Segregation and Stained Glass in the New Christ Church, ca. 1890

As earlier narratives produced by the Isaac Project have detailed, Christ Church was established as a slaveowners' church. Prior to the Civil War, each of the parish's rectors and at least 89 percent of its contributing members owned slaves. The abolition of slavery and postwar Reconstruction promised to dramatically reorder the social, economic, and political landscapes of the South by guaranteeing Black men the right to vote, offering economic protections to newly freed Black workers, and establishing state-funded public schools, among numerous other initiatives aimed at undoing the legacies of slavery. Barely a decade after the end of the Civil War, however, many of these promises were brought undone in favor of maintaining the white supremacist status quo. By the time the present Christ Church building was under construction in the early 1890s, the South had reached what historians have described as "the nadir of race relations," with the disenfranchisement of most Black (and poor white) voters, the legalization of racial segregation, and an upsurge in lynchings and other forms of anti-Black violence. This broader history shaped the design of Christ Church and worshipers' experience of it, both practically and symbolically.

The most obvious and straightforward example of this is the gallery that overhangs the nave along the Broadway end. Its placement there served at least two practical purposes. By lowering the ceiling height at the back of the nave, it created a kind of narthex, a threshold between the massive oak doors leading out to the street and the soaring space of the nave within. Its other purpose was to ensure the congregation could be strictly segregated. Rev. James R. Winchester, who assumed the rectorship just a few months before the parish broke ground on the new church in 1890, published a series of articles documenting the history of Christ Church in the Nashville Churchman in 1896. It contains detailed descriptions of the new building, including the gallery, which the rector noted, was "capable of seating about 150 people." He continued, "The vestry, following the good old Southern ways, have set aside the gallery with its comfortable seats, and where acoustics and sight of the chancel are the very best in the church, for the colored people."

It is unclear how long this practice was maintained. There is no mention of discontinuing it in church records. As late as the 1960s, leaders of the church offered conflicting ideas about how welcome Black worshipers were at Christ Church, claiming, on the one hand, that no African American "had ever been denied access to the Christ Church altar rail," even as the vestry passed a resolution in April 1960 "to ensure the continued existence of this parish as a non-integrated religious body." Regardless, as Rev. Winchester made clear, the establishment of a segregated gallery in the 1890s was not a novel requirement of the Jim Crow era but an evolution of existing practices. Space had been reserved in one of the galleries of the old Christ Church, built in 1830, for the enslaved servants of white parishioners. Now, however, church leaders offered a more "enlightened" argument in favor of racial segregation—African Americans were being given the best seats in the house, which just happened to ensure they also remained out of sight of white congregants.

Above the gallery is the Great Wheel Window. Now mostly obscured by the organ, it depicts angels playing string and wind instruments, a pair in each of the eight sections, radiating outward from the figure of Christ at the center. According to Rev. Winchester, the ensemble represents the passage, “Their sound is gone out into all the world” (either Psalm 19:4 or Romans 10:18, he doesn’t specify; other sources suggest Psalm 150 as the window’s inspiration). The window was dedicated to Jane Smith Washington, who died February 11, 1894, less than a year before the church was completed, by her children. At the opposite end of the church is a triptych above the high altar depicting the Resurrection. The central window shows the angel before the empty tomb with Gothic tracery along the top of the scene and a smaller trio of angels above. Jane Washington dedicated this window to her husband, George Augustine Washington (1815–1892).

The Washingtons were one of the wealthiest families in Tennessee. That wealth derived from Wessyngton Plantation, which was, prior to the Civil War, one of the largest slave-holding plantations in the region. Joseph Washington, George’s father, established Wessyngton in 1796 near Cedar Hill, in Robertson County, about 30 miles northwest of Nashville. The plantation produced fire-cured dark-leaf tobacco, a highly profitable but time- and labor-intensive form of cultivation. George inherited the plantation in 1848. By 1860, he had expanded his landholdings to more than 13,000 acres. His enslaved workforce of 274 people produced 250,000 pounds of tobacco that year.

