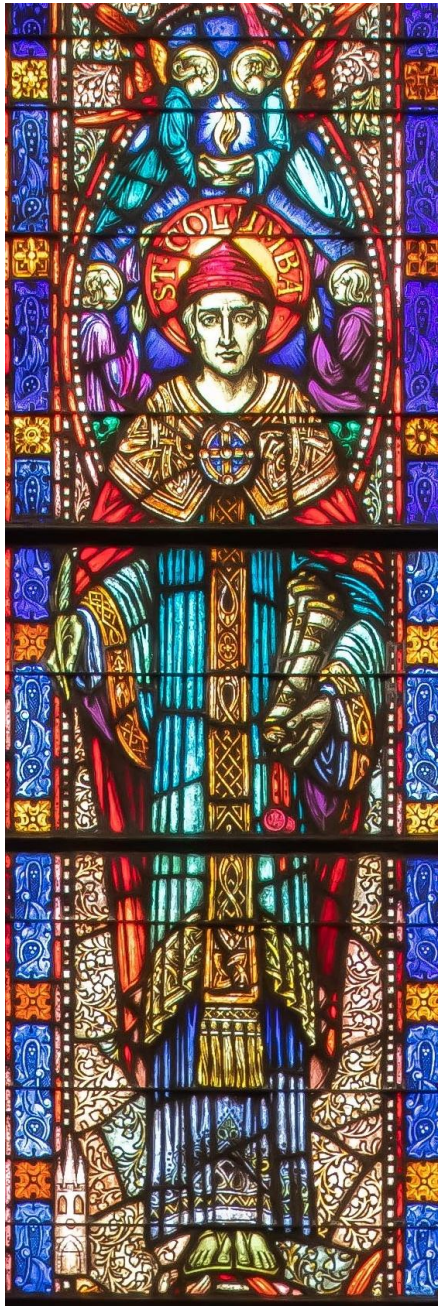


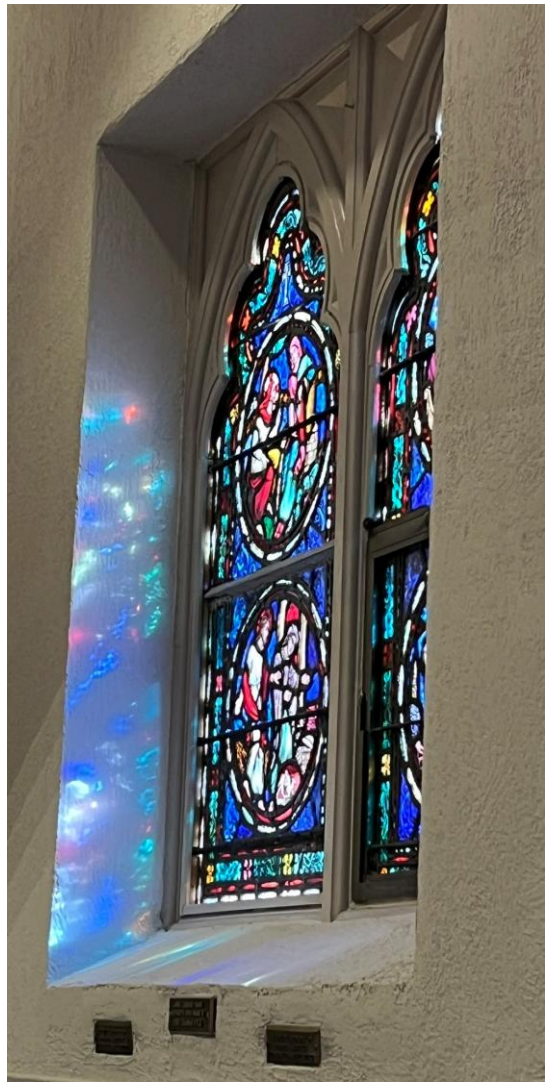
St. Columba's Stained Glass Windows: A Short History

Barbara Wolanin

Expanded version of Forum presentation
Given on October 12, 2025

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
4201 Albermarle Street, NW
Washington D.C. 20016

Our stained glass windows are artistic and spiritual treasures, but most of us know very little about them



What events or stories do they depict?

Who designed and made them?

When were they installed?

Who paid for them?

Who do they honor? (Some have small plaques)



Few parishioners can identify all of the stories in the windows

Easy to guess subject



What is happening?



Easy to guess subject



What is happening?



Where did people worship before the current church was built?



St. Columba's, first called St. Alban' s Chapel, in 1909

Services were first held in 1874 under a large oak tree until a log chapel was built the next year. In 1904 the mission parish was named after St. Columba, one of the saints of the British Isles, after which a parish hall and an expanded chapel with a bell tower were constructed.

In 1924 St. Columba's became an independent church. Additional land was purchased with plans for a new building. At that time the neighborhood was being gentrified, which meant that Black neighbors and St. George's church for Black Episcopalians which had been placed under St, Columba's, were driven out. (See Sondra Mills' history.)

St. Columba's rector and Vestry started making plans for a new much nicer building. Construction was funded with a mortgage.



Janney Elementary School for White students opened across Albemarle Street in 1925

Who were the key players in the creation of the new church building?

Rector William W. Shearer

Church Building Committee

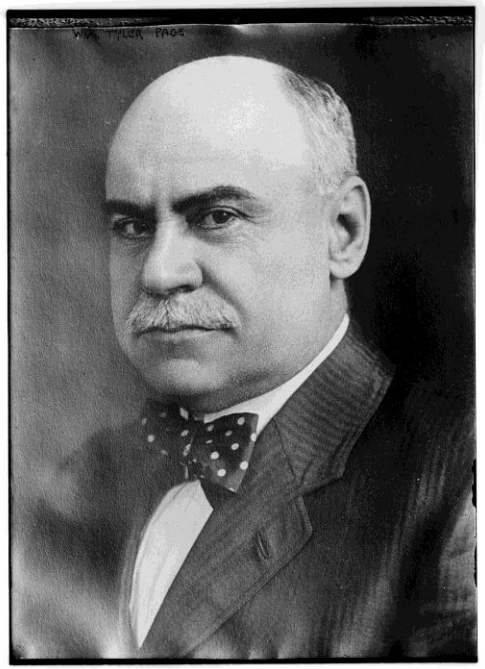
General Chairman A. F. E. Horn

Chairman of Memorials & Furnishings Committee **William Tyler Page**
Choir director since 1907
First Senior Warden on the Vestry
Clerk of the House of Representatives
Author of "The American's Creed"

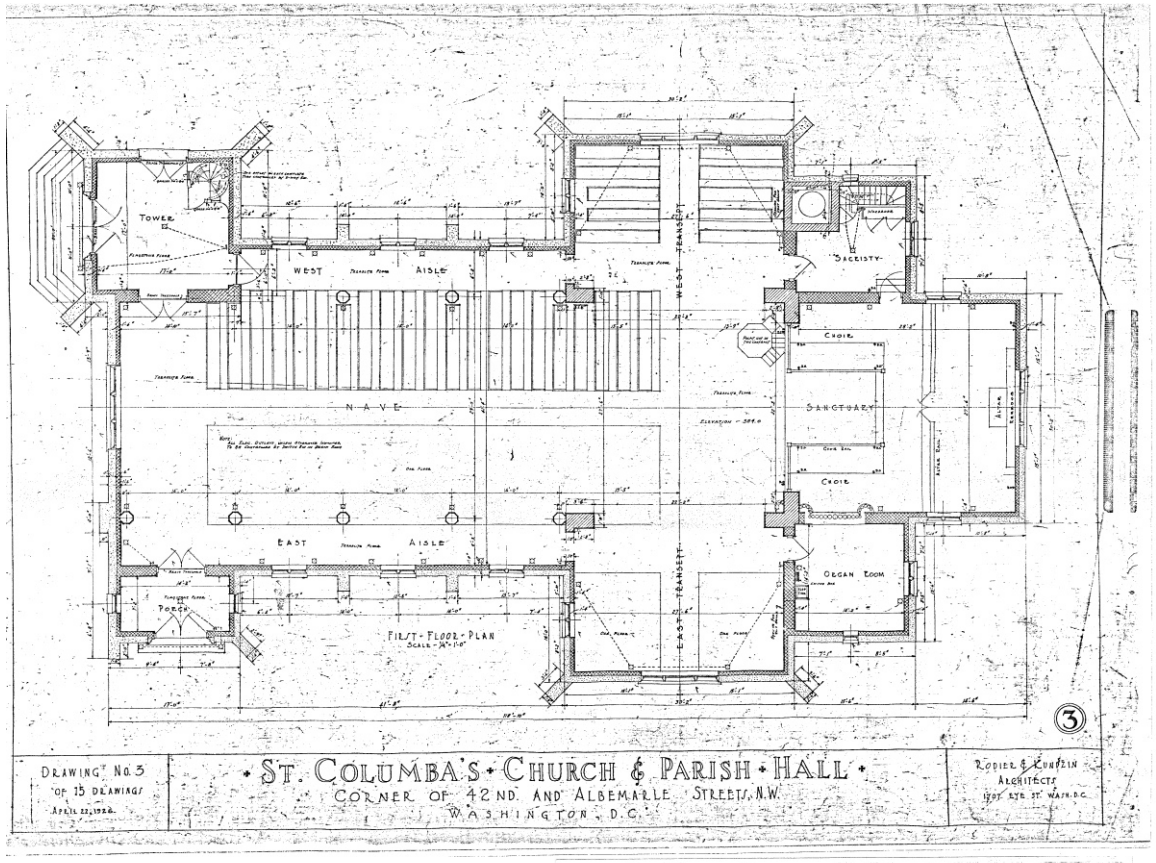
Architect Gilbert LaCoste Rodier of Rodier & Kundzin AIA

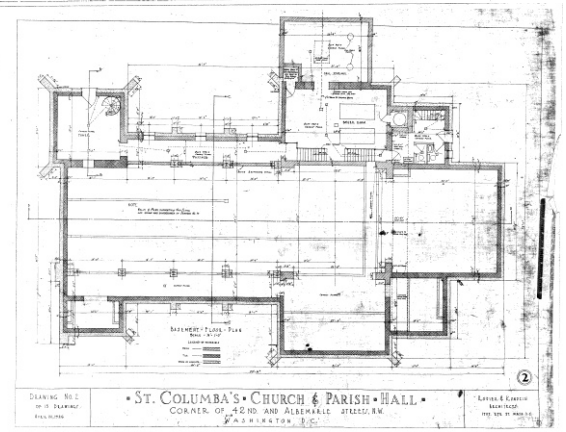
Builder George J. Fletcher, Meatyard Construction Company

