

Previously published in *The Nassau County Historical Society Journal*.
Revised and modified in July 2010 for website publication at www.spinzialongislandstates.com
Please cite as: Spinzia, Judith Ader "Louis Comfort Tiffany's Legacy in Nassau County." *The Nassau County Historical Society Journal* 1991:8-17.

Artistry in Glass; *Louis Comfort Tiffany's Legacy in Nassau County*

by Judith Ader Spinzia

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Louis Comfort Tiffany was born in New York City to Charles Lewis and Harriet Young Tiffany on February 18, 1848. His father, a founding partner of Tiffany and Young, formed Tiffany and Company in 1853, when Louis was only five years old, and it is the success of the jewelry firm that gave Louis educational opportunity at Flushing Academy on Long Island and Eagleswood Military Academy in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. However, at the age of seventeen he persuaded his father to allow him to discontinue formal education and permit him to study painting instead. The exotic art of Europe and the Orient, which decorated his home and his father's store, came to life when his father allowed him to tour Europe in 1865-66.

Upon returning from the "Grand Tour" in 1866, he studied with George Inness. Tiffany began to paint in the style of the Barbizon School, which Inness represented. Life and landscapes were objectively portrayed, embellished only by his sense of their reality. Light and shadow were carefully expressed. His paintings, at this early stage of his career, show him to be a devout disciple of this school of painting and the activity of this period of his life greatly influenced his subject matter, technique, and fascination with light – a fascination that is easily traced throughout his career, even to the latest commissions.

Again he traveled in Europe and, in Paris, studied in the studio of Leon Bailly, which attracted painters who concentrated on Oriental scenes reflecting the glories of the Ottoman



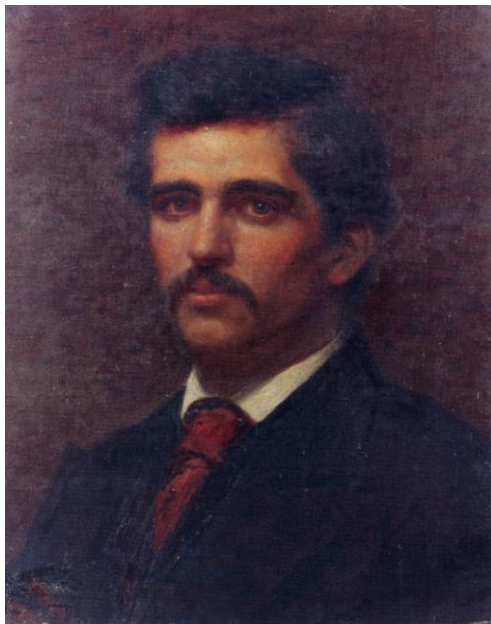
Louis Comfort Tiffany

Empire. Archaeological finds of the late 1860s had greatly stimulated this movement. Tiffany resumed his travels, visiting Bohemia, Spain with its Moorish culture, Italy, Gibraltar, and North Africa. The influences of those early experiences were monumental and Tiffany's art clearly demonstrates his fascination with these cultures and the art of Islam.



*On the Way Between Old and New Cairo,
Citadel Mosque of Mohammed Ali and the Tombs of the Mamelukes,
by Louis Comfort Tiffany, c. 1872*

After his return to New York and through the 1870s, Tiffany pursued a successful career in oil painting, exhibiting regularly at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Anyone who has taken the time to study his canvas work has seen the extraordinary talent that was this creative man; the phenomenal expression of light and its relationships to his subjects; and the early love of the Impressionistic School.



In 1872 he married Mary Woodridge Goddard and the following year the first of their four children was born. During this same period, his fascination with light led to experimentation with glass. At the Thill Glasshouse in Brooklyn he experimented with the goal of creating stained-glass windows in which no painting on glass would be required, not even for hands, feet, and faces. The closest to the realization of this objective was his creation of *The Bathers*, installed in his Long Island home, *Laurelton Hall*, in 1914.

