



# The Herald News

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LIFESTYLE

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Of

*fate, art*

and two men's parallel

*lives*

## How St. Patrick's stained glass was rescued twice

**Linda Murphy**

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Divine providence may have led William Vareika to "wake up" from a quick lunchtime Transcendental Meditation and discover the artist that would influence his life. But that was only the beginning of a series of twists of fate that would ultimately lead him to rescuing the most comprehensive collection of the artist's stained glass windows from destruction at Fall River's St. Patrick's convent.

Vareika, raised in Brockton, was about halfway through Boston College, immersed in the idealism of the late 1960s with a clear vision of going on to law school and, as he put it, "changing the world." But an art history class thwarted his plans.

More than a century earlier, the artist, John La Farge, who was also heading for a career in law, decided at the urging of a friend, New York architect Richard Morris Hunt, to move to Newport, R.I., to study painting with his brother, William Morris Hunt. With plans to become a lawyer abandoned, La Farge married a Newport woman, Mary Margaret Perry, daughter of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, and immersed himself in Newport's robust intellectual artistic community, painting landscapes of the seaside city, portraits and flowers.

Considered to be the father of the American mural movement and the painter of the first Impressionist experiment on American soil, La Farge is regarded today as one of the preeminent 19th century artists for his pioneering stained glass work, including the invention of opaque opalescent glass designs, artistically significant floral painting and early Art Nouveau illustrations.

Vareika, in an attempt to get out of a final exam in his art history class at Boston College, hastily arranged to opt for a last-minute research paper and was given 24 hours to find a topic. Frantically he headed to nearby Trinity Church, where he often spent his lunch in Transcendental Meditation. Upon awakening, he said, the vision of La Farge's murals and stained glass in the church revealed his research topic. As part of the project, Vareika stopped at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, spending his last \$10 to purchase a print of La Farge's landscape "Wood Interior."

He said the project was so well-received that the professor urged him to change his major to art history, but he remained steadfast in his determination to become a lawyer.

Before heading off to law school in 1974, Vareika decided to visit Newport to see the city where La Farge had lived and worked for most of his life. As fate would have it, one of the first people he met was a woman who was trying to save La Farge's stained glass windows from destruction in an abandoned church.

Preserving the La Farge windows in that church turned into a six-year battle. "I agreed to help them over the summer," said Vareika. "I was very naïve back then; I had no idea how long something like that would take."



This stained glass window by John La Farge was once in St. Patrick's convent in Fall River.

Supporting himself as a part-time janitor and art picker, buying and selling art he picked up at yard sales, proved to be lucrative. Like La Farge, Vareika discarded law school plans, married a Newport woman, his wife Alison, and settled into a career in the arts in Newport, eventually opening William Vareika Fine Arts on Bellevue Avenue. Over the years he's grown to be regarded as an expert and dealer in La Farge's work, and today he owns the original painting of the \$10 "Wood Interior" print he bought back in college as part of his research project.

"I would say I have a passion for his work," said Vareika. "He's played a major role in my life."

An art dealer of three centuries of significant American artists, Vareika also handles the work of Benjamin West, Gilbert Stuart and William Trost Richards.

In the 1890s, La Farge's broad art career and expertise in stained glass led to the commission of 13 windows for a private chapel in a home on Kay Street. Two wealthy Newport sisters, Mary Gwendolyn Bird Caldwell and Mary Elizabeth Breckenridge Caldwell, who were orphaned at a young age and raised by a guardian, built the chapel in memory of their parents.

In 1931, during the Great Depression, the chapel with La Farge's images of the Madonna and child, the motherly St. Elizabeth of Hungary and Saint John the Evangelist was slated for demolition but the art and chapel contents were spared through the efforts of Fall River Bishop James Cassidy. He secured the windows and the other chapel furnishings and installed them in the St. Patrick's Church Sisters of Mercy convent house.

Approximately 70 years later, the Diocese of Fall River had merged several parishes into the church at 1589 S. Main St., which is known today as the Good Shepherd Parish, and announced plans to demolish the former convent for a parking lot.

Twenty-seven years after saving the first series of La Farge windows, Vareika was called on again to preserve the work of the artist who had played such a prominent role in his art career. This time it was Sister M. Therese Antone, president of Salve Regina University at the time (she's the chancellor now) and her colleague, Sister Marypatricia Murphy, treasurer of the Sisters of Mercy of America, who contacted the art dealer in 2001 in an effort to save the 13 stained glass windows and original chapel contents from destruction at the convent.

"It seemed like déjà vu. I thought about the windows we saved back in 1974 and began to wonder what would happen to these windows," he said.

Against all odds, Vareika, the two nuns and a committee of volunteers managed to rescue the windows and chapel contents in 2004 and in the process, their preservation effort expanded to include the construction of the new chapel at Salve Regina, scheduled to open in August 2010.

Michael Semenza, Salve Regina vice president for university relations, said the university, through the efforts of the board of trustees and private donors, raised \$350,000 to buy the windows and chapel items from the Fall River diocese.

"This is the case of how art has inspired a construction project," said Vareika. "Now they'll be back in Newport at a Catholic institution and chapel where they can be appreciated for their liturgical value as part of a worship environment."

As part of the project, Vareika has assembled the most extensive show and sale of La Farge's work to date to raise funds to restore the windows, which are being repaired by the Serpentino Stained and Leaded Glass Studio in Needham.

"This summer I discussed postponing the show with Sister Therese Antone because the economy was so lousy and she told me 'to have faith,'" he said. "A show like this, with pieces from museums and private collections, can take a year or more to pull together, but in less than six weeks I managed to assemble the entire exhibition."

The show, which includes several of the stained glass windows, features approximately 150 pieces of La Farge's oils, watercolors, drawings and block prints as well as illustrations and paintings of stained glass designs.

"I set out to put on a survey of every aspect of his work to show how important his work was so people would come together and support the project," he said.

One of only two known cartoons (true to size preliminary paintings of stained glass) priced at \$225,000 is for sale as part of the show. The only other known La Farge cartoon is in the Worcester Art Museum's collection.

"When I lecture to school kids I tell them to be open to signals: If I hadn't come to Newport I would never would have become an art dealer, I wouldn't have met my wife and these stained glass windows would never have made their way back to a chapel in Newport. It's fate," said Vareika.

**The show at the 212 Bellevue Ave. gallery runs through Nov. 30. For more information and to view additional La Farge artwork see [www.vareikafinearts.com](http://www.vareikafinearts.com) or call 401-849-6149.**