

TWO AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: *La Farge Windows in North Easton, Massachusetts*

by Robin Neely

“I have done the Ames window... and have suffered much from it”

By the time John La Farge wrote to his friend historian Henry Adams about the completion of the *Angel of Help* stained glass window for Unity Church in North Easton, Massachusetts, he was already considered one of America’s leading artists. Well known for works in painting, book illustration, stained glass, and murals, La Farge had just completed what a critic declared in the 1887 *Art Review* to be “the most elaborate window made in the United States.” What La Farge did not know is that this would be the first of two masterpieces he would create for the church, two important windows that would become the crown jewels in a small New England town already resplendent with architectural treasures.

North Easton, the Ames Family, and The American Renaissance

By 1887, the town of North Easton was centered on the Ames Shovel Company. The company, founded by state senator Oliver Ames, Sr., thrived by furnishing shovels for the Union Pacific Railroad during America’s westward expansion and by supplying shovels to the Union during the Civil War. The prosperous Ames family shaped North Easton’s economy and also influenced its architecture and landscape, creating a collection of works by some of the best and most respected architects, artists and artisans of the American Renaissance. Commissions by the family included five buildings by the architect for Boston’s Trinity Church, H.H. Richardson.

Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of New York’s Central Park, complemented three of Richardson’s buildings with landscapes. In addition, Olmstead designed landscapes for four



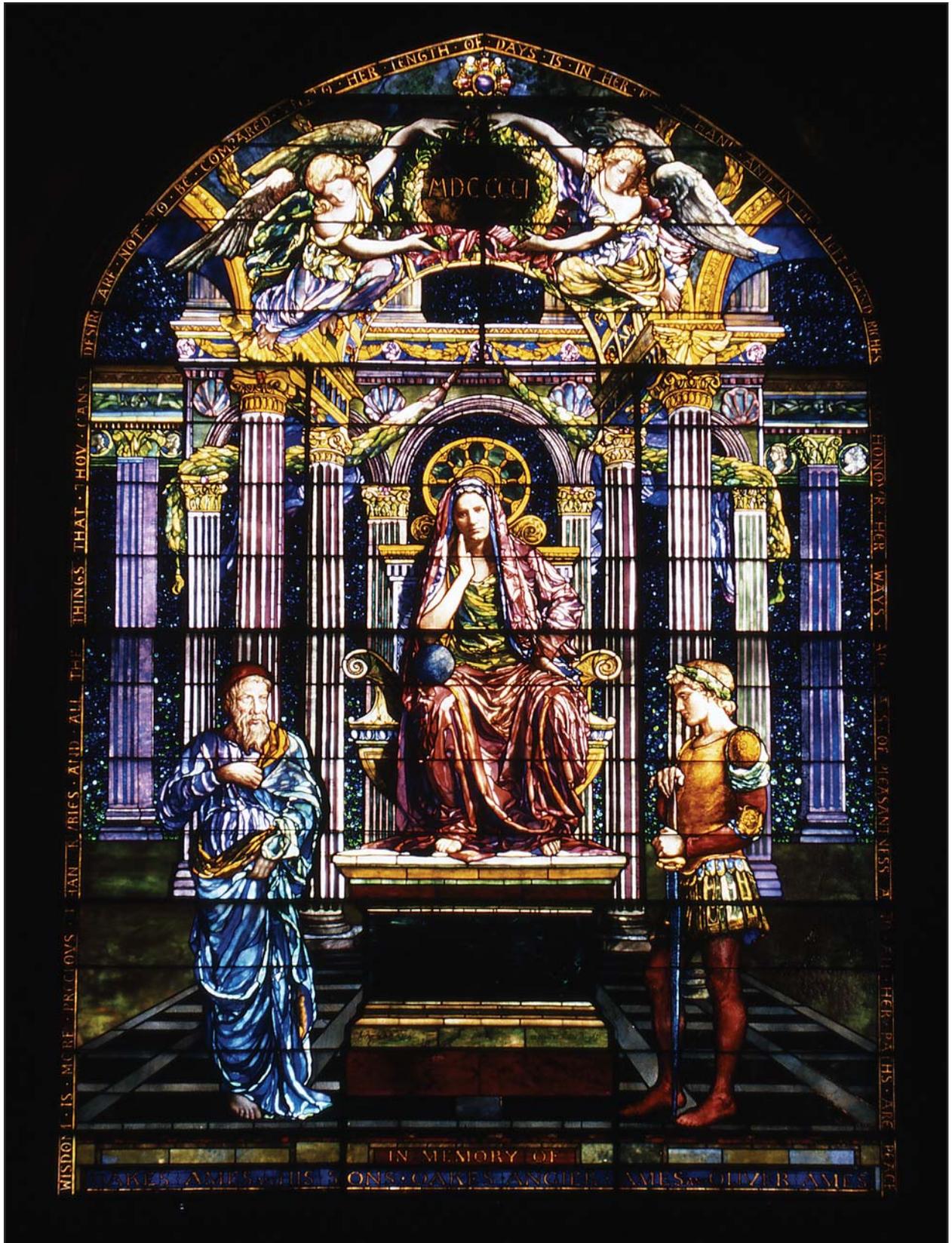
of the Ames family estates. Other late nineteenth-century architects, including George Snell; Ware & Van Brunt; Carl Fehmer; Rotch & Tilden; Shepley, Rutan, & Coolidge; and Guy Lowell also graced North Easton with works. Artistry was represented not only in the stained glass windows of John La Farge but also through works by sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens and woodcarver Johannes Kirchmeyer.