Louis Comfort Tiffany, self portrait, c. 1872

Although there was no surface painting, as was the case with European and American stained-glass windows at the time, paint did have to be applied between the glass layers to achieve the color tones he needed to represent the nude body.

Tiffany continued experimentation at the Thill Glasshouse through 1877. Drapery glass, molten glass pulled by tongs and elevated by air compressors that is cooled to the textured folds of silicone garments, for which he became justly famous, was developed during this period. Tiffany then opened his own glasshouse under the supervision of Andrea Boldini of Venice. It was the art and chemistry of the Venetian glass artists that Tiffany had revived and the association with Boldini sought to bridge the years to those early glass artists in an effort to accelerate the research. Experimentation led to the destruction of two glasshouses by fire; he and Boldini parted company, but still the experimentation continued.

Tiffany's first ecclesiastical figure window, installed in St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Islip, Long Island, in 1878, represented an experimental mixture of European and American glass. This stylized St. Mark set against a background of crown glass rondeles was installed in the 1847 clapboard church which preceded the present *stavkirke*. The window was removed from the 1847 church and reinstalled in the apse of the 1880 *stavkirke* at the same time that Tiffany's jewel glass "pebble" trefoil was installed in the same church. In 1895 the original 1878 St. Mark was replaced, by Tiffany and at his own expense, with nine impressionistic lancets which also include a representation of St. Mark. The whereabouts of the original figure window is unknown.

Tiffany and Samuel Colman, with whom Louis had traveled through North Africa, joined with Lockwood de Forest and Candace Wheeler to form L. C. Tiffany & Associated Artists in 1879, an association which continued through 1882 and was responsible for many notable interior designs. Among these were: the extraordinary and critically acclaimed drop curtain for Steel MacKaye's Madison Square Theater (their first commission); the Fifth Avenue mansion of the George Kemps, a commission which included the *Eggplant and Squash* stained-glass windows (1879); the Veterans' Room



the large glass screen installed in the White House, Washington, DC, in 1882, destroyed at the direction of President Theodore Roosevelt during the redecoration of the public rooms

and Library of the Seventh Regiment Armory (1880); the Fifth Avenue mansion of Ogden Goelet (1881); the North African design for the drawing room of Cornelius Vanderbilt II's Fifth Avenue residence (1881); the Blue Room, the East Room, a corridor, and the State Dining Room of the White House (1882); and the Mark Twain house in Hartford, CT (1882).

Beginning in 1880 and for some years thereafter the Heidt Glasshouse in Brooklyn was the site of Tiffany's continuing glass experimentation. Coincidentally, John LaFarge was also conducting experiments at Heidt during these years. LaFarge was the first stained-glass artist to incorporate the glorious opalescent glass into stained-glass windows, a technique which would distinguish the American stained-glass artists and make one, Louis Comfort Tiffany, very famous. On November 25, 1880, Tiffany was granted two patents for variations on the opalescent glass technique originally developed by John LaFarge and patented by him a year earlier, on November 10, 1879. To make matters worse, LaFarge had been persuaded by Tiffany not to patent a colored glass technique. LaFarge later felt that Tiffany's patents for "favrile" glass usurped his own work and violated their agreements. A dreadful alienation of these two artistic geniuses was the result.

Tiffany's personal life also changed dramatically at this time. His wife Mary died in 1884 and he married Louise Wakeman Knox in 1886 with whom he had three more children.

By 1890 Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company was formed, a reassociation of those who had formed L. C. Tiffany & Associated Artists. With a furnace in Corona, Queens, showrooms in Manhattan, and the patent for "favrile" glass (1894), stained-glass masterpieces were being produced at a phenomenal rate – before 1900 under the name of Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company; after 1900 under the name Tiffany Studios. In 1897 the company's glass inventory was estimated to be between 200-300 tons in 5,000 colors.

The legacy of stained-glass windows which we can still enjoy in Nassau County were produced during this peak period of appreciation and demand.

