

Patrick Keely: Prince of Church Architecture

BY PATRICK J. MCNIERNEY, P.E.



One of the most influential architects of ecclesiastical buildings, both churches and cathedrals in the United States, was an Irish immigrant architect named Patrick Charles Keely who emigrated from Ireland to New York City in 1842. In his 55-year career, Keely was responsible for the designs of more than 600 churches and 16 cathedrals throughout the Eastern states. In fact, his works are found from Louisiana to Nova Scotia and as far west as Iowa. The most frequent locations for his work, however, were New York City, neighboring New Jersey, and the Boston area.

Born in Thurles, County Tipperary, in 1816 young Keely was influenced by his father, a draftsman, carpenter and builder who worked in Ireland. Keely's father was associated with the gothic revivalist, Welby Pugin, participating architect of the houses of Parliament in London. Keely's father was responsible for the construction of the Fever Hospital and St. Patrick's College in Thurles. The family traces its roots to Kilkenny and at one point spelled its name "Kiely."

EARLY SUCCESS IN BROOKLYN

Upon his arrival in New York in 1842 at age 25, Patrick Keely settled in Brooklyn. He began employment as a carpenter, and his early work on several church interiors went unnoticed. In 1846, however, he made the acquaintance of Father Sylvester

Malone, who had been charged by the archdiocese of New York to form a parish and build a church in Williamsburg. (By the early 1840s Irish immigrants, who had previously crowded into lower Manhattan, had begun moving by improved ferry services to towns and villages like Williamsburg across the East River. The Catholic faith remained central to their lives, and with the Famine years beginning in 1845 still larger numbers of Irish immigrants produced increasing demands for new churches.) Keely, together with Father Malone, designed and administered construction of the new church in Williamsburg. This building, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, in neo-gothic style featured pointed arches, buttresses, and pinnacles—and opened the door to Keely’s career.

Keely’s first design and his careful administration of the construction led him to subsequent commissions for other churches. Soon, his reputation for honesty in business dealings, along with the relative scarcity of Catholic architects in New York City—and the constantly growing need for more churches—fostered Keely into becoming a well-respected and much sought-after architect.

INFLUENCES FROM EUROPE

Keely’s churches for immigrants in New York neighborhoods intentionally did not mimic the plain, stark Quaker designs, nor copy the simple designs utilized by Congregationalists, for church buildings previously constructed in the United States. Buildings that the Irish held dear were elaborate structures that expressed the grand glory of God as they saw it. Being influenced by the European architecture of his day, Keely utilized his experiences from Ireland and designed American churches and cathedrals based on his own background of faith and culture. More than mere utilitarian structures to accommodate the faithful, his designs celebrated and rejoiced in the faith of God shared by the Irish community of his time.

Keely’s success as an architect influenced others in his family including James Farmer, his wife’s brother, and James Murphy, her brother-in-law. Both became architects associated with his practice. Charles Keely and John J. Keely, Patrick’s sons, were trained in his office, as was Brooklyn-born Thomas F. Houghton, who was married to his oldest daughter. While supervising the design and construction of the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, Connecticut, Charles Keely suddenly died of pneumonia. Patrick Keely, with the assistance of Thomas Houghton, continued his practice until shortly before Keely’s death at his home on Brooklyn’s Clermont Avenue, partly caused by heat exhaustion, in 1896. Keely was buried in Holy Cross Cemetery.

In 1884 the University of Notre Dame awarded its second annual Laetare Medal to Patrick Keely, for “...changing the style of ecclesiastical structures and modified architectural taste in this country.” Led by Keely’s great granddaughter, The Keely Society of Enfield, Connecticut, maintains the tradition of Keely’s efforts by publicizing his accomplishments and seeking to preserve his constructed work. The photos and captions here present a small sample of his enduring work.

Patrick J. McNierney is a structural engineer in New York City and holds degrees in engineering from Bucknell and Columbia universities. He is a past contributor to New York Irish History. ©2007. Published with permission of Patrick J. McNierney.



St. Patrick's Church, Brooklyn

One of Keely's earlier works in Brooklyn is St. Patrick's Church on Kent Avenue, Brooklyn. This building reflects the early gothic style, with its cruciform shape, clerestory windows, and pointed arched windows. Its simplicity of style is also reflected in his other earlier works, including St. Brigid's Church and the Church of St. Nicholas, both in Manhattan.



The Church of St. Francis Xavier, Manhattan

The third and present-day Church of St Francis Xavier on West Sixteenth Street was designed by Keely in the 1870s.

Construction was completed in 1882. The original design called for a spire that was never realized in the final construction. The interior of the Church is in the traditional gothic floor plan of a Latin cross and is based upon the Cathedral of Pisa, Italy. With its rounded arches, polished granite columns and coffered stone ceiling, the image of a European cathedral is captured perfectly. Carrera marble is featured in many of the side altars surrounding the main altar.

William Lamprect, the noted ecclesiastical artist, painted the many frescoes that adorn the walls and ceiling of the church. Many windows are Tiffany stained-glass windows. Joseph LeFarge was commissioned to design a gold mosaic for the altar of the North American Martyrs.



*St. John the Baptist Church,
Brooklyn*

The massive Romanesque church of 1888 has its upper nave shuttered and closed, unlike the openness of gothic structures. The side aisle windows were designed by Otto Heinike.

Its clerestory windows give St. John's a voluminous appearance as seen from the interior. The magnificence of this Keely interior is illustrated in the nave. This area of the Church was closed off more than a decade ago. Great strides have been taken by the parish to restore closed areas of this vast Keely complex of buildings. On entering the Church, one sees spectacular angels carved in marble by Joseph Sibbel that adorn the main altar of the edifice and many other features.

St. Michael's Church, Jersey City

St. Michael's Church in Jersey City is a variation of the neo-gothic style developed by Keely. Lacking the requisite pointed arches, the window designs fall back onto earlier Romanesque rounded windows. Additionally, the facade features designs created by ornate tile work, a feature shared with other facades by Keely. It is possible that the tiles could have been imported from England, from the famous Minton Company, from which Keely imported tiles in his designs for St. James the Greater Church in Boston and St. Joseph's in Albany.





St. Brigid's Church, Manhattan

St. Brigid's Church in lower Manhattan is also known as the "Famine Church." Slated for demolition by the Archdiocese of New York, the Church has been the target of a grassroots effort to preserve it. St. Brigid's may be the oldest church designed by Patrick Keely that is still standing. After the laying of its cornerstone on September 10, 1848, the Church opened its doors 15 months later. Its stark, simplistic Carpenter Gothic style lacks the more formal transepts or apse found in later works. The vaulted ceiling resembles an upside down boat, and is thought to have been constructed by shipbuilders.

In the 1870s, the Church benefited from many upgrades. Theophile-Narcisse Chauvel, a French artist, provided the Stations of the Cross. A statue of St. Brigid was installed in 1884. The ceilings were frescoed by the famous church decorator, A. Ertle. New stained glass windows, custom made in Bavaria, were installed. A new marble altar and new chandeliers were also added. The interior of the Church always echoed its Irish immigrant ori-

gins, as several windows and plaques were dedicated to its first parishioners and rectors. St. Brigid's parish has seen its prominence rise and fall throughout its lifespan. During the construction of St. Patrick's Cathedral (1858–1879) St. Brigid's parish ranked third in the diocese in providing construction funding for the Cathedral. During the late 19th century, St. Brigid's parish served newer immigrant populations, including Slavs and Italians. More recently, it has served the lower Eastside's Latino community.

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