While the end of the war cost many white planters their fortunes, Washington pioneered an exploitative form of sharecropping that minimized, for him, the economic disruptions of emancipation. He negotiated contracts with his former slaves—many of whom remained on the plantation—that demanded they hand over half their crop of corn, oats, and tobacco, prohibited them from seeking other employment without Washington’s consent, and required them to perform other labor on the plantation (tending the stables, mending fences, etc.) as necessary for 65 cents a day, among other conditions. In return, the sharecropper and his family received one-third of the harvest’s proceeds. Washington meanwhile retained ownership of the land on which these workers labored and the tools they used to do so. While under some circumstances sharecropping could offer benefits to newly emancipation but landless African Americans, arrangements like Washington’s trapped most in a permanently indebted, near-feudal relationship with their former owners. By contrast, Washington quickly recouped the financial losses brought on by abolition and, at his death in 1892, remained one of the wealthiest planters in the region.

The other two windows in the Resurrection triptych, depicting the three women arriving at the tomb, also reflect the legacy of slavery. The righthand window is dedicated to William Allison Buntin (1827–1887), scion to a Robertson County plantation and Confederate army veteran; the lefthand window memorializes John B. Johnson (1808–1868), a slaveowner who served on the vestry several times from the 1840s into the 60s, his wife Eliza Ann Baird Johnson (1815–1853), and their grandson John C. Maguire (1856–1887). When the church was completed in 1894, only eight other stained-glass windows had been installed. All of them memorialized former slave owners or members of their families.

It is worth considering then how Black worshipers at Christ Church, confined to the gallery, might have seen these windows, especially those at either end of the nave. The Great Wheel looming behind them and the chancel's Resurrection scene in line with their elevated position are, without doubt, exquisitely crafted images of Christ triumphant. But the money that produced them and the names they memorialize also point to another unavoidable reality. They transmuted the continued exploitation of Black labor into signs of enduring piet

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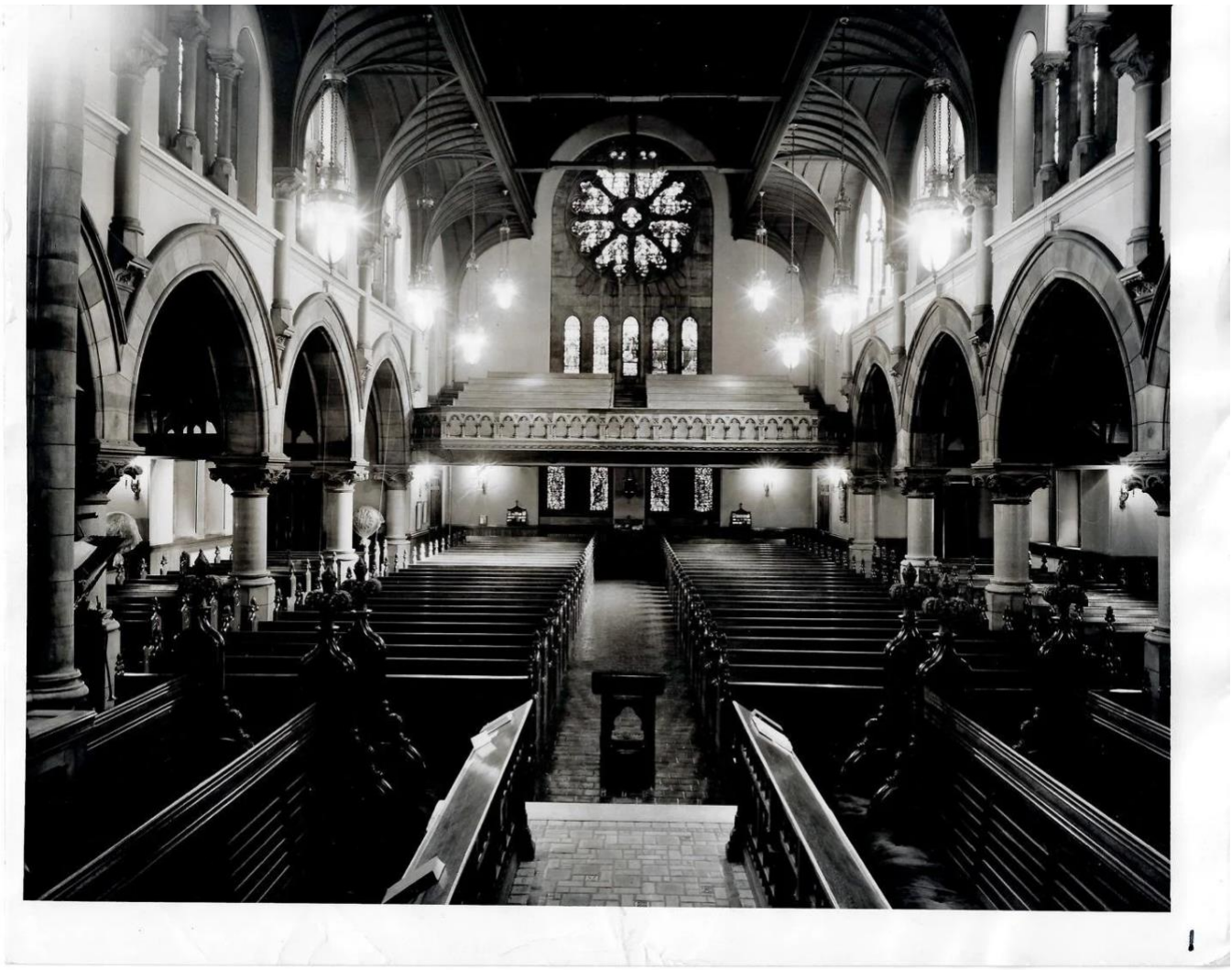


