

Churches in the Parlor

John McAllister & Brother of Philadelphia

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Above the tower of City Hall, overlooking Philadelphia, PA, stands the gigantic thirty-seven foot high statue of William Penn whose dream was to create a community of “brotherly love” (Philos-Adelphos in Greek).

A devout Quaker, Billy Penn believed that everyone should be able to worship as one pleased. Born in England in 1644, he personally experienced the effect of opposing the state religion – The Church of England – as he was imprisoned three times, once in the Tower of London, for preaching and writing in favor of Quakerism. Philadelphia, the city he founded in 1682, was destined to become a center of religious freedom as churches of many different faiths were built. There was room for all in Penn’s town. When a certain Episcopalian priest criticized Penn for allowing a Roman Catholic Mass to be publicly celebrated, Penn strongly defended an impartial liberty of conscience to “Jesuits and papists” as well as to all others.

In the days before the advent of radio, television, sports arenas, and automobiles, the Church played a very significant role in the life of the city and its people. For many it was the focal point of community activity outside the confines of their homes. The Church was not only the proclaimer of the “Good News” and the instructor of “Right Living,” but it was also a magnet drawing together strange combinations of people in corporate worship. The rich and the poor, political leaders and commoners, all laid aside their distinctions as they sang hymns, read the Bible, and prayed together.

The Church also symbolized the highest and best in life, not only in morals and ethics, but also in the arts. Church music and architecture inspired the heart and mind to look beyond the tyranny of the present moment. Their beauty and excitement idealized the future.

It is not surprising then to note that the Church was the tallest, the largest, and the most magnificent building in the community. Seating accommodations in the Church were only secondary; its silent yet visible majestic presence primary. It was a well-designed reminder that life is not confined to an earthly existence and that overshadowing all of life is each person’s religious faith and commitment.

The importance of the church in the 19th Century was particularly noted by the photographers and stereographers in the developmental years of the new art of "picture-taking." In Philadelphia, John Moran and others photographed both the exterior and interior of many churches. Many of these photographs were sold by the famous McAllister firm. *The Evening Bulletin*, on Wednesday, December 19, 1860, carried an article titled, "The Church in the Parlor-A Capital Idea." It read in part as follows:

McAllister and Brother, the well-known Opticians, North 725 Chestnut Street, have originated an idea in the line of their business that cannot fail to become very popular, and the first successful fruits of which they have just introduced to the public. They have had faithful photographic views taken, for the stereoscope, of the interior of a number of churches of the city... and the sacred interior is brought literally, so far as the optics are concerned, to the parlor of the possessor.

The McAllisters, though Presbyterians, did not limit their photographic attention to only Presbyterian Churches. They were astute businessmen who sensed the interest that parishioners of any church would have in purchasing three-dimensional pictures of their own places of worship. Thirty different churches pictured on stereographs produced by McAllister and Brother from 1860 to 1864 have been viewed by this writer. Some of these are at the Library Company in Philadelphia and others at the Library of Congress in Washington. These include: Protestant Episcopal 16, Baptist 3, Presbyterian 4, Roman Catholic 2, and 1 each of Reformed Presbyterian, Lutheran, Unitarian, United Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. In addition, there is a noted stereo-picture of the officers and members of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church from May 16 to June 1, 1861. The reverse side of the stereograph lists the names of the 153 ministers and the 111 ruling elders who were commissioners to the General Assembly.

The McAllister name is well-known to collectors of photographica. John Sr., born in Scotland in 1753, came to America in 1775 with his brother William and temporarily settled in New York. The British invasion of New York provided the impetus for the brothers to quickly move to New Jersey and then on to Philadelphia. John's first business was the manufacture of whips and canes until a friend, Benjamin Franklin, persuaded him to expand his stock of goods to include spectacles and other optical devices. By 1796 his business at 48 Chestnut Street advertised "a large assortment of spectacles, reading glasses, concave glasses, goggles, and...new glasses in old spectacle frames." Shortly after the turn of the century, his son John graduated with honors from the University of Pennsylvania, at the remarkable age of 17 years, and joined his father in business. He married the daughter of William Young, who was the Vice-President of the United States from 1823 to 1825. The reputation of McAllister and Son, Opticians, became widespread as they supplied bifocals for George Washington, President Thomas Jefferson, President Andrew Jackson and other dignitaries such as

Chief Justice Tilghman, Count Joseph Bonaparte, and Henry Clay. The Wills Eye Hospital reports that McAllisters made the first eye-glasses to correct astigmatism.

