



Foundation Document Overview

Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site

New York



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of SAINT PAUL'S CHURCH NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to preserve and protect Saint Paul's Church and Cemetery and interpret the site's historical events leading to the establishment of the Bill of Rights, its importance as an extant structure used by both sides during the American Revolution, and its place in American architectural preservation history.



Significance

Significance statements express why Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site preserves an important chapter in the early history of the United States, telling the story of the development and political and military history of colonial society. Issues of freedom of individual religious preference and growing support for political independence, along with the impact of war on the civilian inhabitants, were encountered here and raised throughout colonial America.
- Saint Paul's Cemetery is one of the oldest continuously used burial grounds in the country, with marked interments from 1704 and burials as recently as 2016. Thus, it preserves more than 300 years of marking graves with an impressive variety of stones, carving styles, religious and secular symbolism, and epitaphs. Among the approximately 8,000 people buried here are men who served in our nation's wars from colonial times through the Korean War.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Historic Structures.** The historic structures consist of the restored Saint Paul's Church and Parish Hall.
- **The Site of Saint Paul's Church.** The site of Saint Paul's Church preserves an important chapter in the early history of the United States. Remnants of the village green and Saint Paul's Cemetery contribute to the understanding of the historic setting and purpose of the national historic site.
- **Collections.** The national historic site's collections include historic objects and archival materials related to the establishment of the Bill of Rights (including the trial of John Peter Zenger), Saint Paul's Church in the American Revolution, the history of the church structure itself, and burials in the site's cemetery.

Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Archeological Resources.** Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site has archeological collections related to the Late Woodland Lenape residents of the area.



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Consent of the Governed.** The election for an open seat in the New York assembly held on the village green at Saint Paul's Church on October 29, 1733, is one of the earliest recorded examples of the prized American tradition of consent of the governed and a landmark moment in the extension of religious freedom.
- **Role in Revolutionary War.** Difficult personal decisions reached in a politically divided, war-torn region characterize the story of the American Revolution preserved at Saint Paul's Church. Caught in "neutral ground" between warring armies, local residents were forced to make grave choices among patriots, loyalists, and neutrals, often splitting families and generating partisan warfare. Those same Revolutionary War battles and conflicting loyalties led to the military use of Saint Paul's Church by both sides at different times during the conflict.
- **Saint Paul's Cemetery.** The cemetery, one of the oldest continuously used burial yards in the country, contains an impressive variety of stones, carving styles, and iconographic representations that provide insights into changes over three centuries regarding religious beliefs, cultural changes, and attitudes toward death and salvation. The personal and family histories of the people interred in the yard chronicle the story of the area from the early 1700s to the present.
- **Architecture.** The architectural history of the church building, especially several internal alterations, provides significant insights into changing religious practices, community development, and attitudes toward historic preservation and its purposes.

Description

Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site is located at 897 South Columbus Avenue in Mount Vernon, New York, in southern Westchester County. The polygon-shaped site encompasses about 6 acres and contains a church building, carriage house, burying ground, and a small remnant of the old village green. The site is in the block defined by South Columbus Avenue on the north, Leona Lane on the east, South Third Avenue on the west, and Edison Avenue and Dock Street on the south. The property itself fronts South Columbus Avenue. The surrounding area is characterized by commercial structures and light industry.

The parish of Saint Paul's was founded in 1665. One of the longest-standing parishes in the state, the congregation used the site until just after the church building came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service in 1980. It was used as a hospital following the important Revolutionary War battle at Pell's Point in 1776 and was the scene of various military developments for the next six years. The church stood at the edge of Eastchester village green. Events on the village green in 1733, including the "Great Election," documented one of the earliest manifestations of the importance of freedom of assembly, the press, and religion in the public life of America, predicting the eventual incorporation of these concepts into the Bill of Rights. The adjoining cemetery contains more than 8,000 interments dating from 1704.

Increasing industrialization of the area around Saint Paul's Church in the early 20th century led to the decline of the parish. In 1942, as part of an effort to revitalize the congregation and draw attention to the site's historical significance, the interior of the church was restored to its 18th-century appearance based on the original pew plan of 1787. A committee chaired by Sara Delano Roosevelt, mother of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, raised funds for the project.

Although the restoration initially succeeded in reviving the congregation, by the 1970s the parish had dwindled to only a handful of worshippers. The last regular Sunday service at Saint Paul's was in May 1977. In 1980, the site was transferred from the Episcopal Diocese of New York to the National Park Service. The site opened to the public in 1984 and is operated under a cooperative agreement with the Society of the National Shrine of the Bill of Rights at Saint Paul's Church, Eastchester Inc.

Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site is a site with historical, architectural, and potential ethnographic resources. The burying ground contains gravestones that are unique in regard to stone type, style, and iconography; it is also actively used for traditional purposes such as burials and religious rituals. The current church (the second on the site) is constructed of fieldstone and brick. It was built just before the Revolutionary War with major alterations carried out in the 1850s, 1880s, and 1940s. The adjacent carriage house (also called the parish house) is also constructed of fieldstone and brick. A small strip of lawn in front of the church was part of the former village green. The church is now used as a museum; it is interpreted as a religious structure, and is representative of the mid-20th-century preservation movement in America. The carriage house is used as a visitor center, administrative offices, and maintenance shed.

