

Church of the Ascension (interior)

Architecture at the Church of the Ascension in the Context of 19th-Century Historical Revivals

By Dennis Raverty, Ph.D., Art Historian. 2024 (all rights reserved)

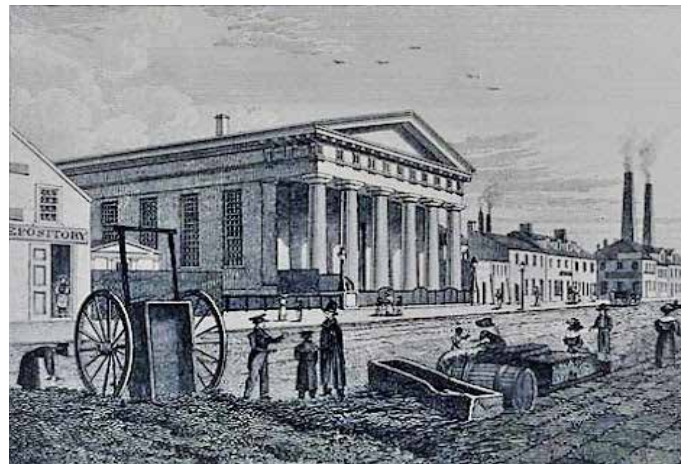
The 19th century was unique in the last millenium of European and American architecture in that it never developed its own original style (until the 1890s with the advent of *Art Nouveau*). Most buildings from that century were executed in a variety of historical styles that were revived from earlier periods. The architecture at Ascension reflects these developments in style in its various designs and remodelings over the course of the decades.

The Neoclassical Church on Canal Street

The first church building, erected on Canal Street in lower Manhattan in 1829 for the fledgling parish, was in the Neoclassical manner. It was designed by members of the A. J. Davis, Ithiel Town and Thompson architectural firm.

Neoclassicism suggested ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, and was the style preferred by European and American architects as best representing the values espoused by the democratic political revolutions that took place during the last quarter of the 18th century.

The stark, relatively unadorned Doric order utilized in the original church was derived from ancient Greco-Roman temples and embodied classical principles such as order, harmony, unity and balance. Contemporaneous German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann described the classical style as characterized by “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” Thomas Jefferson’s famous residence, Monticello, which he designed, exemplifies the democratic virtues associated with Neoclassical style in the 19th century.



The original Neoclassical church building on Canal Street (destroyed)

Just as Monticello is a brick building with wood balustrade, colonnade, porch and dome, so the first Ascension Church on Canal Street was a brick structure with wooden roof and details, including, most likely, its imposing fluted pillars. Parts of the exterior were covered with white stucco to enhance its chaste sense of pristine purity. The pediment over the porch was unadorned by sculptures and the triglyphs in the frieze alternated with empty metopes as if it were a Greek temple stripped of its sculptural ornaments. This iconoclastic attitude was in keeping with the primarily Protestant outlook of the parish at that time.

In 1839, just before the sermon at a Sunday afternoon service, a disastrous fire that started in a nearby carpentry shop swept through the church destroying almost everything in it as well as the adjacent church school.

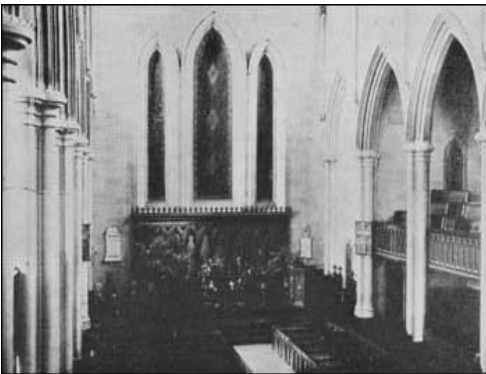
A New Neo-Gothic Building

The present church on Fifth Avenue in New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood was designed by renowned architect Richard Upjohn in the Gothic Revival Style and was consecrated in 1841.

Upjohn was at the same time working on Trinity Church on Wall Street in lower Manhattan. Unlike that church, Upjohn designed Ascension with a very shallow chancel.

