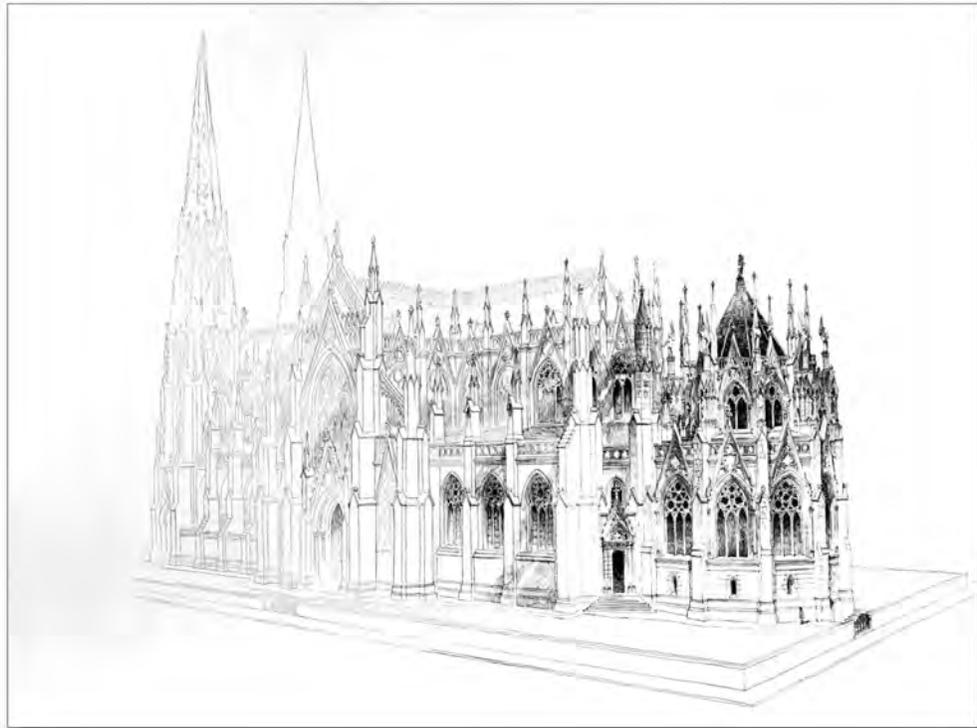


# The Building of St. Patrick's Cathedral

BY PATRICK J. MCNIERNEY, P.E.



**Illustration:**

Competition drawing submitted by the firm of Renwick, Aspinwall & Owen for the proposed Our Lady's Chapel. The winning design was submitted by architect Charles T. Matheus. Courtesy of Avery Library, Columbia University, New York.

For many Irish New Yorkers, it is a vivid symbol of their presence, accomplishments, and history in and around New York City. It is St. Patrick's Cathedral, located in mid-town Manhattan on the block bounded by Fifth and Madison Avenues and 50th and 51st Streets.

The Cathedral was constructed between the years 1858 and 1879 and was formally opened as a house of worship on the Feast of St. Gregory in 1879 by Archbishop John McCloskey. It was officially dedicated as a cathedral in 1910 when the building became debt-free and all construction loans were paid in full as required by church policy. Plans for a new cathedral to replace the original St. Patrick's Cathedral, located on Mulberry Street and built in 1809, were first discussed in the early 1850s as the City's Roman Catholic population continued to grow.

#### CATHOLICS IN EARLY NEW YORK

In less than century after the American Revolution, the Roman Catholic religion made

huge strides in both population and presence in the United States and especially in predominately Protestant New York. In the early days of the republic, Roman Catholics constituted a small minority of the population. The Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians had established their hold in New York City as early as the 1630s, and it was not until 1785 that St. Peter's Catholic congregation was established here. The first priest to say mass on a regular basis was Rev. Ferdinand Farmer, S.J. Officially assigned to the missions of Maryland, Father Farmer would travel to New York City as often as possible to serve an estimated two-hundred Catholics during the 1770s and 1780s. The first Catholic Church, St. Peter's, was erected in 1785 on property that was leased from Episcopalians, who owned not only Trinity Church but large tracts of land in lower Manhattan. On June 10, 1785, the Catholic Church in New York was legally established. Faced with religious as well as ethnic discrimination, the early Catholics in

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New York City, who were of predominately Irish ancestry, were not accepted throughout the British and mainly Protestant governed community. It was only after the ouster of British rule, and the establishment of the United States of America, that the Catholic cause found support from French and Spanish allies. St. Peter's Catholic Church in New York City was made possible to a large extent by financial aid from King Charles of Spain, and its doors opened in 1785.

