



THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

July 24, 2025

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Margaret Herman, Director of Research
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
253 Broadway, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Request for Evaluation of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 39-04 61st Street, Queens, as an Individual Landmark

Dear Chair Carroll and Director Herman,

The Historic Districts Council is proud to be working with Woodside on the Move to secure Individual Landmark status for St. Paul's Episcopal Church. We offer this statement of significance as part of the Individual Landmark RFE.

SUMMARY



St. Paul's Episcopal Church, located at 39-04 61st Street in the Woodside neighborhood of Queens, NYC, is a historically significant Carpenter Gothic style church founded in 1874. It holds the distinction of being the first church established in Woodside, reflecting the early development of the community. The quaint wooden chapel, with its pointed-arch stained glass windows, overhanging eaves, vertical wood siding and multicolored roof tiles, is a rare survivor from the 19th-century. Though it suffered a devastating fire in late 2007 (often cited as 2008), which gutted its interior and

destroyed many original features, the 19th-century structure still stands in its original location, serving as an important landmark of Woodside's heritage. Over the decades, St. Paul's has been a center of local religious and community life, adapting to serve a diverse population. Today, the historic wooden church remains vacant due

to fire damage, while an adjacent mid-20th-century brick sanctuary houses an active Episcopal congregation. The chapel is an invaluable piece of Queens history, noteworthy as one of the borough's oldest surviving wood-framed churches and a tangible link to Woodside's Victorian-era roots.

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT

St. Paul's Episcopal Church was established in 1874, during a period of rapid suburban development in Woodside. In fact, the church's construction came just seven years after developer Benjamin W. Hitchcock had first laid out building lots for a new village at Woodside in the late 1860s. At that time Woodside was transitioning from rural farmland into a village, and the founding of St. Paul's, the first house of worship in the area, signaled the growing, family-oriented community starting to thrive. The parish was



organized by prominent local families, including descendants of longstanding colonial-era landowners as well as newer residents who had settled in Woodside in the mid-19th century. According to local history, members of the Rapelye, Hicks, and Riker families (who had farmed the area for generations) joined with newer German-American and Irish-American families such as the Sussdorfs, Windmüllers, and Kellys to establish St. Paul's in 1874. These families pooled funds and served as the first vestry, underscoring the church's importance in the nascent village.

Woodside at this time was still sparsely settled, described as "little more than a kind of frontier town" in the 1870s, so the building of St. Paul's Episcopal gave the community a focal point. A modest wooden chapel was erected on a prominent corner (61st Street and 39th Avenue) on land likely donated or purchased with the founders' contributions. The choice of an Episcopal church reflected the dominant faith of many early Woodside landowners. On May 5, 1874, St. Paul's was formally dedicated as Woodside's first church and congregation. Initially the parish was very small, only about 50 participants in the early years, but it provided an immediate spiritual and social center for locals. The establishment of St. Paul's also paved the way for other denominations to follow; a Baptist church was founded two years later by other residents, and Catholic and other congregations would arrive in subsequent decades as Woodside's population grew. In this way, St. Paul's Episcopal played a pioneering role in Woodside's development, anchoring the community's early religious life and signaling that the once-rural hamlet was emerging into a structured village.

ARCHITECT



The original 1874 chapel of St. Paul's was designed in the Carpenter Gothic style typical of small Episcopal churches of that era. The name of the architect or builder has not been firmly documented in available sources, suggesting it may have been built by local craftsmen following a standard Gothic Revival pattern or plans circulated by the Episcopal Church. Carpenter Gothic, a vernacular form of Victorian Gothic Revival adapted to wood construction, was a popular choice for 19th-century parish churches, influenced in part by architect Richard Upjohn's published designs for rural churches in the 1850s. St.

Paul's exhibits hallmark features of this style: pointed Gothic windows filled with stained glass, steeply pitched roofs with overhanging eaves, and vertical board-and-batten siding (vertical wood boards separated by narrow battens). Contemporary descriptions note the church's multi-colored slate roof tiles and a likely small bell tower or belfry, which together lent it a quaint but elegant appearance. The modest scale and wooden construction of St. Paul's would have made it one of the few Gothic Revival structures in Queens built of wood rather than stone.

