

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, CHAPEL AND CEMETERY, 2500 Westchester Avenue, Borough of the Bronx. Church - completed 1855, architect Leopold Eidlitz; clerestory added and restoration completed in 1879, architect Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz, Chapel - built 1867-68, architect Leopold Eidlitz.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 3848, Lots 18 and 6 in part (that portion of the lot extending to the western boundary of the cemetery which stretches from Westchester Avenue to Butler Place).

On January 27, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of St. Peter's Church, Chapel and Cemetery and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were no speakers at the hearing. The representatives of St. Peter's Church, Westchester, have given their approval of the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

St. Peter's Church, Chapel, and Cemetery form a pleasant and charming enclave in the heart of the old town of Westchester in the Bronx, formerly part of Westchester County. The two strikingly picturesque Gothic style buildings in their quiet graveyard setting dominate the neighborhood and are a tangible reminder of the rural past of this section of the Bronx. The county of Westchester was formed in 1683 and the borough-town of Westchester was named the county seat. St. Peter's Chapel now occupies the site of the old courthouse. In 1788 the state legislature decreed that all counties were to be divided into townships, and the town of Westchester became one of the twenty-one townships of Westchester County.

The parish of St. Peter's, one of the oldest in New York City, was organized in 1693 following an act of the Colonial Assembly "for settling a ministry and raising a maintenance for them in the County of Westchester." It was not until 1700 that the town meeting house, previously used for religious services, was abandoned, and a church was erected. This first edifice, built of wood, was quadrangular in form with a pyramidal roof, in the center of which was a bell turret. The bell, presented to the church by the Morris family, bore the inscription "Lewis Morris, 1677." The church was situated on the town green adjoining the county court house and jail, the same site as that of the present structure. Building expenses were defrayed by a tax levied on all inhabitants of the townships of Westchester, Eastchester, Yonkers, and the manor of Pelham which were encompassed by the precincts of the new parish. The first regular minister was the Rev. John Bartow who was sent in 1702 from London by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. In 1706 Queen Anne of England presented to the congregation a communion service consisting of a chalice and paten, a communion table, a church Bible, a book of homilies, and a pulpit cloth. A royal charter from George III in 1762 incorporated St. Peter's as "the Rector and inhabitants of the Borough Town of Westchester, in Communion of the Church of England, as by law established." This gave the church the authority to conduct its affairs as a corporate and independent body without consulting the authorities and inhabitants of the town. During the American Revolution, the Rev. Samuel Seabury, appointed rector in 1766 and later the first Protestant Episcopal bishop in the United States, aroused the ire of the local populace by preaching the Tory cause from the pulpit.

A new church building, constructed of wood with a cupola containing the original bell, was consecrated in 1795. It was replaced by the present structure, which was completed in 1855 and designed by the noted architect Leopold Eidlitz. Robert Bolton in his History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the County of Westchester from its Foundation A.D. 1693 to A.D. 1853 (New York, 1855) wrote that "active measures have . . . been taken, for the erection of a parish church, upon or near the old site, towards which pious work fifteen thousand dollars have already been contributed. -- The work is

now under contract." He also published a perspective drawing and floor plan of the church as built. After a fire partially destroyed the building, it was restored by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz, son of Leopold. The rebuilt structure was consecrated in 1879. The choir room, now the sacristy, was added in 1898, and an extension for offices and a rectory was built beyond the apse in the early 1950's.

Leopold Eidlitz (1823-1908) was born in Prague. After studying at the Vienna Polytechnic, he immigrated to New York in 1843, joining the office of Richard Upjohn, the leading exponent of Gothic Revival architecture whose Trinity Church, a designated New York City Landmark, was then under construction. Eidlitz soon formed a partnership with Otto Blesch to design St. George's Church, Stuyvesant Square, of 1846-48, also a designated New York City Landmark. This design established Eidlitz's reputation as a church architect and started his career as a practitioner of the Gothic mode. Among his notable churches, in addition to St. Peter's, Westchester, were the Church of the Holy Trinity and Temple Emanu-El in New York (now demolished), the Second Congregational Church, Greenwich, Connecticut, and Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. Eidlitz also designed a number of notable commercial and public buildings, none of which have survived with the single exception of his addition to the old New York County Courthouse. Perhaps his most significant commission was the redesigning and completion of the New York State Capitol in Albany undertaken in partnership with Henry Hobson Richardson and Frederick Law Olmsted during 1875-1885.

Eidlitz expressed many of his ideas about architecture in his book, The Nature and the Function of Art with Special Reference to Architecture (New York and London, 1881). It is a statement of the functional-organic view of architecture, based on a medieval-inspired approach to structure and composition, that parallels the thinking of John Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc. William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe state that "Eidlitz believed in a virile rebirth of Gothic through boldly inventive structure, since all significant architecture emerged from structure, and Gothic architecture was structural building par excellence." Montgomery Schuyler, the noted 19th-century architectural critic and a great admirer of Eidlitz, asserted that Eidlitz repeatedly affirmed that "Gothic is adequate to every expression."

Cyrus Lazelle Warner Eidlitz (1853-1921), the son of Leopold Eidlitz, is best remembered for his commercial architecture, in particular the triangular tower building for the New York Times at Broadway and 42nd Street. Trained abroad at the Royal Polytechnic School in Stuttgart, he entered his father's office as a draftsman in 1871. His first independent work was the rebuilding and remodeling of St. Peter's Church -- a reconstruction highly sympathetic to the architectural integrity of his father's original work. Very likely Cyrus was given the commission because his father was then deeply involved in the State Capitol project and consequently too busy to undertake reconstruction of the church.