The father, John McAllister, Sr., was a devout Christian who served as a ruling elder for 45 years in the Associate Presbyterian church. A receipt for his payment of \$9 for the annual pew rental of the church in 1829 is on file at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia.

While still in business at the turn of the century, John McAllister, Sr. and a friend identified only as J.K. conducted a five-week preaching tour throughout parts of Pennsylvania and Maryland for the purpose of "setting forth the Gospel." His handwritten diary reported the details of the 462 miles they traveled, the 23 meetings they conducted, the names of families from whom they obtained accommodations, and other interesting anecdotes.

Upon the father's death in 1830, John Jr. managed the optical business until his own retirement in 1835. The business then passed to William Young McAllister, the grandson, until his brothers Thomas Hamilton and John Allister McAllister joined him in 1852. Others associated with the McAllisters were Walter R. Dick and John White Queen. Cohen's Philadelphia City Directory of 1860 listed John Jr. as a "gentleman" apparently indicating that though worthy of recognition, he was now retired from business. His retirement at age 49 gave him ample time to continue an active life with numerous interests. It is reported that he was the first paying sitter in the pioneer daguerreo-type studio of Robert Cornelius. The political debates which occurred in the Congress of the United States were particularly stimulating to his inquiring mind.

Because he was an avid collector of old pamphlets, newspapers, maps, and manuscripts, many sought him out for information he had collected and carefully filed. His many scrapbooks of newspaper clippings on file at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania have provided considerable information for this writer. His practicality led him to devise a system for the numbering of houses and streets which is still in use today in many cities and towns. The famous Wills Eye Hospital of Philadelphia honored him by electing him to the advisory capacity of Manager, prior to the formation of a Board of Directors. He also contributed generously to the University of Pennsylvania and was its oldest living alumnus when he died in 1877 at the age of 91. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania appropriately recognized the loss of one of its most respected members for fifty years in a memorial notice quoted in part as follows: "He did justly; he loved mercy; he walked humbly with his God."

The McAllister's business expanded to include a wide variety of optical items including stereoscopes and stereographs. McAllisters, familiar with many photographers who had their shops on Chestnut Street, collected their works and sold them from 728

Chestnut Street, where they boasted of the largest shop-window in Philadelphia. Their catalog of February, 1858, shows drawings of a Brewster type viewer of mahogany with brass tubes (eye pieces) for just \$2 each or \$21 per dozen.

The 1861 catalog issued by McAllister and Brother advertised a listing of 106 different glass stereographs that could be viewed by a stereoscope, or through a stereopticon projector. The slides sold for \$12 per dozen. In addition, they listed 170 views on either glass or paper mounts, colored or plain, with prices ranging from \$3 to \$21 per dozen. It is interesting to note that though the catalogs were selling photographs they included only engraved drawings of photographs. Printers did not learn the process of transferring actual photographs to the printed page until several years later.

The series of stereographic pictures of Philadelphia Churches produced by McAllister and Brother was a natural result of the family's involvement in the life of the church. It seemed to be a means of highlighting the significance of the church in the development of the city of Philadelphia. This photographic history more than equals the value of any written record. It captures and reconstructs the Past as it was, without the encumbrance of words or interpretations. It is self-interpreting.

Along with the stereographs of churches, the McAllisters carefully recorded additional data on the reverse side of each card including the dates when the churches were organized, the cornerstones laid and the buildings dedicated; the style of the architecture and the name of the architect; the size of the buildings; the seating capacity; the height of the towers; and the names of ministers as well as others including the sexton.

One famous architect, Thomas U. Walter, Esq., was the architect of the U. S. Capitol Extension in Washington, the State Capitol Building in Nashville, Tennessee, as well as Girard College, the U. S. Bank (Custom House), the Church of the Epiphany, Trinity Church, and the Third Reformed Dutch Church, all in Philadelphia.

John Notman was the architect of the Church of the Holy Trinity, built in 1857. It is one of Philadelphia's landmarks today, still with an active ministry. Notman was also one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Institute of Architects.

Of the 30 churches photographed and published by McAllister, 14 still exist in the same location, more than 120 years later they are:

- The Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul at Logan Square.
- Christ Church, 2nd Street above Market.

