



New York Says Farewell to American Bible Society, and Its Building Building Blocks

By David W. Dunlap Oct 21, 2015

“Behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

Angels have never been especially conspicuous around Columbus Circle in Manhattan. But it is hard to look at 1865 Broadway, the former headquarters of the American Bible Society, and not think for a moment about the ladder of Jacob’s dream, as described in Genesis 28:12.

If the bold, Brutalist rungs of the main facade do not persuade you of a biblical provenance, you are also free to read symbolism into the 12 deep recesses at each floor. Might they represent the 12 tribes of Israel? Or the Twelve Apostles?

No matter, really. On the eve of its bicentennial, the society moved to Philadelphia, where it dedicated new headquarters last week. It sold its site at Broadway and 61st Street for \$300 million to AvalonBay Communities, which plans a 300,000-square-foot apartment tower on the site.

“Leaving New York was bittersweet,” Roy L. Peterson, the president and chief executive, said in an email. “The building was in need of significant updates and repairs, and the cost of living and doing business in New York City had become untenable for the organization and many of its employees.”

Mr. Peterson said proceeds from the sale paid for the move and would also be used for ministry and to ensure long-term stability. He said three-quarters of the staff remained through the transition. There are 122 employees in Philadelphia.

Founded in 1816 to ensure the widest possible circulation of the Bible, the nondenominational society was first quartered on Nassau Street in Lower Manhattan, where it had a steam-powered printing press.

In 1852, during the presidency of Theodore Frelinghuysen, the society began building the large Bible House on Astor Place, between Third and Fourth Avenues. By 1893, the society had printed 56,926,771 volumes and had aided in the translation, printing or distribution of the Scriptures in 95 languages and dialects.

On the society's 100th anniversary, in May 1916, President Woodrow Wilson likened its agents and colporteurs — peddlers of religious books — to the “shuttles in a great loom that is weaving the spirits of men together.”

The society stopped printing Bibles in 1922. It moved in 1936 to 450 Park Avenue, at 57th Street, where it remained until it opened its 12-story building at 1865 Broadway in 1966. Representative Peter H. B. Frelinghuysen Jr., a New Jersey Republican and descendant of Dr. Frelinghuysen, spoke at the event.

Roy O. Allen Jr. and Donald C. Smith of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill were the architects, working with engineers at Weiskopf & Pickworth. The building was the first in the city to be constructed with load-bearing exterior walls made of pre-cast concrete panels — the aesthetic opposite of office towers with heavy interior steel frames and diaphanous glass skins.