William Gibson Stained Glass Windows Discovered in South Carolina Church

By Ann Hutchinson Waigand

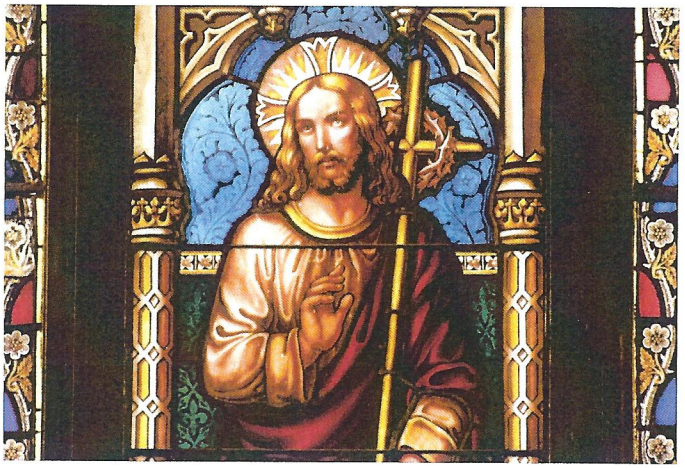

PHOTO: ANN HUTCHINSON WAIGAND

The deflating of a more than 120-year-old legend has revealed a startling discovery about the stained glass windows in a Civil War-era church, Trinity Episcopal Church, Abbeville, South Carolina. Recent research has provided sufficient evidence to attribute the church's chancel window to William Gibson, a stained glass craftsman based in New York City who scholars have called the "father of glass painting in America." Stylistic similarities between the chancel window and a side window, as well as the medallions with symbols of faith gracing the tops of windows throughout the church, suggest that these pieces of stained glass were also crafted by William Gibson's studio, making this the largest collection of William Gibson windows yet discovered in the United States.

Legend passed down from generation to generation had long held that Trinity's chancel window, ordered from England, had run the Union blockade in 1863 in order to reach Charleston. Traveling by land—by horseback or by train—the window arrived in Abbeville miraculously intact. But when church elders opened the packing crate, they discovered a window that had been ordered by a Northern church (some said the Old North Church in Boston, which actually has never had stained glass). The window was too large but, given the war situation and the window's propitious arrival, church members decided to cut off the bottom and fit the window into the existing space. No one reciting the legend over the years accounted for the fact that the church had been consecrated three years earlier, on November 4, 1860, less than three weeks before one of the first meetings calling for secession.

With the assistance of Jean Farnsworth, a noted stained glass expert who is writing a biography of William Gibson's brothers, John and George Gibson, also stained glass painters, this researcher was able to piece together newspaper archives and historical records from the church architect, George E. Walker (1826–1863), to provide convincing evidence of the window's true attribution.

Abbeville's *Independent Press*, published November 9, 1860, five days after the consecration, describes windows remarkably similar to the windows that exist today: "On either hand are the large Gothic Windows of Stained Glass through which the 'dim, religious light' falls in rays of many a fantastic hue; whilst in the rear the beautiful Chancel...and rich stained glass window... one of the finest in the State; representing the figure of Christ bearing his cross and surrounded with many appropriate devices."

In a letter dated May 9, 1862, found buried in a wad of 1950s bank statements in an old safe in the sacristy, then-Vicar Benjamin Johnson requests payment for repairs to the frame of the chancel window, writing that the window "had shrunk to such an extent and the glass drawn out of its place so generally thereby that it became necessary (in order to stop the numerous leaks) to take down the outside wire and putty and paint it all over again." If a stained glass chancel window existed in 1862, as evidenced by the mention of wire protecting the outside of the glass, why would the church have still been waiting for a window to arrive from England in 1863?

