

Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 27, 1981, Designation List 148
LP-2014

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 230 Classon Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1858-59; architect Richard T. Auchmuty.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 1909, Lot 47 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of St. Mary's Episcopal Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, located in the northeast section of the Clinton Hill neighborhood, just north of Pratt Institute, is perhaps the least well-known of the surviving Gothic Revival style churches built in Brooklyn during the mid-19th century. Designed in 1858 by the relatively unknown architect Richard T. Auchmuty of the firm of Renwick & Auchmuty, St. Mary's is among New York City's most beautiful and original examples of a Gothic Revival style church designed in accordance with the philosophy of ecclesiology.

St. Mary's Protestant Episcopal Church was organized in 1835 by five parishioners of St. John's Episcopal Church, then located on Washington Street. The congregation, which was the first Episcopal parish in the sparsely populated area known as East Brooklyn, first met in a former district school house on Flushing Avenue. St. Mary's drew most of its congregation from the modest residential neighborhood that had grown up near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Beginning in the 1820s, small wooden houses and modest brick dwellings were erected north of Myrtle Avenue for the Navy Yard workers and new church congregations were founded to minister to their needs. In 1837 St. Mary's built its first church, a small frame building located on Classon Avenue north of Myrtle Avenue. Since most of the congregants at St. Mary's were poor, the church was one of the first to institute a system of free pews. During the 19th century most Episcopal churches charged pew rent, thus making it difficult for poor families to belong to a congregation.

An article in the New York Mirror discussing the free pew system at St. Mary's quotes a 19th-century historian who noted

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that "the system of Free Churches was yet in embryo--an untried and doubtful theory, in which few people believed." By the 1850's, the population of the Navy Yard area had grown substantially and the church membership had outgrown the small wooden church.

In 1858 the vestry purchased land one block away on Classon Avenue, south of Myrtle Avenue, in order to erect a larger building.

The vestry commissioned a design for the new church from the architectural firm of Renwick & Auchmuty. Although as the senior partner James Renwick must have seen the plans for St. Mary's and may have contributed design ideas, a contemporary source attributes the design to Richard Auchmuty.² Richard Tylden Auchmuty (1831-1893) was a descendant of one of New York's oldest families; his great-grandfather was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Auchmuty of Trinity Church. Educated at Columbia College, Auchmuty studied architecture in the office of James Renwick and in 1858 became Renwick's junior partner. He continued to work with Renwick until the Civil War. Auchmuty served in the Army of the Potomac in 1862-1863. Perhaps as a result of a leg wound, Auchmuty was assigned to the War Department in Washington where he served until the end of the war, having been promoted to the rank of colonel. Auchmuty was independently wealthy and did not return to the architectural field after the war. In 1867 he married Ellen Schermerhorn, an affluent member of another old New York family, and together they sponsored a number of philanthropic ventures. Auchmuty's main effort was the establishment of the New York Trade Schools, founded in 1881 to train young people in practical skills while at the same time instructing them in the science upon which these skills were based. The subjects taught at the school were bricklaying, plastering, plumbing, carpentry, house and sign painting, fresco painting, stone cutting, blacksmith work, and tailoring. Auchmuty also owned a summer home in Lenox, Massachusetts and "was one of the prime movers in making Lenox what it is-- a model Summer and Autumn resort"³ for the social elite.

James Renwick (1818-1895), one of the great American architects of the nineteenth century, was among the first architects to design buildings in the Gothic Revival style. Among his better known Gothic Revival style structures are Grace Church (1843-1846), Calvary Church (1845), and St. Patrick's Cathedral (1858-1879). It was undoubtedly through his training with Renwick⁴ that Auchmuty gained a proficiency in Gothic Revival design. St. Mary's also reflects a knowledge of the contemporary religious philosophy of ecclesiology which laid out a strict set of rules for the design of Episcopal churches.

The ecclesiological movement originated in England in the 1830s.⁵ Largely through the efforts of the Cambridge Camden Society, the classical styles and the fanciful Gothic style practiced by church architects of the 18th and early 19th centuries were replaced by a more dogmatic style that drew its inspiration from medieval Gothic style parish churches. This architectural development was part of a larger movement away from the secular quality of 18th-century religion towards

a more doctrinaire view of Christianity. The architectural pronouncements of the Cambridge Camden Society had a tremendous influence on the restoration of old churches and on the design of new churches in England in the 19th century.

Primarily through the efforts of English-born architects such as Richard Upjohn, Frank Wills, and Henry Dudley, ecclesiological principles influenced American church design, although American architects and patrons were never as doctrinaire as their English counterparts. In 1848 the New York Ecclesiological Society was founded to further ecclesiological teachings in America. The new society began to publish a journal, the New York Ecclesiologist, which was the first periodical in America principally devoted to architecture and design issues.⁶ The journal ceased publication in 1853, but the architectural doctrine that it espoused remained extremely influential. Auchmuty's design for St. Mary's shows a thorough understanding of ecclesiological principles; the building, however, is not always strictly true to the teachings of the Ecclesiological Society.

