

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XII

2-13-90

No. 6

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

At Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas, a woman full of good deeds and acts of charity.

Acts 9:36

Our stained glass series continues this week with another subject from St. John's Episcopal Church in Medina. Tabitha, alias Dorcas, alias Gazelle is a somewhat remote character found only briefly in Acts 9:36-43. Here, paraphrased, is the essence of her story:

"Peter was preaching at Lydda. Two men from Joppa sought him out and told him Dorcas was dead. Dorcas! Peter knew Dorcas. Everyone in Lydda and Joppa knew Dorcas. She was dress-maker to the poor; she had made and fitted coats, dresses, and baby clothes for years. Dorcas dead? That couldn't be. God wouldn't...."

"But God had. Dorcas was dead. Peter found her body lying in state in her Joppa house, surrounded by widows and orphans. He sent them out, stretched his arms toward heaven and cried, 'Dorcas, arise,' She arose. Many, when they heard of it, believed in the Lord."

"Many believed in the Lord, too, while Dorcas lived and sewed. Many looked at her and said, 'If all the Christians were like that — !'"

This century old memorial window depicts Dorcas in acts of charity. The inscription under the illustration notes: Full of Good Works and Alms Deeds Which She Did. We see her in the left lancet dispersing a loaf of bread to an orphan child. Dorcas is clad in a rose colored dress with a grey cape which has a vivid red lining denoting love. The child is wearing a blue tunic and a red hat as he reaches for the bread. The right lancet depicts a beggar kneeling, holding a staff, about to receive a new garment from Dorcas which she has sewn. The illustrator has indeed shown the poor beggar in great need of new clothing. His shirt is torn and tattered and his pants are ripped and dirty. He is depicted as destitute since all his clothing is doudy in its color scheme giving a 'grungy' appearance. The garment Dorcas is about to hand him by contrast is a rather rich rose color. He reaches forth for the new apparel with great admiration for her, and with gratitude painted upon his face.

It is without a doubt that the artisitic designer of this window used live models to arrive at the basic design or cartoon for the figures. In illustrators terms a cartoon is a preparatory design, drawing or painting for the actual work of art to be created. The beggar for instance, in this window has facial features, a beard and baldness which is really quite believable even in a contemporary sense. I am equally sure that live models were commonly used and are the basis for the personages found in all our major figural windows.

This scene of Dorcas with the orphan and beggar seemingly takes place on the door step of her Joppa home. Although difficult to see in the window itself, there is a castle-like dwelling in most of the background space. However, we do see a leafless tree in the distance. The tree has played an important part in Christian symbolism. In general, the tree is a symbol of either life or death, depending upon whether it is healthy or withered. In a mediaeval tradition the dead tree of life may only become green again if the Crusified Christ is grafted upon it and revives it with His blood. This alludes to the tree of Jesse mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah which in part, Chapt. 11 verse 4,

notes "but with justice shall He judge the poor." Perhaps this all gives reason for the illustration of the tree here. In the apex of the window is a quarterfoil which contains a cross and crown suggesting the reward of the faithful in heaven as it is back-lighted with a brilliant sun, a symbol of God.

In the base of the window we find a geometric decorative design with clusters of grapes which denote holy communion. Here too we find the window is signed "E. Colegate New York." The memorial inscription for this window accompanies it on a brass plaque attached to the window sill rather than having it painted on the glass. It notes: To the Glory of God and in Memory of Prudence Kilbourne Weld February 14, 1786 - November 23, 1884. The Dorcas window was given by Mrs. J. Ruggles Weld in memory of her mother. Mrs. Weld was the wife of J.R. Weld who was a merchant and miller. He and Albert J. Hill owned a mill on Oak Orchard Creek at the Medina Falls just north of the canal. Being a prominent local family it is easy to see how they could afford this memorial. And no doubt, it was certainly an appropriate subject to a mother who was generous in her own right. At one time there were Dorcas Societies in many churches whose mission it was to help the needy.