According to the rector at that time, Dr. Manton Eastburn, "... it [the chancel] must be shallow, leaving no room for high church doings." This was in reference to the contemporaneous Oxford movement in the Church of England (the Episcopal Church is affiliated with the Church of England).

The Oxford movement, sometimes referred to as "High Church" or the "Catholic Revival," was a tendency that favored a return to pre-Reformation liturgical practices closely resembling Roman Catholic Latin rites but using the English-language Book of Common Prayer instead of the Roman Missal. This High Church tendency was dismissed as mere superstitious "ritualism" by many Anglicans, including most American Episcopalians (who considered themselves to be more traditionally Protestant or "Low Church" in their ceremonies).



In fact, the building was sometimes referred to as the "Cathedral of Low Church" within the denomination not because it was actually the seat of a bishop but because of the loftiness of its architecture and the congregation's standing as unofficial flagship organization of this Low Church tendency in New York City during those years.

The interior of the church before 1880 was very different than it appears today. The side aisles in the nave up until this time had balconies on an upper level that faced inward (they are just visible on the right in the photograph below).

The large empty space of the wall above the sanctuary was relieved only by three tall lancet windows with pointed arches and a nonfigurative carved wooden reredos behind the altar with the Ten Commandments. This chaste and unadorned interior embodied the attitude towards imagery and ceremony that the congregation valued.

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the building's exterior as designed by Upjohn is the church's single, massive bell tower that seems both to rise upward and to come forward to meet the city and welcome parishioners and visitors.

Neoclassicism had represented democratic republican virtue, order and reason for an earlier generation, but now a more spiritualized, mystical and Romantic search for the sublime drove the Gothic revival at midcentury. The soaring upward thrust and pointed arches of the late Medieval style reveals the underlying aspirations of this Romantic yearning.



Interior Redesign in the Neo-Renaissance Manner

According to cultural historian David Garrard Lowe, a notion which swept through Protestant denominations in the United States during the 1880s was that the Gothic style, so popular at midcentury, was more appropriate for Catholics, while classical styles, like the Renaissance "more accurately expressed the Reformation's intent" with its sense of order and rationality rather than mystery and romance.

After Dr. E. Winchester Donald became the rector of Church of the Ascension in 1882, a renovation was begun of the building's interior, which he felt was unnecessarily drab, in order to create an uplifting and dignified setting for the weekly church services without, however, lapsing into what was seen as the overly Catholicized rituals and theology of the Oxford movement.

So it was decided that the renovations would be executed in the new Renaissance style pioneered by rising young architect Stanford White rather than the more chaste and humble (and Catholic) medievalism of Richard Upjohn.

Stanford White and the “American Renaissance”

Stanford White was the principal designer for McKim, Mead and White, one of the most successful and prolific architectural firms of the period. Among White’s most celebrated works are the Boston Public Library, the Washington Square Arch, as well as Madison Square Garden and Pennsylvania Station in New York City (both now demolished).

His colleague Charles Follen McKim, had been trained in the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, the most prestigious architectural school of the time, but White received no formal architectural training at all. Instead, he was apprenticed to Henry Hobson Richardson, the architect who had designed Trinity Church in Boston, considered an important forerunner of 20th-century modernist architecture.

McKim, Mead and White are associated with the “American Renaissance,” a conservative tendency in late 19th and early 20th century American architecture, sculpture and painting that emphasized continuity with earlier traditions and favored a classicizing style related to earlier Neoclassicism. But instead of the spartan simplicity of ancient Greece, it took as its model the lush, richly decorative manner of the Italian High Renaissance.

White Oversees Artists and Artisans at Ascension

White was consulted on the re-design of the interior of the church and arranged for some of the artists he had worked with under Richardson at Trinity Church to collaborate with him in the redecoration.

Charles McKim designed the new pulpit, Louis Saint Gaudens (brother of the more famous Augustus Saint Gaudens), sculpted angels that adorned the sanctuary, and John La Farge created large stained glass windows that graced the nave.

