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A Brief History of RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE in New Jersey

by Frank L. Greenagel, PhD

Part 2: The Early Nineteenth Century

This is the second of a four part article on New Jersey's religious architecture, this time focusing on the early nineteenth century. The observations and generalizations are based on a sample of 1,300 surviving meetinghouses, churches and synagogues erected before 1900. Many early congregations of the period are not included in this sample because they have disappeared or because they erected churches in the twentieth century. Although the apparent subject is architectural styles, the real matter are the social, cultural, economic and religious factors that gave shape to the New Jersey churchscape.

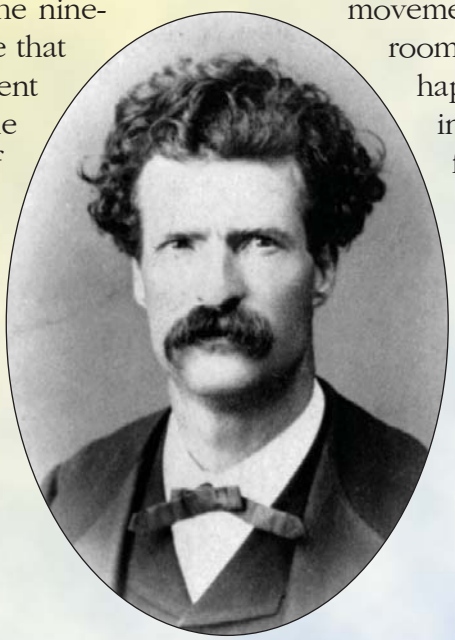
An article on American architecture in an 1836 issue of the leading intellectual journal argued that "the ecclesiastical architecture in our country is in a very unsettled, ill-defined state. It has neither the stern simplicity and unpretending rudeness of the puritanical meetinghouses, nor the grace and richness of form and ornament of European churches. It seems worthwhile then to inquire, what kinds of churches the religion of our country requires, and what points are to be particularly attended to in their construction."[1] Perhaps the first question to address, however, is what was the nature of the country's religion at that time?

Beliefs and practices had changed considerably from the early Puritan and Presbyterian Calvinism and its insistence on original sin and depravity; many people had turned to a more hopeful variety embodied in the plaintive question, "What must I do to be saved?" Long before twentieth-century scholars determined there was a Second Great Awakening, the country spilled over with prophets, camp meetings, revivals and circuit-riding preachers. Whereas most states in 1800 required ordination of an educated minister, by 1850 anyone who could speak, even if functionally illiterate, might find a willing audience on the subject of salvation. Mark Twain made use of that stereotype in *Huckleberry Finn;* when the "King" and the "Duke," run out of town by an angry populace meet on the raft, Huck describes their initial conversation thusly: "What's your line, mainly?" asks the "King."

"Jour printer, by trade; do a little in patent medicines; theatre-actor–tragedy, you know; take a turn at mesmerism and phrenology when there's a chance–oh I do a lot of things–most anything that comes handy, so it ain't work. What's your lay?"

"I've done considerable doctoring way in my time. Laying on o' hands is my best holt–for cancer, paralysis, and such things; an I k'n tell a fortune pretty good, when I've got somebody along to find out the facts for me. Preaching's my line, too; and workin' camp meetin's; and missionaryin' around."

We don't have to take Twain's word for it–accounts abound testifying to that aspect of the religious activity in the first half of the nineteenth century. But it was also a time that witnessed the *high church* movement in Episcopal congregations, the Hicksite schism among the Society of Friends over the issue of "worldliness," and the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church–the first national institution in this country run by blacks. It was a period when the Adventists, the Disciples of Christ, Unitarians, Mormons, Shakers and dozens of less prominent sects got their start. It was also a time when, to less recent arrivals, the flood of Irish Catholics seemed to overwhelm the cities. It was a religious stew.



Mark Twain
by Abdullah Frères, 1867

But powerful denominational institutions had already formed, and they would exert an increasingly centralizing order on the newly-formed congregations. By 1800, or shortly thereafter, presbyteries, conferences, synods, ministeriums, and other associations had organized to recognize congregations, train and supply ministers, found colleges and seminaries, organize subsidies for smaller congregations, and expel ministers for heresy. They also pushed for better architecture, in the belief that their institutional success depended on their public face.

