

# OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION

1908-2008



A TREASURE IN STAINED GLASS

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# INTRODUCTION

f all the stained glass windows that grace the nave of Our Lady of the Assumption Church, there is one in particular that stands out from the others, both for its beauty and for its history. This is the first window on the left wall, closest to the Blessed Virgin Mary altar. It is the oldest of all the windows, and thought to be the first installed in our church. It is variously called the Willet window, after its artist; the Sullivan window, after its donor; or the Annunciation/Nativity window, after its subject.

Taken as a whole, this window illustrates several major events in the life of Mary, notably those which deal with the Incarnation. In keeping with the historical purpose of stained glass windows in the Middle Ages—which was both to educate and inspire—this window can be used as a means of contemplating the *story*, as well as the *mystery*, of this event.

Alongside the religious message imparted by these windows, there is also the fascinating story of how it came to be part of Our Lady of the Assumption Church.

Following the suggestion of our pastor, Monsignor Joseph Marino, this booklet has been prepared to acquaint parishioners with the story of this window, which is truly one of the treasures of our church. It is our hope that with this booklet in hand, parishioners will be able to approach the window and look at it with more understanding and appreciation, once they know its remarkable story.



*To the Glory of God  
and in Loving  
Memory of*

*Leta Sullivan  
Hoffman*



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# The Sullivans and Our Lady of the Assumption

*A*t the base of the panels of the Nativity and of the Annunciation are two scrolls with the words, “To the glory of God and in loving memory of—Leta Sullivan Hoffman.” Who was Leta Sullivan Hoffman, and why is there a memorial to her in our church?

In the early, financially troubled days of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish, a number of members of St. Katharine of Siena Church concerned themselves with the welfare of the Italian immigrants in their midst, and sought ways to help them. Foremost among these benevolent neighbors was the socially prominent family of Mr. and Mrs. James Francis Sullivan of Philadelphia, New York, and “The Woods” in Radnor, Pennsylvania (now a development called The Woods, on the corner of Pine Tree and Upper Gulph Roads).

James Francis Sullivan was a wealthy industrialist and president of Philadelphia’s Market Street National Bank. His wife, Lucy Nichols Sullivan, was from a distinguished New York family. Having their principal residence in Philadelphia, the Sullivans and their four children preferred to spend summers at their estate in Radnor. The Sullivans were involved in many works of charity, both in New York and Philadelphia. In her obituary, Lucy Sullivan was praised for her “deeds of quiet charity,” for which she was well-known and loved in the Wayne community. For many years later, their daughter, Frances Sullivan Rowland, continued this charitable work.

When they were residing at The Woods, the Sullivans attended St. Katharine’s Church in Wayne. Though they were never members of Our Lady of the Assumption, they, along with other St. Katharine’s members, were exceedingly generous toward this Italian parish, both in money and in kind. One memorable example was Father Scialabba’s Model T Ford, a gift from the Sullivans in 1924.

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## Leta Sullivan Hoffman

**L**eta, the Sullivans' third child, was "one of the most beautiful and popular girls in Philadelphia society," according to a 1922 article in the *Suburban & Wayne Times*. In addition, "she was a graceful amateur dancer... and frequently took part in notable entertainments for charity." At Our Lady of the Assumption, she taught Sunday school for several years to the Italian children.

In 1918, she married Lieutenant Albert Lincoln Hoffman of New York. One year later, while they were spending the summer in Greenwich, Connecticut, she gave birth to their son, Albert Lincoln Hoffman, Jr., on August 19. A week later, in a tragic turn of events, she died suddenly of "heart failure." She was 27 years old.



"Leta"  
*Portrait by William Willet*

As a memorial for their beloved daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan commissioned a stained glass window in her memory from the renowned Willet Studios of Philadelphia. William Willet, founder and head of the studio, was an acclaimed portraitist as well as a stained glass artist. He had already painted a portrait of Leta for the Sullivans. However, he died in 1921 before he could begin the commission, and his wife, Anne Lee Willet, took over the running of the studio, and the execution of the Sullivans' project. This window, which was commissioned in 1921 but only finished in late 1922, was to be made for the newly-built church of Our Lady of the Assumption.