La Farge, who had pioneered important new techniques of manufacturing opalescent glass, also executed the monumental mural of Christ’s Ascension that dominates the west wall behind the altar. It is considered by some to be his greatest achievement.

White designed the large frame surrounding the mural, taking inspiration from the frames surrounding the frescoes in the *Stanza della Segnatura* by Raphael at the Vatican.

The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893

The American Renaissance reached its apex a few years after La Farge’s Ascension mural was completed, at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. His great rival Louis Comfort Tiffany also displayed an entire stained-glass chapel at that event. Despite its historical significance and its many fascinating exhibits, the fair was a blatantly Eurocentric



celebration of five hundred years of colonialism, oppression and racism. At its heart was the so-called “White City” (not meant ironically), a courtyard in the American Renaissance style executed largely in stucco as freestanding facades (i.e. not attached to a building) surrounding a reflecting pool and decorated with colossal, classically inspired statuary by Daniel Chester French and others. It was later destroyed by a fire.

The Marginalization of the New Renaissance

The aims of the American Renaissance were summed up in a book by painter Kenyon Cox entitled *The Classic Point*



Court of Honor, World’s Columbian Exposition (the “White City”)

of View published in 1911, near the end of the movement’s influence. Although he doesn’t discuss architecture directly, he promotes a classical idealism inspired by the Italian Renaissance. The author lauds Raphael’s art and condemns recent Realism and Impressionism as vulgarities.

Such conservatism in the progressive new century was anachronistic. After World War I, with the emergence of Modernism, the American Renaissance slipped into an obscurity from which it has never fully recovered.

Remodeling of the Parish House Under White

Around the corner from the church is the parish house, including administrative offices, a kitchen, meeting rooms, a modest library and a residence for the sexton. The impressive facade is executed in a very slender yellow brick called “Tiffany Brick” because it was used in the mansion of Charles Lewis Tiffany, father of the famous designer. The palatial residence on Madison Avenue by McKim, Mead and White was completed just two years before the Ascension Parish House was finished in 1888.

In its asymmetrical design, its elegant brickwork, and its vertical windows fenestrating the stairway (to the left of the wide wooden doorway in the photo), it could almost be a wing of the Tiffany mansion (another of White’s buildings now unfortunately demolished). The delicate leaded glass and bay windows are rhythmically grouped in threes, and on the next floor arranged by twos, with single windows in the dormers on the top floor, creating an effect of increasing lightness as the facade ascends.

The most spectacular room is the stunning reception hall, spanning two floors and decorated with pilasters and tasteful, understated detailing in the wide and generous ceiling. This light and airy space is crowned by elegant brass chandeliers, conveying an uplifting, convivial and eminently social environment for meetings, dinners or festive occasions.



The Scandal Surrounding Stanford White’s Murder

In 1906, at the height of his prolific career, and just months before the opening of Penn Station, his greatest achievement, White was shot at a musical theater performance on the roof of Madison Square Garden, a building he himself had designed.

During the ensuing trial, it was revealed that White drugged and molested the murderer’s wife when she was sixteen. It was one among many affairs the architect had with underage girls. White’s fall from grace was undoubtedly a factor in the subsequent devaluation of the architect’s work.

Contemporary Reevaluation of Historicism

The excesses of the Gilded Age, exemplified in the projects (and lives) of impresarios like Stanford White were overshadowed by the chaste modernist aesthetic that had dominated architecture and design during the 20th century

However, in the past few decades, there has been a reconsideration of the value of the historical eclecticism that had been the outstanding feature of late 19th century architecture in the United States.

The use of historical references in recent architecture has given us a new perspective on and appreciation for the formerly neglected revivalist architecture of this complex period.

Church of the Ascension in the 21st Century

No longer a bastion of Gilded Age wealth and privilege, the current parish of the Church of the Ascension reflects the rich diversity of the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. Rather than a “Cathedral of Low Church” as it had once been, the congregation now identifies itself as a “Broad Church” (as their website says, “Not too high, not too low”), adopting both Protestant and Catholic liturgical practices and embracing a wide spectrum of beliefs.