Stone Mason L. Perna & Sons



William Tyler Page
1868-1942



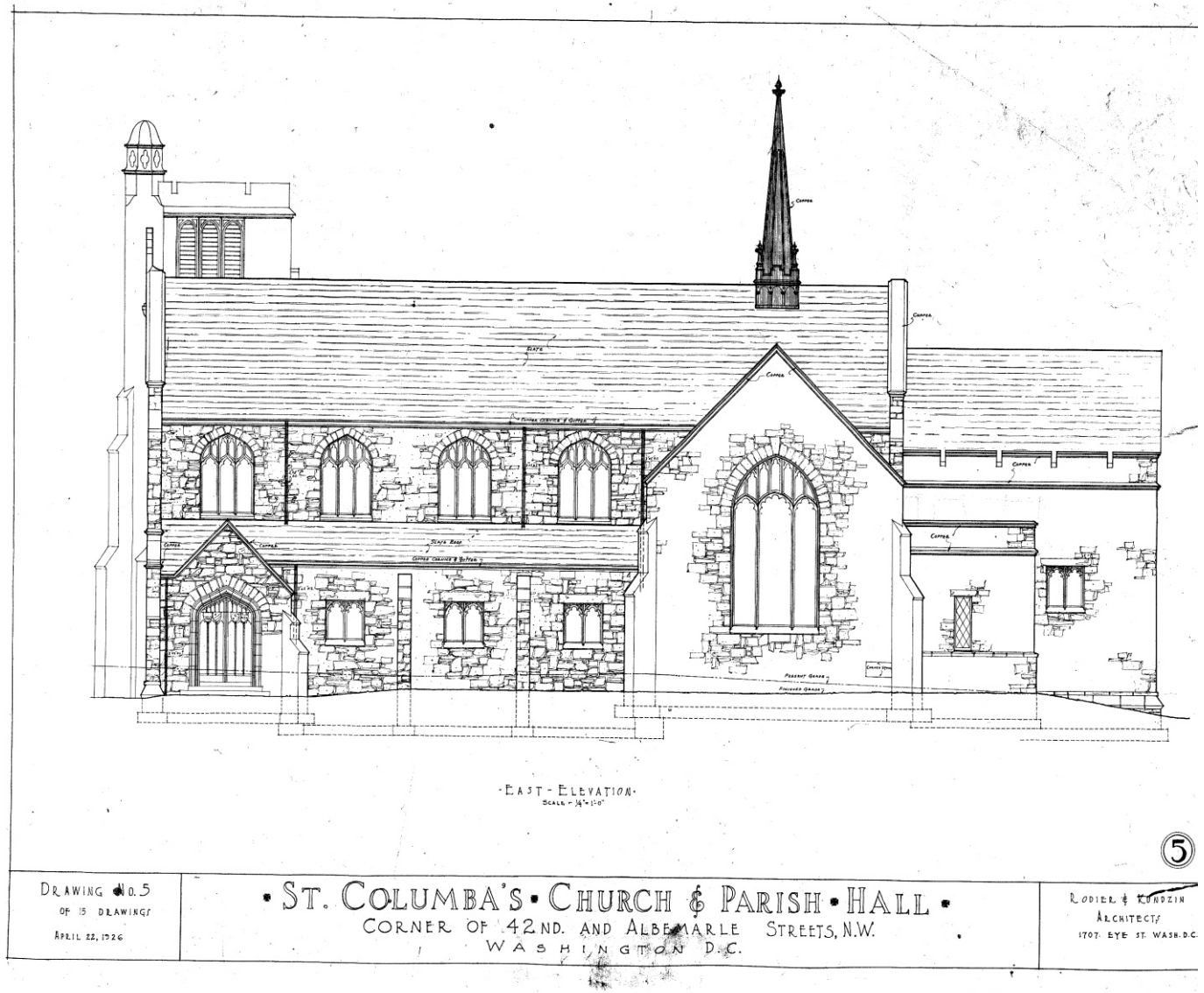


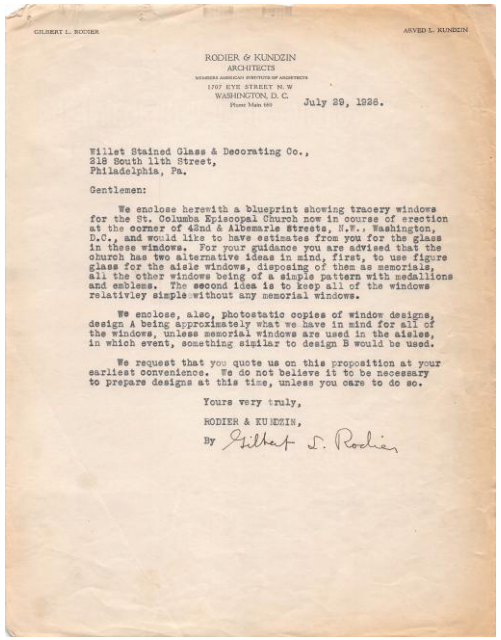
Architectural drawings
April 22, 1926
by Gilbert LaCoste Rodier

Cornerstone laid June 9, 1926



Architect Rodier planned a Gothic style building calling for stained glass windows.





GILBERT L. RODIER ARVED L. KUNDZIN

RODIER & KUNDZIN
ARCHITECTS
MEMBERS AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS
1707 EYE STREET N. W.
WASHINGTON, D. C.
Phone Main 660

July 29, 1926.

Willet Stained Glass & Decorating Co.,
218 South 11th Street,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Gentlemen:

We enclose herewith a blueprint showing tracery windows for the St. Columba Episcopal Church now in course of erection at the corner of 42nd & Albemarle Streets, N.W., Washington, D.C., and would like to have estimates from you for the glass in these windows. For your guidance you are advised that the church has two alternative ideas in mind, first, to use figure glass for the aisle windows, disposing of them as memorials, all the other windows being of a simple pattern with medallions and emblems. The second idea is to keep all of the windows relativley simple without any memorial windows.

We enclose, also, photostatic copies of window designs, design A being approximately what we have in mind for all of the windows, unless memorial windows are used in the aisles, in which event, something sigilar to design B would be used.

We request that you quote us on this proposition at your earliest convenience. We do not believe it to be necessary to prepare designs at this time, unless you care to do so.

Yours very truly,

RODIER & KUNDZIN,

By Gilbert L. Rodier

Architect Rodier wrote to the prominent Willet Stained Glass & Decorating Company, located in Philadelphia, on July 29, 1926, soon after the cornerstone was laid :

“We enclose herewith a blueprint showing tracery windows for the St. Columba Episcopal Church… and would like to have estimates from you for the glass in these windows. For your guidance you are advised that the church has two alternative ’ideas in mind, first, to use figure glass for the aisle windows, disposing of them as memorials, all the other windows being of a simple pattern with medallions and emblems. The second idea is to keep all of the windows relatively simple without any memorial windows.”

His letter has been preserved in the Willet Stained Glass Studios archives.

Parishoners were informed: “This feature of the new church building has been studied and wrought out with great care, resulting in a scheme that will present, not only beautiful stained glass windows of artistic design but a symmetrical art representation of the leading events in our Lord’s life on earth, thus affording a teaching value as well as serving a practical purpose and beautifying God’s house.”

The 1926 Willet contract prices were:

rose window $200

sanctuary window $2000

two transept windows $1500

one aisle window containing two medallions, $300 each or $600 for two

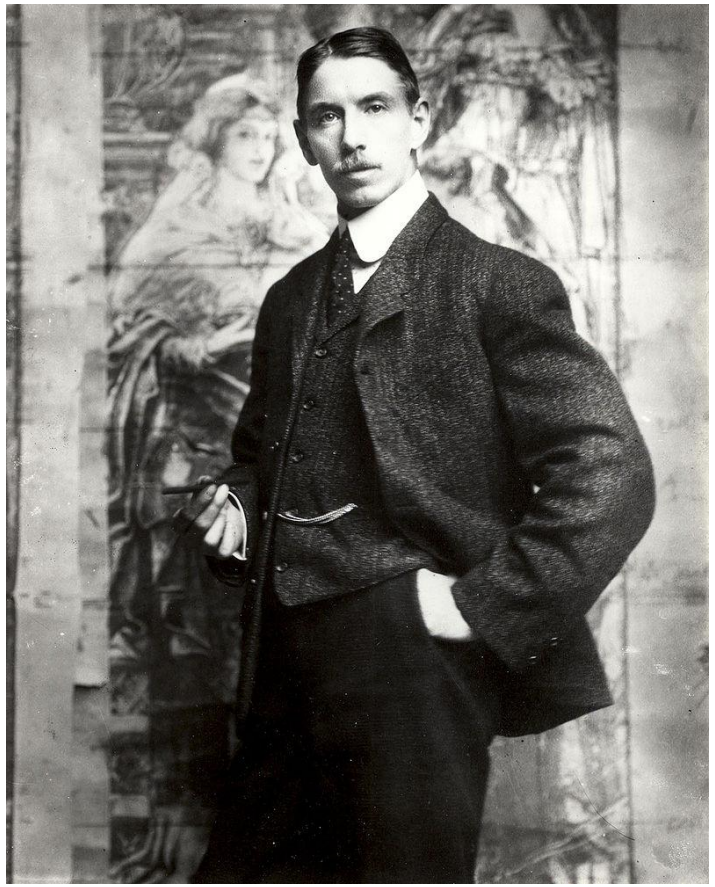
Saint Columba window, $3,500

Amazingly, the company never raised these prices!

Who was the artist who designed our windows?

The Willet Stained Glass and Decorating Company was founded in 1898 by a couple who were both trained professional artists. Anna designed and executed windows herself as well as ones with her husband. They were based in Philadelphia.

William Willet (1869-1921)

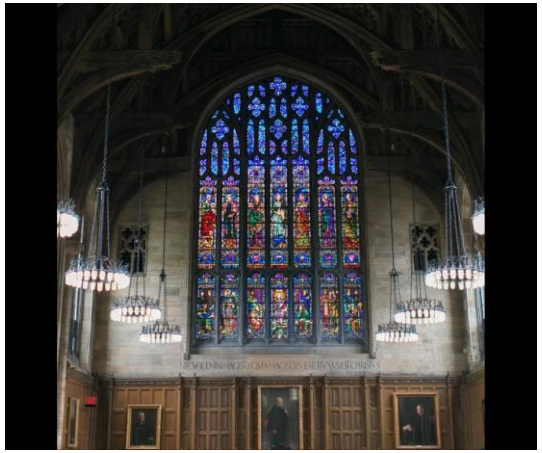


Anna Lee Willet (1867-1943)



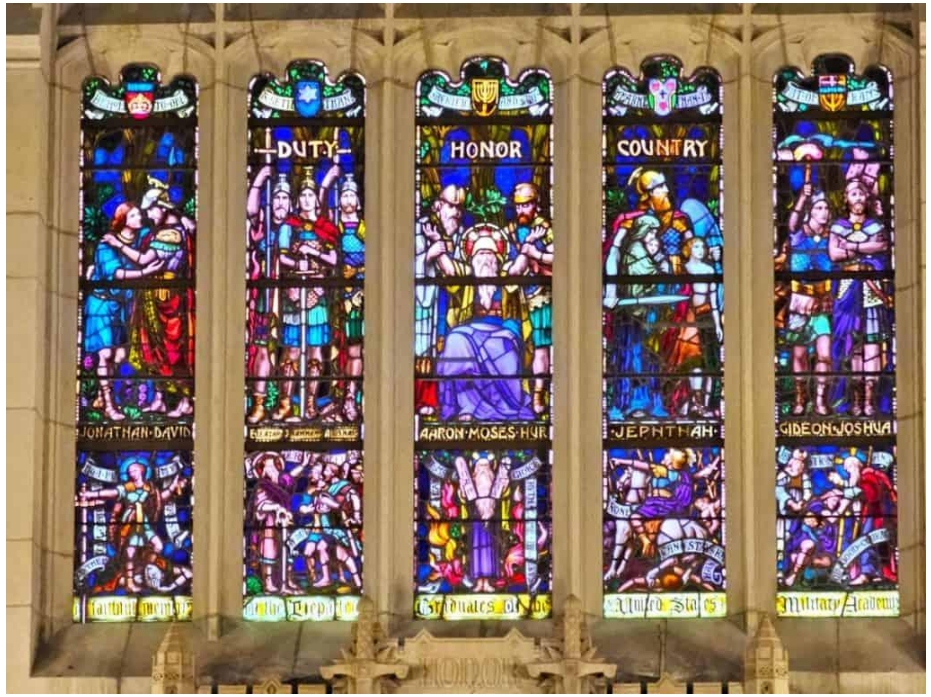
Portrait or Anna by William

West Point Cadet Chapel's first Willet window



The Willet company was well known when architect Rodier reached out to them. It had won a major commission for the Cadet Chapel for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, beating the Tiffany Glass Company and many others. The company's first of 178 windows for the chapel, the 50-foot-tall sanctuary window, was installed in 1915. It was made of thousands of pieces of glass. The commission was not completed until 1976.