The Cane Ridge camp meeting in 1801 spurred the use of revivals as a means of proselytizing and gaining members; it also led to a proliferation of missions, sects and movements, many of which needed their own churches or preaching stations. In New Jersey, there were roughly three times as many new congregations formed in the first half of the nineteenth century than in the entire eighteenth century. Much of that was due to the increase in population, of course, but the consensus among historians is that the country went from having about 10 percent of the population in some affiliation with a church to almost half by the outbreak of the Civil War.

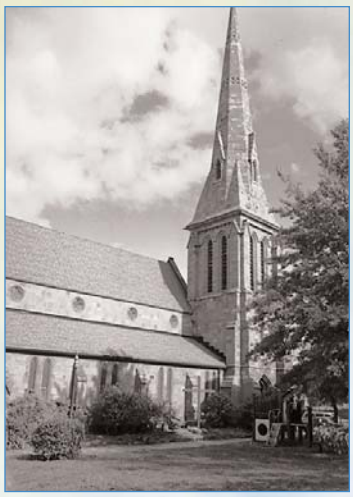
There were also changes in the role that churches were asked to play–Sunday school movements, Bible study groups, and hosts or sponsors of temperance societies, abolitionists and women's rights movements all required additional meeting rooms, which churches were generally happy to provide, even if it meant jacking up the church to dig a basement for those spaces. The liturgy, too, was under pressure; in the Episcopal Church, the Oxford Movement to restore high church liturgy lead to a demand for true Gothic buildings; in the evangelical churches it was a movement away from long services emphasizing biblical exegesis in favor of shorter sermons, often on topical issues of the day.[2] From the many boastful notices in church histories about acquisition of a new organ we can infer a desire for more and better music. And even the Methodists and Baptists who had once distained education as irrelevant to saving souls now are starting up colleges and seminaries to train the next generation of ministers.

The religious ferment was not the only factor affecting the churchscape; perhaps more important were the economic and industrial changes in the country. Improvements in transportation by construction of canals and railroads, as well as upgrading the roads connecting the interior of the state made available a wider variety of materials and of experienced artisans, even a few architects. About 1801 Benjamin Latrobe knew he had to do survey work to provide for his family–there was not much architectural work even with a sympathetic presi-

dent [Jefferson] in office. But by the 1830s we begin to note that carpenters are becoming *builders* and *contractors,* and a decade later several will be called *architects.* Among those who made that progression were John Notman, William Kirk, Aaron Hudson, Robert Steadman, Nelson Hotchkiss, and Henry Austin. The profession is not yet in flower, but it is definitely on the rise. "I want a church, not a meetinghouse or a barn; therefore I want an architect," said a Carolina minister in a widely-quoted statement.[3]

The Zion Methodist Episcopal church was erected in 1837 and appears to be untouched since. It stands a little East of New Egypt, in Ocean County.

In addition, there were underlying social and demographic forces at play: recovery from the devastation of the Revolutionary War in this state took years, and the Panics [depressions] of 1819 and 1837 caused a hiatus in building of all kinds. As we get to the fourth decade of the century, industrialization in Newark, Paterson, Camden, and Trenton brings a prosperity previously unknown, including the accumulation of capital that was soon financed large architect-designed churches in most of the major cities. It also brought a general affluence that expressed itself in a desire for better churches.



Architect Frank Wills designed the House of Prayer (Episcopal) church in Newark in 1850.

At the opening of the century, the typical *meetinghouse* (for that's what they were often called) in that part of the county that was not urban (90-some percent) was a one-room frame building with a stone foundation, a hand-hewn timber frame covered with shingles or clapboards. It had been built by members of the congregation or the local community with materials at hand. Its model was another church in the general vicinity, with a few details taken from a builder's handbook. In much of the state it was likely to be Presbyterian, Baptist or Methodist, and in south Jersey, Quaker. In north Jersey (Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Passaic) it was more likely built of stone in a traditional manner that had been in use for 50 years, and it was probably a Reformed congregation.