Upon close examination of the panels of the Annunciation and the Nativity, one can detect in the face of the Virgin a portrait-like quality unlike that of the faces of the other figures in the scene. In fact, the artist, Anne Lee Willet, used her husband's portrait of Leta as the model for Mary's face. The face of the Baby Jesus in the Nativity is that of Leta's son, who was then almost three years old. Anne Lee Willet wrote, "I have used her own lovely face as the model for the Virgin, and the little boy was brought on from New York to sit for me for the Child"—a practice which, in her words, "is quite after the manner of the medieval artists."

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## “One of Pennsylvania’s Notable Artistic Productions”

**B**efore its installation in Our Lady of the Assumption Church, this window took a remarkable detour. In December 1922, it was chosen to be included as part of the Exhibition of American Handicrafts, to be shown at the Pennsylvania Museum at Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park (the forerunner of the Philadelphia Museum of Art), and five other national museums. This group of artworks was, in the words of the American Federation of Arts which organized it, a “selected exhibition of the best American Handicrafts.”

While the exhibit was at its final stop at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Barr Ferree, a prominent architectural historian and the director of the Pennsylvania Society of New York, praised the window in his writings, regarding it as “one of Pennsylvania’s notable artistic



productions.” Such was his interest in it that he asked to be informed when it was to be dedicated at Our Lady of the Assumption Church. He died before he could see it, however, but wrote about it “on his deathbed.” (from a letter by James Francis Sullivan to Anne Lee Willet)

The beauty of the window, as well as its faithfulness to traditional methods, colors, and symbols used by the artists of the Middle Ages, make it truly an outstanding example of Gothic Revival art in America.

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# The Window— A Cycle of Marian Stories

*Much of this narrative is taken from a paper prepared for  
Our Lady of the Assumption by Amy Pulliam,  
Research Librarian for Willet-Hauser Architectural Glass, Philadelphia.*

Composed of two lancets and tracery, the window has four panels, each one illustrating a significant event in the life of Mary, notably the ones concerning the Incarnation. In jewel-like blues, reds, greens and violets, the stories of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi, are told through traditional figures and symbols. As it was for the medieval observer, an understanding of the symbolism used in the window is necessary to unlock its messages.



*Willet 1922*

The window was executed in leaded antique glass, as in the windows of the great cathedrals of Europe. The term “antique” refers to the process by which the glass is made. Rather than being rolled in large uniform sheets, it is mouth-blown, a method which produces a superior glass with colors that are more brilliant and jewel-like. Once cut, the individual pieces of colored glass can then be hand-painted, and the paint fused to the glass by firing. The paint allows for control of the passage of light through the glass, and adds detail and a sense of depth to the figures in the panels.

Each panel is framed in an ornamental border. The Gothic canopy suspended above the figures in the two lancets symbolizes Christianity and the Church.

## The Annunciation

The program of Marian narratives begins in the right lancet with the scene of the Annunciation, the moment at which the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive in her womb and bear a son. Mary is kneeling, her head bowed in humility, and in front of her is an open book on a stand. According to St. Bernard, Mary was studying the book of Isaiah, and at this moment was contemplating the verse, “Behold, the Virgin shall be with child and bear a son.” (Is 7:14) *(Continued on next page)*



*Lilies*

Mary is dressed in her traditional colors: a red tunic, the color of love and religious aspiration, and a blue mantle, the color of constancy and heavenly purity. Hovering beside Mary, with multi-colored wings and dressed in rich clerical vestments, Gabriel holds a spray of white lilies, which is his attribute as angel of the Annunciation, and an emblem of Mary, symbolizing her purity.

At the top of the panel, God in the form of the *Padre Eterno*, the Eternal Father, is enthroned in heaven and holds a celestial orb.