Two wonderful stained-glass windows were installed in Garden City. An *Angel of Resurrection* window in the second-floor chapel was the constant companion of the girls who attended The Cathedral School of St. Mary, built in 1883. The school building has been demolished and the window has been sold. This school and its companion school for boys St. Paul's were donated to the Episcopal Diocese along with a see house, the Cathedral of the Incarnation, and sixty acres of land by Cornelia Clinch Stewart as a memorial to her husband Alexander Turney Stewart, the founder of Garden City.

The Anne Boggs/Eben Dodge window, which is not listed in surviving Tiffany records, was installed on the east wall of the intimate second floor chapel of The Cathedral School of St. Mary. It was removed from the chapel and sold prior to the demolition of the building. With the enameled script

signature “*Louis C. Tiffany N. Y.*” we know that it had been created between 1915 and 1920. The robes of the beautiful gold-crowned *Angel of Resurrection* were formed from heavy lavender/pink opalescent drapery glass in this stunning two-paneled window. Opalescent drapery glass also formed the beautifully pieced and dramatically positioned wings and the collar of feathers. Plating layers and the painting of gold between plating layers allowed light from the east to give remarkable reality to the eternal flame, symbolic of remembrance and of the Resurrection, which has been included in this window.

Angel of Resurrection, formerly installed in the east wall of the chapel in The Cathedral School of St. Mary, Garden City, Long Island, New York



The discontinuation of the private schools by the Diocese of Long Island and the selling of the properties resulted in the loss of the landmark Cathedral School and the very fine window created by Louis Comfort Tiffany. The 1877 main building of St. Paul’s School for Boys was sold to the village of Garden City. This landmark too is very much in danger and, yes, the future of the fine Tiffany window installed in the former school chapel is also in question. The surviving, albeit incomplete, records of Tiffany Studios confirm that the unsigned Thomas Newcomb Memorial, *Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*, on the west wall, is indeed by the famous artist in glass. There are two large panels in the window with six figures, three of which are soldiers. An astounding aspect of this window is seen in the “black” uniforms, helmets, shields, and spear points of the soldiers. Except for a bit of blue, no portion of the white light spectrum is emitted through the smooth glass, a technique which may be unique to this commission. The kneeling Saul of Tarsus is seen on the right blinded by the “light from heaven,” which in this case is created by the refraction of light from the west

“Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus” installed on the west wall of the chapel in St. Paul’s School for Boys, Garden City, Long Island, New York – currently in jeopardy



through glass mechanically layered to form what is known as plating. Light and shadow, refracted through these multiple layers, change from morning to evening but the effect at sunset is breathtaking. The canopy above this window suggests the arches of the Cathedral of the Incarnation.

The signature “*TIFFANY GLASS & DECORATING COMPANY NEW YORK*” on the Thorne Memorial window, *Resurrection*, in the United Methodist Church of Hempstead places the creation of this window between 1890 and 1899. Under Tiffany’s direction, many Resurrection windows were created from intimate single-paneled scenes, as in this window, to grand 30-foot-high, full-wall triptych creations. Sometimes there were three Marys or, as in this example, two Marys; sometimes John is included, as here, and sometimes not; sometimes the figures of Christ was not represented, as we see in the Thorne window; sometimes an elaborate mausoleum was designed and sometimes the tomb was represented as a simple boulder, as here; but always there are palms and lilies symbolizing triumph and the Resurrection and, more often than not, these Resurrection windows were designed specifically to transmit morning light from the east.

Just to the west of United Methodist Church, also in Hempstead, is St. George’s Episcopal Church. Two windows in this historic parish, the Henry Van Rensselaer Kennedy and the Bessie Morgan Belmont Memorials, are of interest, not because they were created by Tiffany Studios, but because Jacob Adolphus Holzer, a designer for Tiffany as early as 1885, created and signed the Kennedy window in 1917. He is renowned for designing the impressive mosaic baptistry in St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Troy, New York, considered by many to contain one of the finest total church interiors ever designed by Tiffany Studios. Although the Belmont window is unsigned, the work is comparable and it is believed that this is also the work of Holzer. Whether he was still employed by Tiffany at the time of this personal commission has not been confirmed, but it is certain the unusual style and design are completely his own and not those of Tiffany Studios.