More convincing evidence comes in the form of a letter found in the papers of the church architect, George E. Walker. The letter, signed by William and his son James Gibson of New York, is a response to an order from Walker for a stained glass window for a house being built in Charlotte for wealthy businessman James Harvey Carson. The letter is noteworthy for several reasons. Nineteenth-century architects often selected one stained glass artist with whom to work on their

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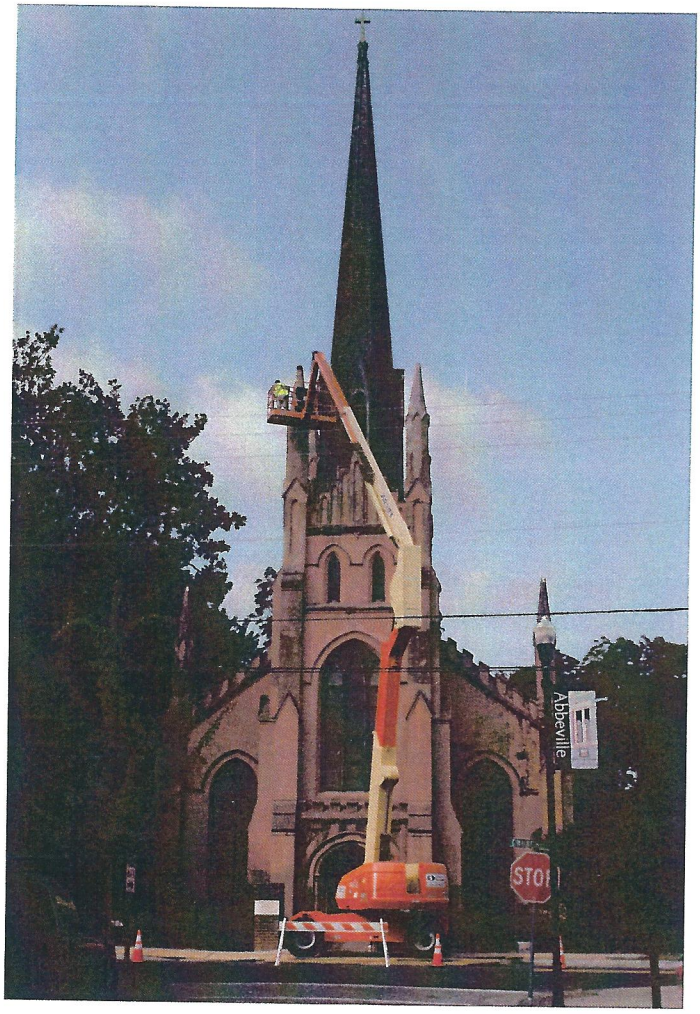

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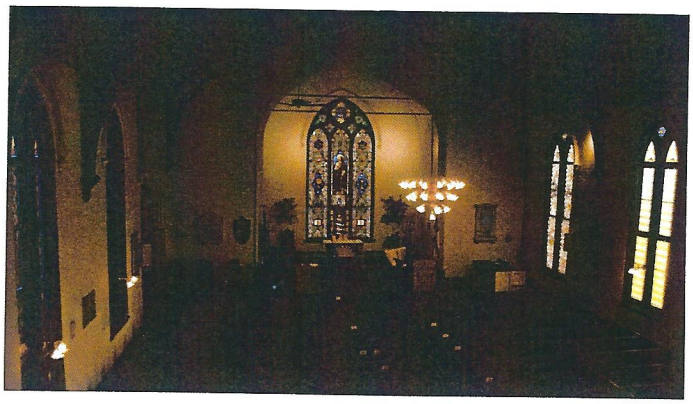