The company had turned away from the popular style of windows designed by the Tiffany and LaFarge companies and became known for its ecclesiastical stained glass in a medieval style like that in Chartres Cathedral in France. It was also known for the high quality of its work. Their style suited the gothic style church Rodier was designing.



Detail of lowest section

Chartres Cathedral - Medieval Style





St. Columba's



Tiffany Studios



Willet used imported 'antique" mouth blown uneven glass, not flat sheets, creating deep and rich colors. The details were painted and fired in a kiln, making it a permanent part of the glass.



Henry Lee Willet and his mother.

St. Columba's windows were credited to
A.L Willet and Henry Lee Willet, Associated Artists

Anna Lee Willet continued designing and executing windows after her husband's death in 1921. She created the sketches for our windows in 1926.

Their young son Henry Lee Willet (1899-1983) came to run the company with her.

He directed the company after she retired in 1934.

Henry Lee's son took over In 1965.

Later merged with Hauser, the company has returned to the Willet Stained Glass Studios name and is still making and restoring stained glass windows in Winona, MN and other locations.

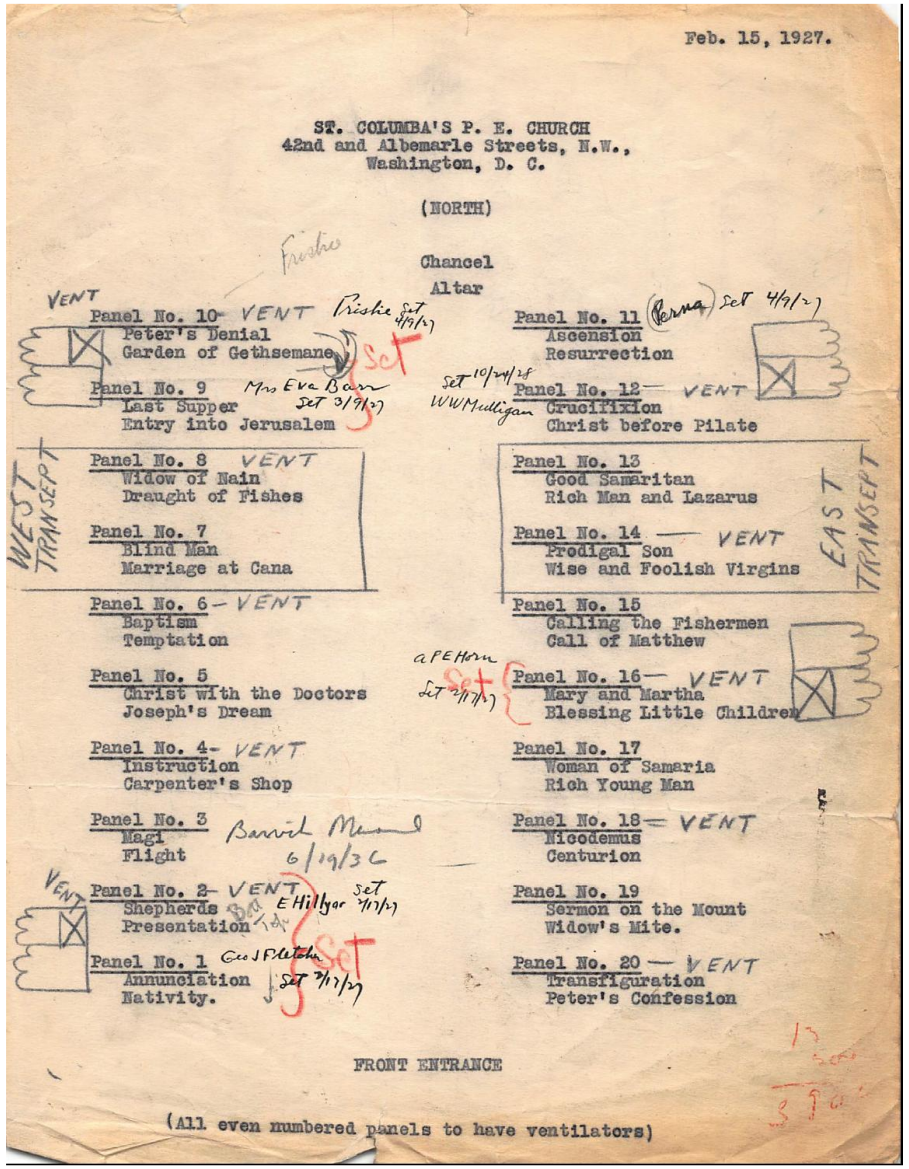
Anna Lee Willet made the sketches for St. Columba's windows and l;ikley oversaw the execution of the first ones. Other artists likely used her designs to create the final cartoons, and other artists designed later windows. One can see variations in the artistic styles in our windows.

The final plan for the subjects, some chosen by the Rector, was arranged to fit the plan of the nave by Henry Lee Willet, on February 12. 1927.

Passion

Miracles

Early Life of Christ



Feb. 15, 1927.

ST. COLUMBA'S P. E. CHURCH
42nd and Albemarle Streets, N.W.,
Washington, D. C.

(NORTH)

Chancel
Altar

VENT
Panel No. 10 VENT
Peter's Denial
Garden of Gethsemane

Panel No. 9
Last Supper
Entry into Jerusalem

Panel No. 11
Ascension
Resurrection

Panel No. 12 — VENT
Crucifixion
Christ before Pilate

WEST TRANSEPT

Panel No. 8 VENT
Widow of Nain
Draught of Fishes

Panel No. 7
Blind Man
Marriage at Cana

Panel No. 6 — VENT
Baptism
Temptation

Panel No. 5
Christ with the Doctors
Joseph's Dream

Panel No. 4 VENT
Instruction
Carpenter's Shop

Panel No. 3
Magi
Flight

VENT
Panel No. 2 VENT
Shepherds
Presentation

Panel No. 1
Annunciation
Nativity.

Panel No. 13
Good Samaritan
Rich Man and Lazarus

Panel No. 14 — VENT
Prodigal Son
Wise and Foolish Virgins

EAST TRANSEPT

Panel No. 15
Calling the Fishermen
Call of Matthew

Panel No. 16 — VENT
Mary and Martha
Blessing Little Children

Panel No. 17
Woman of Samaria
Rich Young Man

Panel No. 18 — VENT
Nicodemus
Centurion

Panel No. 19
Sermon on the Mount
Widow's Mite.

Panel No. 20 — VENT
Transfiguration
Peter's Confession

FRONT ENTRANCE

(All even numbered panels to have ventilators)

Passion

Proverbs

The Ministry of Our Lord

Parishioners were shown color sketches for the scenes and were informed:

“This feature of the new church building has been studied and wrought out with great care, resulting in a scheme that will present, not only beautiful stained glass windows of artistic design but a symmetrical art representation of the leading events in our Lord’s life on earth, thus affording a teaching value as well as serving a practical purpose and beautifying God’s house.”

The hope in 1927 was that many would be inspired to donate a memorial window.

Henry Lee Willet provided, along with the final list of subjects in the medallions In the aisle windows, descriptions of the large windows and of the symbols in the clerestory and transept windows. The information was shared with the congregation in 1927. Lists of the subjects were reprinted in 1957 and 1960 with some variations, but no list was created at the time the last window was installed.

A list of the subjects with locations as installed and current locations noted, keyed to a floor plan, was created for this project and as a guide to those curious about the stories in the windows.

The Aisle Windows

Forty scenes in the aisle windows depict The Life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Ascension, in mostly chronological order. The six lancets from the first three windows showing the Early Life of Christ were reversed when they were installed in the doors to the Common in the 1980s expansion and are shown here in the way they were meant to be seen from the Nave.

Early Life of Christ (west aisle set in doors)

1A. The Annunciation to the Virgin
1B. The Nativity

2A. Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple
2B. Angels Appearing to the Shepherds

3A. The Flight into Egypt
3B. The Visit of the Magi

4A. Instruction of the Child Jesus
4B. Christ in the Carpenter's Shop

5A. Christ with the Doctors
5B. Angel Appearing to Joseph in a Dream

6A. Baptism of Our Lord
6B. Temptation of our Lord

Miracles (moved to west transept light box)

7A. Christ Healing the Blind Man
7B. Christ Raising the Son of the Widow of Nain

8A. The Marriage at Cana
8B. The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

The Passion (in current St. Aiden's Chapel)

9A. The Last Supper
9B. The Entry into Jerusalem

10A. The Garden of Gethsemane
10B. Peter Denying Christ

11A. The Ascension
11B. The Resurrection

12A. The Crucifixion
12B. Christ before Pilate

Parables (east transept under balcony)

13A. The Good Samaritan
13B. The Rich Man and Lazarus

14A, The Prodigal Son
14B. Christ Blessing the Little Children*

The Ministry of Our Lord (east aisle)

15A. Calling the Fishermen
15B. The Call of Matthew

16A. Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha
16B. The Wise and Foolish Virgins*

17A. Christ and the Woman of Samaria
17B. Christ and the Rich Young Man

18A, Christ and Nicodemus
18B, Christ and the Centurian

19A. Sermon on the Mount
19B. The Widow's Mite

20A. The Transfiguration
20B. St, Peter's Confession

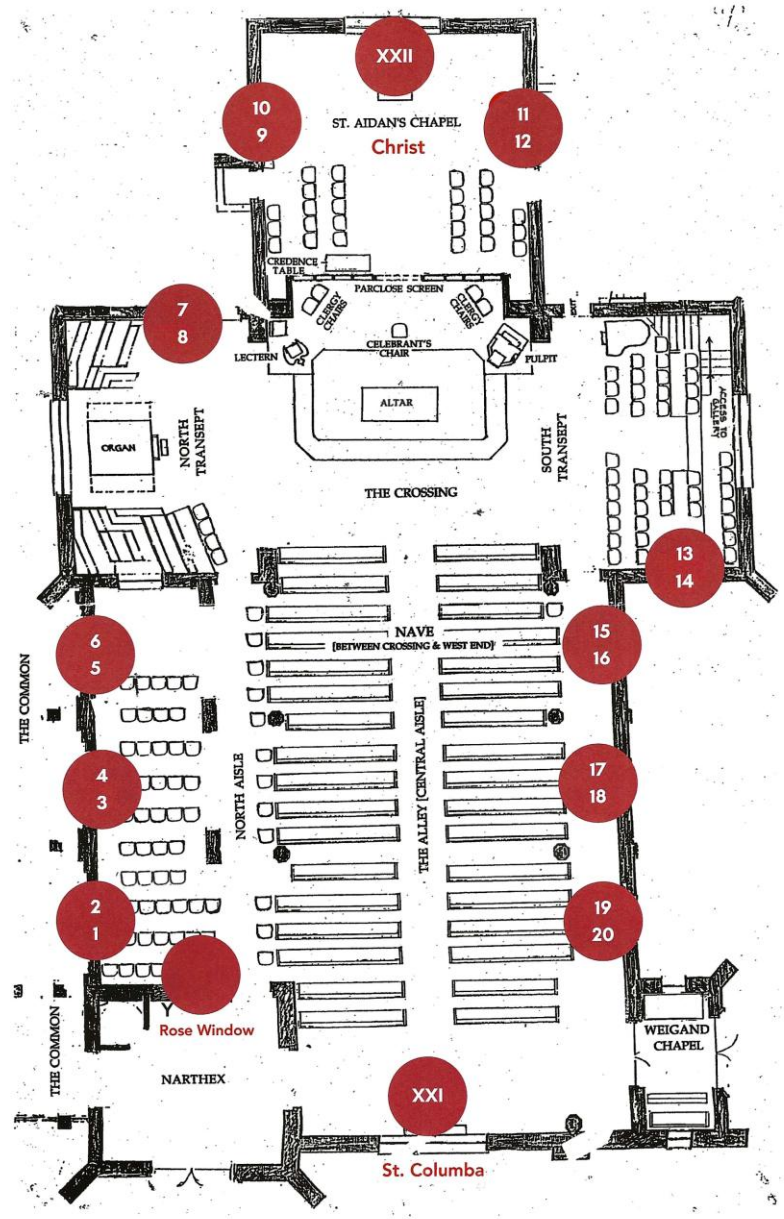
XXI **ST.COLUMBA OF IONA** (façade window)

