

## The Story of the Murals | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961

### *THE STORY OF THE MURALS AT GRACE CHURCH*

BY EDGAR SERGEANT

MAN is forever searching for the source of things, whether it be of life, of power, of a river, or of an idea. Thus, it has been a privilege to trace the source of our murals and get it down in print.

It was high time to write this story, for I found that there is only one man who can supply the facts and he, while still hale and hearty is on in years; all the others who had a part in the story have passed away. If not written now, this record might have to be handed down by word of mouth, as in the days of old, when tales were told by bards and troubadours whose sprightly imaginations sometimes varied the facts.

Fortunately, my source is the painter of these murals and the hero of this story. Clinton Balmer studied art in Liverpool School of Art and the University of Liverpool under Fred Burridge.

While still a student, he whet his appetite for murals by doing a series of them for the saloon of the S.S. Columbia, Anchor Line, on the life of Christopher Columbus. A little later while visiting the Toxteth Public Library, just completed, his artistic eye espied a vacant wall space fifteen feet in height and thirty-five feet long. This empty space, to his way of thinking, cried aloud for decoration. Though rather shy and self-effacing in most social contacts, he was far from that when questions of art were concerned. He was quick to convince two wealthy ship owners of Liverpool that he and a fellow student were just the right artists to embellish this space with a mural painting. Their design was duly submitted to the Corporation, approved and executed at the expense of his new found friends, the wealthy ship owners.

Then we find our young Englishman paying a visit to a brother who lived on Prospect Street in Nutley. Like all artists he loved the company of his fellows and soon he was a member of the artists' colony that was centered in The Enclosure. Here he became a close friend of young Fred Dana Marsh.

Marsh, it seems, had recently attended services in the new building of Grace Church on Highfield Lane. This church had just been completed in 1906. While there he noted the blank white walls and ceiling, devoid of decoration and instantly thought how infinitely better they would look if filled with murals of his own making. At that time he was doing murals showing men like structural iron workers, high aloft, fitting together the bones of skyscrapers; heroic figures, somewhat in the style of Michelangelo. Marsh told Balmer of his plan. They put their heads together and agreed that, if permitted, they would join hands and decorate Grace Church. Balmer would paint five panels for the left side, and Marsh, five for the right side.

The next man to join in this enterprise was Henry W. Goodrich, known to all as the "Judge," although no more a judge than are most "Kentucky Colonels" colonels. No judge perhaps, but a jurist distinguished for his knowledge of maritime law and a real judge of the better things in life. He could vie with a Frenchman in the gentle art of living. None could order a better dinner with just the right wine to go with it, choose a more fragrant cigar, turn a better phrase, quote more suitable poetry, or show better appreciation of a picture. Some of these qualities may imply a love of self, but in addition, he loved his fellow man and all returned this love. He was a staunch supporter of worthwhile movements, backing them with money, ideas and work. A lazy golfer, it was his custom to sit in the shade of a fine old oak alongside the seventeenth tee of Nutley's Yountakah Country Club, and offer to bet each golfer that his tee shot would not make the green. This pleasant pastime increased his income and also made him acquainted with all the club members.

Loving the beautiful, wherever found, it was natural for him to enjoy the friendship of the artist colony, so it was not long before Marsh and Balmer had told him of their dream to decorate Grace Church. From that moment he became an ardent sponsor of the idea. The next to be consulted was the architect Henry P. Kirby, who thought it a wonderful idea, as did the rector, the Reverend Douglas Matthews who, however, was a bit skeptical at the start. The sole obstacle was the complete lack of money and the project languished and bid fair to die.

Noting the despondency which seemed to settle each day more deeply on young Balmer, and sensing its cause, his sister-in-law, Mrs. John Balmer of Prospect Street, woman-like, hit upon a way to restore his good spirits and at the same time set the whole project in motion. If he would donate his time, she agreed to somehow find money with which to buy paint and canvas for the first two panels. So our hero set to work in a studio provided by "Judge" Goodrich who borrowed it from an artist friend. From there on the "Judge" got to work with a right good will. He induced his close friend, William Harris Arnold, to underwrite these first two panels. Thus the sister-in-law was relieved of her obligations and Balmer was assured of some pay for his work. The pay, however, was small and so to make ends meet he was obliged to paint portraits, exhibit pictures and illustrate children's books. While the work went slowly forward the "Judge," good showman that he was, found ways to have prospective patrons visit the studio, meet the artist and watch the decorations progress. Thus he sowed seeds which later flowered at a large reception given to commemorate the finishing of these first two trial panels. To this gathering, the "Judge" made certain that those most likely to be interested were present and while there he spoke of the ambitious plan to beautify the church. Thanks to this preparatory effort, the idea took fire and under his skilled guidance the two murals already completed were spoken for and orders were placed for four more - enough to finish the entire left side of the church.