Over time, the church property expanded. In 1957, a new brick sanctuary was constructed adjacent to the original chapel to accommodate a growing congregation. This 1957 church building (a plain brick structure) became the main worship space, while the historic 1874 chapel remained as a secondary space for smaller services and events. The architect of the 1957 sanctuary is not widely noted in historical accounts, indicating it may have been a relatively utilitarian design. The contrast between the two structures is beautiful: the old wooden chapel with its Victorian Gothic charm vs. the mid-century brick church of a more modern, functional style. Inside the old chapel, notable features included hand-crafted wooden pews and a pipe organ that had been installed in the early 20th century, records show that organ builder M.P. Möller provided a 2-manual, 6-rank organ (Opus 3536) for St. Paul's in 1923. The sanctuary was also illuminated by a series of stained glass windows, some of which dated back to the 19th century and were donated by early parish families. Unfortunately, many of these features, the organ and several 100-year-old stained glass windows, were lost in the fire of late 2007. Despite these losses, the exterior of the 1874 chapel still displays its Gothic lancet window frames and characteristic vertical siding, testifying to the craftsmanship of its unknown architect/builders and the Carpenter Gothic aesthetic they achieved.

NOTABLE HISTORY AND FEATURES

Throughout its long history, St. Paul's Episcopal Church has been associated with notable local figures and has served as a hub for community activities. Among its founders and early leaders were members of the Kelly family, in particular journalist John A. F. Kelly, who played a relevant role in Woodside's history. Kelly (the son of landowner Frederick Kelly, on whose estate the church stood) not only helped finance and guide the church's

establishment, but he also unwittingly gave Woodside its name. In the 1850s–1870s, John A.F. Kelly wrote a newspaper column called “Letters from Woodside,” referring to his family’s estate “*Woodside*” in Queens – and according to local history, this is how the neighborhood itself came to be called Woodside. Another prominent early parishioner was Louis Windmüller, a German-American financier and philanthropist who settled in Woodside in the 1870s; Windmüller was a charter member of St. Paul’s vestry and later had a local park named in his honor. Likewise, William Sussdorf, another German-born entrepreneur, was a founding vestryman. The involvement of these families (Kelly, Windmüller, Sussdorf, and others) in St. Paul’s early years illustrate the church’s deep roots in Woodside’s founding community. Generations of those families would continue as parishioners, and some are buried in local churchyards, underlining St. Paul’s role in the continuity of community life.

Beyond its founders, St. Paul’s served the broader community in many ways. The church became known for its inclusive, multi-ethnic congregation, especially in the late 20th century as Woodside’s population diversified. By the 2000s, the parish of St. Paul’s was sharing its facilities with six different congregations, serving various immigrant and minority groups. For example, a Romanian Orthodox mission and a Bengali Christian fellowship held services in the older chapel, while a Filipino Episcopal congregation worshipped under Father Fred Vergara (himself an Episcopal priest and the national Director of Ethnic Ministries) in the main church. Father Vergara noted in 2008 that “this is a very inclusive church, open to all communities, especially minorities and immigrants” – a reputation St. Paul’s had earned over years of welcoming diverse groups. In its earlier history, St. Paul’s also hosted events like seasonal fairs, charity drives, and youth programs typical of a parish church. Longtime residents recall the church’s annual Christmas pageants and its bells ringing on Sunday mornings, small-town touches that persisted into the modern city.

One of the church’s most notable physical features was its set of stained glass windows, some of which were over a century old. These windows, likely installed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, depicted biblical scenes and saints. Tragically, eight of the oldest stained glass windows, “100-year-old” by 2007, were destroyed in the fire that swept through the chapel. Those windows had been a defining feature of the interior, casting multicolored light on the wooden pews, and their loss was deeply felt by the congregation.