*Thurible*

Opposite Gabriel and directly above Mary is the universal emblem of the Holy Spirit, the dove, by whose power Mary conceived the Son of God. On the scroll at the top of the lancet, the Latin phrase, “*Veni Creator Spiritus*”—Come Creator Spirit—announces the presence of the Holy Spirit. Significantly, Gabriel is not

looking at Mary but directly at the rays from the dove, suggesting that he is uttering the words, “The Holy Spirit will come down upon you” (Lk 1:35)—which signals the moment of Incarnation.

Below the Angel Gabriel, a thurible with plumes of incense rising upwards represents the adoration offered to God by the angels. Visible along the edges of Gabriel’s vestments is the cross, a symbol of Jesus’s death and our salvation. Its presence in this Marian scene implies Mary’s central role in God’s plan for our salvation.



*Immaculate Heart of Mary*

Other symbols surrounding the scene are the Immaculate Heart of Mary, located in the upper left medallion: a red heart pierced with a sword, which is a symbol of the prophecy of Simeon to Mary, “...you yourself a sword will pierce.” (Lk 2:34-35) In the upper right is a medallion containing the letters IHS, a monogram for Jesus, consisting of the first three letters of his name in Greek. In the bottom center medallion is a stalk of white lilies surmounted by a crown, symbolizing that Mary, pure and chaste, is Queen of Heaven.



*Crown of Lilies*

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## The Visitation

**T**old during the Annunciation that her cousin Elizabeth was already with child (the future John the Baptist), Mary traveled to the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. In the lower right predella we find the scene of the Visitation. In a series of Marian narratives, this event has great religious significance: it is the first that acknowledges that Mary's son is God, when Elizabeth says, "How does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:43)



*The Visitation*

In the scene, Mary has just arrived and is greeted outside by Elizabeth, who kneels before her, and has placed her hand on Mary's abdomen. Elizabeth's expression of reverent humility signifies her recognition of Mary as "the mother of my Lord." Mary is bent over Elizabeth, her hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, as if to embrace her. The scene is one of loving warmth and familiarity. Looking on meditatively are the figures of Zechariah, standing in the doorway of his house, dressed in his priestly robes; and Joseph, who is dressed as for a journey. The other two figures are servants.

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She cried out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary responded with what is called the Magnificat, or Cantic of Mary. Weaving among the figures in the panel, and partially hidden, is a scroll with the opening words of this song: "Mary said, My soul [doth] magnify the Lord; my spirit hath rejoiced in God [my Savior]." (Lk 1:46)

## The Nativity

**T**he scene of the Nativity is featured in the left lancet. Seated in a rustic shelter made of tree branches and a thatched roof, Mary holds the child on her lap while Joseph looks on, standing at a little distance as if in quiet admiration of the radiant pair. In his hand he holds the Marian lily. The severed tree branches have sprouted many leaves, recalling the words of Isaiah: "a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." (Is 11:1) The child Jesus is portrayed not as a newborn baby but as an older child, following the medieval tradition in which he, as the Christ, is portrayed as a miniature adult. *(Continued on next page)*



*Butterfly*

He holds out his hand toward a butterfly, a symbol of the resurrection. Around his head is the three-rayed halo, used exclusively for Persons of the Trinity. Within each ray is a cross, foretelling the manner of Jesus’s death. Mary’s halo contains stars and the *fleur-de-lis*, a stylized lily which symbolizes her virginity. Above the Holy Family shines an eight-pointed star, known as the Star of Regeneration, signifying Jesus’s Jewish roots, and the Jewish custom of circumcising on the eighth day of life.



*The Dove*

Behind the figure of Joseph can be seen the head of an ox, which is a symbol of strength and patience. Without its counterpart, the ass, it could also represent St. Luke, the Gospel writer to whom we owe the details of the Nativity.

Still within the central medallion, there is below the figure of Mary a patch of roses, another ancient Marian symbol. These are drawn in the form of wild roses, typical of those known to medieval Christians, and called by them, “Mary’s roses.”