- First Reformed Presbyterian, Broad Street between Spruce and Pine. Original building demolished and rebuilt in 1897 as Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church.
- Old Swedes Church (Gloria Dei at Delaware and Christian)
- St. Peters, Third and Pine.
- St. Stephens, 10th between Market and Chestnut.
- West Arch Street Presbyterian, 18th and Arch.
- West Spruce Street Presbyterian, 17th and Spruce (now the Tenth Presbyterian Church).
- Church of the Holy Trinity, Walnut and 19th Streets.
- St. Andrews, 8th Street North of Spruce (now St. George's Greek Orthodox Cathedral)
- St. Lukes, 13th below Spruce.
- St. Malachi, 11th above Master.
- St. Mark's, Locust between 16th and 17th Streets.
- St. Pauls, 3rd between Walnut and Spruce.

Two of the oldest churches in Philadelphia are Old Swedes' Church and Christ Church. Both have impressive histories. Old Swedes (Protestant Episcopal), also known as Gloria Dei Church, was organized in 1677. The building was erected in 1700 at its present location (Wicaco) at Delaware Avenue and Christian Street. At first there was considerable disagreement among the Swedes, who were divided as to the best location for the church. Some wanted it at Wicaco and others at Passyunk. They settled the matter by choosing lots. Two pieces of paper were prepared with Wicaco written on one and Passyunk on the other. After being shaken in a hat and thrown on the ground, one was taken up and opened. The name Wicaco appeared. Dissension ceased at once and all joined in singing a hymn of cheerful praise.

Christ Church (Protestant Episcopal) at 2nd Street above Market included among its worshipers Betsy Ross, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and many other famous persons from colonial days to the present. The Church has been in continual usage as a place of worship for over 250 years. A present day comparison of the Church edifice with the stereographs of December 1860 shows very little change in either the exterior or interior with the exception of electrical lighting. The original church built in 1695 was replaced by the present structure erected on the same site in 1727. The steeple and chimes were added in 1754. In 1708, Queen Anne of England presented a silver flagon, cup, and paten to be used in the celebration of Holy Communion. McAllister stereographs pictured these vessels, still possessed with pride by the church today.

The Church of the Intercessor, another Protestant Episcopal Church, was built in 1859 at Spring Garden Street below Broad. The large sanctuary, 64 feet by 100 feet, was described as “being lighted at night by a gasallier, containing 104 burners, which gives a clear and steady light.”

Trinity Church, on Catherine Street between 2nd and 3rd, was dedicated in 1822. The Rt. Rev. Bishop White disapproved of the organization of this new parish because of its location, considering it impossible for the church to succeed in that area of the city. His predictions were proven wrong as the church became very successful and found it necessary to enlarge the sanctuary.

The First Reformed Presbyterian Church began in 1798 and held worship services in two locations before erecting the third edifice in 1854 at Broad Street between Spruce and Pine Streets where it continues its present ministry as the Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Rev. Samuel Brown Wylie, D.D. and his son Rev. Theodorus W.J. Wylie were both ministers of the Church, with the father serving 50 years from 1802 to 1852 and the son from 1843 to 1860. The present edifice, built in 1901, was designed in the early English Gothic style with clerestory. This writer, a clergyman, has often been the guest preacher in this church and in the Tenth Presbyterian Church at 17th and Spruce Streets known to the McAllisters as the West Spruce Street Presbyterian church which once had a 250 foot steeple. The Church was made famous in the 20th Century through the ministry of nationally known Bible teacher Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, and presently of Dr. James Montgomery Boice. Few churches today can boast of the beauty of this Gothic sanctuary and its original Tiffany stained-glass window.

The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, (Roman Catholic) located at Logan Circle was begun in 1846 and not completed until 1863. This magnificent edifice is 136 feet wide, 216 feet long, and 104 feet high. The dome rises 240 above the pavement. When Pope John Paul II visited the United States in 1979 a special platform was constructed in front of the Cathedral where Mass was celebrated before several thousand observers. Additional millions watched via world-wide television, a photographic phenomenon just a few scientific leaps beyond the optical skills of the McAllisters.

The church series of stereographs furthered the success of the McAllister family business which spread from Philadelphia to New York City. In 1865, one of John Jr.'s sons, T.H. McAllister, located his establishment at 49 Nassau Street and became a leading distributor of magic lanterns, lantern slide series, microscopes, and stereopticons. The zoetrope, anamorphoscope, parlor

kaleidoscope, and polyprism were only a few of the exotic optical devices sold by McAllister through his 136 page catalog.

The contribution of the McAllisters to the field of the optics, and particularly to a variety of photographic forms, is immeasurable. In addition, the stereographs of Philadelphia churches by McAllister are a reminder to the present day stereo photographer of the importance of capturing on film a rapidly disappearing present. Who knows, or can estimate, the value of the photographic heritage some photographer will leave for a future generation by the pictures one takes today.

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Stereographs of churches included in this article will be added to this web-page