

Trinity Church
141 Spring Street at corner of
Church and Frank Streets
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-102

Trinity Church (RI-102)
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and Frank Streets
Newport County
Newport
Rhode Island
in HABS CATALOG SUPPLEMENT (1959)

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
17-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

TRINITY CHURCH

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
17-

- Location: West side of Spring Street, between Church and Frank Streets, Newport, Newport County, Rhode Island
- Present Owner: Trustees and Wardens of Trinity Church
- Present Occupants: Congregation of Trinity Church
- Present Use: House of Worship of the Protestant Episcopal Church
- Statement of Significance: Built in 1725-1726, to replace an earlier structure, Trinity Church served the congregation organized in 1698 by Francis Nicholson, Lieutenant-Governor of New York and later Governor of Virginia and Maryland. Similar in design to the original Christ Church, Boston, Richard Munday's Trinity Church was inspired by the work of Sir Christopher Wren. In 1762, the church was lengthened by the addition of two bays to the east.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1725-1726
2. Architect, builder, etc.: Richard Munday, architect; builder unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The building is located in Plat 24, Lots 172, 173, 174, and 175.

The property on which the church is sited is composed of a number of small parcels, sold or given to the church. The first church was placed on lots given by Robert Carr and purchased from Francis Brinley in or before 1699. The 1725 structure was placed on the same property. However, more property was acquired for the eastern addition of 1762. Although no deed exists for the acquisition of this land, it perhaps was sold to the church in c. 1733, by Grizell Cotton, administratrix of the estate of William Sanford. In order to increase the size of the burial ground, the church, in 1790, purchased a strip of land to the west of the original lot from Thomas Wickham. Purchasing continued until the present property configuration was attained in 1874. For specific deed references see:

Norman M. Isham, Trinity Church in Newport, Rhode Island (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1936), George C. Mason, Annals of Trinity Church, Vol. I. (Newport: George C. Mason, 1890), and the Land Evidence Books, Newport City Hall.

4. Original plans: None known
5. Alterations and additions: In 1762-63, the eastern wall of the church was moved approximately 26 feet to the east, allowing for the insertion of two bays. Thus the original five-bay structure was enlarged to its present seven-bay size, including the eastern apse. A new, five-story steeple, including a spire and tower, was erected in 1767-68, on the original foundations. The organ loft was altered in 1810-11, to increase the area for the choir. The pews and upper gallery were probably removed at this time. The west gallery was enlarged for the organ in 1833. A center projection was extended over the aisle below. The windows were sashed in 1740. All windows in the body of the church and tower were fitted with blinds in 1834-35. In 1867, the windows in the east gallery ends were covered with plaster and lath on the interior. The louvers remained on the exterior.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Between 1699 and 1702, the congregation of Trinity Church, established under the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, erected its original structure. This building is described as a one-room, hall church with a gallery at the west and a chancel at the east. The growth of the congregation initiated the building of the present structure. Dean George Berkeley visited the parish in 1729, during his three-year stay in Middletown, Rhode Island. After his return to England in 1732, he presented the congregation with an organ, signed by Robert Bridges, London, 1733. During the British occupation of Newport in the Revolutionary War, the presence of the Bishop's Mitre as a weathervane saved the building from vandalism. George Washington is supposed to have worshipped at Trinity Church in 1781 in pew #81. Admiral D'Arsac De Ternay, Commander of the French forces in Newport, is buried in the churchyard. Throughout its history, Trinity Church could count many important Newport citizens among its congregation. Prior to 1800, Dr. Brett, Dr. Moffatt, Martin Howard, the Bulls, Ellerys, Malbones, Cranstons, and Vernons worshipped there. During the late 19th century, Trinity Church became the summer colony's social church. Monuments to Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt and August Belmont attest to its social prominence.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views and plans: "View of Newport," painting of the city from the water, 1740. Lithograph of this panel painting by Newell, 1865, Newport Historical Society. Watercolors, 1830, by John Gilpin, Redwood Library. There was in existence, c. 1890, an undated plan of the church, including pew arrangement with list of owners. Plans, sections, and elevations drawn by R. Kinnicutt in 1929, during the repairs and restoration under the direction of Norman M. Isham, 1925-1936, are in the Newport Historical Society map and plan collection.