The Angel of Help Window
John La Farge, 1882

Photograph by Richard Gross

The Angel Window

In 1882, industrialist Frederick Lothrop Ames commissioned the first of Unity Church’s two La Farge windows to commemorate his only sister, Helen Angier Ames. Intended as a memorial to



The Wisdom Window
John La Farge, 1901
Photograph by Richard Gross



The Wisdom Window (detail)

Photograph by Richard Gross

a beloved sibling, the *Angel of Help* window poses no question in the viewer's mind of its purpose as a mourning icon. La Farge skillfully used all of the window's elements to exploit an emotional power in the glass to aid the viewer in visualizing the ascent of the deceased into heaven. Through the use of coloration and light control, the eye is drawn upward to the jeweled sarcophagus. Rendered with early Christian and Renaissance symbolism, the casket draped in vines, symbolizes eternal life. The heavenly ascent is further reinforced by the darkness of the broken jewel background and the supportive placement of the levitating angels

immediately below. The standing angel contributes to the window's verticality with its outspread wings. Identified as an allegory of Help, the figure ministers to the seated figures of Need and Sorrow. Ninety years later, the preeminent La Farge scholar, Barbara Weinberg, called the *Angel* window "one of the most impressive (windows) in the history of American glass." Others have called it simply "breathtaking."

The Wisdom Window

It would be remarkable for a small church to hold one monumental window by John La Farge, but Unity Church holds a second and equally stunning mas-

terpiece by the artist. Cousins Oakes Ames and Winthrop Ames, in memory of their grandfather, Congressman Oakes Ames, and their fathers, Governor Oliver Ames and Oakes Angier Ames, commissioned the *Wisdom* window in 1901. La Farge turned again to a combination of Classical, Early Christian, and Renaissance motifs to implement his theme. A simple passage adapted from Proverbs 3: 15-17 rims the window's perimeter and contrasts with its visual lushness: "Wisdom is more precious than rubies, and all the things that thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

La Farge uses the three major figures found in a traditional triangular arrangement of a "sacred conversation" composition to illustrate the ancient text. Here the artist substitutes the Wisdom figure for the sacrosanct Madonna and Child. This mysterious figure was influenced by La Farge's involvement with sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens' earlier work to create a monument for Clover Adams, wife of La Farge's good friend, Henry Adams. The quiet somberness of the figure is punctuated by the knowledge that Adam's wife did not die a natural death but tragically took her own life by drinking photographic chemicals, leaving Adams grief stricken for years. At the base of the seated Wisdom figure, an elderly man, inspired by Donatello, reinforces the inscription's "length of days," and a



The Wisdom Window (detail)

Photograph by Richard Gross

young warrior from a Mantegna painting personifies “riches and honour.”

Combined, the *Angel of Help* window and the *Wisdom* window tells us a 19-year-long story about John La Farge as an artist, an artisan, and a man. But of equal importance may be that the windows are two shining threads in a tapestry of rich architectural and cultural history in a small town that exemplifies the best of the late nineteenth century.

The Restoration

By the early 1990s the cracked and buckling windows were in need of care, and Unity church members formed a committee to start the project. The com-

mittee members’ prior experience of protecting works by Richardson, Olmstead, and St. Gaudens informed their approach, an approach that focused on the philosophy of the conservation aspect — preserving the hand of the craftsmen as much as the hand of the artist. Below, Robin Neely, the stained glass consultant for both windows, discusses the finer points of the project with Victor Rothman, the conservator of the *Angel* and the *Wisdom* windows.

Rothman: What helped you formulate the specifications?