XXII **CHRIST OUR PROPHET, OUR PRIEST AND OUR KING** (sanctuary window)

ROSE WINDOW (narthex)

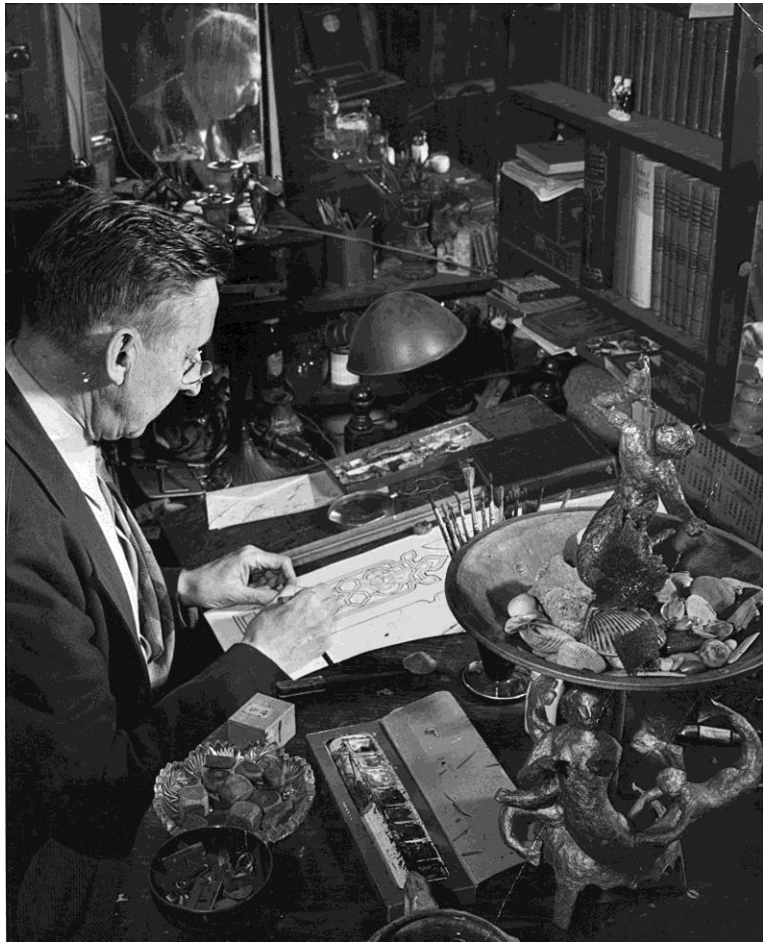
*Scenes installed in different locations from the original plan

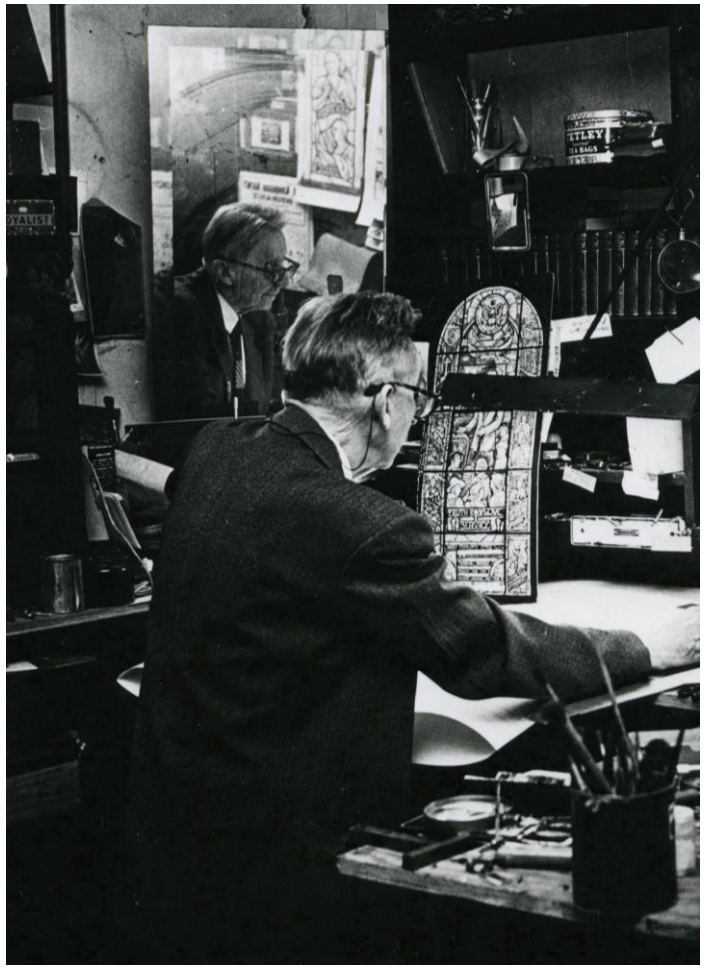
Floor Plan of Nave with Numbered Windows



George Gugert (1878-1958)

Painter and sculptor George Gugert designed windows for the Willets from 1912 to the end of his life. From the 1940s he was listed as co-director on the company letterhead.

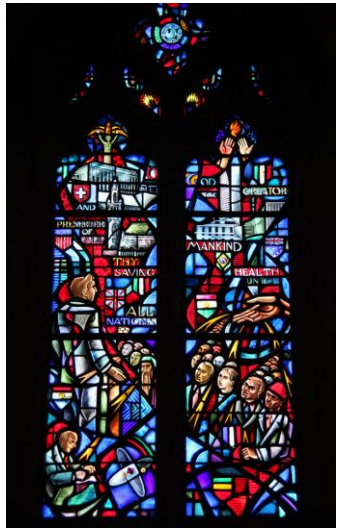




Marguerite Gaudin (1909-1991)







Gaudin's "Prayer for All Conditions of Men, " one of three she designed at The National Cathedral, 1957

Artist Gaudin designed and created the full-size cartoons for Willet for 60 years, so likely was responsible for some of ours. She was also a co-director of the company.

She designed ALL of the windows at the nearby National Presbyterian Church, completed in 1967.



What inspired the designs of the scenes telling the story of Christ's life?

The compositions of scenes from the Gospels were loosely inspired by Medieval and Renaissance paintings and fit into the circular medallion.

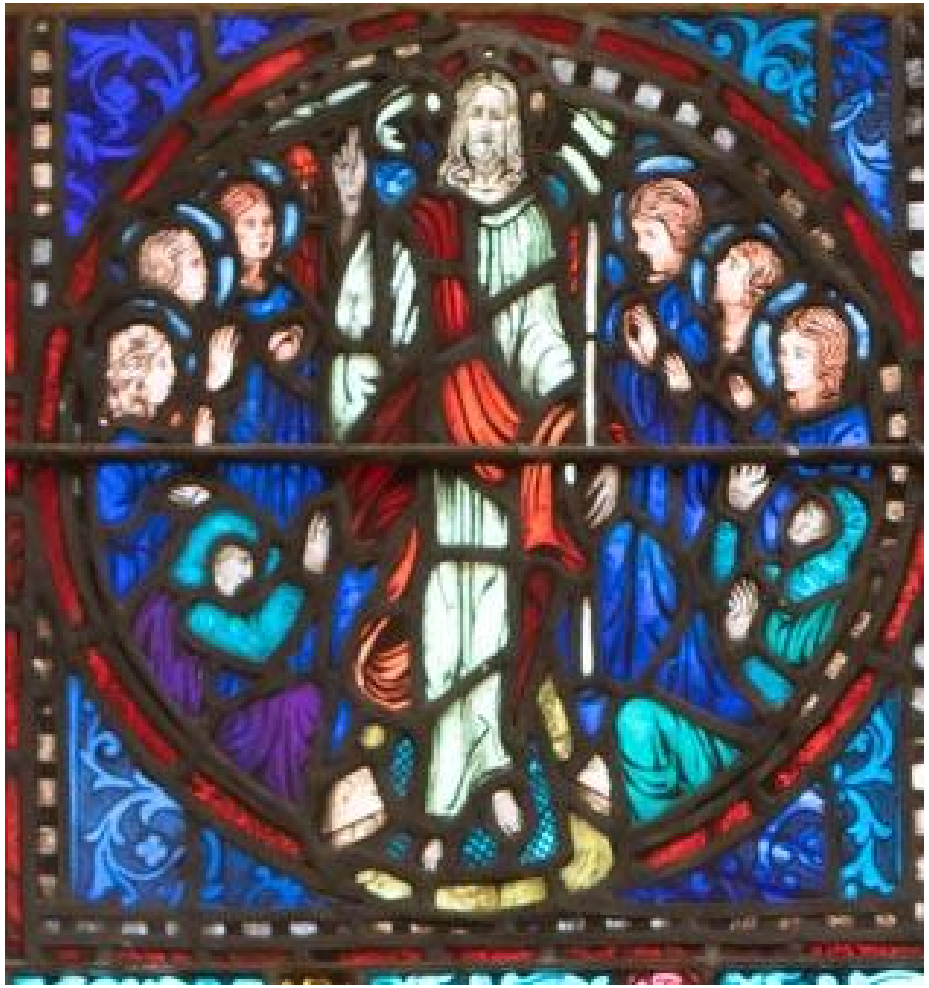
1a Annunciation

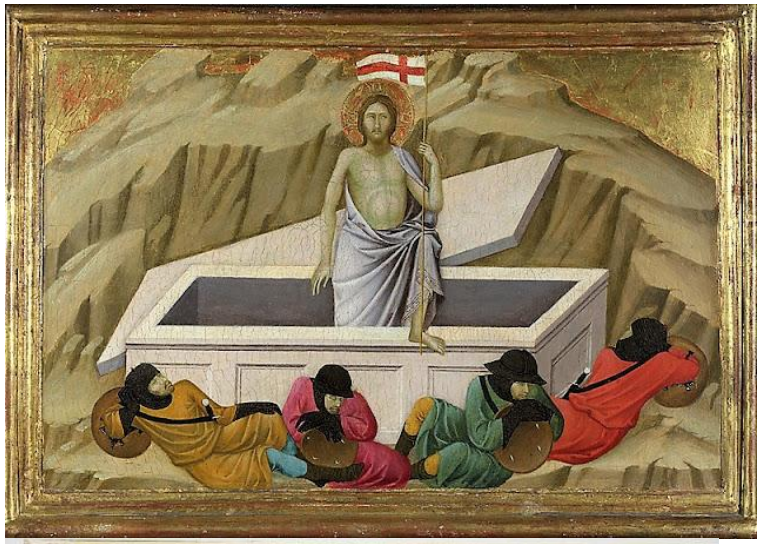






11B. The Resurrection







The figure of Christ, garbed in white and red, can usually be recognized in each scene by his tri-radiant halo with three rays, used only for depictions of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.