*Acrostic*

The dove, the Holy Spirit, hovers in a niche of the canopy above. A scroll across the top of the panel has the words, “Domine Deus—Speravi In Te,” from the opening words of the Latin version of a psalm of King David. The words mean, “In Thee, O Lord, I have hoped.” (Psalm 31:2) (This was the motto of Pope Benedict XV, 1914–1922, who was pope during WWI and died the year this window was made.)

In the upper left of the lancet, a small medallion has the acrostic REX PAX LUX LEX in the form of a cross, linking this Latin motto—King Peace Light Law—to the Kingdom of God that Jesus’s birth heralds. The corresponding medallion on the right has a white cross flanked by two stars, on a sky blue background, another Marian symbol, recalling her presence at the foot of the Cross.

More ambiguous is the symbol in the medallion at the base of the panel, where the Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, is placed on a crimson background, with a clover filling the space within it. A similar Omega-clover design can be found in a 14th century church in Blumenstein, Switzerland, but its meaning is undiscovered. The clover is a symbol of the Trinity, but the Omega symbol on its own is quite unknown. Perhaps the artist was intending a stylized Alpha-Omega symbol, with the shamrock simulating an Alpha superimposed on the Omega. This would be in keeping with the designation of Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.



*Alpha-OMEGA*

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## The Adoration of the Magi

The predella on the bottom left of the window depicts the Adoration of the Magi, in which three magi traveled to Bethlehem from far away countries to pay homage to the newborn King. The five-pointed Star of Bethlehem, which has guided the magi to this place, is at the top of the panel, shining down on Mary and Jesus, while Joseph leans pensively on his staff behind the pair. Behind Joseph can be seen a town—Bethlehem, the City of David. The three magi are bent in homage before Jesus, and according to convention, are shown of three different ages: young, middle-aged, and old. Jesus extends his little hand toward them, recalling a legend in which he blesses them with the spiritual gifts of love, meekness, and perfect faith, in return for their gifts and their homage.



On the edges of the scene, identified by their crooks and their sheep, are two shepherds. The shepherds were the first to hear of the Messiah's birth, and the first to find him. In this scene they have now moved back to give room to the magi. Weaving around the figures is a scroll with the words that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds on the night of Jesus's birth, "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" Glory to God in the highest! The combining of the two events — the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Magi — into the same scene is intended to show in one depiction the manifestation to the Jews (shepherds) and the manifestation to the Gentiles (magi). In this telling, the magi are not dressed in rich robes nor are their gifts visible.

This predella brings to an end the window's cycle of Marian narratives. To remind us once again of Mary's importance in the story of Jesus's mission and our salvation, the artist has placed a scroll along the bottom of the scene, containing the words which Elizabeth first said to Mary, and which we repeat in every Hail Mary, "Blessed art thou amongst women!"

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## Afterword

**A**fter Leta's death, her husband Albert Lincoln Hoffman, with their baby, lived for a while in the home of his parents in New York City. The Hoffman family of New York was intimate with the Belgian royal family, so much so that Elizabeth, Queen of Belgium, was chosen as baby Albert's godmother.

In 1924, Albert married again, this time to Leta's younger sister Elaine. They had a daughter two years later, and named her Lucy after her grandmother.

At Our Lady of the Assumption Church on May 10, 1925, the window was dedicated, along with the bell, having been installed some time before.

Albert Jr.—the face of the Baby Jesus—grew up and married Florence Meyer of Great Neck, Long Island, in 1941. Together they raised two sons.

In an effort to contact the owner of the face in our window, the Hoffman family was traced and located. A phone call was made and Mrs. Hoffman was reached. She was very gracious during the conversation and informed us that, sadly, Mr. Hoffman had died about 10 years ago. She had seen the window in the early years of her marriage, some 60 years ago, and requested pictures of the window for her own children and grandchildren who have never seen it.



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