By 1850, perhaps earlier, that typical church in a rural or small town area might as easily have been constructed of brick with a quarried stone foundation; it was probably built of dimensioned lumber using the new balloon-frame method of construction that rapidly spread from its Chicago origin, instead of the labor-intensive mortise-and-tenon manner of the braced-frame buildings of the past. The frames, sashes and mullions in the windows were manufactured by steam-driven milling equipment, and it had Gothic-arch windows, which may have had stained glass. The church (*meetinghouse* was no longer in vogue except for the Quakers) was probably built by a contractor or an architect acting as builder too, who may have specialized in churches as well as upscale residences. In style, it drew heavily from medieval and neo-classical models. In the cities, there was probably an architect-builder involved for anything built of stone or with more than two stories, and it might have had stone imported from a distant, but still regional quarry. It might have been built for a Catholic parish in one of the state's growing cities, or for a Disciples of Christ, or even a Mormon congregation in parts of central Jersey. In the cities, most likely it would have been Episcopal or Presbyterian. Presbyterians and Baptists were still building vigorously, but they had been passed by the Methodists in terms of membership and number of churches. There was massive Irish and German immigration in the 1840s and 50s, which led to an increase in Catholic and Lutheran congregations, and soon enough they were able to erect substantial churches, and sometimes schools and convents as well.

With that background let's consider what was being built as we move from 1800 to about 1850.

Traditional Wren-Gibbs style churches were still being built. The Reformed churches in Schraalenberg (1801), Wycoff(1808), New Brunswick (1812) and Pompton Lakes (1814) carry on the Dutch tradition established decades earlier.

The Quakers also continue in their tradition styles, with eight new meetinghouses in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, notably in Mullica Hill (Gloucester, 1808), Moorestown (Burlington, 1802) and Shrewsbury (Monmouth, 1816).

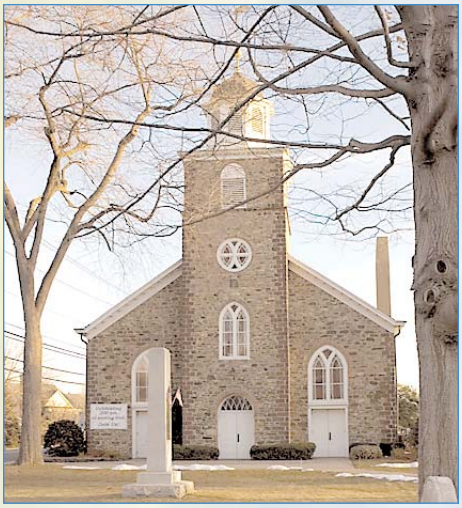
Soon the smaller forms of the Quaker meetinghouse will give way to the doubled house (two identical meetinghouses joined side-by-side), as in Mansfield (Burlington, 1818) and Upper Evesham (Burlington, 1814). The Hicksite schism in the 1820 eventually led to additional meetinghouses, usually somewhat smaller, built for the minority of the meeting which had to cede the existing meetinghouse to the prevailing side.

Plain meetinghouses, too, still dominate in much of the state, which remains largely rural. In Weymouth Methodist church in Atlantic County (1807), in Sussex County the Old Clove (Reformed) church (1827), and the Methodist Episcopal church in Estellville in Atlantic County (1834), simple forms persist.

But as the population increased there was a need for larger seating, and forms evolved from the early New England-style meetinghouse to buildings of the same mass but with Georgian detailing. The Reformed churches again seemed to lead the way with buildings in Hillsboro (1828) and Blawenberg (1832) in Somerset County, and the large brick church with Gothic arch windows in Marlboro (Monmouth, 1826).

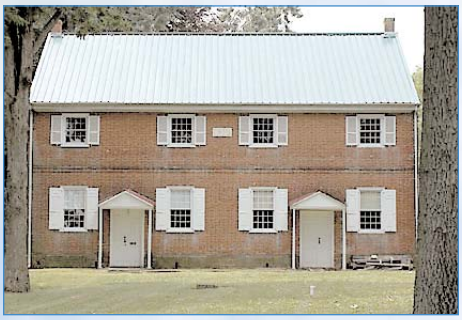
But that style was a brief interlude that soon yielded to what has been described as the country's "first national style," Greek Revival. There is some dispute over which building was actually the very first to copy the columns, shallow-pitched roof and accentuated pediment of the Parthenon, but one of the prominent ones was the second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia, designed by William Strickland and erected in 1818. Soon that style was emulated in other public buildings, banks, and even residences up and down the eastern seaboard, and eventually we can see it in this state. As near as I can determine, the first Greek Revival church in New Jersey is the Miller Chapel on the grounds of the Princeton Theological Seminary, erected in 1833.