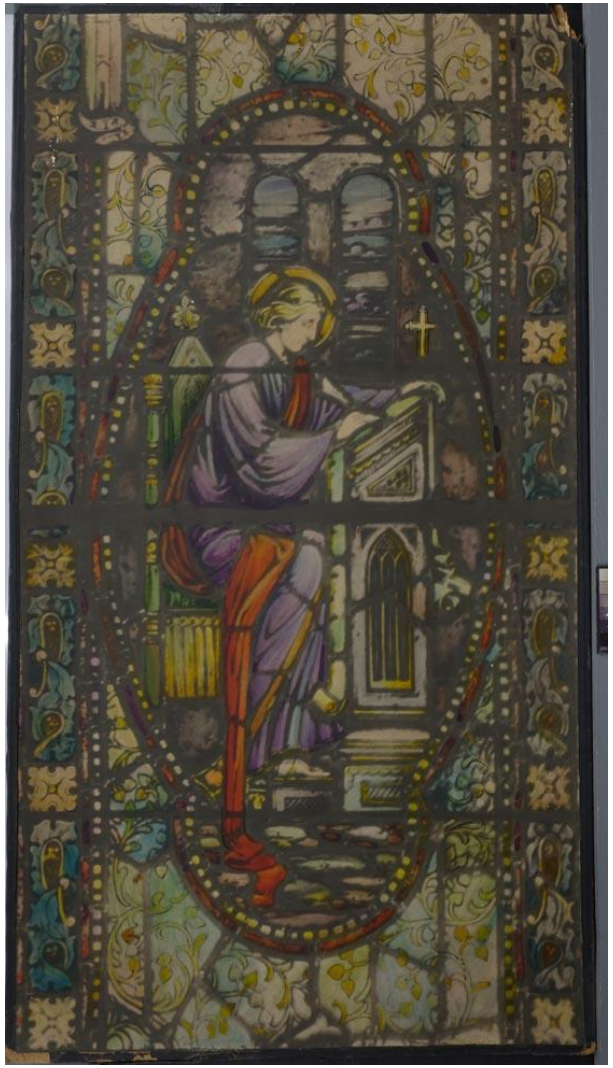
Photographs of the black and white cartoons (full-size drawings) for a few of our windows are in the archives of the Willet company. The black and white cartoons were based on the preliminary sketches. They guided the craftsmen cutting the pieces of glass and the artists painting the details.

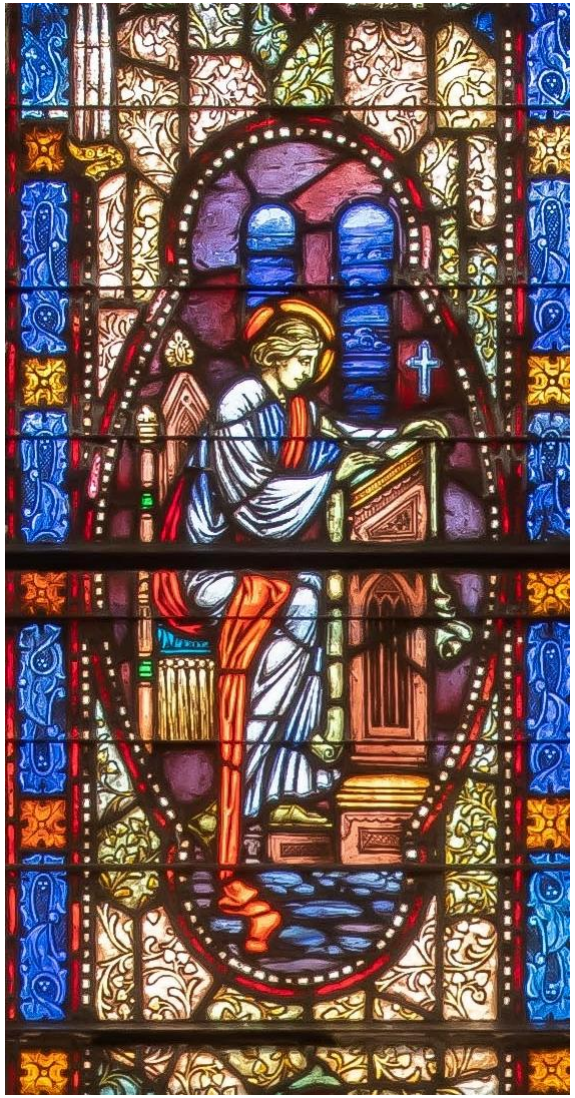






Only one cartoon with color for this scene in the St. Columba window was preserved.







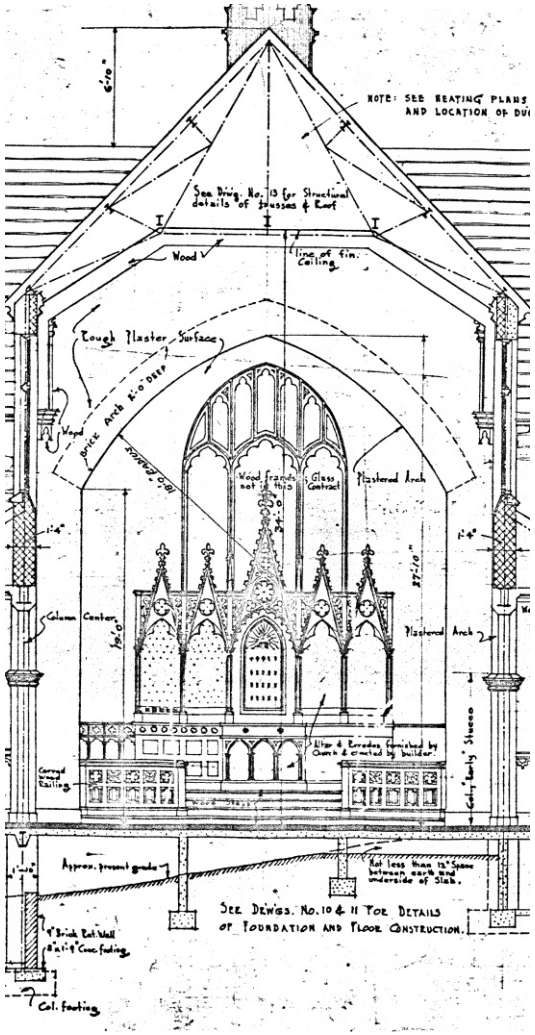
Creating a window based on the black and white cartoon involved many skilled craftspeople and many steps: selecting the pieces of glass; cutting the glass into shapes to fit the cartoon; painting details and stains on the glass, firing the painted sections in a kiln at a high temperature, sometimes many times, to make them permanent; fitting the pieces of glass together with lead came; and finally putting the window into a frame.





When the first service in the nave was held on April 10, 1927, Palm Sunday, only some of the planned stained glass was in place. The windows with plain glass can be seen in this early photograph.



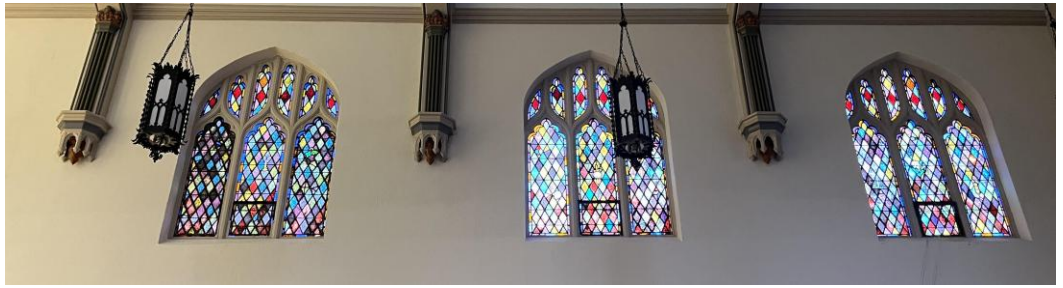


These were the only stained glass windows in place when the church opened in 1927

