A Link to a Legacy

Since the School of Law acquired Westminster Hall 24 years ago, it has become a vital part of the institution, even serving as an architectural resource to those designing its new neighbor.

Betty Lynne Leary
Solitude is often elusive at the University of Maryland's Baltimore campus. Fire trucks scream down crowded city streets, sirens echoing off the aged brick buildings. Students and faculty rush from one class to another, sidewalk vendors shout for attention from passersby while overhead the trauma helicopter circles low and fast, blades beating furiously as it makes its noisy descent through the heavy air.

Yet, on the edge of campus, on the tree-lined corner of Fayette and Greene streets lies a small patch of solitude that, if not for the vision of one man and the commitment of countless others, might have been lost forever in the city's westward march.

By December 1977, when the last amen was uttered marking the final service at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, the building and its accompanying graveyard, the Westminster Burying Ground, had fallen into disrepair. Vandal's wreaked havoc in the graveyard while the church reflected the neglect of its dwindling congregation. Just a half a block away, the expanding University edged closer to the hallowed grounds and threatened to gobble up the precious real estate. A potential nemesis, the law school instead became the church's savior. Michael J. Kelly, dean of the School, saw beyond the falling bricks and choking weeds and recognized an opportunity to resurrect the beauty and dignity of the church and its grounds.

"Mike Kelly was certainly the person with the vision and the energy who made the Westminster project go forward," says Garrett Power, professor of law and current president of the Westminster Preservation Trust, Inc. "He appropriately conceived that the law school was next to a disintegrating piece of history that was being lost. He turned a liability into an asset."

With help from private donors, the City of Baltimore, the Maryland Historical Trust and other state agencies, Kelly created the Westminster Preservation Trust, dedicated to the rehabilitation and preservation of the church and cemetery. After six years of often-painstaking restoration, the law school and the University community celebrated the reopening of the old church, renamed Westminster Hall, and the newly landscaped burying grounds.

"The hall is a resource for the School of Law as well as the University and the local community," explains Mary Jo Rodney, director of special events and the Westminster Preservation Trust. Rodney manages the daily operation of the hall, including all bookings that range from weddings and bar mitzvahs to scientific seminars and cultural events. "We host from 75 to 100 events each year and every weekend is booked," she adds.

Rodney and Power work together to tackle the logistics of maintaining a 150-year-old church. The cemetery, with its catacombs and crypts dating back to the early 19th century, poses its own problems. A contractor specializing in concrete and granite repaired and restored many of the tablets and stones in the cemetery several years ago.

Although the restoration efforts created a visually stunning and highly useful space for the School of Law, one fundamental flaw of the old church remained. For years, anyone seeking to enter the hall without climbing the entrance steps was sent on a circuitous route through the Marshall Law Library and down narrow hallways. Using a black-and-white photo that shows a portico on the old church as inspiration, an entrance porch and gently sloping walkway was designed to create an easier and more dignified access to the hall for wheelchair users and others who may find it difficult to negotiate the steps.

"The architect, Jim Arnold with Amos, Bailey and Arnold, did a great job because the porch looks like it's been part of the building forever and that's exactly what we wanted," says Rodney. The entryway is now large enough to serve as a welcoming area for visitors before they enter the hall.

"During the planning of the law school's new building, we reevaluated the link between Westminster Hall and the law school," explains Dean Karen H. Rothenberg. "We decided that it was critical for the two buildings to be structurally integrated."

In designing the law school building, architects were inspired by Westminster Hall. The new building's main tower and Gothic arches are all reminiscent of Westminster.

The law school community takes great pride in its relationship with the historic church and the famous residents of its cemetery, including Edgar Allan Poe. Tours are conducted at least four times a month, April through November, by staff members who feel a certain sense of responsibility for the site.

"We have a vested interest in making sure things are done right," says LuAnn Marshall, tour director with the Trust. "We want to make sure our visitors have a pleasant experience and learn something too." Marshall has been conducting tours of the site since 1977 when the Trust was formed and enjoys sharing her extensive knowledge of Baltimore history with curious city natives and visitors alike.

"We get a lot of Poe questions obviously, but people get in there and find a lot of other interesting people too," she says.

"We take great pride in it because it's such a beautiful landmark," Rodney adds. "It's part of our heritage and it makes you feel good to show it to people." And now, more than 20 years after saving the old church from destruction, the law school finds itself undergoing its own restoration. As the new building rises just beyond the graveyard's walls, the law school and Westminster will be forever tied, both physically and perhaps even spiritually.

"As we thought about the new building in terms of educating lawyers in the 21st century, it was important for us to acknowledge our heritage," notes Rothenberg. "And although it has been 'ours' for only 24 years and it came to us with a legacy of its own, Westminster is a vital part of the School's history—and its future."