When the young painter had half finished his share of the murals, he received

bad news from England. It seemed that his parents, along in years and in poor health, urgently wished to see him. Here was a dilemma-the murals must be finished and the parents should be visited. It was then that a friend made a strong proposal, saying "Roll up your canvasses and take the first steamer for England." That's just what Balmer did and well it was, for in England he found studio rent and art supplies and the cost of living in general much less expensive than in the States. At the end of a year, Balmer sailed back to the United States with his six canvasses all complete.

Doctors used to say a sea voyage was good for people. Perhaps it helped those paintings too, for when they were set in place in the church, the congregation was deeply stirred by their beauty. "Judge" Goodrich's perception was so keen that he readily noted those who appeared to be the most profoundly impressed. From their number, before long, he had found donors for the second five panels which were to go on the north wall, men and women to whom spiritual comfort came because they had glorified their God in bringing new beauty to their church in memorializing their dead.

Now that half the murals were finished, there was need of a lighting system which would expose the full beauty of the paintings and also provide light for the congregation to follow the services in prayer books and hymnals. It was at this point that the "Judge" first set me to work on the project. We realized that the best lighting system in the whole wide world is the sun. It needs no fixtures but sheds its light on us mortals so that we hardly know whence the light comes. After much deliberation we contrived a somewhat similar system. First, we would hide our lights in the tops of the pillars which support the roof of the church, this without harm to the church architecture. Second, from these pillars we would shed ample light (like the sun) on our paintings, directed at such an angle that the light rebounding would also illuminate the pews. No manufacturer could provide the electrical fittings we needed. Undaunted, we put our ideas into a rough pencil sketch and from it John Windheim, a church member and skilled tinsmith, made the concealed fixtures which have served us faithfully ever since. We like to believe that this was the first time reflected light was so used in a public building. Now it is common practice.

Now it was Fred Marsh's turn to paint the last five panels, but he emphatically refused to do so. Said he, "Clinton, you have done so magnificently thus far, that to you should belong the credit of completing this whole work." Despite all persuasion, he held firmly to his decision.

Inasmuch as our artist was at the time, being paid more in accord with his ability and he did not need to augment his income by outside work, the project moved much faster. Soon the second group of paintings were ready for permanent placement in wall and ceiling, where we hoped they might remain forever or as long as the church would endure. To fit them firmly in their places we sought the aid of Mr. A. C. Keyser, a master painter in our town. He did the work under the artist's watchful eye, using a mixture of white lead and

copal varnish applied in thick layers to both canvas and wall. This work was meticulous, tedious and time consuming, for he had to lay on the adhesive mixture with a spatula. Then he had to smooth it with a rubber roller, rolling outward in all directions from the center of each picture. This rolling continued day after day until there were no wrinkles and the white lead had hardened. It finally became almost as hard as the enamel on our teeth and fitted as snugly as the skin on our bodies. These murals attached in this way should be almost as enduring as the frescoes of Michelangelo, painted though they were right into fresh plaster. It took one whole ton (2000 lbs.) of white lead to complete this work. Firmly in place, a fitting celebration was held, and thanks were given to God that our efforts to further beautify a church already beautiful had been brought to completion. Here again, the New York critics paid tribute to the quality of the murals by showing them in the illustrated Sunday supplements.

It had been a bold and daring adventure in the realm of interior decoration which could have ended in flat failure. Never before, so far as we know, had a church of almost pure Norman architecture had so much space devoted to pictorial decoration. That it was done successfully was due to the consummate ability of Clinton Balmer. As an artist would say, his murals take their place and stay put in the walls. There are no dark spots that seem to jump from the canvas to pursue you. Color contrast is there aplenty, yet the murals harmonize with the basic hue of the building. The people in these murals seem alive and to have third dimension, yet they have that flat decorative quality so essential to good murals. The Biblical characters are not dated but seem ageless as good art would have them.