Neely: When I wrote the specifications for these windows I was influenced by their context. These are monu-

mental windows still in their original setting, spanning La Farge’s artistic life. Additionally, the architectural significance of North Easton and the attitude of the restoration committee influenced me. With five Richardson buildings, seven Olmstead landscapes, and works by Saint Gaudens plus other artists and artisans, these windows were just one part of a unique historical fabric. Not only did I understand the importance of their context, but the committee had spent years as good stewards of their properties and was very experienced in historic preservation. They were not looking for a treatment that implied they would not need to touch the windows



The Angel of Help Window (detail)

Photograph by Richard Gross

for 75-plus years, as in total rereading. Instead, they embraced the idea that we needed to preserve “the hand of the maker” as much as possible and were willing to accept that certain panels may need work in the future. In the end, the project straddled a museum conservation approach and an architectural approach. The committee was undoubtedly the most informed and sensitive that I have ever worked with, but I’m sure that living amongst these American treasures would teach one appreciation on a daily basis.

Neely: So Vic, let’s talk about the work that was done on the windows. This was a real opportunity for you to view the artistic and technical evolution of La Farge, the artist, and Thomas Wright, the fabricator. How

were the windows similar, and how did they differ?

Rothman: The *Angel of Help* window was commissioned in 1882 and was installed in 1887. It is fairly early in La Farge’s stained glass career, and at that point, his figural work was in one plane, without much architectural detail. The figures tend to float on a jeweled background. Later on, with the 1901 *Wisdom* window, you can see there is a lot more architectural detail. The window is more three dimensional in quality; it may lack some of the spontaneity of the earlier window, but the figures are more grounded than in the earlier window.

Neely: And, technically, how did the two windows differ? Were there a lot of changes in the fabrication, or was he using the same techniques?

Rothman: He was using the same basic techniques in both windows. Early on, La Farge and his craftsmen figured out the way of forming the drapery in the clothing, by cutting long, skinny pieces of glass and plating them. You can see the same kind of shapes carrying through from the early work to the later work — the figural work and the modeling of the figures. The big difference is found in the background of the later windows. There is a lot of glass in high heart leads, that is, two pieces of glass placed in the same high-hearted lead. The earlier windows generally have all the glass in single pieces of lead, plated separately.

Neely: So there were differences in the type of lead; what about differences in the manner of plating?

Rothman: As a craftsman myself, I can envision having an oddball artist with a new idea of how to make a window come to me and say, “This is what I want done,” and then I have to figure

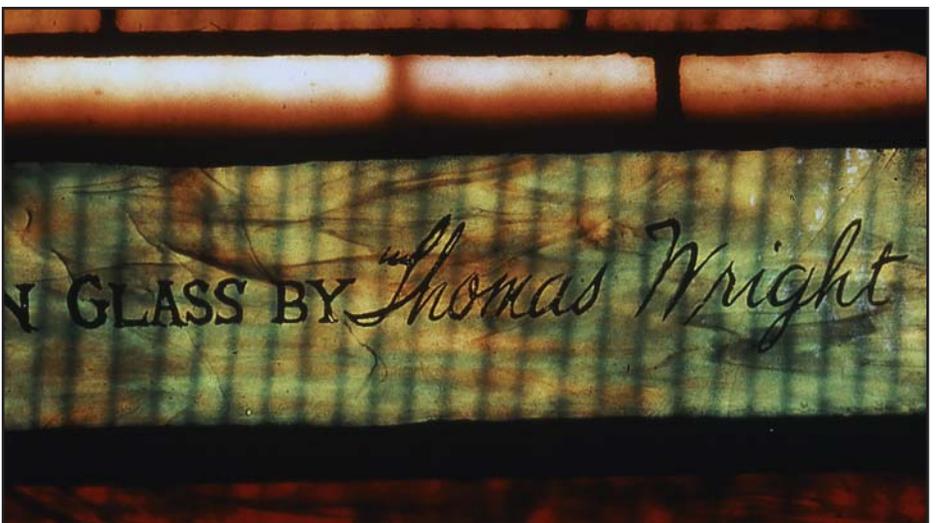
out how to build it. And I’m assuming this is exactly what happened in the early days of La Farge. When he had his own company, the La Farge Decorating Company, his two main craftsmen were Thomas Wright and John Calvin. When the decorating company went out of business in 1885, Wright and Calvin opened up their own company, called the Decorative Stained Glass Company, just around the corner from La Farge’s studio. So these are the guys who invented the glazing and the plating style for La Farge’s vision. They continued to make windows for him for the next 30 years or so. Though the plating technique got easier for the bench mechanics to build, it didn’t, in my opinion, evolve a great deal.