2. Bibliography:

- A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Church Archives. Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island.

Hunter Family Papers. Newport Historical Society.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Covell, William King. The Organs of Trinity Church, Newport, R.I. London: Musical Opinion, 1935.

Downing, Antoinette F., and Scully, Vincent J., Jr. The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island. 2nd ed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967.

Isham, Norman M. Trinity Church in Newport, Rhode Island. Boston: Merrymount Press, 1936.

Marlowe, George Francis. Churches of Old New England. New York: Macmillan Co., 1947.

Mason, George C. Annals of Trinity Church. Vol. I. Newport: George C. Mason, 1890.

_____. Annals of Trinity Church. Vol. II. Newport: V. Mott Francis, M. D., 1894.

Newport Mercury. June 15, 1767.

_____. December 7, 1867.

Patykewich, Victoria. "Trinity's Disquieting Ghost." Providence Sunday Journal, October 28, 1956.

Rhode Island. Colonial Records, VI (June 8, 1767), 527.

Stevens, Maude Lyman. "Trinity Church and some of its members." Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society, LXXVII (1930).

Trinity Church Messenger. 1886-1888.

Udike, Wilkins. A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island. I, II, III. Boston: Merrymount Press, 1907.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated: Unknown theses and dissertations on early American church architecture.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Although not far removed from its London prototypes, Munday's church is executed in wood. Rebuilt in 1768, the tower has a lightness of massing reminiscent of the stone tower on Wren's St. Lawrence Jewry. Norman M. Isham's restoration of 1936 has brought the building back to its original appearance-- a wooden Colonial church, with wine-glass pulpit, sounding board, and box pews all in place.
2. Condition of fabric: Since the repair and restoration between 1925 and 1936, the structure has been satisfactorily maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This church building measures 96 feet (seven bays) by 46 feet, excluding the rectangular tower at the west end.
2. Foundations: The foundations are fieldstone, painted black.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Beaded clapboards with shiplapped vertical joints are painted white. The structure probably was not painted until 1733 or 1736. Originally, white lead was combined with oil and litharge, a yellow drying agent. The first color thus appeared more creamy white than the present color.
4. Structural system, framing: The wood framing system is set on a heavy molded plank.
5. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A porch with a pitched roof encloses the five-step, sandstone stoop on the south

side of the church. An oval window is centered in the south porch wall. Five granite steps lead to the door on the south side of the tower. Three stone steps lead to the doors on the north side. A bulkhead is located at the southwest corner of the church and adjoining tower.

6. Chimneys: None.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The two north doors, one at the west end of the nave, the other in the tower, are framed by grooved pilasters set on large paneled bases. The heavy, molded, segmental pediments, although not truly broken, contain an inverted, semi-circular form. The two south doors are similarly framed, but are topped by molded triangular pediments. On the southeast corner of the apse, a narrow, arched door leads to a storage area. A narrow, six-paneled door at the northeast corner of the apse leads from the sidewalk to the vestry. All doors and doorways are painted black.

b. Windows and shutters: Two tiers of round-headed windows fitted with black louvered shutters line the north and south facades. In the lower tier the original fifty-four-light windows are topped by twelve-light fans. Stained glass memorial panels of the late 19th century fill four lower tier windows on the north side. The western doors in the main body of the church, although fitted into the arrangement, are not central to the bays. In the second tier, the forty-eight-light windows continue onto the tower. There are circular windows in the third-tower level on the north and south sides. The fourth-tower level or belfry contains three double-arched openings fitted with louvers. The apse contains a large, round-headed window installed in 1762. The second level of the north and south sides of the apse contains a circular window. A six-over-six, double-hung window is located in the north and south walls of the apse.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The gable roof of the main block is covered with black asphalt shingles. A curved roof caps the eastern apse.

b. Cornice: A heavy, molded cornice is finished by a band of dentils.