Initially under the diocese of Philadelphia, the three Catholic churches in New York State had become favorites of immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Poland in the later part of the eighteenth century. With the apparent need for Catholics in New York to have their own diocese, the New York Diocese was created in 1808 and thus indicated the need for a cathedral. A cathedral was built in New York City between Mott and Mulberry streets in lower Manhattan in 1815 and named after St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, who was the favorite saint of the predominantly Irish Catholic population.

The land upon which the present day St. Patrick's Cathedral was acquired by the Catholic Church through a myriad of real estate transactions in the early nineteenth century. Originally owned by the City of New York, the block on Fifth Avenue was first acquired from the City by a Robert Lylburn for \$405 in 1799. Through a series of transactions that transpired over the next fifty years, the land was acquired in 1852 for \$5,550 by Francis Cooper, who was a trustee of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The original intention for the land was an uptown cemetery far from what was then the downtown urban hub of metropolitan New York. Upon closer examination, the idea of a cemetery was quickly abandoned due to the rocky soil and high elevation of bedrock found at the site.

In the early 1800s, a mansion on the property was used as a school for the "New York Literary Institution," a Jesuit school that catered to the most esteemed families of New York City. The school was very short lived, and Trappist monks later used the school building as an orphan asylum after the school's closing.

#### A GRAND GOTHIC CATHEDRAL

The original St. Patrick's Cathedral downtown served the Diocese of New York since its original construction in 1815. But during the early 1850s Archbishop John Hughes began to envision a great cathedral, located in the "countryside" of the City (which was to become midtown Manhattan). He organized plans for the financing, design, and construction of his idea at the



same time his vision was being dubbed "Hughes' Folly" because of its location far from the heart of the mid-nineteenth century community.

Archbishop Hughes began to discuss the idea of a new cathedral with the New York architect, James Renwick. Renwick was born in New York City in 1818 to a well-educated and wealthy family. His father was a professor of philosophy and chemistry at Columbia University, where Renwick studied structural engineering and graduated at age eighteen. Renwick's two brothers were also Columbia educated engineers. Having never formally studied architecture, his knowledge of architectural history was self-acquired, and his engineering skills lent themselves well the design of a gothic cathedral.

Renwick's career as an architect began with his first major commission, the design of Grace

*Photo: James Renwick, the architect for St. Patrick's Cathedral. Renwick was a native New Yorker who was self-educated in architectural work. Before receiving the commission for St. Patrick's, he had designed Grace Church on Broadway and Ninth Street.*

Church in New York City, which he received at age twenty-five. A member of the congregation of Grace Church, he chose the gothic style of architecture. Other commissions that Renwick had executed prior to his work on St. Patrick's included Vassar College's Main Hall (known as "The Castle"), the New York Public Library, the original



*Photo: The Cathedral nearing completion in early 1879. (Note the ongoing work on the Fifty-First Street wall and the absence of present-day spires atop the towers.) The building was opened during that year but formally did not become a cathedral for another thirty-one years*

facade for the New York Stock Exchange, plus many banks, hospitals, and several mansions for the wealthy of New York. Prior to the design and construction of St. Patrick's Cathedral, it is noteworthy that no gothic cathedral of such size and prominence had ever been constructed in America. (Construction on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, also designed by Renwick and presently the seat of the Episcopal See in New York City, began in 1892 and remains unfinished today. Construction on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. began in 1907.) Not only was Renwick been successful in his transporting the gothic style for cathedral design to the United States, he also set precedence for the style in future cathedrals in America. One commentator responded to the design of St. Patrick's by stating "There is a style of architecture which belongs peculiarly to Christianity and owes its existence

even to this religion whose very ornaments remind one of the joys of a life beyond the grave: whose lofty vaults and arches are crowded with the forms of prophets and martyrs and beautiful spirits, and seem to respond with the choral hymns and angels and archangels... these are the characteristics of the architecture of Christianity, the sublime, the glorious Gothic."<sup>1</sup>

Renwick collaborated with fellow architect, William Rodrigue, and began developing the idea of a grand cathedral with Archbishop Hughes in 1853. Rodrigue was married to Archbishop Hughes' sister, and had already designed the chapel for Fordham University on the Rose Hill campus in the Bronx.<sup>2</sup> Renwick and Rodrigue were given a contract which compensated them in the amount of \$2500 per year for a ten-year period. Although both architects were involved in the early stages of work, Rodrigue played a lesser role in the later design and actual construction of the cathedral. No reason is known why Rodrigue's involvement seems to end in 1858.