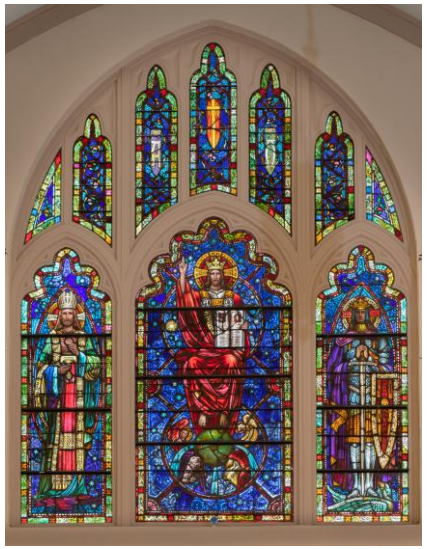
Rose Window



Seven Clerestory Windows



Sanctuary Window



1 2



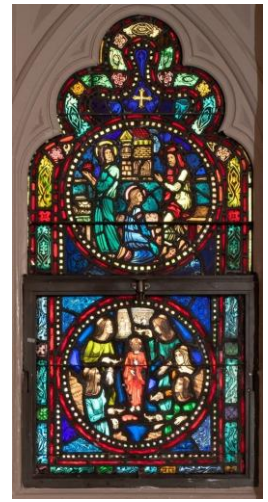


9 10

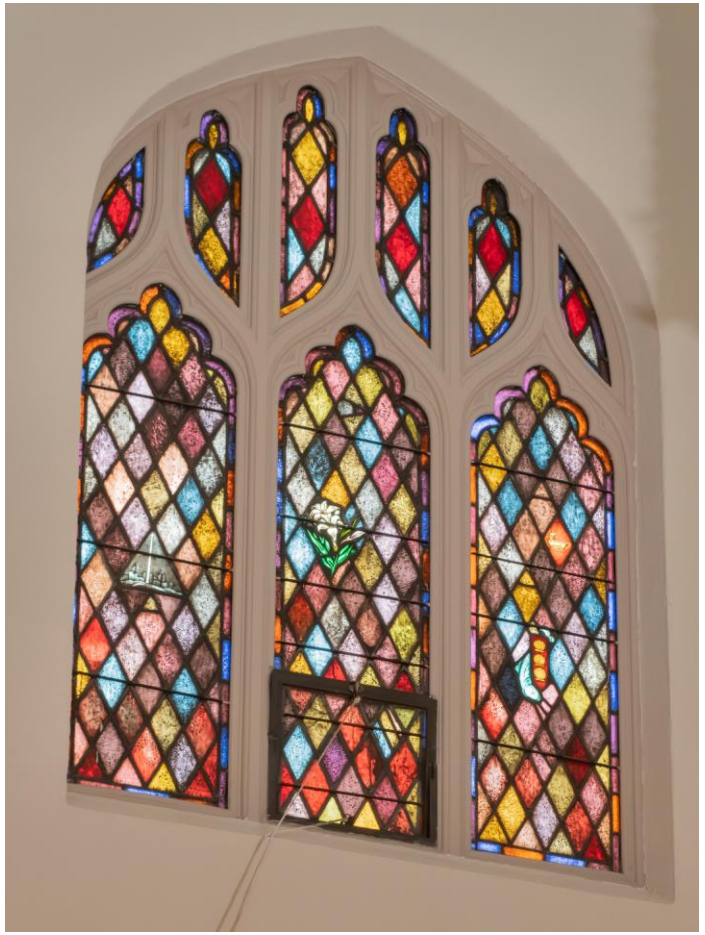


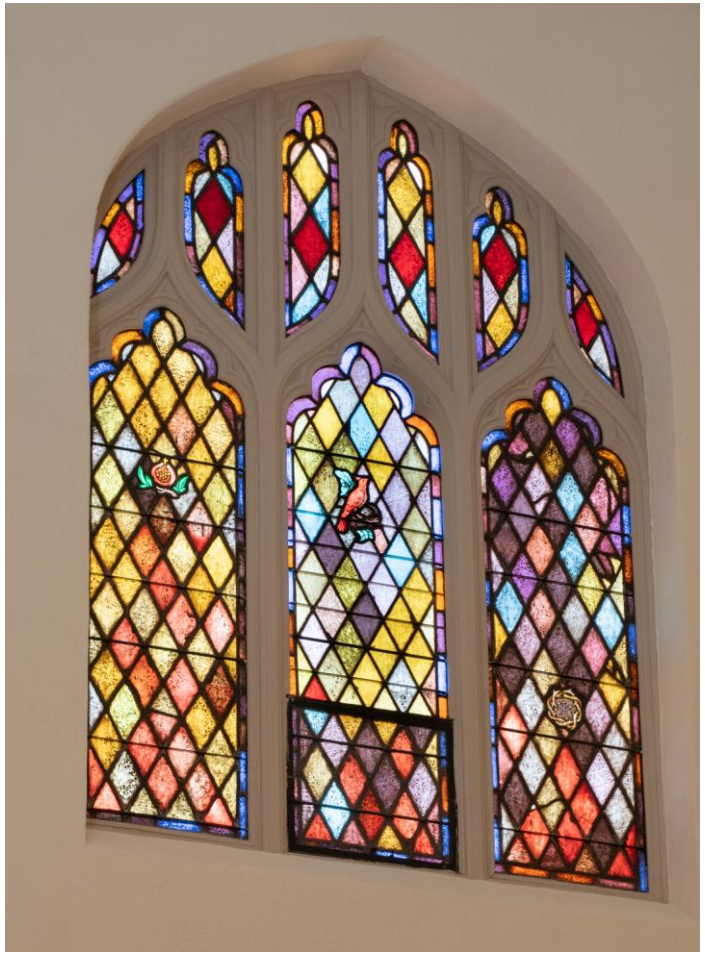
11 12 16





The seven clerestory and two large transcript windows were described by Willet as “mediaeval quarry treatment with occasional odd breaks and irregularly shaped panes and the introduction of symbols and other decorative inserts. “ The clerestory windows were part of the construction. The transcript windows were installed in 1928.)

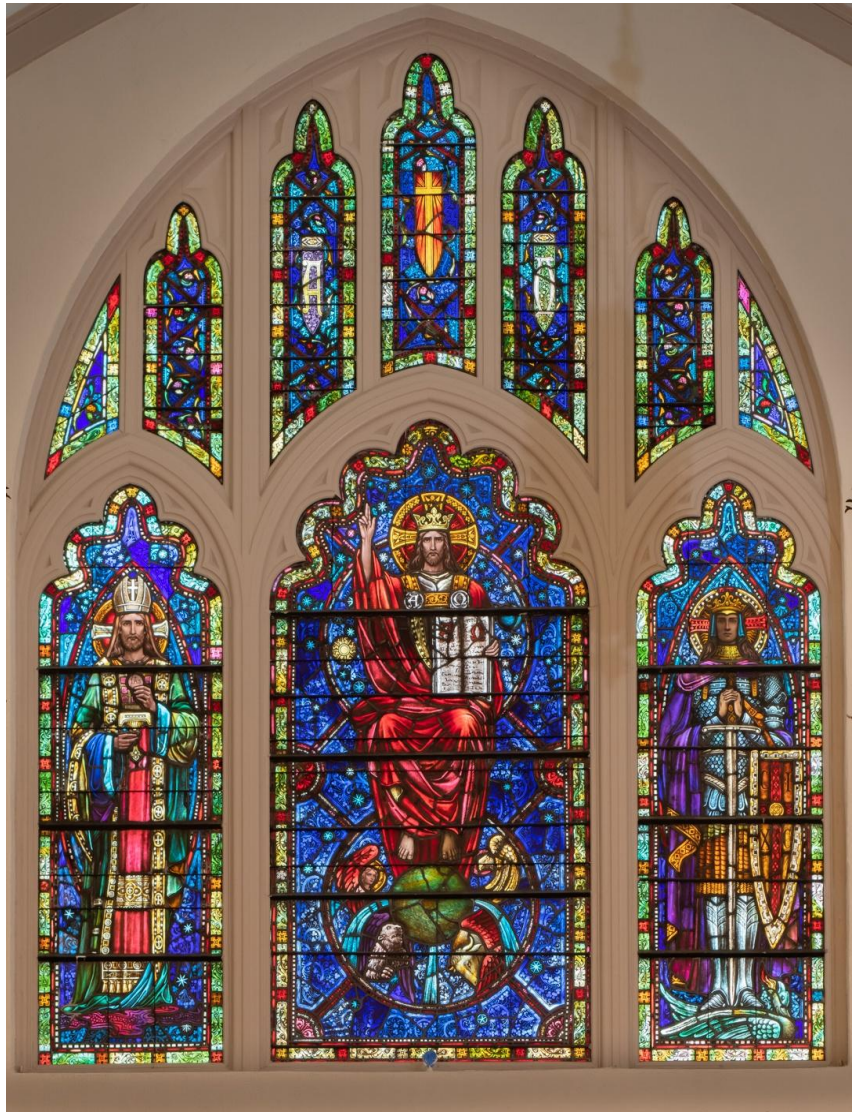




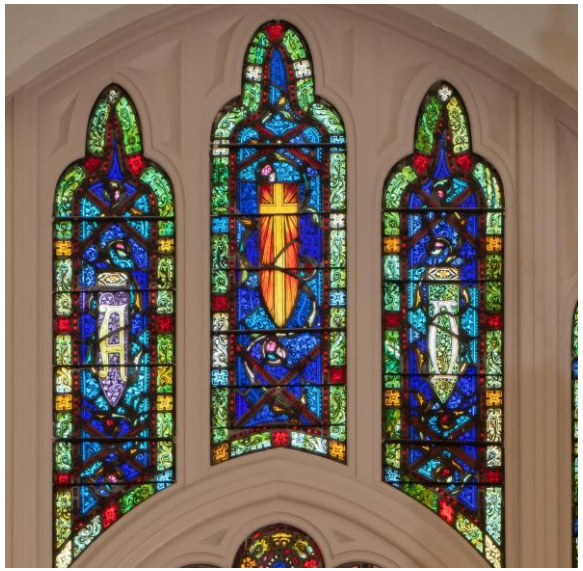


The magnificent sanctuary window was dedicated in Christmas Eve, 1926.

Christ as Our Prophet, Our Priest, and Our King



Alpha and Omega





It is based on the Apocalypse described in Revelations, showing Christ at the end of the world. Designs of shamrocks in the blue heavens symbolize the Trinity.



Shamrocks- symbol of Trinity



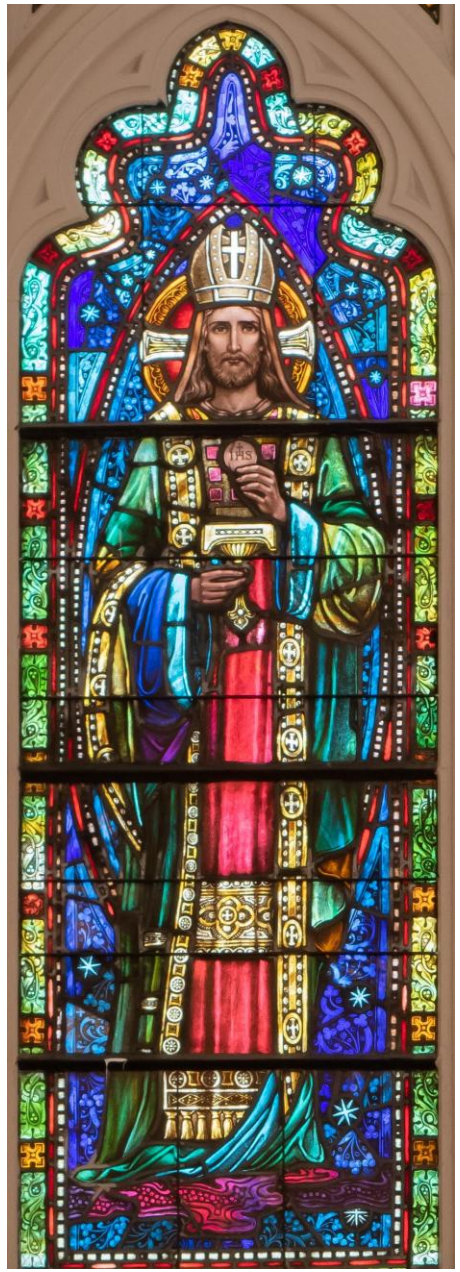
Matthew

Mark

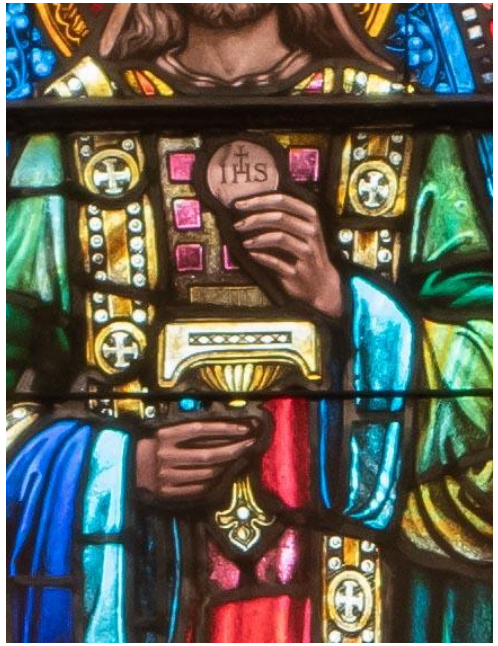


John

Luke



Melchizedek

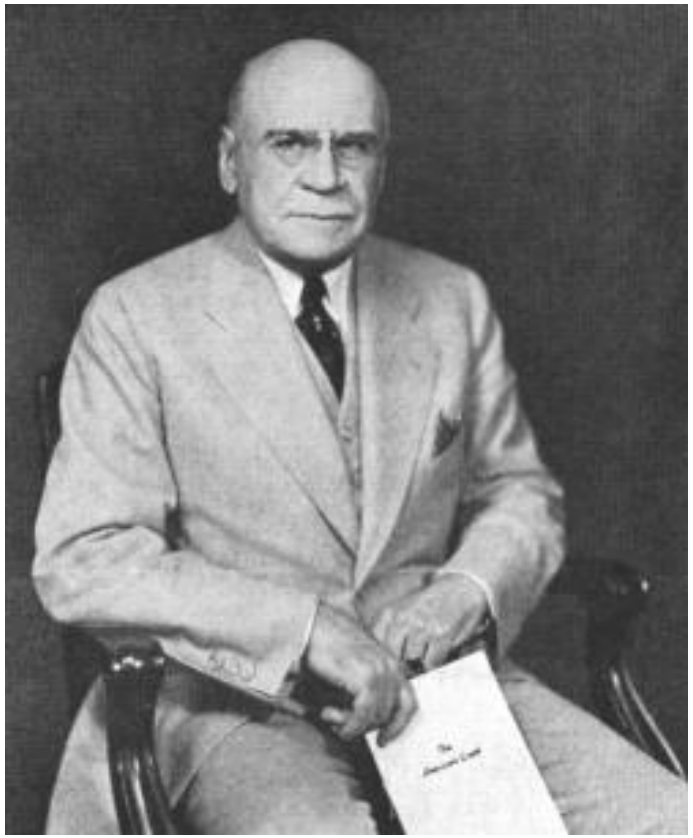




Saint Michael



The St. Columba's window, by far the most expensive, was donated by William Tyle Page.



The $3,500 cost of the window would be worth almost $70,000 today.

Page wrote to Henry Lee Willet on April 10, 1929:

"I have just had the misfortune to lose my wife and I want to place in the church a suitable memorial. The Saint Columba window is beyond my means unless payment therefor could be arranged on a long time basis. Unless some individual gives this window as a memorial. I apprehend it will be many years before it will be placed in the church."

