

# **THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH NEWBURGH, NEW YORK**

Prepared for  
Newburgh Preservation Association's Dutch Reformed Church Restoration Committee

This project was funded by Preserve New York

A grant program of

The Preservation League of New York State  
and  
The New York State Council of the Arts

With a supporting grant from  
The City of Newburgh, New York

With additional support from  
Richard and Mary Jane Bauer  
Geoffrey and Danielle Brackett  
Mr. Christopher Forbes  
George and Pamela Ketchum  
John and Barbara Lonczak  
Central Hudson Gas & Electric  
Meadow Hill Reformed Church

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## FOREWORD

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The year 2003 marks the bicentennial of the birth of Alexander Jackson Davis. What better way to honor this master of American architecture than to celebrate, rehabilitate and bring back into public use one of his greatest surviving buildings, the Dutch Reformed Church in Newburgh, New York? That is what this report helps to advance, and we wish the work Godspeed.

When the Church was erected in 1835 it was sited on a bluff with its imposing portico facing not the street but the commanding view down the Hudson River towards the Highlands Gorge and its scenes forever associated with the nation's struggle for independence and the birth of the republic. Several blocks to the south is the Hasbrouck House in which General Washington in 1782 firmly rejected the suggestion that he become king. The choice of the Greek Revival style for the Church is therefore not surprising: Americans looked to ancient Greece for the origins of democracy, and the austere nobility of such a structure linked piety and nationalism with civic aspiration, pride and confidence in the community's future. Burgeoning river commerce and manufacturing were already impelling the Village of Newburgh well on its way to becoming a city.

Davis himself championed the style for its "grandeur ... simplicity ... elegance ... harmony", and as quoted in the following pages the local press in 1835 hailed the effect of the new building as seen by those traveling on the Hudson: "... the gigantic portico ... will henceforth serve as a conspicuous and characteristic landmark indicative of the taste, discrimination and sense of classical beauty of the inhabitants of Newburgh."

This magnificent but now woebegone landmark is the greatest surviving ecclesiastical commission of America's greatest architect of that era. The Ionic columns of the monumental portico continue to do their assigned task, waiting for us to do ours. The long wait is now ending. While the City of Newburgh, owner of the structure, places a high priority on its needs, a grant from the Preservation League of New York made the Historic Structure Report a reality, the State of New York has made a matching grant toward the urgent task at hand, and the National Park Service has weighed in with funds through the Hudson River National Heritage Area administered by the Hudson River Valley Greenway, it is time for all of us to collaborate in resurrecting the Church as an inspiring place of public assembly for the people of Newburgh.

The preparation of this historic structure report is an essential first step in the careful but urgent actions needed to advance the enterprise. It has been accomplished in the excellent fashion we have come to expect from the preservation architecture firm of Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker Architects. Their clients are the City of Newburgh's attentive officials and the devoted, energetic members of the Dutch Reformed Church Restoration Committee of the Newburgh Preservation Association. Encouragement and assistance for these collaborative efforts continues unabated from William Krattinger of the State's Historic Preservation Office. All deserve the public's thanks.

The next step is acquisition of funding for preservation and conservation planning. The importance of this cannot be overstated - - because of the significance of the structure to our nation's heritage, its visibility as an emblem of our vanishing landmarks, the degree to which it is at immediate risk, and the necessity to do the job right.

In 2002 the Church was honored with the coveted distinction of National Historic Landmark designation by the Secretary of the Interior. It is situated amidst New York's second largest district on the National Register of Historic Places - - 2,400 buildings, one third of the City - - in which the handiwork of noteworthy architects survives along with splendid streetscapes, parks and historic river views. During the 19th century Newburgh was called the Queen City of the Hudson. In the 21st century, in the Queen City, it is architecture that will reign, that will provide the key to a rebounding local economy and property values, an incentive for reinvestment and rehabilitation, a spur to heritage tourism and an enhanced sense of place and quality of life. Just as the Reformed Church was hailed in 1835 as being emblematic of Newburgh's prosperity and civic pride, it is no exaggeration now to say that the fate of the Church may be seen as a metaphor for the fate of the City. Together they will rise again and reclaim their throne.