- c. Tower: At the west end of the church is a steeple composed of a square tower, an arcaded belfry, a lantern, and a slender spire crowned by a weather-vane. The molded cornice of the tower is finished with modillions. A clock of octagonal form is located on the west side of the tower.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The church is basilican in plan. Its nave is separated from the two aisles by a row of square piers which support the gallery. The main entrance, at the west end of the north facade, opens to a wide, north-south aisle, which runs under the west gallery and terminates at the west entrance on the south facade. Access to the galleries is provided by two U-shaped stairways located in the northwest and southwest corners of the main body of the structure. (The west gallery contains the organ.) The center, east-west aisle terminates in the first level of the tower on the west and at the three-step chancel on the east. The aisles are lined with boxed pews symmetrically arranged.
2. Stairways: The two U-shaped paneled stairways leading to the galleries have black painted molded rails.
3. Flooring: The wooden flooring has been carpeted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The plastered barrel-vaulted ceiling, based on a very flat, four-centered arch, is penetrated by the gallery vaults. The gray-green plastered walls are fitted with bolection paneled wainscoting topped by a molded rail. The galleries are supported by superimposed piers composed of a boxed and paneled, rectangular lower level pier topped by a square, fluted pier which supports the central vault and carries the entablature from which the transverse gallery barrel vault springs. Along the north and south gallery walls, these entablatures are carried by fluted pilasters. At the end of each gallery, the four corner bays are covered by half-groined vaults. All capitals are molded, with a pronounced angled profile. The pier bases are stepped and molded. The gallery breasts have raised paneling topped by a heavy, molded rail. The gray-green vaulted ceiling contains four carved, gilded plaster rondels with a design of grapes and wheat. The three chandeliers and the pulpit sounding board are suspended from these decorations.
5. Doorways and doors: All doors are set in finely molded doorways. The six-paneled, two-leaf north door has a

toplight. The five-paneled, two-leaf south door also contains a toplight. The north and south entrances to the main body of the structure contain five-paneled doors. A six-paneled, double door is located between the west end of the nave and the tower. The interior surfaces of the above doors are painted black. The white, six-paneled door, located at the northeast corner of the apse, leads to a modernized vestry. A short white, flush, arched door leads to the small storage area in the southeast corner of the apse.

6. Special decorative features: Two canopied pews located on either side of the entrance from the tower have elaborately paneled ceilings and backs. A three-level pulpit is located in the center of the church, in front of the chancel. The upper level or polygonal box used for preaching can be reached by a ten-step stairway which has spiral balusters and newels, a string decorated with scrolls, and a finely molded rail. The middle level contains a reading desk. The lower level is used by the clerk who leads the responses to the Psalms. This wine-glass shape with its central support is capped by a canopy or hexagonal sounding board which is suspended from one of the ceiling rondels. The pulpit is finely molded and paneled. The sounding board is finished by a heavy decoration which repeats the motifs used in the canopies of the rear pews. The chancel rail, with squared and turned balusters and a molded rail, separates the nave from the sanctuary.
7. Hardware: All the boxed pews are latched and hinged.
8. Lighting: Three large, two-tier, twelve-branch, brass chandeliers are suspended from the ceiling rondels. Three-branch, electrified wall sconces are centered in each bay on the gallery breast.
9. Heating: A modern hot-air furnace has been installed.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church and adjoining churchyard on the north completely fill the north, east, and south street boundaries. The east end abuts the sidewalk of a busy, narrow, commercial and residential street.
2. Historic landscape design: The adjoining churchyard is completely enclosed by a 19th-century cast-iron fence. This burial ground contains many 18th-century stones, including one by John Stevens, Newport's leading stone-cutter in the second half of the 18th century.

3. Outbuildings: There are no other buildings on the property described. The hall, located to the south of Frank Street, was built in 1956. Honeyman Hall and the park which extends eastward to Spring Street are located on property outside the original plots.
4. Walks, enclosures: A sandstone walk leads from Church Street on the north, through the fence, up to the two north doors, and continues around the tower and along the south facade, east to Spring Street.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade
Architectural Historian
October 10, 1972

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report is part of a photo-data project initiated in the summer of 1972 by the Historic American Buildings Survey, John Poppeliers, Chief, in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman, and the Newport Restoration Foundation, Francis R. Comstock, Director. Historical and architectural documentation by Susan R. Slade supplements the photographs taken by Jack E. Boucher in 1969, and by Cervin Robinson in 1970.