

Belmont Chapel Getting New Lease on Life

By James Merolla

Belmont Chapel, a hidden gem in the heart of Island Cemetery, is a 19th-century, Neo-Gothic remnant of the historic romance of Newport. It is being restored, one glorious piece of slate and glass at a time.

Thanks to a grant from the McBean Foundation, the long overdue work to restore this treasure has begun, starting with the roof. Preserve Rhode Island also gave a matching grant to enable electricity to be brought to the structure and a security system put in place.

Pam Kelley, president of the Trustees of Island Cemetery, worked with Sharon Hussey, the administrator, to create grants for the chapel.

"Harry Eudenbach (president of the Belmont Chapel Foundation) [has been] responsible for clearing out all of the leaves and vines and securing the building as best he could in the past five years," said Kelley. "We decided to help Harry get some funding."

The nonprofit applied to all the large foundations in the area for grant relief.

"We also thought the time was right to get some traction from [the various foundations] because of the interest generated by an art exhibit put on in the chapel last year by Art & Newport founder Dodie Kazanjian," she said.

Kazanjian, a Newport native and graduate of Salve Regina University, has written about the art world for Vogue magazine since 1989. For the past several years, her group has put unusual installations in buildings around town, highlighting underutilized spaces and what can be done with them, said Kelley.

Also, last winter, the Newport String Project launched the online "Hidden Newport" series, featuring its string quartet filmed in eclectic spaces throughout the city, including the Belmont Chapel.

Ealain McMullin, String Project director, told *NTW* music writer Mark Gorman why they chose the chapel. "While its Gothic profile is a familiar sight to many, the interior is still relatively unknown," McMullin said.



The chapel, built by George Champlin Mason, has not been utilized for decades. (Photos provided by the Belmont Chapel Foundation)



The chapel remained in occasional use for funerals and other services through World War II, but by the 1960s, it was in a derelict state.

Propelled by this artistic enthusiasm, Kelley's group has been working for years to get restoration quotes to complete the daunting task. A few years back, patches were put on the roof as a Gothic bandage to keep the structure from deteriorating further.

"If there is some additional money remaining from the McBean grant, we're hoping to complete the exterior repointing of the stones," Kelley said.

"The interior needs a lot of work, but it's not safe to do that until the exterior roof is completed. If we can't get the roof done, we can't do anything," she said. "We requested money to renovate the whole roof. We needed to have a full-blown restoration, shingles replaced, interior beam duplicated. It's a big project."

The work started two weeks ago.

"It is thanks to the dedication of the Island Cemetery Company Trustees and the Belmont Chapel Foundation Trustees that we find ourselves in the present position of starting the restoration of the Belmont Chapel," said Eudenbach.

"We had two companies that were bidding on the projects, then we asked for rebids," she said.

John Damon & Sons, with offices next door to the cemetery, was selected to do the work.

"They have taken the old slate off," Kelley said. "There has been a wood delivery for replacing some of the beams. They are trying to match it."

Photos of the original interior are being sought as there is evidence of decorative painting that is difficult to ascertain. The impressive stained-glass windows also will have to be restored, which will be part of Phase II, with the work done by Serpentine Stained Glass of Needham, Massachusetts.

"We may actually request individuals to do it [partially]. That's how they used to do it; people would donate windows," said Kelley.

