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*The Shape of Memory*

# A Cross as Memorial

By Quentin Warren



Photo: Jeremy Morozau



Photo: Kahlbrya Whitney Lucey

*St. George is portrayed with the likeness of alumnus Ronald Hoskier, who died in combat in France on St. George's Day, 1917. Restored Peaslee Processional Cross in chapel.*

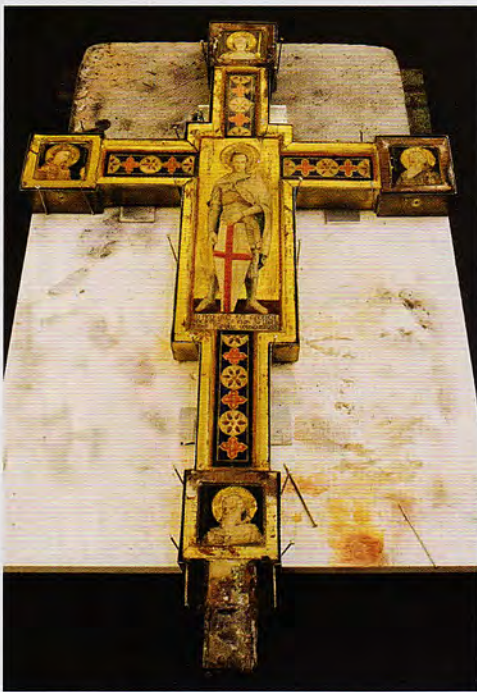
SOMETIMES IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS. The great chapel designed by Ralph Adams Cram at St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island, is more than towering limestone, inspired sculpture, and shimmering stained glass. Among its treasured features is a processional cross that has heralded choirs and celebrants down the nave since the building's consecration in 1928. To be sure, the cross predates the chapel by ten years, having been given to St. George's by mathematics teacher The Reverend Arthur Newton Peaslee in 1918 to honor members of the school com-

THE AUTHOR IS A STAFF WRITER IN THE ALUMNI OFFICE AT ST. GEORGE'S SCHOOL.

munity killed during World War I. An ornate artifact rendered in wood, copper, and gold-plated brass, hand painted in bright colors and adorned with several religious and allegorical references (including the regnant Christ) the Peaslee Processional Cross is as important to the deeper religious psyche of the chapel itself as it is to the daily lives of the students and fellow communicants who rally behind it in worship and prayer week in and week out.

The story of this timeless relic braids elements of school tradition, honor through remembrance, religious devotion, and stewardship of the highest order. Drawing on the Episcopal heritage of St. George's, it

was intended to be, and became, an integral component of the school's routine spiritual observance and remains so to this day. Detailed iconography, conveyed graphically and colorfully through representational art on its front and back, speaks both to that sacred agenda and to the secular veneration of fallen war heroes from the school community. Finally, given the effects of time and recurrent handling, the need for repair and restoration naturally becomes an issue and it was the school, along with support from a generous alumnus, that put the piece into the hands of a professional conservator who returned it to its original brilliant state.



During restoration the cross was disassembled, repaired, and cleaned.



Details of the base of the restored cross.

The cross was made by Alexander E. Hoyle of Boston, and consists of a wood crucifix with painted images on both sides, bound and framed by gold-plated brass and mounted on a wood staff. On the front is the figure of Christ, described by Peaslee as “not the sufferer merely, looking shameful death in the face, but the risen Christ crowned, no longer with thorns, but with the diadem of His eternal universal kingdom.” Below that is the tree of life, around which is coiled the proverbial serpent. The three arms of the cross represent the fruits of that tree, namely the Christian virtues: Faith to the Lord’s right is robed in white, the symbol of purity; Hope is above, clad in green to represent verdant growth

and the promise of an abundant harvest; and Charity to His left is attired in red, “symbol of the fire of love and of the blood which love must ever be ready to shed for the beloved.”

The reverse includes figures related to World War I arranged around a depiction of St. George, patron saint of England and particularly of this namesake school. They represent the principal European allies: St. Columba on one arm symbolizes Britain; St. Francis of Assisi on the opposite arm symbolizes Italy; above, la Bienheureuse Jeanne d’Arc evokes France; and at the foot of the cross, St. Rombold stands in for Belgium and the ravaged city of Mechelen.

Bringing all of this curiously home is the notion that the face of St. George on the Peaslee cross is derived from a photograph of alumnus Ronald Hoskier, St. George’s Class of 1914, who was shot down over France on April 23, 1917 by German fire. Ironically and perhaps fittingly, April 23 happens to be St. George’s Day. Hoskier had left Harvard College after graduating from St. George’s to enlist as an American volunteer in the French Lafayette Escadrille where he became an adept pilot. The St. George’s Class of 1914 contributed 32 of its members to military service in the conflict abroad. To Peaslee, Hoskier’s sacrifice was symbolic of the role played by his school in the war.

In Peaslee’s own words, “This cross is given to be used in the worship of God at St. George’s School in the name of and to honor all members of the school who have consecrated their lives to this war for the freedom of mankind, both those who have paid the full patriot’s debt in one swift moment of final pain, and those who are yet to complete that payment by years of service to God in church and state.”

Early in 2010, it had become obvious that the 92-year-old cross was in need of an extensive overhaul. Given the significance of the piece along with the complexity and multiplicity of its parts, such an undertaking would require the expertise of a skilled restorer. The school contacted local professional art and metal conservator Howard Newman of Newport-based Newmans, Ltd., for an assessment. His findings point to the fragile state of the cross prior to its restoration. The brass and copper ferrule section between the crucifix and the pole had become loose and distorted, and the joint itself had separated. The brass plates framing the crucifix and its painted surfaces had become bent and the edge joints had broken in places. Lacquer coating the gold-plated brass, originally left bright, had eroded, exposing unevenly oxidized base metal. The painted images had become dark with decades of dirt.



Students carry the newly restored Peaslee Processional Cross into St. George’s School chapel.

Restoration of the piece included structural repair and the remediation of lacquer and wax, along with conservation and consolidation of its painted surfaces.

Needless to say, this fell outside the parameters of a normal operating expense. It represented a project that required capital input from a person or people who understood its significance and considered the investment worthy. As it turned out, support for the enterprise came by way of a St. George’s alumnus from the class of 1970 who as Senior Prefect had carried the cross regularly up and down the chapel nave. Of his involvement he said, “Thanks for approaching me with this project.... My year as Senior Prefect meant a lot to me and I am delighted to be able to help restore the cross which was one of the symbols associated with the office.”

Throughout the summer of 2010 Newman engaged in the painstaking process of disassembling, restoring, and reassembling the piece, completing the project in time for the opening of school in September. He documented his work in a fascinating video slideshow currently posted on YouTube (accessible on the *Faith & Form* website, at [faithandform.com](http://faithandform.com)).

Today, the Peaslee Processional Cross continues in its role as the dynamic symbol of a young congregation led in service and prayer. It moves through the chapel at St. George’s like a beacon. It represents nearly a century of religious and human piety in that uncommon space, viewed with reverence by its stewards and the school community at large. Affectionately, it is “the Stick” to the student vergers and crucifers who carry it, never failing to appreciate its artful presence and its central focus. RF