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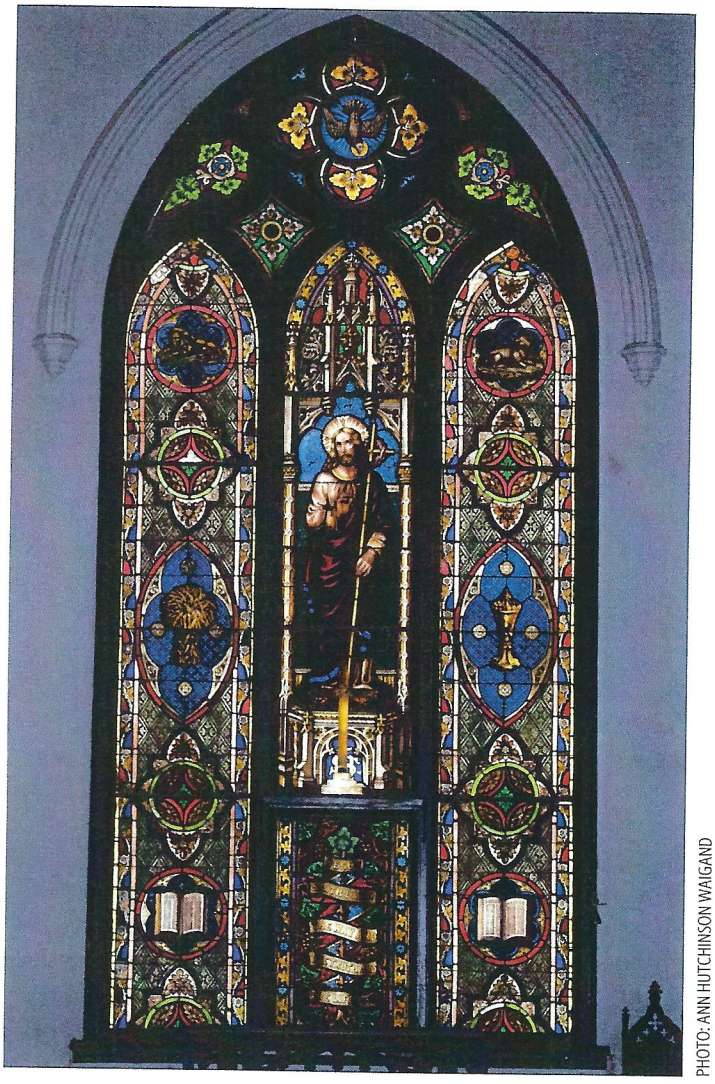

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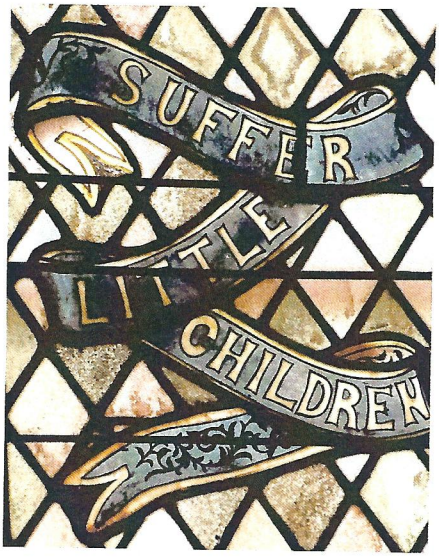
projects, and Walker was working on the Carson house just three years prior to his commission to design Trinity. Likewise, religious denominations tended to favor the same stained glass artisan. Farnsworth's research has shown that the original chancel window in Trinity Episcopal Church, New Orleans (since replaced), was made by William Gibson during the same period as the windows at Trinity Episcopal Church in Abbeville.

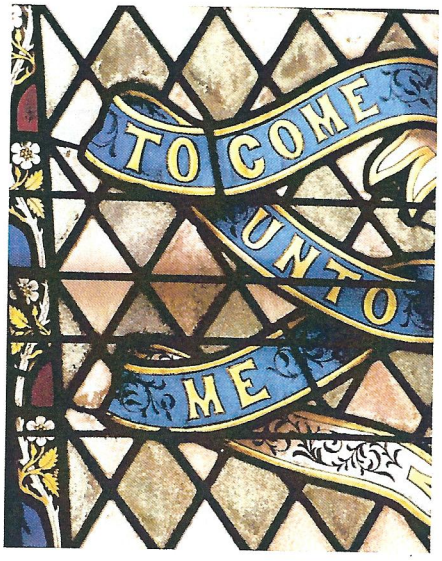
Artisans in 19th-century America, many of whom were immigrants or first-generation Americans, often selected fellow countrymen to work on their projects, and it appears that George Walker was no exception. Walker's father, a celebrated cabinetmaker in Charleston, SC, immigrated from Scotland in 1793. William Gibson also came from Scotland, setting up his first stained glass studio in New York City in 1833.

