

The Spirit Of St. Paul's Chapel

by Lynne Belluscio

This past weekend, all of us were reminded of the tragic events of September 11, but for the group of LeRoyans who visited New York City with the Historical Society three weeks ago, the story was even more poignant.

On the last day of our visit, we walked over Maiden Lane to Broadway to St. Paul's Chapel, the oldest surviving church in Manhattan. The church was built in 1766 for parishioners of nearby Trinity Church.

In the 1700s people wanted to go to church closer to where they lived so Trinity built the chapel north of Wall Street. St. Paul's was built of Manhattan mica-schist with brownstone corner quoins. Today the church faces Broadway, but when it was first built, it faced the Hudson River.

The church is surrounded on three sides by burial grounds. Just inside the fence on Broadway, next to the entrance on the North side is the vault of Jacob LeRoy dated 1803. To be honest, it's not clear just which Jacob LeRoy is buried here. The church records were destroyed many years ago. It's certainly not the Jacob LeRoy who lived in LeRoy

House, but in the LeRoy family there were many Jacobs and it was because of this tombstone that I brought the group to St. Paul's Chapel.

The Chapel's history is intertwined with the story of the American Revolution and George Washington. When the British were about to invade New York City, George Washington suggested that the city be torched, leaving nothing to the invaders, but the Colonial Congress ordered him not to set the fires. Shortly after the British took control of the city, a fire broke out and destroyed a large portion of New York. St. Paul's was saved by a bucket brigade.

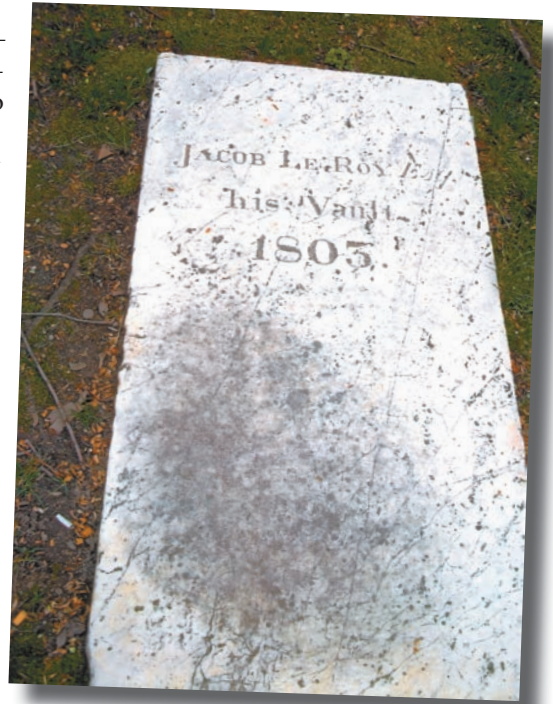
Seven years later, when a victorious George Washington entered the city and rode down Broadway, he passed the historic church. Six years later, he returned to St. Paul's as president-elect. Washington and members of the first Congress worshipped at St. Paul's Chapel on the first Inauguration Day, April 30, 1789.

Washington worshipped at St. Paul's for the two years, while New York served as the nation's capital. When you visit St. Paul's Chapel you can see the box pew

used by President Washington. Over two hundred years later, the pew would become part of the story of 9/11. You see, St. Paul's Chapel was in the shadow of the World Trade Towers and it witnessed the tragic event. When the towers fell on that ill fated day, buildings all around the towers were damaged, but miraculously St. Paul's survived. Not even a single window was broken. The church yard was filled with debris, but only one tree was felled.

Almost immediately the Chapel became a refuge for the emergency workers and hundreds of volunteers. For the next eight months, the chapel was a soup kitchen and a place for emergency workers to sleep and take a break from the massive cleanup. They piled their equipment on the old wooden pews, while other pews became make-shift beds. George Washington's pew became an office for a podiatrist. Emergency workers were walking on hot debris and were suffering from numerous injuries.

After the rescue and recovery efforts ended, the interior of the chapel was filled with mementos and banners. The old wooden pews were badly damaged from all the heavy equipment. The church finally decided to have them repaired and restored. They have not been brought back to the church yet. Today when you visit St. Paul's Chapel, you are reminded of the massive effort



Jacob LeRoy's vault.

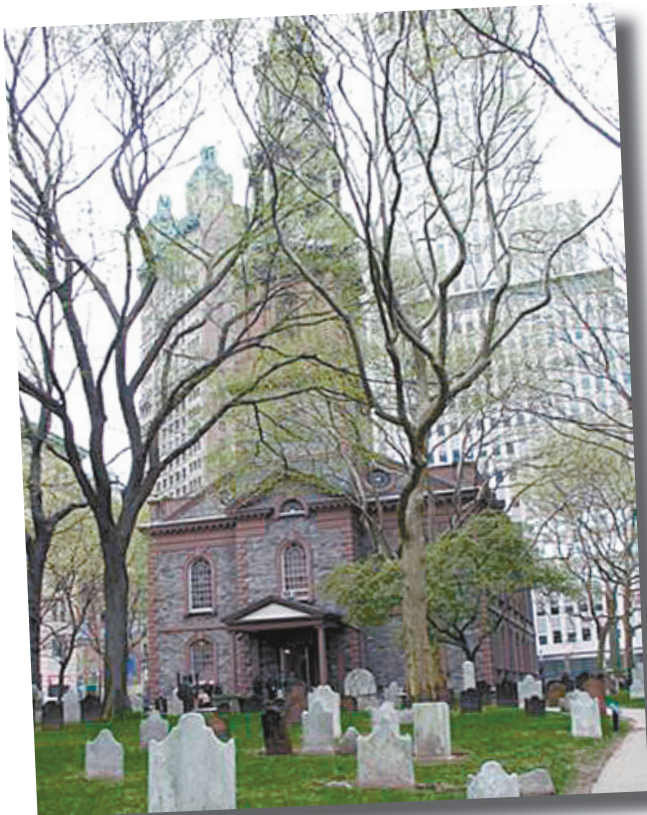
that was needed to recover from the disaster of 9/11.

As you stand in the portico of the back door of the Chapel and look over the gravestones of the church yard toward the empty space where the Trade Towers once stood, and where now the new construction continues, you sense the magnitude of what happened.

The Chapel has produced a DVD which chronicles the events after 9/11. It is appropriately titled "The Spirit of St. Paul's." I bought a copy and we watched it in the bus on the way home. It had a profound effect on all of



us. If you are in New York City, make sure you visit St. Paul's. Pay your respects to Jacob LeRoy and walk past Washington's pew, but experience the spirit of St. Paul's as you learn about this parish's role in the recovery efforts after 9/11.



St. Paul's Chapel on Broadway.