

Nº 1 in a Series of Reports from *The Mayor's Committee on St Paul's*

The Historical and Architectural Significance of St. Paul's

A Unique Planned Community

The news on July 17, 1869, that the multimillionaire “merchant prince” Alexander Turney Stewart had purchased 7000 acres of the Hempstead Plains came as a shock to the New York business world. The \$395,328 paid in cash made it the biggest private land purchase of the century.

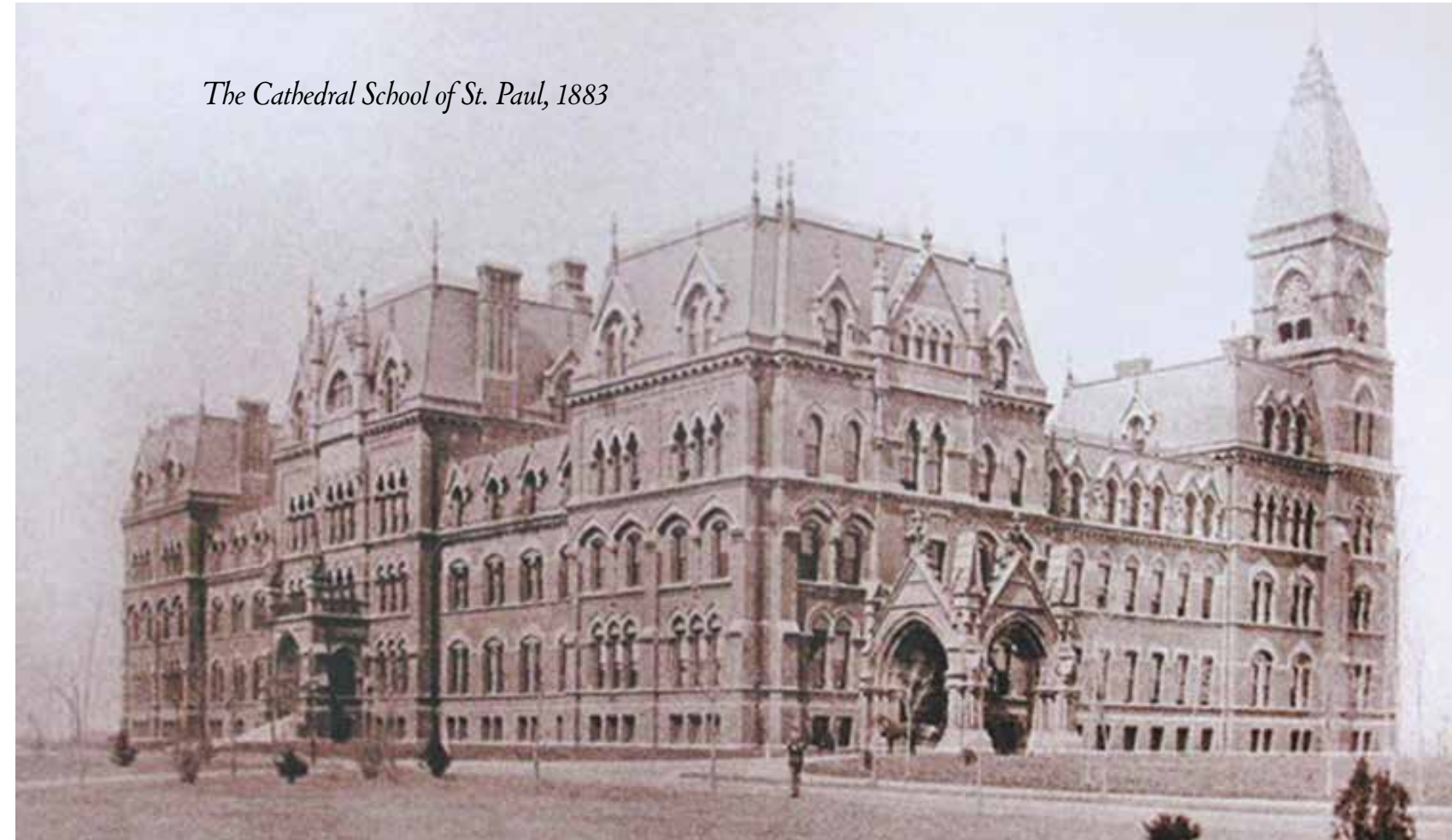
Once Stewart bought the massive Hempstead Plains property, he and his architect, John Kellum, designed a master plan and mapped out wide streets and blocks for the nascent town of 500 acres. They designed a large park in the center, occupied by the Garden City Hotel, yet close



enough to the Garden City Train Station for an easy commute to Manhattan. Thousands of trees and bushes were planted in the entire village at great cost to Stewart.