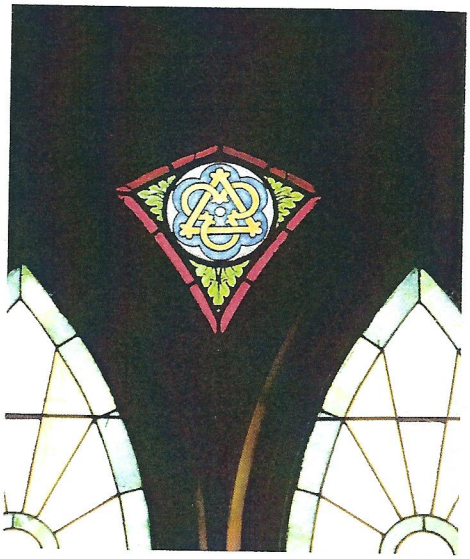
In addition, both Virginia Raguin, who headed the Census of Stained Glass Windows in America, and Tony Benyon, who has compiled a list of 19th-century stained glass artists in England, confirm that stylistic changes that occurred in

FACING PAGE:
Trinity Chancel Window, detail, attributed to William Gibson.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Trinity Episcopal Church exterior during condition assessment.
Trinity Episcopal Church interior.
Trinity Chancel Window, detail, attributed to William Gibson.







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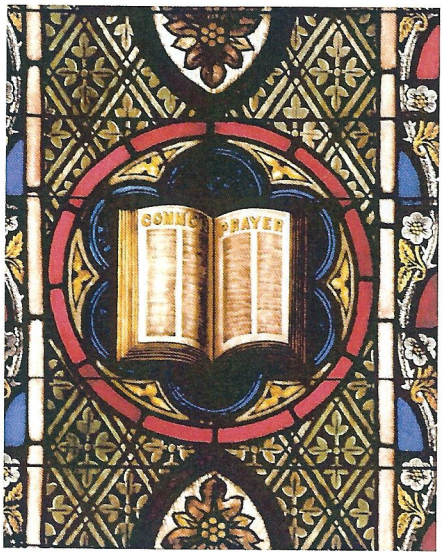
English stained glass in the late 1850s are not reflected in Trinity's chancel window, further verifying that Trinity's windows are American-made.

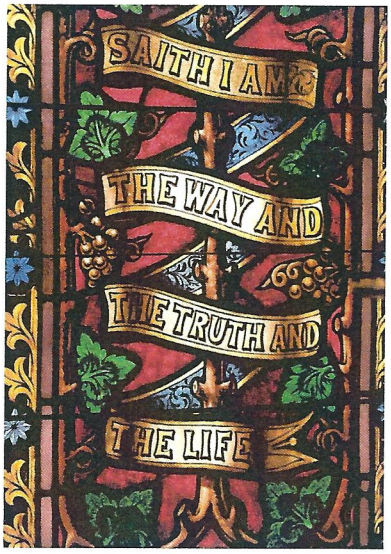
The question naturally arises: How did Gibson windows end up in a small town in South Carolina? Abbeville Courthouse, as it was known prior to the Civil War, was a prosperous county seat, and church members, including lawyers, doctors, a state senator, a former Speaker of the House in the U.S. Congress, and a nephew of John C. Calhoun, comprised the town's elite. Jehu Foster Marshall, a member of the building committee and the major benefactor to the construction, had significant ties to the nation's Capitol, where William Gibson's brothers, John and George, were creating stained glass skylights as part of the Capitol Extension. At that time, Marshall's brother-in-law, James Lawrence Orr, was in the U.S. Congress, serving as Speaker of the House. In the years just prior to the building of Trinity, Marshall graced the gardens of his home on Abbeville's North Main Street with a large cast iron fountain made by Janes, Beebe and Company of New York City, whose business was located barely a block away from William Gibson's studio. Letters between Thomas Walter, the architect of the U.S. Capitol Extension, and Charles Fowler, co-owner of the iron foundry, speak of William Gibson and the prowess of one of his "modellers" and also discuss the iron frames that Janes, Beebe is making for the Gibson stained glass skylights. Marshall may have learned about the excellent quality of work of both the iron foundry and the stained glass makers from his brother-in-law, thus affirming for him and the building committee the wisdom of their architect's selection.

One final puzzle of Trinity's stained glass legend deserves attention: How did the story of the window running the Charleston Blockade arise? Abbeville's *Independent Press* reports that the church building fund had two major Charleston benefactors who donated over 10% of the church's building cost of $15,665: Mr. Trenholm, who gave $1,000 and $500, and Mr. Wagner, who donated $500. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that George Alfred Trenholm and Theodore Wagner were partners in a Charleston-based shipping business which also had an office in Liverpool, England. During the Civil War, Trenholm, who later became Secretary of the Treasury of the Confederacy, was a blockade runner so celebrated that many believe he was the model for Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*. England, blockade runner, large donation to Trinity's construction—all these "facts" figure in Trinity's long-standing legend.