How does one go about documenting unsigned and previously undocumented windows created by Tiffany Studios? First there is a sense of Tiffany’s art that one comes to know over the years. Every student of Tiffany’s work makes the complicated and laborious effort to “get into the artist’s mind,” to interpret. No work left his studio without his approval; he was even known to destroy a window with his cane if the finished product did not look as if it was the product of his hands. Therefore, there is no substitute for understanding Tiffany, for studying every window that you can find *in situ*, for studying the types of glass and plating techniques used in each, or for creating a catalog in your mind of the faces which appear in his work and the work of his employees.

Artists have copied Tiffany windows, some with remarkable success, although usually the lack of access to Tiffany glass, the frugality of plating thus reducing depth of field, and other shortcuts

suggest a different studio. The windows in the former the Lawrence Methodist Episcopal Church (which became the Community Bible Church and, subsequently, the Hispanic Christian Missionary Alliance), exhibiting fine glass and fine technique with thematic scenes depicted very much in the style of Tiffany, are said to have been fabricated by Thomas Jones Window Decorating Glass Company of Brooklyn.¹ Enormous, allegorical windows, representing scenes from Johann Heinrich Hofman's paintings decorate this church successfully referencing several of Tiffany's own, documented Long Island commissions using quality glass and extensive plating. *Christ in Gethsemane* borrows from a window by the same name in Trinity Episcopal Church in Northport, Long Island, with the exact number of pieces of glass in the hands, the arms, and the robes. *Suffer the Little Children*, on the northeast wall of the same church, contains a face which is the same face of one of the children in the documented Tiffany window *Christ Healing Peter's Wife's Mother-In Law* in St. George's Episcopal Church in Flushing, Queens. The robes on Jesus and the faces of the elders surrounding him in *Presentation in the Temple*, also on the northeast wall, are strikingly similar to those in the window by the same name created in 1917 by Tiffany Studios for Christ Church, Sag Harbor, Long Island.

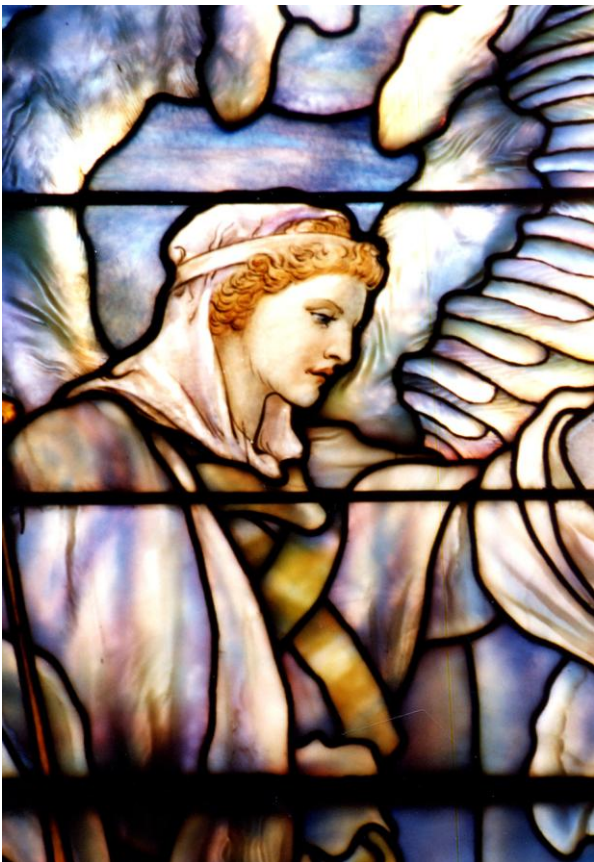
In the Town of North Hempstead two churches preserve the Tiffany legacy. All Saints Episcopal Church, Great Neck, has four four-paneled windows created by the artists of Tiffany Studios, three of which are documented in the Tiffany records. The windows on the north wall, listed in Tiffany records as *Angel with Landscape* and *Sermon on the Mount*, clearly show how the technique of external plating increases depth of field. The hills behind these scenes appear to be miles and miles away. It is no wonder that the parish has renamed the *Angel with Landscape*, created and signed by Tiffany Studios' designer Edward P. Sperry in 1907, as *I Lift Mine Eyes Onto the Hills*.