Charles Steadman, a local builder is usually credited with its design, but the record seems to indicate he bought the plans from Thomas Ustick Walter of Philadelphia, who already had considerable experience with Greek Revival. In any case, within a few years we can find several dozen churches, some with a full portico like the Miller Chapel, and others with the *in antis* design of Trenton's First Presbyterian church (1839). Most of the surviving Greek Revival churches in the state are Reformed, but the style was used by Baptist churches in Newark and Mt. Holly, a Lutheran church in Stewartsville (Warren County), a Methodist church in Cokesbury (Hunterdon County), and a handful of Presbyterian churches in the middle region of the state. Even the Episcopal Church managed to build a Greek Revival house of worship, albeit with Gothic arch windows (St. James, Piscataway, 1836).



In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Dutch reformed congregations built a number of similar churches in the Wren-Gibbs style. This well-maintained example was erected in Wycoff in 1808.

Gloucester County was the site of early settlements by Quakers; at Mullica Hill they erected this brick meetinghouse in 1808.



Mansfield has two early Quaker meetinghouses; this is the later one, erected in 1812.

The Old Weymouth meetinghouse in Atlantic County is a small wooden-frame building erected in 1807. In the burial grounds are both wooden and iron grave markers.

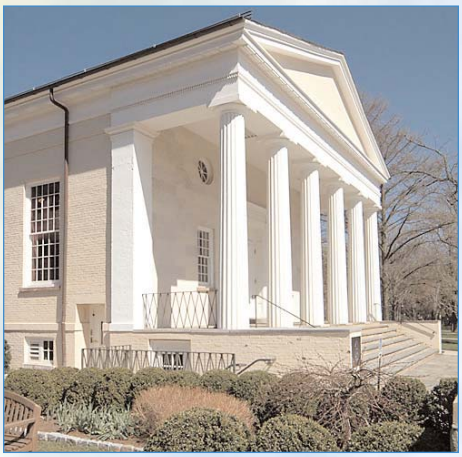
Perhaps that blending of pagan and Gothic in Piscataway is what set Episcopal Bishop George Washington Doane on his campaign to insure that all Episcopal churches erected under his leadership would be Gothic structures.[4] And not merely meetinghouses with a few Gothic elements tacked on, but churches based on authentic English parish churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The high church Ecclesiology movement in England, under the leadership of the Cambridge Camden Society, prepared measured plans of a number of "approved" Gothic churches that Anglican congregations in "the colonies" might adopt. St. Mary's church in Burlington is one of the outstanding examples in the country.

It was designed by architect Richard Upjohn, one of a handful of really important architects of the century. St. Mary's was one of the first churches to be based on plans prepared from a specific English church. It was not the first Gothic church in the country, of course, or even in New Jersey. Upjohn's design for Trinity Church in New York preceded it by several years, as did fine examples of early Gothic churches in Bridgeton (Bethany Presbyterian, 1840) designed by Philadelphia architect William Strickland (a versatile fellow), St. Paul's church in Rahway (1843) [whose architect I have not yet discovered], and St. Andrews church in Mt Holly (1844).

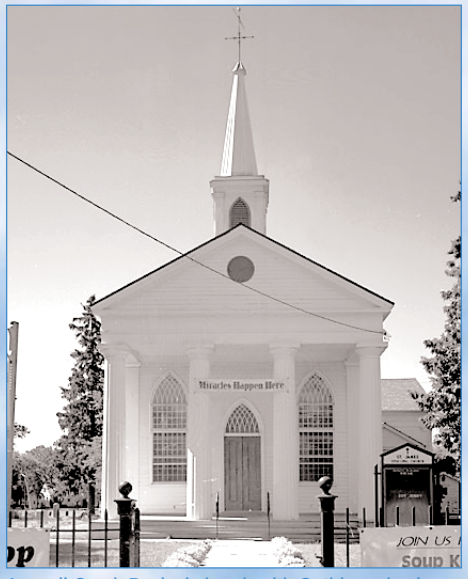
The picturesque cottage style had become popular for upscale residences in LLewelyn park, and that board-and-batten construction of wood soon found e xpression in churches in the Gothic manner. An excellent example is St. Peter's church (1849) in Spotswood (Middlesex).