Stewart's wife, Cornelia Clinch Stewart, wasn't the traditional real estate developer. She did oversee the building of homes here, but her major accomplishment was the development of the most important, iconic set of buildings in Garden City: The Cathedral complex including the St. Paul's School.

Mrs. Stewart was a full partner in Garden City's development with her husband. She was familiar with every aspect of its growth. As our



The Cathedral School of St. Paul, 1883



Mrs. Stewart at the laying of the cornerstone at St. Paul's

country was entering the Gilded Age, Cornelia continued the grand vision they both had for our village, despite serious public doubt of its viability after he passed away in 1876.

Without much time to mourn her husband, Mrs. Stewart set to work improving Garden City. Her glorious vision was a lasting memorial to her husband and a final resting place for both. Cornelia's vision meant not only building the Cathedral, but also the See House (Bishop's Residence), the Deanery, Cathedral School of St. Mary for the girls and Cathedral School of St. Paul for the boys.

Mrs. Stewart accomplished all her generous projects before women had the right to vote. Alexander Turney Stewart's and Cornelia Clinch Stewart's legacies live on, more than 150 years after their visionary planned community on the Hempstead Plains was founded.

A Rare Gem

The Garden City entry in the AIA (American Institute of Architects) Architectural Guide to Nassau and Suffolk Counties describes the St. Paul's Main Building as follows:

St. Paul's School was from the outset an extraordinary structure. Designed by Henry G. Harrison in the Ruskinian Gothic Style, a mode rarely encountered outside of an urban context, the huge mansard-roofed brick building, with its ornate 300-foot facade, 500 rooms and fenestration comprised of 642 windows, was, on its completion, Long Island's largest structure other than a resort hotel. Polychromatic voussoir-arched windows, elaborate cast-iron balustrades and Dorchester stone trim were some of the elements that combined to make St. Paul's such a successful exercise in Victorian exuberance.

St. Paul's School Main Building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 as part of the A.T. Stewart Era Buildings district. The National Register of Historic Places is the Nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation.

In addition, in 2003, the Main Building was chosen by the Preservation League of New York State as one of its “Seven to Save”

significant but endangered properties.

St. Paul's and the Cathedral are the only two remaining major buildings commissioned by Cornelia Stewart in the 1880's that speak to our history and our cultural values.

“St. Paul's School is far more than a landmark in Garden City—it is one of the great works of the Gothic Revival in the United States, and along with the Cathedral of the Incarnation it stands as one of the key buildings by the American architect John Kellum and the British architect Henry G. Harrison.

St. Paul's is a monumental civic building in the very best sense in that it is a work of great architecture and like all great public architecture it inspires us with the potential of buildings to enhance the idea of community.

St. Paul's strengthens the identity of Garden City as a unique place with a unique history. There is no doubt that the re-use of a building like St. Paul's presents an enormous challenge, but it is also a great opportunity for Garden City to create a public facility that will be like none other anywhere, and that will make Garden City an even more special community than it is now.

I hope that citizens of Garden City can take comfort in the extraordinary success of the recent conversion of an even larger late-19th century complex at the other end of New York State, the enormous Buffalo State Hospital by Henry Hobson Richardson, which is being turned into a hotel, conference center and architecture center.

I'm confident that the restored and renewed St. Paul's will be just as triumphant an example of adaptive reuse and will bring people to Garden City as the newly reconceived Richardson complex is bringing people to Buffalo.”

- Paul Goldberger

Paul Goldberger is the New School's Joseph Urban Professor of Design and the former Architecture Critic for both The New Yorker and The New York Times where, in 1984, his architecture criticism was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