The other two windows in this church appear to be of earlier vintage, with only the Childs Memorial window *Choir of Angels* listed in surviving records. The church is said to have documentation for the Stanton Memorial window, which is unsigned and which is not listed in the surviving records of Tiffany Studios.

Trinity Episcopal Church in Roslyn preserves more of Tiffany's artistry in six panels of Tiffany glass, none of which was listed in studio records. The script signature on the window in the east transept suggests that the window was designed c. 1915-1920. However, the dates on the window clearly suggest that this signature may have been used in a period later than originally thought, in this case 1927. Therefore, this window would have been completed after the 1924 closing of the Tiffany Furnaces in Corona and after Tiffany had withdrawn from personal involvement in window design, that being in about 1926.

Five windows installed in 1907 in Trinity Church were originally mounted high up on the north wall to decorate and light a chapel. These are now mounted in an all-purpose room with a hillside behind them, limiting the transmission of light and changing the intention of the artist. They preserve more than the art of Louis Comfort Tiffany, however, for they also preserve the faces of the Mackay children, whose mother paid for the building of this church and for these windows.

St. John's Episcopal Church is in the Town of Oyster Bay portion of Cold Spring Harbor. The three magnificent stained-glass windows, which it contains, are therefore in Nassau County. Two windows, *Annunciation* and *Good Shepherd*, on the east wall, were specifically designed to transmit morning light from the east. The third window illustrates how windows designed to utilized transmitted light can not be successfully moved. The Moore Memorial, *Angel of Resurrection*, was moved from the west wall to its present position on the east wall and the glory of this creation has been diminished because its plating layers were designed to use the spectrum of light as it is received from the west.



closeup of opalescent glass in Annunciation



Good Shepherd, a frequent theme

St. John's Episcopal Church, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island

The Russell Memorial window in St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Glen Cove, is listed in the records which survived the 1932 bankruptcy of Tiffany Studios. Reportedly, a boiler explosion made the original 1898 clapboard building unsafe and in 1939 the present church building was constructed. The stained-glass windows, presumably including the Russell Memorial, were removed and their disposition is unknown.

Another window of interest and concern which now resides in Nassau County is the Lott Memorial window, listed simply as “ornamental” in Tiffany Studios’ records, but which is a large triptych depicting *Christ and Adoring Angels*. St. Gabriel’s Episcopal Church, Hollis, Queens, constructed a new building in 1959, choosing at that time, not to reinstall this memorial in the contemporary structure. Its three panels were stored, uncrated, in a basement until the descendants of the Lott family persuaded St. Gabriel’s to turn the window over to St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church in Plainview where members of the family then worshipped. They were in storage at last visit but the church was planning to install them somewhere in the church complex.

Many Tiffany commissions for domestic purposes also found their way into the homes of Nassau County residents but this discussion addresses only those which are readily accessible to the public and these, as you have seen, are ecclesiastical. Additionally, few records of the private commissions have survived, complicating the search.

In 1890 Tiffany and his family became residents of Nassau County when he built his first home in Laurel Hollow, *The Briars*. Subsequently, he built a new mansion on the 580-acre tract which he had bought in 1902, also in Laurel Hollow. *Laurelton Hall*, as it was named, was designed by Tiffany and built on the site of a hotel named Laurelton Hall. In 1904, just a few months after the death of his second wife Louise, Tiffany and his children moved into the new home. Described as a combination of Moorish and Art Nouveau, the mansion, its magnificent grounds and its eclectic exterior and interior reflected his commitment to pure form and color in art and to the artist’s dependence upon light and nature.