Enthusiasm ran high. The space around the great east stained glass window now seemed painfully blank so I was asked to interest the Satterthwaite family in commissioning Balmer to decorate that space in the same manner as the side walls. Although only one of the family now lived in Nutley, they still had a great affection for it. Once "Old Nutley," their ancestral home, had stood close to the site of the present Federal Laboratory. This homestead had embraced a large part of what is now Nutley. They had built a chapel on their land, the first Episcopal Church to be established here and, besides, the family had donated the land upon which Grace Church now stands as well as the site of its predecessor on Grant Avenue. It took time and work to contact all this far-flung family, but approval was at last secured and in due time these panels were completed and dedicated. It is interesting to note that we were able to persuade George Blake to do the lettering. He was a direct descendant of the great William Blake, English poet and painter, a genius in both fields of expression. George Blake was a commercial artist who worked in water color and he was one of the most skilled artists of his day in illustrating all sorts of materials used in interior decoration.

Now that the task was done, all concerned settled down for a well-deserved rest, the "Judge" to devote more time to golf, books and enjoying life, the artist

to return to portraiture, pictures for exhibition, illustration of children's books and playing his beloved cello. Arnold had more time to collect first editions and outstanding pictures. That he had a flair for this was proven after his death when his collections were sold at auction at a famous New York gallery for more than a quarter of a million dollars. Among his pictures were water colors by Winslow Homer, for which it was rumored he had paid about fifty dollars each. At the sale, they were sold for about five thousand dollars or more each.

All went well with our little church for several years and they seemed to the churchgoers to be an integral part of the actual building, so accustomed to them did they become. Then something happened - described by our artist as follows: "Riding in the subway, strap-hanging, overlooking a neighbor's Daily News, I read vivid headlines 'Ten Years of His Life Wasted' and saw a picture of a burning building which I recognized as Grace Church, Nutley. Then I realized that the poor straphanger whose ten years of life had been wasted must be me." In the dead of the night before, on December 30, 1925, my family like most everybody in Nutley, had been roused from sleep by the clanging of bells on fire equipment rushing pell-mell to our beloved church. As we dashed to the windows we saw an awe-inspiring sight: flames twice its height were leaping straight upwards from the church. Angry saffron colored flames mixed with tongues of myriad colors as from a fire of driftwood, the colored flames perhaps from our murals giving up the ghost. Next morning we surveyed the damage. Before the firemen got control, the roof had gone as had every single wall mural, but like a miracle, the chancel panels were unharmed as was the great East Window. Not a bit of glass was even cracked. The night had been calm and the flames had leaped straight toward Heaven, sparing these murals and the window just a few feet away.

When the insurance was adjusted and the Vestry had funds with which to replace the ravages of the fire, I was selected to negotiate with Mr. Balmer for new murals. I was not sanguine of success for no man who had seen the fruit of ten years labor reduced to ashes would be likely to attempt a repetition. So I thought, but to Balmer it seemed another chance to achieve, let us say, artistic immortality, a chance to create something worthy to pass on to future generations. Because he was happy in his work, this second series was speedily completed bringing joy to a congregation which had sadly missed its murals.

From the way this tale is told, the reader would think that the painting of these twelve murals was a purely physical task like mowing a lawn or hoeing a potato patch. Not so. The artist's mind must be as active as his hands, working at top speed to keep his work fresh and unlabored. Yet his mind must also be as disciplined as a five-star general planning a campaign.

These murals were planned like a battle in advance of the actual painting, after many consultations with his aides, Reverend Douglas Matthews, "Judge" Goodrich, Arnold, Lyman Nichols, Charles W. Hawthorne and many others.

A diligent search of church records fails to disclose the exact dates when these murals were commenced and finished. Balmer's records, press notices, sketches etc. were all destroyed in a fire which consumed his studio and home at Lake George, New York. We do know from a letter of Mr. Matthews that the painting of the first series extended from 1910 to 1919. The second series must have been started shortly after the insurance was paid early in 1926 and completed in 1929. We would like to mention the donors of these murals but unfortunately there is no accurate record of their names.

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