The New York Ecclesiological Society was particularly concerned with the introduction of good design to American ecclesiastical architecture. Among the major concerns of the Society were the correct geographical alignment of the various parts of the church and the clear expression of the interior spaces in the exterior of the building. In an ecclesiologically correct church the chancel was to be the most important design element since this was the area where the ritual of the service took place. The chancel had to be suitably deep and be clearly separated from the nave on both the interior and exterior. The chancel was also to be set at the eastern end of the building so that it would catch the rays of the rising sun. Ecclesiological principles also prescribed that the chancel, nave, side aisles, vestry room, transepts, and entrance porch be clearly delineated and separated on the exterior.

Auchmuty's design for St. Mary's closely follows these precepts. The church is loosely based on the precedent of an Early English style rural parish church. The chancel is 24 feet deep (more than one-quarter the length of the nave), it is set at the eastern end of the building, and it is clearly separated from the taller nave. A handsome square tower with polygonal extension and a broached spire, originally covered with slate shingles, is located to the south of the chancel, giving added emphasis to the portion of the building facing Classon Avenue. The nave, which extends to the west, has a steep sloping roof that is clearly separated from the shallower slope of the side aisle roofs, all originally covered with two colors of slate shingles. To the north of the chancel is a low, polygonal vestry room that connects the chancel and side aisle.

The main entrance to the church is set at the southwest

corner of the building, as prescribed by ecclesiological doctrine. The placement of the porch at this location, far back from the street, created a design problem that Auchmuty solved in a particularly ingenious manner. Since the church is in an urban setting, the porch cannot be approached from many directions as in a medieval rural church. In order to channel the congregants to the main entrance porch, Auchmuty designed a dramatically placed, pointed-arch gateway that takes the form of a stepped flying buttress. This gate projects from the south side of the tower lending the church the "unusually picturesque" form that a contemporary critic commented upon.⁸ St. Mary's follows ecclesiological ideas so closely in its basic design that the Churchman, the leading Episcopal periodical of the 19th century, wrote in 1859 that "to our taste, this is the most beautiful church in Brooklyn, though it has not the appliance of some of the more wealthy parishes".⁹ St. Mary's is constructed of Belleville brownstone. It has a six-bayed nave lit by paired lancet windows separated by buttresses. The chancel is articulated by a large pointed-arch opening composed of three lancets topped by three quatrefoils. The west front has the most ornate fenestration pattern with a rose window and four lancets lighting the nave, and single pointed-arch windows at the side aisles. A passage linking the church to the Johnson Memorial Parish House built in 1892 extends from this facade. The parish house is not part of this designation. The church is set behind the original cast-iron fence, a massive form with posts topped by balls and finials.

The present St. Mary's church opened for services in June, 1859 and was consecrated on May 24, 1862, after the building debt was paid off. The neighborhood in which the church was built proved to be a difficult one at first. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported that "because of lawless conditions in a nearby section at that time the church property was sometimes molested, but later the neighborhood became a thickly populated part of Brooklyn".¹⁰ Today the congregation of St. Mary's is fairly small, but the church has sought adequately to preserve its exceptional Gothic Revival style building so that it can continue to maintain its historic presence in the community.

Report prepared by
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FOOTNOTES

1. New York Mirror, October 1861 (in Long Island Historical Society "Scrapbook," Vol. 142, p.95).
2. Churchman, 28(July 15, 1858), 161. We would like to thank Selma Rattner for supplying information on Auchmuty and Renwick.
3. New York Times, Richard Auchmuty obituary, July 19, 1893, p.4.
4. Renwick may also have had an influence on the interior design of St. Mary's. The church is supposedly supported by iron posts, a mode of construction not favored by mid-19th-century architects of Episcopal churches. Renwick, however, had visited France in 1855 and had studied the use of iron structural supports favored by French architects. In his designs for St. Patrick's Cathedral, which were being drawn up in the late 1850s, Renwick proposed a use of cast-iron structural and decorative forms, unfortunately not carried out (see William H. Pierson, Jr., American Buildings and Their Architects, Vol. III: Technology and the Picturesque, The Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1978), pp. 223-230).
5. For a detailed account of ecclesiology and its influence on the Gothic Revival in America see Phoebe Stanton, The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968).
6. Stanton, p. 161.
7. The present porch is a replacement of the original.
8. Churchman, 28(July 15, 1858), 161.
9. Churchman, 29(June, 1859), 145.
10. Brooklyn Daily Eagle, August 8, 1936 (in Long Island Historical Society "Scrapbook", Vol. 29, p. 127).

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that St. Mary's Episcopal Church has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, St. Mary's Episcopal Church is an exceptional example of a mid 19th-century Gothic Revival style church; that

its design reflects the tenets of the philosophy of ecclesiology which was a major influence on the design of Episcopal churches in England and in North America; that the architect of St. Mary's, Richard T. Auchmuty, was a partner of James Renwick, Jr., whose influence can be seen in the church; that the church, with a well-constructed facade of Belleville brownstone, is designed with clearly delineated building parts, such as a nave, side aisles entrance porch, and chancel as prescribed by ecclesiological doctrine; that it has an unusual flying-buttress entrance gate that serves as an ingenious method of channeling the parishioners to the southwest entrance porch; and that it is one of the oldest buildings in the section of New York City once known as East Brooklyn.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 230 Classon Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 1909, Lot 47, in part, Borough of Brooklyn, on which the described building is situated, as its Landmark Site.

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ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
230 Classon Avenue, Brooklyn
Built 1858-59

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation
Commission

Architect:
Richard T. Auchmuty