The resulting Cathedral would prove to be the highlight of Renwick's career as an architect. In choosing an architectural style for the new cathedral, Renwick looked towards the period in European architecture known as the "high gothic." This period flourished in Germany, France and England in the 1500s and led to designs of the great cathedrals of Amiens, Cologne, Exeter, York Minister, and Rheims. Influences of French high gothic on St. Patrick's include the cruciform plan of the Cathedral and the twin spires that would be later added to the original construction to complete the building.

As an offshoot of the earlier Romanesque period, the gothic was typified by the inventions of pointed (as opposed to earlier rounded) arches, ceiling vaulting, and invention of the structural concept known as the "flying buttress." The flying buttress is a concept through which massive buttressing is placed outside of the nave of a building, and diagonal struts from this buttressing brace the walls of the nave of a cathedral. The advantages of this structural system allowed for the inclusion of clerestory windows in upper portions of the nave. By allowing more light into a cathedral, and by using vaulting for roof-framing systems, the earlier dark tunnel-like effect of romaneseque cathedrals was eliminated. Also,

by intuition, interior columns of the building were made smaller, as lateral wind forces were directed to perimeter exterior buttresses. This design was the result of the engineering practice during the middle ages, later proven a viable structural design approach by Professor Robert Marks of Princeton University. In *Experiments in Gothic Structure*, Prof. Marks documented his structural modeling of scale models of cathedral cross sections and proved the validity of assumptions and empirical designs created by medieval structural engineers.

#### CONSTRUCTION STARTS & DELAYS

A solemn ceremony highlighted the laying of the cornerstone of St. Patrick's Cathedral in August 15, 1858, the Feast of the Assumption. As organized by Archbishop Hughes, a spectacular procession including all bishops in the New York province, chaplains, priests, and members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society proceeded to the building site.

The crowd that assembled to witness the event was estimated to number approximately ten-thousand persons. Archbishop Hughes' sermon that day highlighted the history of the persecution of Catholics in Ireland and the early history of the Church in New York City.

As part of the ceremony, a list of one-hundred-one Catholics and two non-Catholics was placed inside the cornerstone. These individuals had each donated \$1000 for construction of the Cathedral. The initial estimate for construction was \$850,000. Although this initial fundraising effort resulted in less than one-eighth of the projected cost for the Cathedral, it was Hughes' plan to raise funds as work progressed. He was confident that completion of the building would not be a financial burden on the Archdiocese. While Hughes admitted that it might be necessary to finance some of the expenses, he was determined to have all loans paid by the time the Cathedral was consecrated. Responding to criticism that the cathedral was an extravagance while poverty and need existed throughout New York City, he stated that the Cathedral project provided employment opportunities for hundreds of workers, and that he would personally see to it that all wages would be paid for anyone who worked on the Cathedral.

After two years, construction was halted in 1860 when available funds were exhausted. The perimeter walls of the building rose to a height of sixteen feet, where they abruptly ended. In the following year the Civil War was the target of everyone's attention, and labor, finances, and natural resources were primarily focused on war efforts. St. Patrick's Cathedral lay dormant for a number of years, and echoes of the former nickname, "Hughes' Folly," were heard throughout the City. In the area within the unfinished Cathedral trees and grass grew. Finally, in 1865, some work resumed as limited funds allowed — but it wasn't until 1869 that construction was substantially underway.

Archbishop Hughes died in 1864, and never saw completion of the grand cathedral he envisioned. He was succeeded by Archbishop John McCloskey, who would later become America's first cardinal and who inherited the task of overseeing the work. When construction was almost complete, Cardinal McCloskey organized what would prove to be the most fruitful fundraising activity in the Cathedral's history. The St. Patrick's Fair opened in October, 1878 and featured the sale of a wide array of jewelry, embroidery, paintings, religious articles, crafts and other objects that were donated or handmade by parishes throughout the diocese of New York. Each parish was given a table for the fair, and thousands flocked to attend the event. *The New York Times* referred to the fair as "The grandest display of the kind that has been seen in the city since the great fairs of war times."