Neely: The issue of totally releading versus partially releading a window has been a topic of controversy among conservators in print and on Internet forums lately. My specifications required that you relead only where needed so that the maximum amount of original fabric was preserved. How do you view the debate about total releading versus partial releading?

Rothman: In my opinion, a window pretty much dictates what level of work has to get done. You can start a job with the best of intentions, wanting to keep the original structure. But if the lead is shot, the lead is shot, and you have to replace it. On the other hand, I don't believe in a magic 100-year-old number or that windows need to be rebuilt every 100 years. Some may need to be rebuilt in 50 years; some may last considerably longer than 100 years. Again, the window tells you what has to get done.

These windows are important historically, and they are important artistically, so I have a slightly different take on the relead/not to relead issue. While La Farge gets all the credit, essentially because he is the artist, somebody had to cut an incredible amount of glass in very weird and convoluted shapes. They then had to figure out how to glaze it in a manner that had not been seen before in the previous 800 years of stained glass. As a craftsman, I would like to pay my respects to those artisans 100 years ago who built these windows. I think their artistry is just as important as La Farge's, because his vision never would have been able to be translated into glass without these guys. So I am paying homage to the bench mechanics who built these windows as well. I think their work deserves to be preserved for as long as possible, simply because they did such an amazing job.

Neely: The *Wisdom* window has not only La Farge's signature but also the inscription: in glass by Thomas Wright. Did La Farge give credit to Wright or



Signature Plates from the Wisdom Window.

Photograph by Robin Neely

other artists in any of his other windows?

Rothman: Thomas Wright and the painter, Juliette Hanson, both signed La Farge's *Spring* window, which is now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Those are the only two I have seen firsthand. But La Farge has given credit to various people over the years. I have an 1883 newspaper article where La Farge was talking to a reporter from the *New York Times*, and he excused himself and mentioned one of the craftsmen by name to continue the tour. In another article, the author said that La Farge very much wanted to mention the name of John

Johnson as one of his people and to give Johnson credit. And in the book, *John La Farge, Artist and Writer*, written by Cecilia Waern in 1896, La Farge mentions Thomas Wright by name and says that Wright is "he who has no equal in the management in color of glass." He also gives credit to the artisans who helped him build the windows and stated that, without them, he could not have accomplished what he wanted to accomplish. So evidently La Farge was pretty magnanimous in giving credit to the unknown people.

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Two American Masterpieces

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Neely: And that comes around to preserving their handwork in the windows?

Rothman: Exactly. By most reports, La Farge had an enormous ego. And for someone like that to give credit to people whom the public doesn't normally know anything about, says a lot about La Farge's character and the importance that these artisans played in his work. He accepted that fact and was more than willing to give credit where credit was due.

Neely: Let's talk about the committee; they were pretty involved...

Rothman: Yes. That's interesting and relates to the reread/partial reread controversy. A common statement that is floated is that a window needs to be reread every 100 years. A lot of people hear that, and they believe it. The committee at Unity Church — because they have other historic properties — are aware of how to preserve historic building and elements. They are aware of their responsibility in that they are basically the caretakers for these irreplaceable historic features, and they want to preserve them as original for as long as they can. That was the understanding under which both of these windows were worked on. So we didn't restore them or try and make them look like the first day they came out of the factory. We wanted to preserve what was there. We reinstalled them with a dry setting technique instead of glazing putty, so that when they do have to come out again, the next person is going to have a much easier time of it than we did and with less chance of damaging the glass. That philosophy was the basis for all this. This was what I would call a typical museum-quality restoration, from the specification standpoint, from the owners' standpoint, and from my standpoint. And very possibly at some point in life, these are going to be two of the few La Farge windows in their original setting that are mostly all original materials. And I think that's important.

About the author: Robin Neely served as the stained glass consultant for both the Angel of Help window and the Wisdom window. She owns The Neely Studio Inc. in Westbrook, Maine, and has more than 30 years of experience in the stained glass field. Prior to moving to Maine, she was the Business and Project Manager for The Greenland Studio in New York. She is currently restoring a Meyer of Munich window that came to the studio in a bucket.

About the stained glass conservator: Victor Rothman conserved both the Angel of Help window and the Wisdom window for Unity Church. He has owned Victor Rothman for Stained Glass Inc. in Bronxville, N. Y. for 15 years. Prior to opening the studio, Rothman worked at The Greenland Studio as the Studio Foreman. He is a founding member of the American Glass Guild. He is currently restoring the Edwin Booth window by John La Farge from the Church of the Transfiguration in New York.