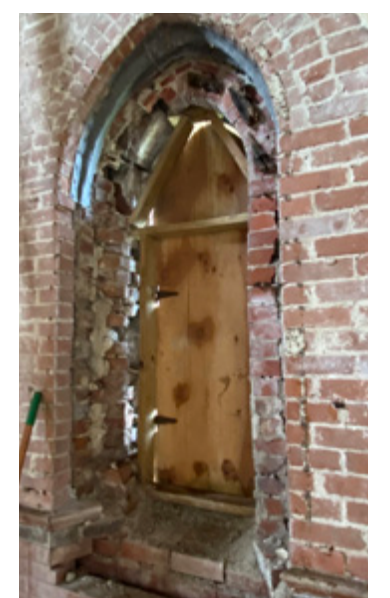
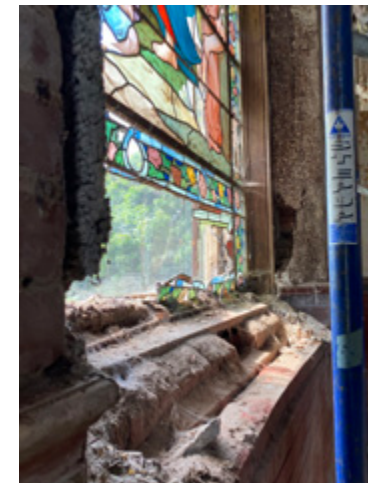
"This project is not open-ended. It is a small building. It is really a wonderful space inside," she added.

A new grant will be needed for interior restoration, and to build an endowment for maintaining the structure in the future. A Chapel Capital Campaign has been started, and the van Beuren Foundation has contributed a grant.

"The chapel and the island cemetery as a whole are undergoing positive changes that will ensure this special place will be valued for generations to come," Eudenbach said.

The painstaking roof replacement will take six to nine months, Kelley said. "It's easier to build something than it is to restore it. It's taking apart a puzzle," she said.

For information or to donate, visit belmontchapel.foundation.org.



Between 1888 and 1899 the Belmonts commissioned nine memorial stained glass windows. The designs for several of these were by the most noted artist of the firm, Luc-Olivier Merson. Seven of these windows are now in a state of grave disrepair and one is missing. The ninth memorial was an American opalescent window manufactured by the firm of Louis Comfort Tiffany. This, too, has disappeared. (Photo by Grace Trofa)



The chapel in its worst state.



After the vines were removed.



Graves of Tiffany and Perry family members are in the foreground of the stone enclave just outside of Belmont Chapel. (Photo by Kirby Varacalli)

Belmont Legacy

Island Cemetery has been a resting place for America's elite for two centuries. It contains the remains of the mavens who made headlines along Fifth Avenue and Bellevue Avenue since Queen Victoria was a child.

Yet the large resting enclave maintains an austere, serene atmosphere surrounded by the city's Common Burial Ground and the North Burial Ground. Founded in 1836, it contains graves from the 1700s having absorbed two earlier cemeteries and older graves which were relocated in later years.

In 1848, the grounds became part of the newly-formed Island Cemetery Company. It numbers some 12,000 graves with ongoing interments as precious space allows, with an adjunct cemetery space nearby for current overflow.

The chapel originated as a commission from wealthy New York financier August Belmont and his wife, Caroline Perry Belmont. During the 1850s, the Belmonts set the trend for elite New Yorkers to summer in Newport. In 1860, they commissioned George Champlin Mason Sr. to build an Italianate summer cottage, By-the-Sea, on the southwest corner of Bellevue and Marine avenues. For the next three decades, the Belmonts and their six children alternated seasonally between Fifth Avenue and Bellevue Avenue.

On Oct. 15, 1875, the Belmonts' eldest child, Jane Pauline, died at age 19. Her interment in Newport's Island Cemetery was in the so-called Perry Circle (also called Belmont Circle), several feet from her maternal grandfather, Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry. In the spring of 1886, August and Caroline Belmont petitioned the Island Cemetery Company to build a chapel in Jane Pauline's memory just north of Perry Circle. The architect was George Champlin Mason Sr., with his son and partner, George Jr., designing the furnishings and decorative ornaments. Soon after its completion in March of 1888, the Belmonts donated the chapel to the cemetery for public use in non-denominational services.

The chapel remained in occasional use for funerals and other services through World War II, but by the 1960s, it was in a derelict state. A heavy overgrowth of ivy as early as 1900 gradually combined with masses of wisteria to bury the building under a blanket of foliage. In recent decades, the deteriorating roof, in places open to the sky, allowed rain and snow to wreak havoc on the interior and furnishings.

Excerpt from *NTW* May 21, 2015 article, "Efforts Underway to Restore Belmont Chapel."