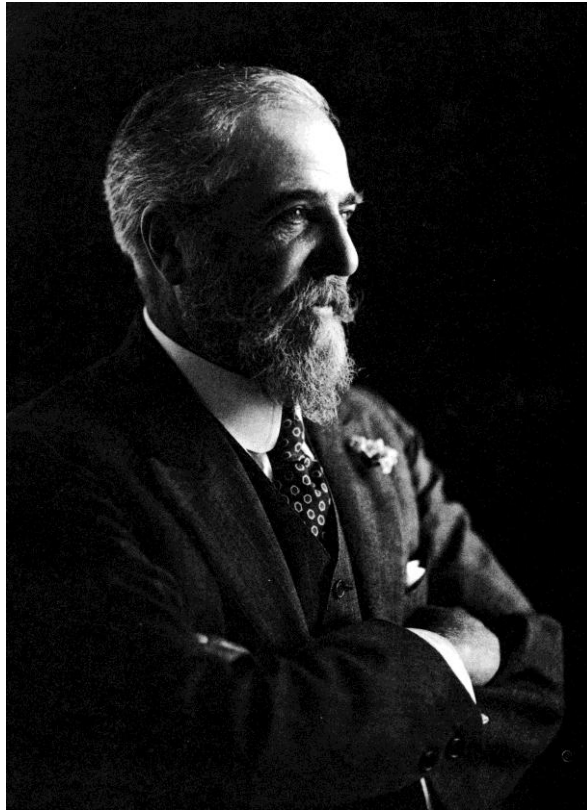
the terrace, Laurelton Hall



*a portion of the central court
closed from the elements by a blue iridescent glass dome skylight
and through which a small stream ran, Laurelton Hall*

In 1920 an art school was established at *Laurelton Hall*, not to teach art but to inspire the artist. The estate plus sixty-two acres had been turned over to the Tiffany Foundation, established by Tiffany in 1918 to support artists. The school continued, under Tiffany's supervision, until his death in 1933, one month before his eighty-fifth birthday. Although endowed by Tiffany for the equivalent of \$10-12 million in today's money value, the Foundation found itself unable to maintain the Laurel Hollow property and auctioned the contents of *Laurelton Hall* in 1946. The building and four acres sold for just \$10,000 in 1949. *Laurelton Hall* alone had cost \$222,870 to build in 1904 and was valued, with its contents and landscaping, at \$2 million in 1910.

Abandoned and vandalized, Tiffany's dream mansion finally burned in 1957 – an art nouveau white elephant in the post-war era. Many windows and examples of his enormous talent, which were still in the house, were destroyed. That which survived is now in the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, Florida. The minaret with favrile glass, which was the smoke stack for his power house and which is now on private property, is visible today only from the water or from the beach at the foot of *Laurelton Beach Road*, a sentinel high above *Cold Spring Harbor*. If you should pass *Tiffany Road*, off *Cove Neck Road* in *Laurel Hollow*, *Long Island*, you may wish to reflect on the genius that was *Louis Comfort Tiffany* and the glory of his legacy.



Louis Comfort Tiffany

ENDNOTES

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1. The stained-glass windows in the Hispanic Christian Missionary Alliance (formerly, the Lawrence Methodist Episcopal Church; subsequently, the Community Bible Church) are identified by Millicent Vollono as the work of Thomas Jones Window Decorating Glass Company of Brooklyn in *Images of America: The Five Towns* (Charleston, NC: Arcadia Publications, 2010), p. 77.

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For further information on the Tiffany estates, *The Briars* and *Laurelton Hall*, see Spinzia, Raymond E. and Judith A. Spinzia. *Long Island's Prominent North Shore Families: Their Estates and Their Country Homes*. vol. II. College Station, TX: VirtualBookworm, 2006 – Tiffany entries.

For information and Long Island locations of ecclesiastical commissions of Tiffany Studios, see Spinzia, Raymond Edward, Judith Ader Spinzia, and Kathryn Spinzia Rayne. *Long Island: A Guide to New York's Suffolk and Nassau Counties*, 3rd edition. New York: Hippocrene Publishers, 2009.

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