John Winthrop Aldrich

New York State Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation (1994-2003)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Greek Revival style came of age in the United States in the 1830s, carrying with it romantic notions of ideal democracies that were expressed in architectural forms with proportions and details determined by the ancient monuments re-discovered by the English architects, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their four volumes of engraved details, published as the *Antiquities of Athens*, formed the basis of the Greek Revival. This style was used in buildings as diverse as thousands of simple farmhouses to numerous state capitols. One of the most famous practitioners in the Greek Revival style was Alexander Jackson Davis. His design for the Dutch Reformed Church in Newburgh, New York, was constructed in 1835. The monumental temple-fronted building, sited on a lush promontory overlooking the Hudson River, now stands in the midst of a declining historic urban neighborhood, itself decaying.

The Newburgh Dutch Reformed Church is the only remaining Greek Revival Church designed by A.J. Davis in the world. Its importance to American cultural heritage, consequently, is quite significant. The goal of the Dutch Reform Church Restoration Committee (DRCRC) of the Newburgh Preservation Association is to bring the once-magnificent building back as a viable component of the community's physical fabric. Once slated for demolition during the "Urban Renewal" of the 1970s, the building was championed by members of the community and saved. Since then, the Dutch Reformed Church has been recognized as part of a National Register Historic District, designated as a National Historic Landmark, and it was selected as a recipient of the coveted Save America's Treasures Awards in 2000. The DRC Restoration Committee, through a Preservation League of New York grant, and the City of Newburgh commissioned the following Historic Structure Report as a first step in the coordinated restoration of the building.

The Historic Structure Report will provide a detailed history of the building, along with its historical context, and a framework for its restoration, focusing on the conservation of the special architectural features that characterize A.J. Davis' design, as well as the materials and construction methods of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The report contains an analysis of the building's existing conditions and alternatives for the repair of the problems uncovered during the investigation, a listing of restoration priorities, and recommendations for the rehabilitation of the building vis-à-vis building code and ADA compliance. Annotated drawings complete the report. The choice of alternatives will depend largely on the end-use of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The principal philosophy, guiding the restoration of the building will be to conserve as much of the original fabric as possible. The approach to the conservation will be to gather experts in the various trades related to the building's restoration: lime rendering, woodworkers and structural stabilization, who will establish appropriate procedures for the entire restoration process. For example, a single column will be conserved from the stone base to the carved wood capital. Each craftsman will create mock-ups to inform the preparation of construction documents. Of utmost importance is the conservation of the historic materials and features. Not only will this exploration inform the work at the Dutch Reformed Church, but also it will help to disseminate information about the treatments for use in other similar structures, and by the building trades throughout the region.

As documented in the report, the Dutch Reformed Church changed with the needs of the congregation over time, both spatially and aesthetically. The addition, first of an apsidal recess in 1860 and of the transepts in 1867-8, dramatically altered the original A.J. Davis design. The desire is not to return to the

1835 design, rather to restore building components and finishes in their 1867-8 configurations with the exception of main doors at the south portico. The aim is to conserve the historic detailing as it evolved during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Stabilization of the structure is the foremost concern to the DRCRC as the building's west wall has subsided significantly due to erosion in and around the foundation caused by improper drainage. Fixing the drainage problem is only the first step in stabilizing the building, however. The building must be viewed holistically, as each decision not only influences the subsequent decision, but also decisions made laterally. Consequently, creative solutions should be sought that otherwise might not be considered making the conservation of the building much more than a bricks-and-mortar process. Rather, it is hoped that the Dutch Reform Church will become a laboratory for the restoration of buildings constructed using lime mortars. Similarly, woodworkers and plasterers will learn techniques prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that are no longer practiced, but should not be lost to memory or from the repertoire of historic building trades.

All this work, of necessity, will be completed in phases. Once a comprehensive conservation plan is achieved, appropriate uses are identified, funding obtained, and qualified craftspersons and contractors engaged, long-term preservation will be secured.

The Dutch Reform Church was a vital and vibrant presence in the Newburgh community during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The restored building has the potential to enrich the community of Newburgh today as an awe-inspiring place of assembly where ideas are exchanged and people brought together. But first, the building must be saved from certain destruction brought on by the passage of time and by the uncertain conditions of its surroundings.