

# Preserving History

Artech Interiors' Owners Bill and Tom Burns Restore Historic Churches

Written by SUSAN BAKER

Brothers Bill and Tom Burns, owners of Artech Interiors of Danbury, have found their niche restoring historic churches and synagogues in the Greater Danbury area and all over the Northeast. It is the third generation of a family whose vocations have all centered around churches.

The Burns' grandfather, Adrian Hamers, made gold and silver chalices for Catholic priests; their cousins continue that work today. Their father specialized in pew restoration. Over the years, the Burns' business has evolved into a full-scale restoration, painting and repair business servicing some 50 churches a year in one manner or another. "We went beyond what my father and grandfather did to do full-scale restorations," said Bill Burns.

In addition to painting, Artech Interiors performs pew refinishing and replacement, and installs carpeting lighting and pulpit accessories. The brothers also apply faux finishes to resemble marble or stone, and apply gold leaf detailing. Tom Burns grew up in the business and never thought about doing anything else. "This is all I've done my whole life and I have a lot of pride in it," he observed.

Bill, who has a marketing degree from Pace University, toyed with the idea of a career in advertising, but decided to follow the path his family had taken and hasn't regretted it since. Both brothers said they found their work with churches very satisfying, in part because many times they help to preserve history.

"I feel I can bring an old building back to its original beauty. I enjoy the process from start to finish. I usually document it with pictures," said Tom Burns.

The brothers receive input from the pastor or priest as well as the parishioners on the churches they work on.

"A lot of them don't realize what they have until its been redone because it hasn't been touched in a generation," said Bill.

This past year, the Burns brothers and their crew worked on the 140-year-old Trinity Episcopal Church in Southport. They took out the old pews and restored them. Modified jeeps, narrow enough to drive down the aisle between pews were parked in the church. A 100-foot telescopic painting boom, specially designed for churches, was then used to strip more than a century of paint from the walls and the ceiling. They then repainted and put in some faux finishes.

Last spring, their work took them to Manhattan's St. Paul's Chapel near the World Trade Center. The church is historically important because it was the place where George Washington worshipped on his inauguration day, April 30, 1789. He attended services there during the two years that New York City was the capital of the United States of America.

"It's kind of a museum with pictures of Washington," said Bill. The project involved completely repainting the interior of the church. The project took six weeks.



Photograph by Bob McNitt, RJM Group

This past year Bill and Tom Burns restored the 140-year-old Trinity Episcopal Church in Southport.

The church, as do most of the churches they work on, remained open during the process. "We work Monday through Thursday, 10-hour days, so people can use the church Friday through Sunday," said Bill.

After the Sept. 11 tragedy, this project held even more meaning for the brothers. Although the church took in a lot of soot, it was not destroyed and even served as a shelter to New York City firemen after the event.

Although restoration of historic churches is their primary focus, the Burns also do work with new churches. Last summer, the brothers worked on a Catholic church being built and named St. Edwards the Confessor in New Fairfield. "We installed new, cushioned cherry wood pews," said Bill. The church seats 1,000.

Their most recent project is the Zion Lutheran Church in Stamford. "They had an electrical fire by the organ," said Tom. "We took out the pews and completely stripped and refinished them. We cleaned the soot damage on the ceiling, wood beams and the stained glass windows. We are replastering and repainting the whole place." The work should be finished in late May. Upcoming projects include a historic Greek Orthodox Church in Cambridge, Mass., and a Congregational Church nearby in Winchester.

"We're already booked to the end of the year and are making arrangements for 2003," said Bill.

Part of the reason they're in demand is that they are not generalists — they just do churches. "There are a lot of painters out there but very few church painters who know how to handle the specialties of a church," he said. ■