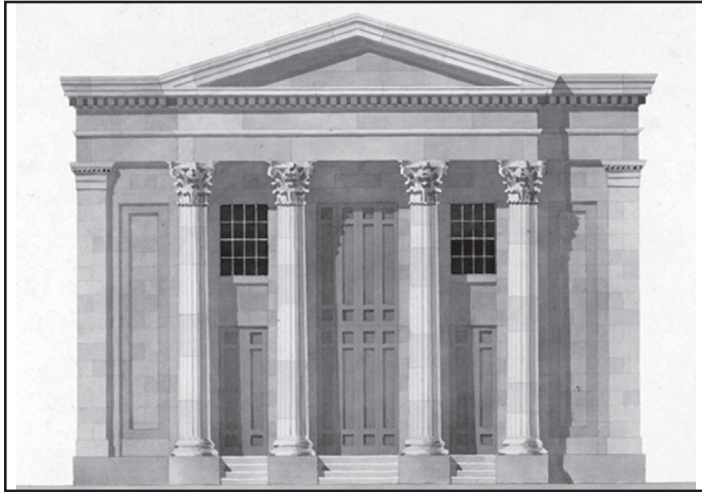


## Then and Now

### Trinity Episcopal Church

By Edwin Rivera

The other day while sitting on a bench in Mario Lanza Park, enjoying the warmth of the sun, I imagined Oliver Hough surveying the old headstones that once stood on these grounds, making notes and sketches, taking measurements and fussing over details. He worked at this for two years, cataloging an old cemetery and church that once stood west of Second Street, between Catharine and Queen. (1) The church — Trinity Episcopal — was situated in the heart of Mario Lanza Park, where I play catch with my kids and where dog owners play catch with theirs.



Philadelphia Athenaeum

It's been almost 90 years since the church was razed and there is little evidence of the old and storied institution under the park's grand sycamores. Consecrated in 1822, the church itself was a simple brick construction, its only architectural flourish a set of Corinthian columns chiseled in late 1700: "Although not an elegant edifice, it is perfectly neat and well adapted to its intended use." (2) By the 1840s, with renovations by a prominent Philadelphia architect, the church had gained "a semblance of ancient majesty. The Corinthian columns... still withstand the weathering of the storms." (3)

While the church flourished for 50 years, time took a heavy toll on its parish. The church was eventually closed in 1908 and, in 1913, was condemned by the City as a menace to public health. A newspaper reported at the time, "Its very rooms, which formerly echoed the tones of the church's most polished speakers, have sheltered for the last six years only the wild birds or no less wild-looking men who could find no other place to sleep." (3) Yet the church's decline gave rise to the treasured urban green space where so many Queen Village residents now congregate.

#### **Prominent Start and Prosperous Growth**

Before the birds and the homeless men, Trinity Church was a vital institution. The cornerstone of the church was laid in 1821. The Advancement Society, a kind of missionary program of the Episcopal Diocese, founded the church. Its original charter was granted under Governor Joseph Hiester (1752-1832) and approved by Judges William Tilghman (1756-1827), former chief justice of the state Supreme Court, John Bannister Gibson (1780-1853) and Thomas Duncan. The Society's members included such prominent citizens as Parson Turner (who gave \$1,000 to the church, the

equivalent of \$13,189 in current value) and George L. Eyre, the original vestry named in the charter.

In the 1840's Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887) designed alterations to the church. Walter was a renowned Philadelphia architect who designed Girard College and parts of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. An ink-and-wash rendering depicts the church's Greek Revival façade, an architectural style that Walter made popular again (image at left). Walter's diary entries for January 1842 document his work on designs for the alteration of Trinity Church. His drawings include a front elevation, plan and elevation, plan of principal story, plan of galleries and pulpit sketches. (4)

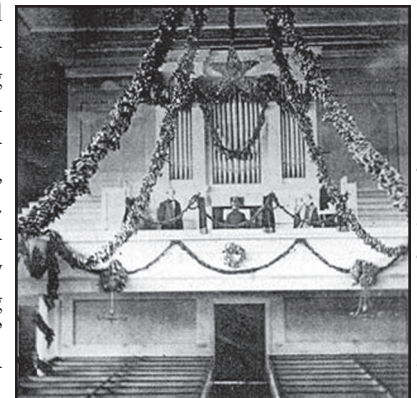
Photographs taken in 1861 testify to the splendor of the church's impressive interior (photo below). At its 42nd anniversary in 1863, a large congregation listened with interest as speakers recalled the honored pioneers of the church. "Meanwhile the renewed earnestness of the congregation here worshipping, their liberal expenditure upon the building, now so neat and elegant through all its interior arrangement, the able management and the efficient ministrations, all confirm the expressed conviction of the speakers, that a new career of happy prosperity is already begun." (5)

The church thrived for many years. Its prominence was reflected in its cemetery. According to a 1913 newspaper account, the burial ground that faced Queen Street sheltered "members of some of the oldest families of Philadelphia... The earliest grave in the cemetery is the one in which members of the Harvey family are interred, the last one being buried in 1818... In the alley to the west of the church lie a row of private vaults containing the bodies of the parents and brother of William Bleddyn Powell, late city architect. Next to this vault is the resting place of Edward Wallington and family... parents of former Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield, son of the martyred President James A. Garfield." (3)