By 1879, construction was substantially complete. The Cathedral received its finishing touches, as the original wooden doors were installed (later to be replaced with the bronze doors that exist today), the ornate stained-glass windows were complete, and the organ was installed. Catholics throughout the New York City remained focused on completion of the endeavor. In the months before its opening in May 1879, a flurry of activities completed work, as the sidewalk was installed, painting was finished, carpentry was completed, and the entire building was cleaned of construction debris. The first mass was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral on May 25, 1879. Cardinal McCloskey presided over ceremonies that commenced at ten in the morning. *The New York Times* estimated



*Photos: (top) View of the Cathedral looking from the west in 1935. The open land in forefront is the construction site for buildings around Rockefeller Plaza. Courtesy of Avery Library, Columbia University, New York.*

*(bottom) The exterior of Our Lady's Chapel, as seen from Madison Avenue. The Chapel had been omitted from the original design and construction of the Cathedral.*

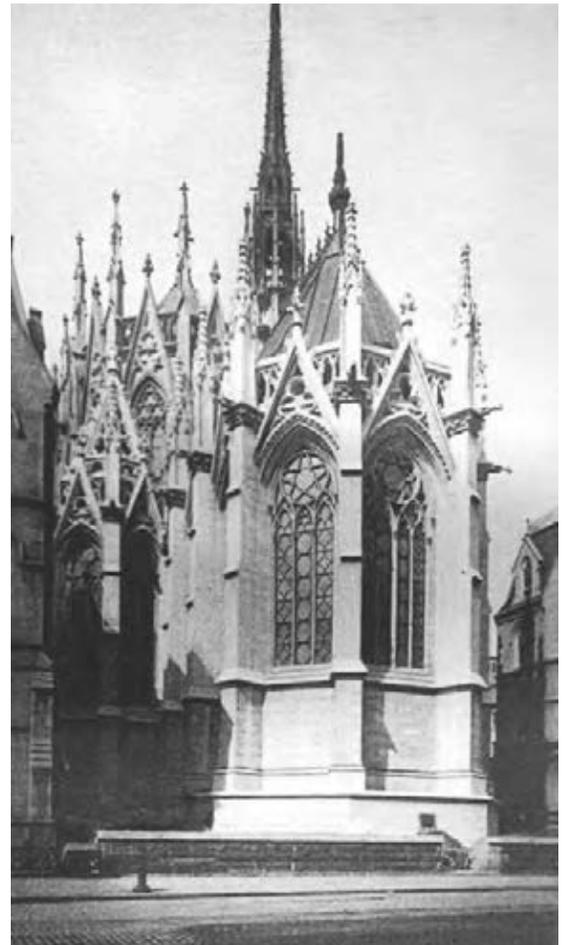
there were approximately seven-thousand people in attendance. A line of six archbishops, thirty-five bishops, plus other priests and religious members started behind the Cathedral and processed on each side toward the front doors. The cardinal blessed the doors as the choir sang. He blessed both the exterior and interior walls of the Cathedral as he went toward the main altar. After the ceremony, it was announced that weekly masses would begin the following Sunday, and the people in midtown could consider St. Patrick's their parish church.<sup>3</sup>

#### SPECIAL FEATURES OF ST. PATRICK'S

As an initial cost-saving measure, the original design did not call for spires on the Cathedral. But in 1885, seven years after its opening, construction commenced on twin spires for the building. It has been speculated that the spires were inspired by construction of the Washington Monument in Washington D.C., completed in 1884. George Mann & Company, of Baltimore, was awarded the construction contract for \$120,000. Addition of the spires was an unprecedented example of construction safety — not one accident or injury was sustained by anyone involved.

As another cost savings measure, Our Lady's Chapel was omitted from original construction plans. Traditionally, most cathedrals feature a small chapel to Mary behind the main altar. In the early plans, the Cathedral originally terminated immediately behind the main altar, and a side altar was designated to serve as the Chapel until a proper chapel could be constructed.

Near the beginning of the 1900s, the Kelly family, successful and established New Yorkers, were aware of this situation and donated the funds for the present-day Chapel. Fourteen architects from America, England, and France were invited to submit proposed designs, and three independent judges all voted in favor of the successful design submitted by the American architect, Charles T. Matthews. Professor Charles Ware of Columbia University's School of Architecture, Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan, and the Kelly family all reviewed the proposed designs and came to a unanimous decision for the design. Construction was completed in 1906, and the





first mass in the Chapel was held on Christmas Day of that year. Today, the Chapel exists as an extension of the original Cathedral, and is the location where weddings are held.

The array of stained-glass windows offers spectacular attraction inside the Cathedral. The windows that appear throughout the Chapel are a combination of original windows, mostly made in France near Chartres, as well as windows subsequently added. The “Rose Window,” directly above the front door (and measuring twenty-six feet in diameter) is a typical design element found not only in gothic cathedrals but also in Romanesque and Byzantine cathedrals.