Over the years, St. Paul’s and its clergy also intersected with wider historical events. In the 1910s–1940s, Woodside’s population boomed, and the church under Rev. S. Miller and later Rev. W.G. Black expanded community outreach during the Depression and World War II eras (for instance, running a soup kitchen and war bond drives, noted in parish archives). While specific famous individuals (beyond local figures) are not strongly linked to St. Paul’s, the church’s true fame lies in its longevity and service. It has stood through Woodside’s transformation from rural farmland to railroad suburb to urban neighborhood. Even after the fire in 2007, the parish community continued its ministries in the newer building next door, exemplifying resilience. Many consider the wooden 1874 chapel itself a “character” in Queens history, it is Woodside’s oldest surviving building, according to community historians, and has been featured on websites like *Forgotten NY* as a treasured relic of the past. This storied little church has thus been a witness to over 150 years of local history, making it a beloved landmark for residents who know its story.

TODAY



Today, St. Paul's Episcopal Church remains an active congregation, but its worship and programs take place in the 1957 brick sanctuary, while the original 1874 wooden chapel stands unused and awaiting restoration. After the December 26, 2007 fire (which broke out late at night after Christmas services), the old wooden church was severely damaged,

firefighters contained the blaze, but not before it gutted the interior and compromised the structure. Thankfully, no one was injured, as the building was empty at the time. In the immediate aftermath, New York City's Department of Buildings issued a vacate order for the entire St. Paul's property (including the undamaged brick building and an adjoining preschool), out of concern for structural safety. Within a few days, engineers determined the brick sanctuary was sound, and the parish was allowed to resume services there, meaning the congregation did not lose its worship space for long. However, the 1874 chapel has remained closed off ever since. The church's pastor at the time, Rev. Anandeskar Manuel, expressed hope in 2008 that they could rebuild the old chapel "as our Christian hope," but he acknowledged the parish did not have the funds readily available for a full restoration. Over the years since, the diocese and congregation have focused on maintaining their regular activities in the newer building, while the charred chapel has stood silently as a poignant reminder of the loss.

Despite its damaged state, the historic chapel still stands on its corner lot and has not been demolished. Local preservationists and community members consider this a small victory, as there were fears after the fire that the building might be torn down immediately. The structure's exterior walls and steeple (if slightly blackened by smoke) were left intact, and a temporary roof cover was put in place to keep out the elements. In the years since, no major restoration has taken place, but also the church has not been razed, essentially, it has been in a state of arrested decay. Without designation as an Individual Landmark, its future is uncertain, dependent on the decisions of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.

The active congregation of St. Paul's continues to serve a diverse community out of the 1957 sanctuary next door, holding weekly services, food pantry programs, and cultural events. They honor the legacy of the old chapel by maintaining a small display of historical photos and salvaged artifacts inside the brick church building.

CONCLUSION

St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Woodside, Queens, embodies over 150 years of neighborhood history. Founded in 1874 during Woodside's formative years, it was the community's first church and has ever since been a cornerstone of local identity. Its Carpenter Gothic wooden chapel, once charming and vibrant with stained glass, is a tangible reminder of a bygone era in Queens when villages dotted the rural landscape. Through the generations, St. Paul's not only provided spiritual guidance but also fostered community across ethnic and cultural lines, truly living up to its inclusive mission.

The tragic 2007 fire marked a turning point, threatening the very survival of the historic structure. Yet even in ruin, the 1874 church remains standing, an enduring if fragile landmark that whispers of Woodside's past. St. Paul's story is thus one of resilience and significance: from its 19th-century origins, to its heyday serving a bustling immigrant parish, to its present struggle to be preserved. The church highlights the challenges of historic preservation in NYC's outer boroughs, especially for humble wooden buildings that easily fall victim to neglect or redevelopment pressures.

In conclusion, St. Paul's Episcopal Church is a cherished piece of Queens heritage. Its early role in Woodside's development and its architectural character make it a landmark worth saving. As a rare surviving wood-framed church in Queens, it offers invaluable insight into the ecclesiastical and community life of the 1870s. Efforts to restore or memorialize the fire-damaged chapel, if successful, would ensure that this "wooden church of Woodside" continues to tell the story of the neighborhood's roots for future generations. Even in its current state, St. Paul's stands as a symbol of continuity amidst change, a venerable chapel that has watched a quiet farming village grow into a diverse urban enclave, all while keeping faith at its heart. If this building is recognized as an Individual Landmark, St. Paul's Episcopal Church will endure as "Woodside's oldest house of worship" for years to come, honoring those who built it and the many who have found fellowship within its walls.