St. Peter's Church is a strikingly picturesque structure, highly expressive of Leopold Eidlitz's conception of Gothic architecture. With its steeply pitched roofs, bold profile, and towering spire, the church is the dominant feature of the neighborhood. Cruciform in plan, it has a high nave with clerestory, narrow side aisles, and shallow transepts. The most important feature is the tower with spire set at the corner of the nave to the left of the main entrance. Corner buttresses--a characteristic Eidlitz feature--add interest to the tower just below the belfry. The octagonal belfry with four pointed-arch louvered openings is crowned by a high spire. Picturesque gables with bracketed roofs appear at the base of the spire and surmount the pointed-arch openings. This spire was rebuilt during the reconstruction of the church completed in 1879, but the original design was followed. Four clock faces in the tower are keyed to the bells in the belfry. The handsome wooden entrance doors have carved panels and are framed by a pointed arch; the tympanum of the arch is enriched by a carved shield containing a bishop's miter set above

keys and a scroll. A rose window with quatrefoils enhances the gable above the entrance. A secondary entrance is provided through a gable-roofed porch which intersects the lower edge of the roof of the nave. Each transept has an entrance and a series of three pointed-arch windows--features of the original design. Cyrus Eidlitz raised the height of the transepts, adding a triangular window with three trefoils at each gable. Four pointed-arch stained glass windows in each side aisle wall are echoed by similar low windows in the clerestory. The clerestory, added by Cyrus Eidlitz after the fire is the only feature which differs significantly from the original design, while the polychromatic slate roof which was also rebuilt is probably similar to the original.

The straightforward use of material--rough-cut pinkish beige stone--, the sense of height and verticality, and the emphasis on planarity and angularity are characteristic features of Leopold Eidlitz's work. Although less polychromatic than many of his churches, the frank expression of structure is a predominant feature of his ecclesiastical designs.

St. Peter's Chapel, now called Foster Hall, is situated in the churchyard facing Westchester Avenue. It was built in 1867-68 for use as a Sunday School and was also designed by Leopold Eidlitz. A modest one-story structure built of the same rough-faced stone as the church, the chapel is a charming example of Victorian Gothic architecture. One enters the building through a picturesque tower which is incorporated into the stone wall enclosing the churchyard. The gabled tower with large pointed-arch opening and lateral buttresses has entrance doors on each side set beneath a low sloping slate roof. The tower gable terminates in a freestanding "bell cot" with pointed-arch opening. Two small engaged colonnettes with foliate capitals--a typical feature of the Victorian Gothic style--flank the opening. While in English medieval prototypes such an opening was intended for a bell, here it appears to be a purely ornamental feature. Each of the long walls contains four windows with corbeled lunettes and sandstone enframements. Each of the buttressed end walls has a group of three triple-arch windows and a triangular window with trefoil motif set within the gable. Two slender picturesque chimneys with gabled capstones pierce the lower edge of the steep roof on the side of the building facing the churchyard.

Although very similar in overall character, the church and the chapel differ somewhat in the use of materials and stylistic motifs. Both are constructed of the same rough-faced stone; while the blocks are of regular size in the church, they are laid up in random ashlar in the chapel. This same stone is used consistently for all arches and enframements in the church, but in the chapel contrasting sandstone is used for such features as well as for buttresses, gable copings, and chimneys. The use of contrasting materials as well as the introduction of cusped arches and such picturesque features as the entrance tower and chimneys is characteristic of Victorian Gothic architecture.

The churchyard and cemetery, which occupy much of the block, are surrounded by a low stone wall surmounted by a handsome wrought-iron fence. The steps leading to the main church entrance are flanked by low marble walls carved with Gothic motifs. Four handsome wrought-iron lampposts are placed on the walls. Vines and foliage executed in wrought iron wind up around the posts, while the lanterns are crowned by foliate pinnacles.

The cemetery, which surrounds the church and chapel, contains many old and interesting graves. In the History of the County of Westchester (New York, 1848), Robert Bolton noted that the earliest grave then marked in the cemetery dated from 1702. He thought that the cemetery was "probably coeval with the settlement of the village." A number of gravestones from the 1750s and 1760s can be found clustered by the side walls of the church, while the headstones of soldiers killed during the Revolutionary War can be seen near the chapel. Most of the graves are marked by simple headstones of brownstone or marble, but there are also a number of interesting larger tombs. An impressive Victorian Gothic tomb with much ornament is located just northeast of the chapel. Northeast of the church, incorporated into a grassy embankment, is the Romanesque Revival vault of the Morris family. Several large mausoleums from the 20th century are situated along the rear wall of the churchyard.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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. Peter's Church, Chapel and Cemetery have 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 their important qualities, St. Peter's Church, Chapel, and Cemetery form a pleasant and charming enclave in the heart of the old town of Westchester, that the two Gothic style buildings in their quiet graveyard setting are a tangible reminder of the rural past of this section of the Bronx, that St. Peter's parish is one of the oldest in New York City, that the church is an important example of the work of Leopold Eidlitz, one of the most distinguished designers in the Gothic style in the mid-19th century, that the church is a strikingly picturesque structure, highly expressive of Eidlitz's conception of Gothic architecture, that it was sympathetically restored by Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz in 1879 after a fire, that the chapel is a charming example of Victorian Gothic architecture and was also designed by Leopold Eidlitz, and that the cemetery contains many old and interesting gravestones and tombs.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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. Peter's Church, Chapel and Cemetery, 2500 Westchester Avenue, Borough of the Bronx, and designates Tax Map Block 3848, Lots 18 and 6 in part (that portion of the lot extending to the western boundary of the cemetery which stretches from Westchester Avenue to Butler Place), Borough of the Bronx, as its Landmark Site.