Unfortunately, no other Gibson windows have been found in South Carolina. Only two Walker-designed churches are still extant. First Presbyterian Church in York, SC never contained stained glass, and church records show that the original stained glass in St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Newberry, SC has been replaced over the years.

Abbeville, like much of the South, never regained its pre-Civil War wealth and status. A happy consequence is that Trinity has remained virtually unchanged since its first use in 1860. The 1860 bell still hangs in the steeple. Pews painted to look wood-grained, a technique known as *faux bois*, have never been painted over. Though the church doors remained closed for over twenty years after the Depression, a faithful but aging congregation of about 25 parishioners currently attends worship service here every Sunday and shares responsibility for keeping the building open to visitors seven days a week. The church historian, herself 94 years old, believes Trinity may hold yet another distinction—the only congregation in the Episcopal Church where all the acolytes are on Social Security!





THESE PAGES:
Trinity Episcopal Church windows, details.

In addition to the Gibson windows, the sanctuary includes two very early "paper" or stenciled windows, four diamond-paned (quarry) windows, and three Victorian-style windows (which may date anywhere from 1880 to 1920)—a veritable library of nineteenth-century, American-made stained glass. Only one window, an Epiphany window from the J.R. Lamb Studio, is definitively of the twentieth century (1941).

Though the stained glass windows remain surprisingly vibrant, Bovard Studio Stained Glass, during a recent evaluation, noted that all the window frames suffer from wood rot and extensive decay. Protective coverings, which have been in place for over 20 years, lack ventilation and are trapping moisture. The material has become so cloudy that it totally obscures the beauty of the windows when viewed from the outside.

The side quarry windows were in place at the time of the building's consecration (the author's grandfather and his business partner funded one window), however, the lead cames in these windows have been replaced. Bovard's evaluation noted round holes along the sides of the window sashes which would have held round support bars. On releading, some of the round bars were replaced by newer flat bars. Portions of the stained glass have been replaced as well; the trim surrounding the quarries on two of the windows includes opalescent glass, which was not introduced until at least 20 years after these windows were installed.

The Gibson windows, sadly, have suffered the most damage. The Gibson side window (the "Suffer Little Children" window) has numerous bulges for which additional support bars were obviously added. It contains several pieces of replacement glass and will need to be removed and restored off site.

The chancel window, which towers almost 20 feet high, has also had problems with bulging over the years, as evidenced by the addition of unpainted metal support bars. The original leading no longer provides adequate support, and the window needs to be releaded. Poor quality attempts to repair broken glass using silicone and mastic can be seen (the oldest parishioner remembers a story of a boy throwing a ball through the window), and there are even places where an extra lead piece has been placed astraddle a painted letter in an attempt to shore up an area of broken glass.

The church building is sound but the structure is in need of restoration as water intrusion from the roof, gutters, and the 125-foot steeple pose threats to the windows and their fraying wooden frames. A conditions assessment puts the restoration bill at $2.3 million of which approximately $190,000 is allocated for stabilization, cleaning, restoration, and protection of the stained glass windows. The congregation is hopeful that a small first phase of the building restoration can begin begin in fall 2016 but additional work will depend upon acquiring adequate funding.

Readers are welcomed, and encouraged, to view the church windows. It helps to call ahead (864-992-2200) as unlocking the church door each day is strictly a volunteer project. Donations to the church restoration are gratefully accepted by Friends of Trinity, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, at P.O. Box 911, Abbeville, SC 29620. ■

Ann Hutchinson Waigand is the daughter of Trinity's Episcopal Church's 94-year-old church historian, May Robertson Hutchinson. The 1862 letter in the article was found in a safe her great-grandfather, James Townes Robertson, donated to the church when he closed his mercantile store in the late 1800s. Waigand's discoveries, while pursuing a U.S. Capitol Historical Society Research Fellowship, led her to challenge Trinity's long-standing stained glass window legend.