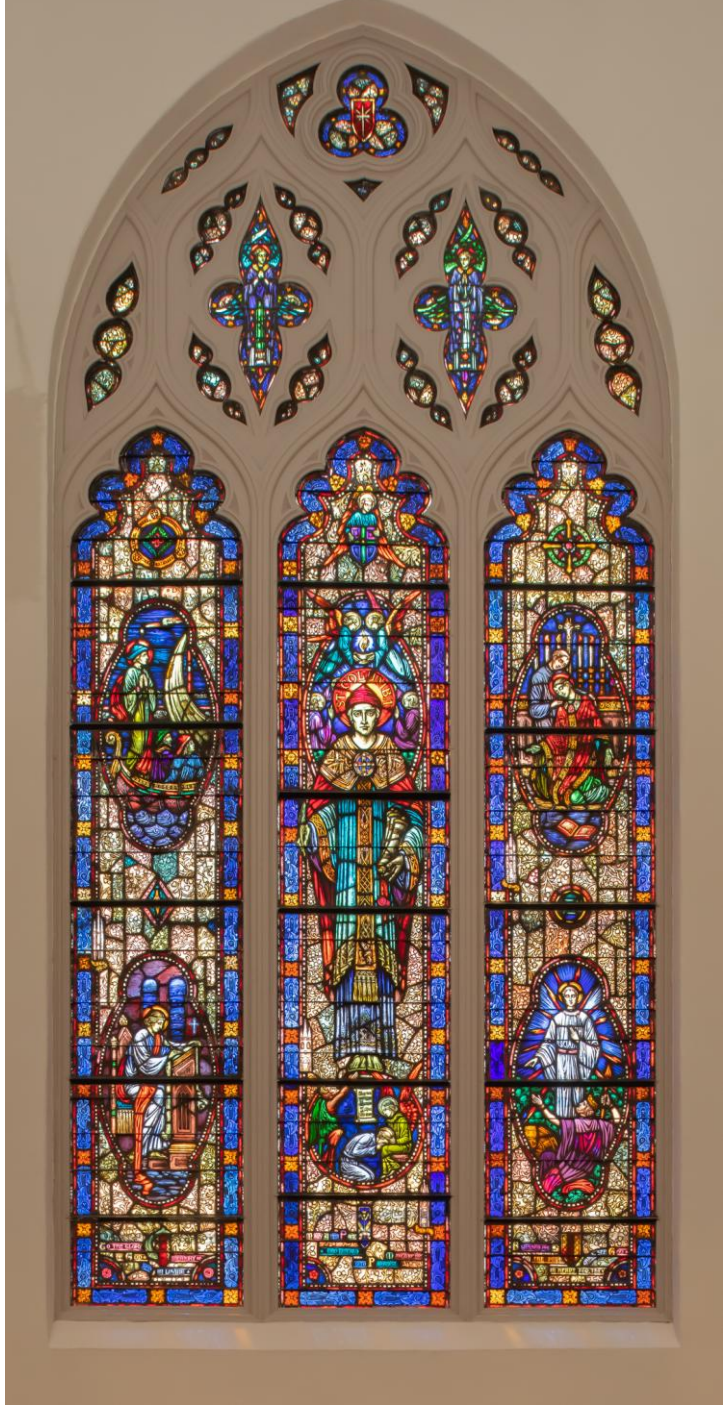
The company agreed to accept payments spread out over years, so that the planned elaborate design could be made.

An image of the cartoon for St. Columba.



Page had hoped to have the monumental and elaborate window installed by St. Columba Day in June. Working amazingly quickly, the Willet company got it installed in early July.

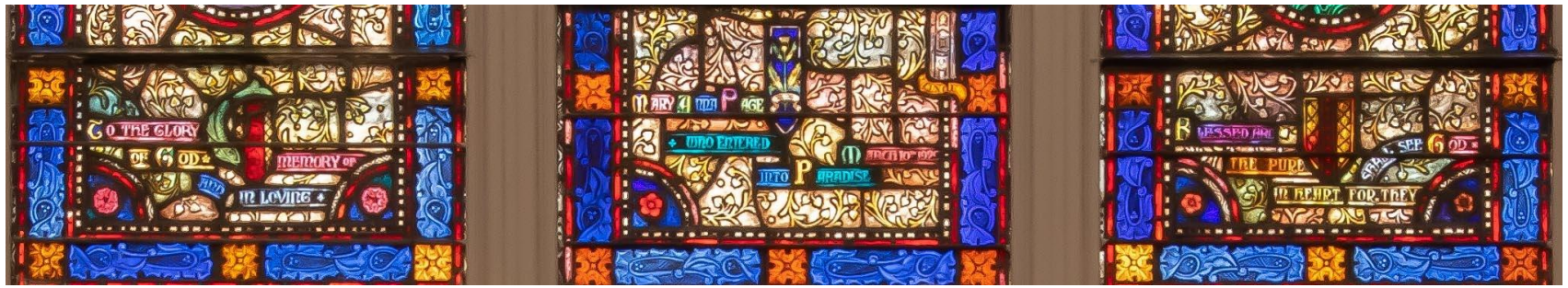
Henry Lee Willet wrote to Page: “I was thrilled it turned out so successfully, as it was quite a novel conception and rendering.”

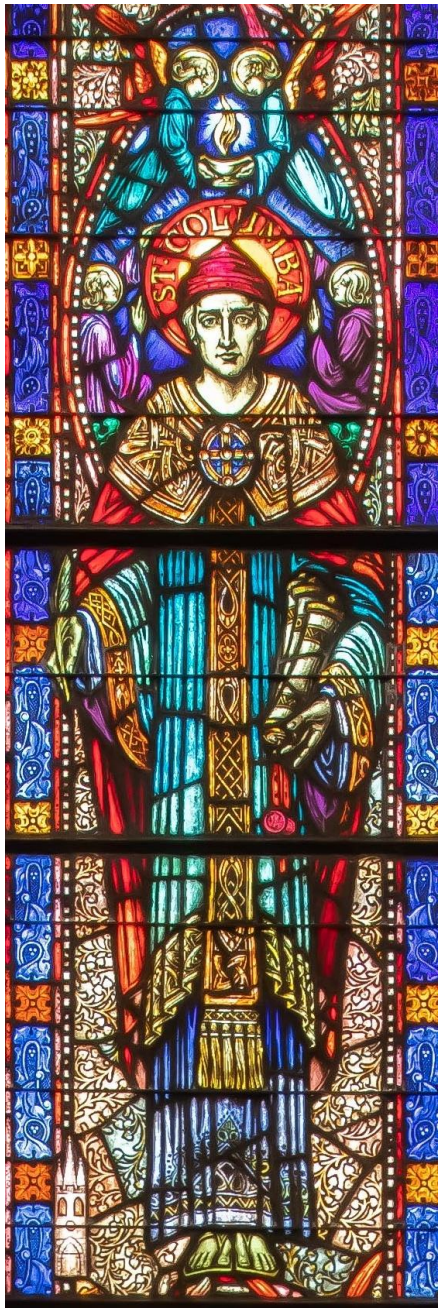


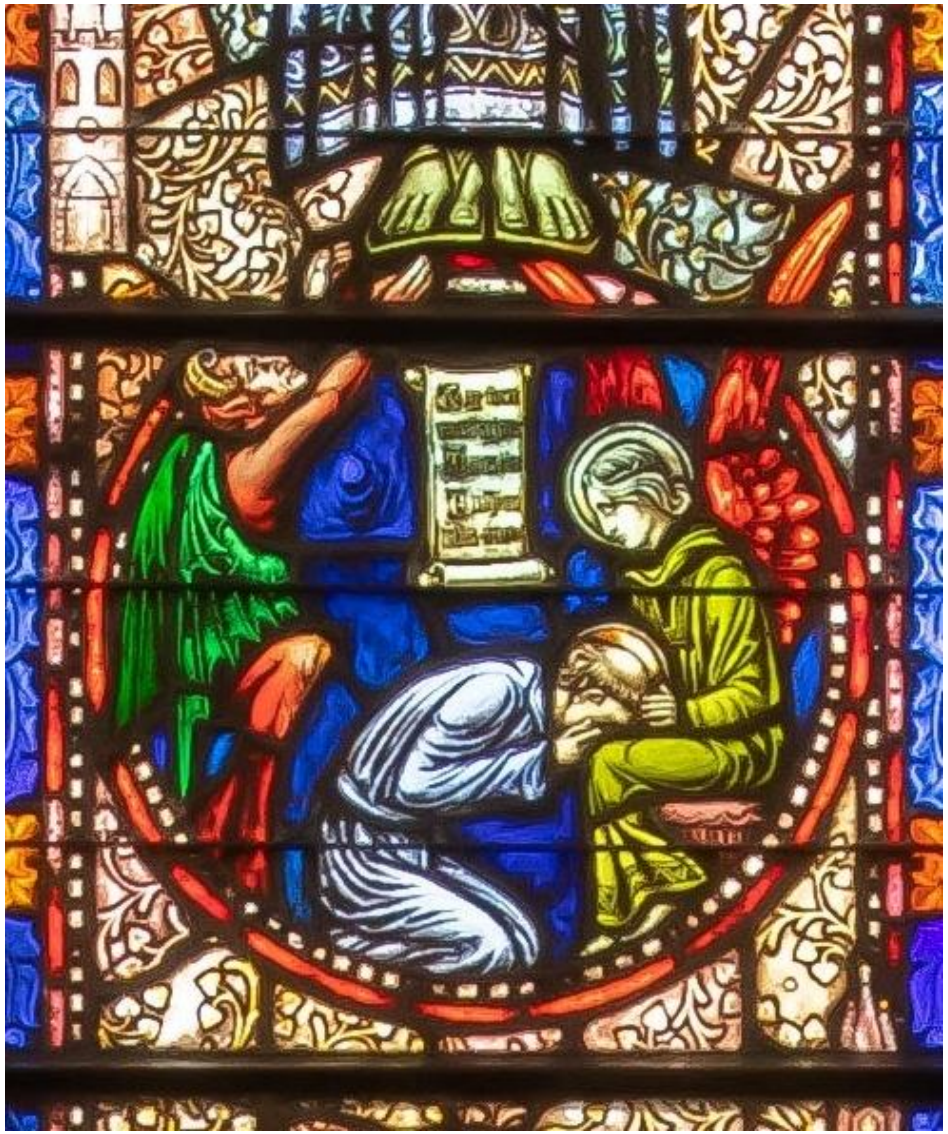
Gilbert Rodier wrote to Page on July 10: “I have just had the pleasure of seeing the new St. Columba window and I wish to take this opportunity to tell you that I think it not only a wonderful tribute to Mrs. Page’s memory, but also one of the most beautiful pieces of stained glass work it has ever been my privilege to see. I really think there is nothing finer in Washington.”

This is the only window in the church that includes memorial wording:

To the Glory of God and in loving memory of Mary Ann Page who entered into Paradise March 10, 1929. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.



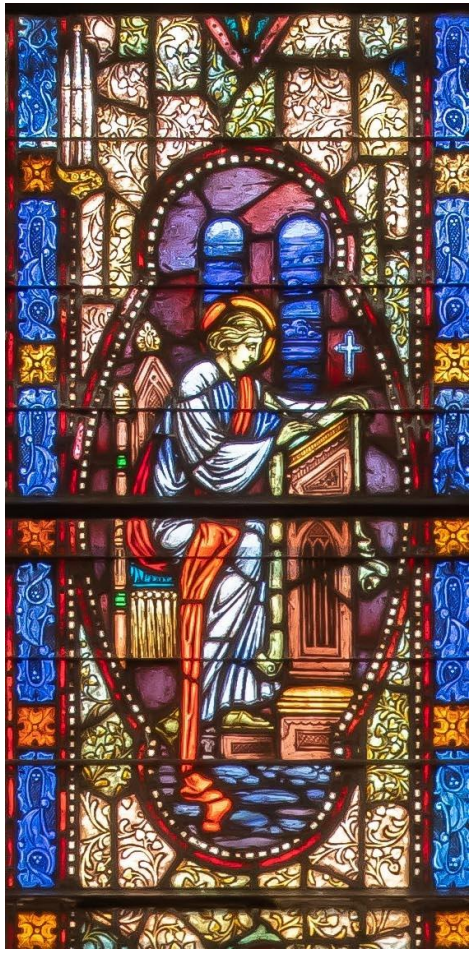




St. Columba begging forgiveness from an angel



Leaving Ireland



Copying the psalter



Death of St. Columba



King Oswald’s vision

The donation St. Columba window in 1929, right before the stock market crash, was followed by the Depression and then World War II.