At the close of the first 50 years of the century the Roman Catholics had become numerous enough to build substantial churches in the state; the earliest survivor is also one of the bestSt. Patrick's pro-Cathedral in Newark (1849). It is often credited to Fr. Moran, but I believe he had substantial help from Patrick Keely, an Irish-born architect who we will see much more of in the next installment.

A master carpenter named ___Brown was responsible for the large Georgian meetinghouse-style church erected by the Dutch reformed congregation in Blawenburg in 1832.



The Miller Chapel of the Princeton Theological Seminary has a full Greek portico, and is very likely the first Greek Revival building erected in the state (1833).



A small Greek Revival church with Gothic-arch windows was erected in Piscataway in 1836.

ENDNOTES

1. Henry Russell Cleveland, "American Architecture," *North American Review,* 43 (October 1936): 372.

2. Jeanne Halgren Kilde. *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-century America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

3. Mary N. Woods. *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth Century America.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999, 92. See also Catherine Bishir et al. *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990

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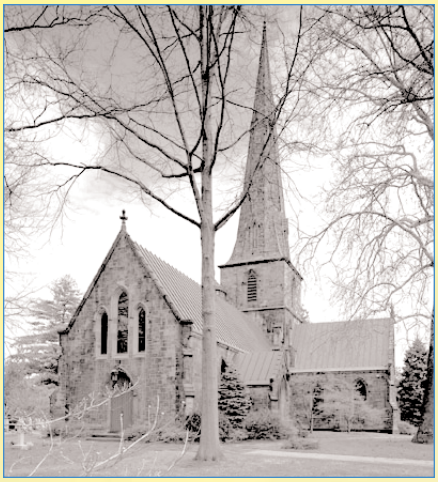
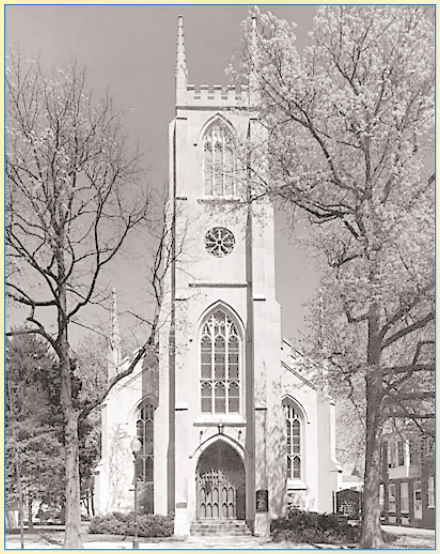
4. For an extended discussion of Doane's role in the process, see Phoebe Stanton's book, *The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968.



When the Episcopal congregation in Burlington outgrew is first church in 1846, the bishop asked architect Richard Upjohn to design a new one; the result is the magnificent St. Mary's Church.



An example of the perpendicular variant of Gothic revival is found in St. Andrew's Church in Mt. Holly. It was erected by the Episcopal congregation in 1844.

The board-and-batten construction of St. Peter's Church in Spotswood, erected in 1849, provided the desired verticality that Gothic architects sought. Frank Wills designed this building.

About the Author

Frank Greenagel's seminal work on the old churches and meetinghouses of New Jersey, titled *The New Jersey Churchscape* was published by Rutgers University Press in 2001. He has since published *A Proper Style: tradition and change in the religious architecture of Monmouth County,* and *Less Stately Mansions*, a complete inventory of the old churches of Hunterdon County, and has prepared similar volumes on the old churches of Morris, Warren, Somerset, and Sussex counties, efforts that have occupied him sporadically over the last 11 years. His latest book is entitled *Asserting Legitimacy. Maintaining Identity: the religious architecture of Mercer County.* All of his recent books are available from Amazon.com, and those on the religious architecture of New Jersey may also be obtained from his publisher's website www.woodennailpress.com

Greenagel is the author of the article on "religious architecture" for the *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, the article on "religious diversity" in *Mapping New Jersey,* and of an essay on Methodist church architecture for the *New Jersey History* journal.

Greenagel earned his PhD. at the University of Minnesota, where he was a member of the faculty; he also taught at the University of Colorado and had been a guest lecturer at several other major universities in California. He has lived in New Jersey since 1971, and served as Mayor of Tewksbury Township (Hunterdon) in the mid-1970s. He is presently directing the efforts to restore a c.1750 Georgian manor in Phillipsburg .

Irish-born architect Patrick Keely designed the exceptional French Gothic St. Patrick's in 1849.