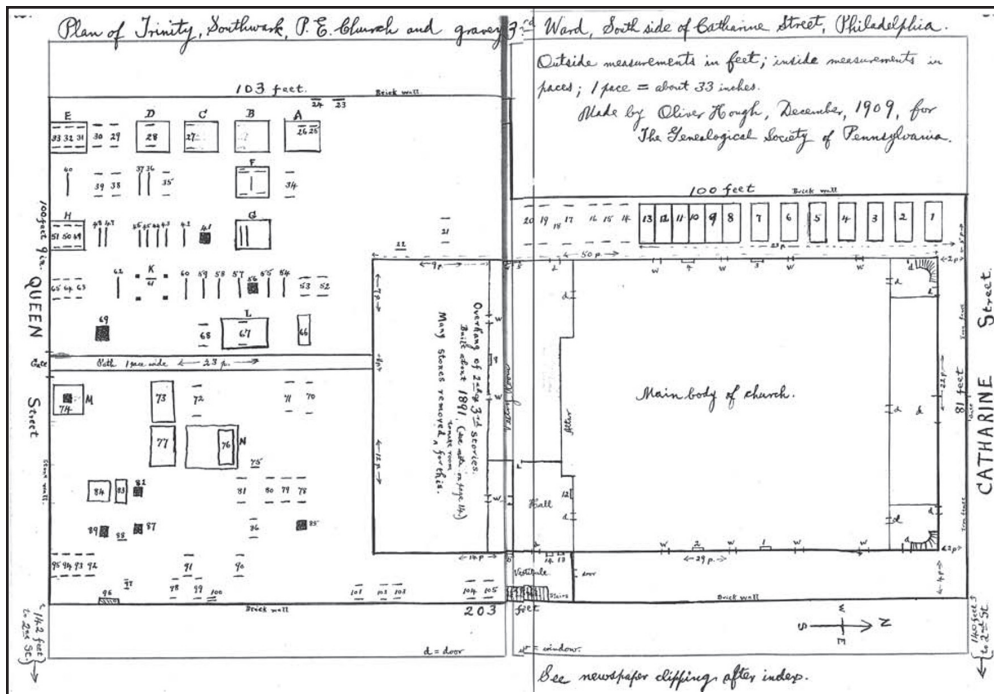
#### **Decline — and Renewal**

Demographic changes in the neighborhood presented a growing threat to Trinity Church and its Episcopal parish in Southwark. Successive waves of Irish, Italian, Polish, Jewish and other immigrants entered the city at Southwark's wharves and settled within its narrow streets and small courtyards. This contributed to an increasingly diverse — and poorer — residential population, as Southwark's more prominent and privileged members moved to the city's western borders and beyond onto the Main Line.

In 1908 the Episcopal diocese closed Trinity Episcopal because of declining membership. The disposition of the church property, including its cemetery, quickly became an issue. The church's original charter stated that the property could not be sold "...as long as a body lay in the ground." (3) While surviving rela-



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- Footnotes**
1. Hough, Oliver. *Tombstone Inscriptions in the Graveyard of Trinity, Southwark*, November 1907-December 1909.
  2. Board of Regulation, Corporation of Southwark, April 21, 1837.
  3. "Where the living question the rights of the dead: Trinity Church to give up its dead," *Evening Telegraph*, June 20, 1913.
  4. *Design for the Alteration of Trinity Church, Southwark Philadelphia, 1842-1845*, Philadelphia Athenaeum.
  5. *Anniversary—Trinity Church, Southwark, 1843*.

### Trinity Church and Cemetery Plots, 1909

tives opposed removing their dead, in just a few years the church and its grounds had fallen into such decay that inspectors from the Board of Health declared the site a menace to public health. The cemetery headstones and remains were eventually removed to Mt. Moriah in West Philadelphia.

In 1914, the City condemned the Trinity Church property (photo below, left) and acquired the lot from its trustees for \$29,000 (about \$535,000 in current value), as well as an adjacent lot on the west. The City declared that the lots would be developed "for park purposes."

By 1917 the derelict structures were razed. At the end of 1918, the Bureau of City Property reported that work on a new "Queen Park" was completed (photo below, right).

The park was later expanded to its current footprint in 1941, when the Octavia Hill Association donated an adjacent vacant lot on the west. On Sept. 29, 1967, the City formally dedicated the park in memory of Mario Lanza (1921-1959), one of Philadelphia's most beloved singers and film stars. However, over the next 20 years the park deteriorated into a trash-filled eyesore in

the wake of citywide budget cuts and the withdrawal of all park-maintenance services.

With the help of the Queen Village Neighbors Association, local residents formed the Friends of Mario Lanza Park in 1988, and they have worked successfully to restore the park to its current beauty. The park is a fitting successor to Trinity Church. It provides a place where neighbors congregate to socialize, listen to live music or even watch outdoor movies, let their children play, or sit on the benches in private reflection.

Long-time residents of the neighborhood have told me that the mound on the Queen Street side of the park is where much of the debris of the old church was piled and buried. I tread a little more thoughtfully in the park now, knowing that the old church may be underfoot.

*I thank Sarah R. Katz for her 2005 paper, Mario Lanza Park: A Cultural Landscape Study. I also thank Al Dorof for his editorial and research assistance.*

Evening Telegraph, 1913



Trinity Church and Cemetery, 1917



Queen Park and Adjacent Vacant Lot, 1941

Temple University Urban Archives