It took decades for donors to be found for all of the aisle windows filled with plain yellow glass to get filled with their stained glass stories. The last ones were installed in 1966, 40 years after they were designed!

The Willet company continued to honor the 1926 contract prices.

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1936 3 The Flight into Egypt The Visit of the Magi

1943 15 Calling the Fishermen The Call of Matthew

16 Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha and Christ Blessing the Little Children (moved later)

1950 17 Christ and the Woman of Samaria Christ and the Rich Young Man

18 Christ and Nicodemus Christ and the Centurion

19 Sermon on the Mount The Widow's Mite

20 The Transfiguration St. Peter's Confession

1957 4 Instruction of the Child Jesus Christ in the Carpenter's Shop

5 Christ with the Doctors Angel Appearlng to Joseph in a Dream

6 Baptism of Our Lord Temptation of Our Lord

1965 Fletcher Window

13 The Good Samaritan The Rich Man and Lazarus

` 14 The Prodigal Son The Wise and Foolish Virgins (switched to 16B)

1966 MIRACLES

7 Christ Healing the Blind Man Christ Raising the Son of the Widow of Nain

8 The Marriage at Cana The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

There was a puzzle about why the bottom right scene in the east transept did match the original plan.



Given in memory of Robert Lindsay Fletcher 1965

PROVERBS

The Good Samaritan
The Rich Man and Lazarus
The Prodigal Son
Christ Blessing the Little Children
(preferred by the donor) **not a Proverb)**

The Wise and Foolish Virgins
The intended Proverb



It turns out that “Christ Blessing the Little Children” from the Ministry of Our Lord, installed in 1927, was switched with the Parable “The Wise and Foolish Virgins” created for the Fletcher window in 1965 at the time of installation, as shown by the date that can be seen at the bottom of the window.

15A and B. Left lancet: Given in memory of
A.F.E. Horn 1943

16A. Right lancet: Given in memory of
Christian Frederick and
Alice Mary Frederick
by Mr. and Mrs. A.F. E. Horn 1927

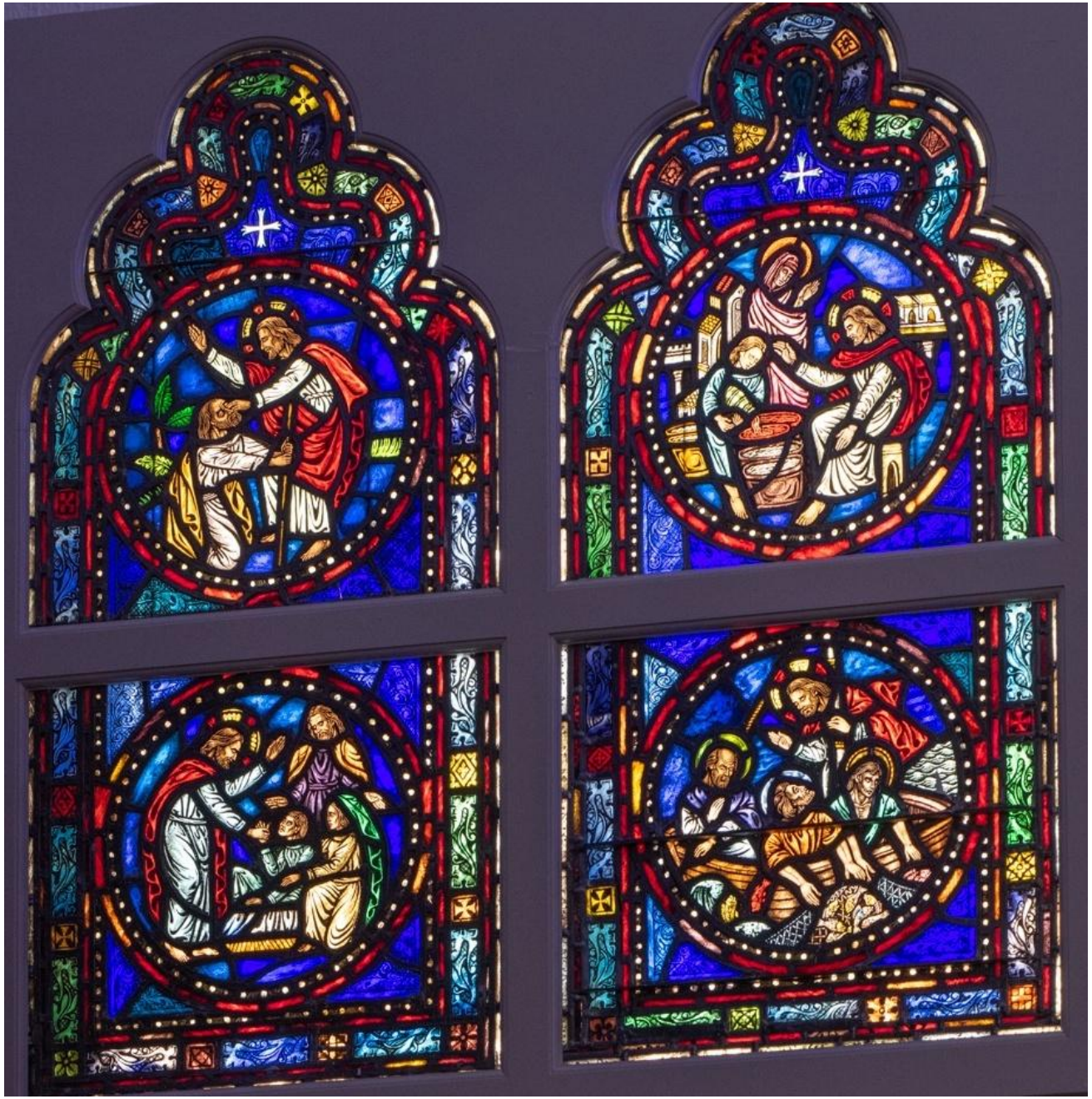


Moved: original 16B
Given in memory of
A.F.E. Horn 1927





Willet Window PHILA 1965



Installed 40 years after they were designed!

MIRACLES in the west transept

Given ibn Memory of John O. Gunn. Sr. 1966

Given in memory of Esther Fundley Henderson and John Robison Baker, 1966

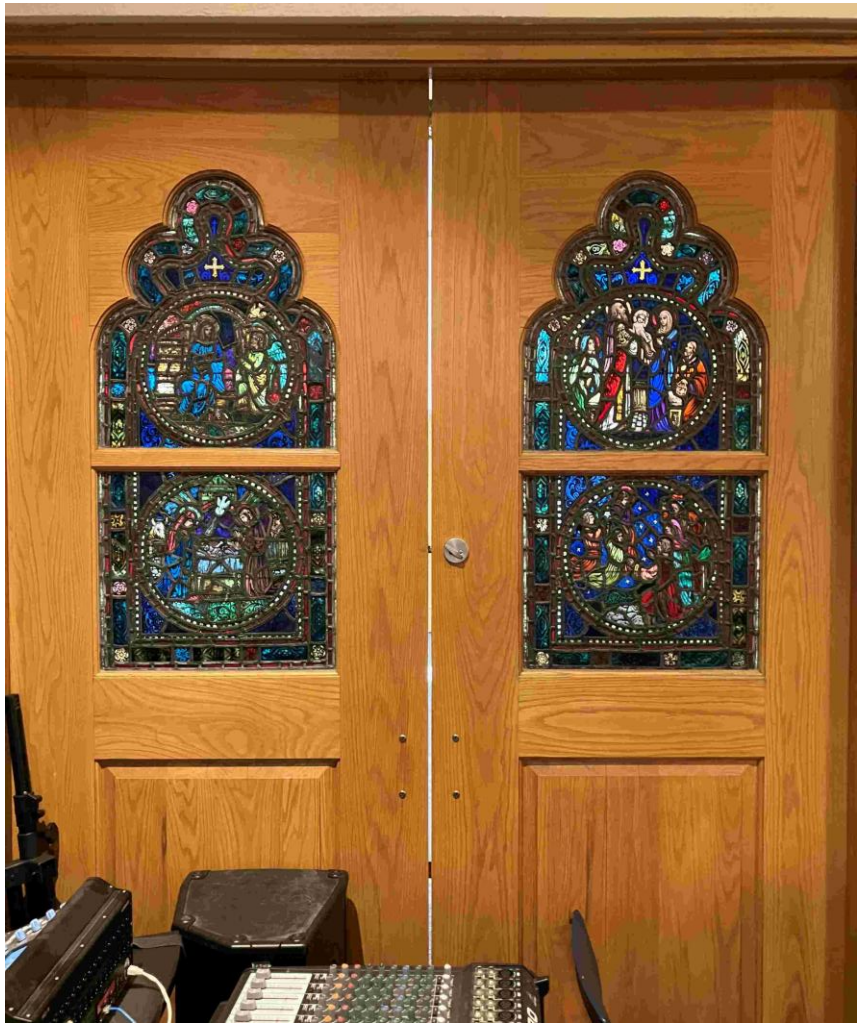
Christ Healing the Blind Man

Christ Raising the So of the Widow of Nain

The Marriage at Cana

The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

In the 1980s when the Common was constructed, the west aisle windows were installed in the doors, facing into the Common, not as they were intended to be seen from the nave.





The Flentrop Organ and the balcony were installed in front of the large transept windows in the late1980s. The transept window of Miracles was moved to the light box across from its original location.





The 1957 list of subjects included citations of biblical passages for the scenes. Many of the stories are in more than one Gospel, and the one that best fits the depiction in the window has been used for the 2025 and corrected 2026 booklet. **St. Columba's Episcopal Church and Its Stained Glass Windows** pairs the biblical passages with images of each scene found on the website at https://www.columba.org/ **Welcome/St. Columba's History/ St. Columba's Episcopal Church and its Stained Glass Windows**

19A. Sermon on the Mount



Matthew 5:14-16

Luke 15:3-7

Matthew 7:24-27

With Thanks to

Rector Ledlie Laughlin, and George and Nicole Cannizzaro of the 150th Anniversary planning team and the Art and Spirituality Committee for their encouragement. Fellow parishioners and staff helped research biblical sources and describe the windows based on their careful looking. They included Jan Benini, John Burgess, Rev. Joshua Daniel, Flori DeCell, Lauren Devito, Susan Elliott, Rachid Gana, John Guenther, David Griswold, Mitch Guffanti, Yvette Herrera, Candice Johnson, Pat Larson, Nancy Nollen, Vicki Porter, Juliette Smith, Joy Thornton, and others, especially . Sondra Mills for her history "St. Columba's Church, Tenleytown and Race," (Prepared for the Reparations Task Force of the Diocese of Washington and St. Columba's Parish, 2022.)

Julie Biggerstaff, Historical Archivist of the Willet Stained Glass Studios generously shared her knowledge and documents from the company archives. Photographs of the Willets and artists used here are from the company's website.

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Photographer James W. Rosenthal, with the support of Michael Dunn

Take time to look at each window so artfully designed to convey an event or story. Each one is filled with brilliant colors and wonderful details.