The six windows that adorn the nave are referred to as the “Windows of the Sacrifice.” Five of these windows each depict the Old Testament sacrifices of Abel, Noe, Melchisedech, Abraham, and the sacrifice of the paschal lamb as part of the Hebrew tradition of Passover. The sixth window illustrates to the sacrifice at Calvary.

Over the Fiftieth Street entrance and on the southern façade of the transept of the Cathedral is St. Patrick’s window. This window is a composite of nineteen individual window panes that tell the story of St Patrick’s life. Made in Nantes, France, in the ateliers of Henry Ely, St. Patrick’s window was a gift from the original St. Patrick’s Cathedral to the new building. Beginning with a scene of St. Patrick’s baptism, subsequent windows feature Patrick’s kidnapping and imprisonment at the age of thirteen, the revelation of an angel to St. Patrick during his imprisonment, his sale as a slave to King Milcho, his subsequent release from slavery, his being made a cleric by his uncle, St. Martin, his ordination as a priest by Bishop Sancuar, his visit to Rome and his blessing by Pope Celestine, his raising of Malfrac from the dead, and other stories throughout his life.

In order to raise funds for the construction of the Cathedral, it was common for other dioceses, individual members of the clergy, and lay people to donate individual windows. As such,

**Illustration:**  
*Depiction from Frank Leslie's Illustrated of the St. Patrick's Fair held in 1878 before the Cathedral was consecrated. Parishoners throughout the city made and donated items to sell to help raise funds to pay for construction.*

the patron would have a say as to the subject matter of the window. One such window, the Founder's Window, was the gift of architect James Renwick. This window features a picture of his presenting his plans to Archbishop Hughes and others and reads, "From James Renwick, Architect 1879" across the bottom.

Around the perimeter of the cathedral are individual altars, or sanctuaries. Dedicated to individual saints and often pairs of saints, these altars were the gifts of individual patrons. On the north side, one sees the Altar of St. Michael and St. Louis, The Altar of St. Brigid and Bernard, Shrine of St. John Neumann, the Chapel and Altar of Holy Relics, and the Chapel and altar of St. Joseph. The Altar of Saints Michael and Louis was designed by Charles T. Mathews, who also designed Our Lady's Chapel, and its statuary and stonework was created by Tiffany & Co.

The south side of the cathedral features the Altar of St. Anthony of Padua, the Altar of St. John the Evangelist, the Shrine of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the Altar of St. Rose of Lima, and the Altar of St. Andrew. The Shrine of Elizabeth Ann Seton is the newest major addition to the cathedral. Elizabeth Ann Seton was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1975 as "The first daughter of the United States of America to be glorified with the incomparable attribute of sainthood." One first notices the modernism of this shrine. Unlike the intricate carvings of marble and traditional table like altars of the other altars, the Shrine of St. Seton features a semicircular metallic screen, seven and a half feet high and 20 feet long that features a statue of St. Seton as its focal point. Created by Frederick Shrady, the screen features visual references to the cities of New York, Livorno, Italy, and Emmitsburg, Maryland, where St. Seton's religious calling was inspired.

At present, St. Patrick's Cathedral serves two ecclesiastical functions for the Catholic population of the Archdiocese of New York. First, since its construction, the Cathedral has continued as the seat of the Archbishop of New York. Secondly, St. Patrick's Cathedral serves as a parish church. With its current parish defined by the boundaries of Third and Seventh Avenues and Forty-fourth and Fifty-ninth Streets, St. Patrick's Cathedral also serves the large transient business community of midtown. St. Patrick's

Cathedral, as a parish church, offers services to its congregation similar to those of most other Catholic churches. A senior citizens club, Al-Anon, and Debtors' Anonymous are three of many social outreach programs offered by the Cathedral during its history. The annual St. Patrick's Day Parade, traditionally called the world's largest parade, passes the Cathedral every year, and marchers are greeted by the Archbishop from the front of the Cathedral.

## Notes

- 1 Cook, Leland, *St. Patrick's Cathedral, A Centennial History*, page 54.
- 2 The windows for Fordham's chapel were the gift of King Louis-Filippe of France and were intended for the original St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street. After their manufacture in France, when it was discovered that they did not fit the window openings for which they were intended, the windows arrived at Fordham. See Venturi, D. "Fordham University Church."
- 3 Farley, John. *The History of the Cathedral of Saint Patrick*, p. 80.

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