The nave of Christ Church looking from the chancel toward the rear gallery, ca. 1950s. The Great Wheel Window, dedicated to Jane Smith Washington, is fully visible above the gallery.

Source: Photo #7, Christ Church Cathedral Archive, Nashville, Tennessee

The Great Wheel Window, dedicated to Jane Smith Washington, now partially obscured by the organ.

Source: “The Stained Glass Windows,” Christ Church Cathedral Flickr album,

https://www.flickr.com/photos/christchurchcathedral/albums/72157718576691153

The chancel as seen from the rear gallery during a service, probably in the mid-1950s, with the Resurrection Windows above the high altar. The windows are dedicated to John B. Johnson, Eliza Ann Baird Johnson, and John C. Maguire (left); George Augustine Washington (center); and William Allison Buntin (right).

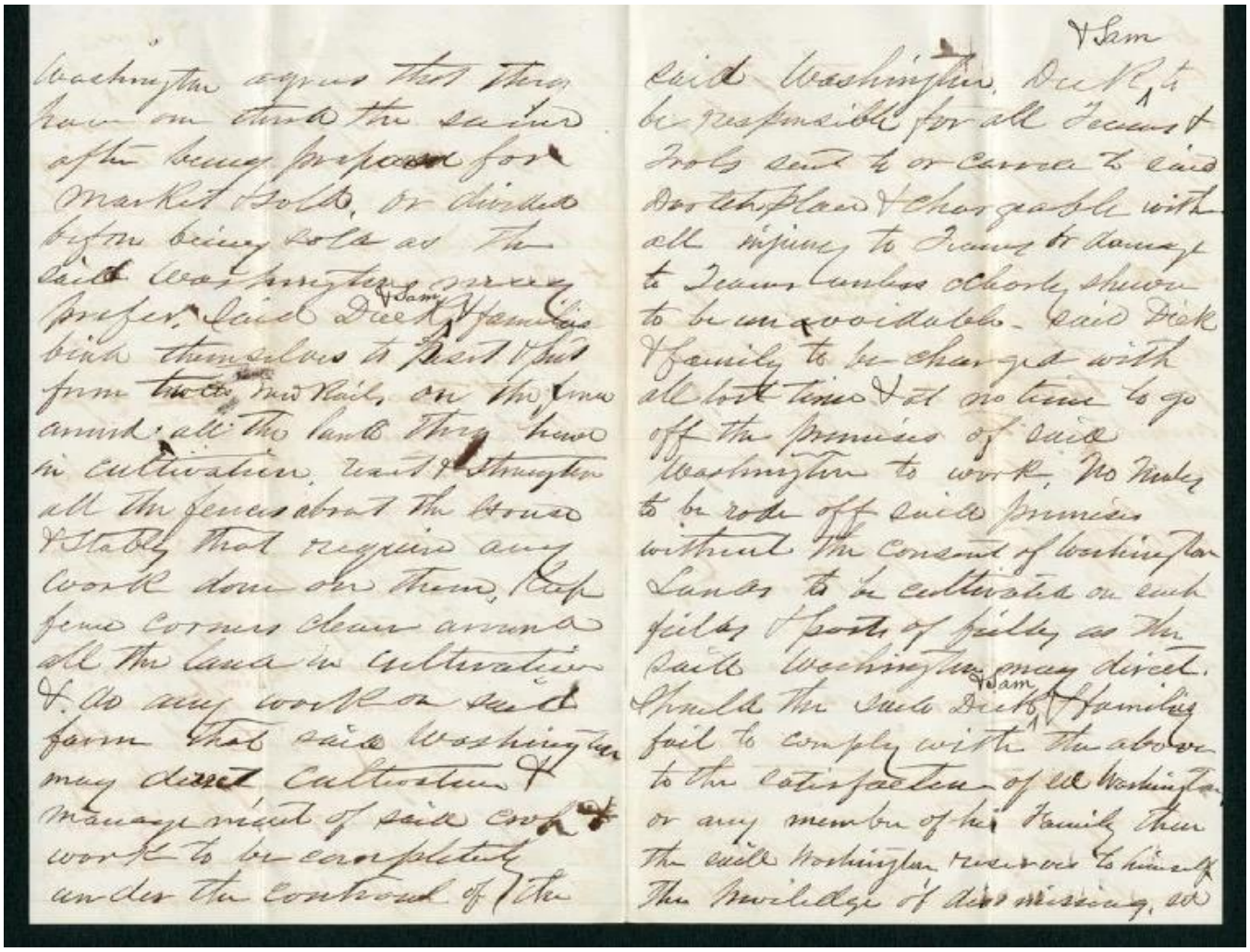
Source: Photo #93, Christ Church Cathedral Archive, Nashville, Tennessee

As seen from the rear gallery, the Resurrection Windows above the high altar are dedicated to John B. Johnson, Eliza Ann Baird Johnson, and John C. Maguire (left); George Augustine Washington (center); and William Allison Buntin (right).

Source: “The Stained Glass Windows,” Christ Church Cathedral Flickr album, https://www.flickr.com/photos/christchurchcathedral/albums/72157718576691153

Formerly enslaved individuals of the Wessyngton Plantation, ca. 1891. From left to right, Allen Washington (head dairyman), Emmanuel Washington (cook), Granville Washington (valet and body servant to George A. Washington), and Henny Washington (head laundress).

Source: “Former Enslaved Individuals of the Wessyngton Plantation,” photograph by William Gustav Thuss, ca. 1891, Library Photograph Collection, Drawer 22, Folder 112, ID# 4305, Tennessee State Library and Archives



A section of the sharecropping contract between George A. Washington and Dick Terry and Sam Vanhook.

Source: Sharecropping contract between George A. Washington and Dick Terry and Sam Vanhook, January 5, 1867, Washington Family Papers, 1796-1962, Accession no. 83-001, XVII-H-4, Box 94, F.14, ID# 39203, Tennessee State Library and Archives