

A Brief History of RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE in New Jersey

by Frank L. Greenagel, PhD

Part 3: The Mid-Nineteenth Century

This is the third of a four part article on New Jersey's religious architecture, this time focusing on the mid-nineteenth century (1850—1879). The observations and generalizations are based on a sample (1,300 of an estimated 1,500) 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.

Between 1850 and 1879 there were almost 550 churches and meetinghouses erected in the state—roughly one-third of the total built between 1703 and 1900. That figure is split almost equally between the three decades, with somewhat fewer in the war years of 1861—1865, but followed by a spurt in church building that continued through the end of the century with no discernible pause even for the Panic of 1873. Here we'll address the central questions of this Brief History—what did the churches look like and why did the congregations build in that manner?

The “typical” church, if one were to assay that question simply in terms of numbers, would have been a gable-fronted, three-bay, wooden-frame building, about 30' x 40,' with tall rectan-

gular windows, a modest entrance, and perhaps a small belfry. Those erected after 1865 probably had a base-



FIGURE 1: Haleyville Methodist is a basic meetinghouse plan with a few Greek revival and Italianate elements. (built 1864) Cumberland County

ment for Sunday school and other activities; the antebellum churches would not. They were clad in clapboards rather than shingles, and had an interior gallery along three sides, but in the smaller churches, only at the rear facing the pulpit. Except for a couple of architectural embellishments, they would have been all but indistinguishable from their counterparts thirty-years older. The Methodist church in Haleyville (Cumberland County), erected in 1864 is a good example. It includes a Greek Revival pediment, Italianate brackets, and the half-round window high in the gable that might have been found on a Georgian building. [Figure 1]

That generalization, appropriate enough for 340 of the 550 churches erected during the period, would have been misleading, of course, because the other 210 churches range from very stylish stone chapels fashioned after fourteenth-century English parish churches to elaborate Renaissance Revival edifices that included imported marble and *tromp l'oeil* frescoes to fool and dazzle the eye. According to architectural historian William Pierson, there was a “trend in mid-century American eclectic architecture toward an increasing opulence of interior decorative treatment . . .”¹ Although still dependent upon a number of European-born and trained architects, the emergence of a new generation of American architects brought an imaginative use of traditional materials and new construction methods, particularly to the expanding urban areas of the state. [Figure 2]

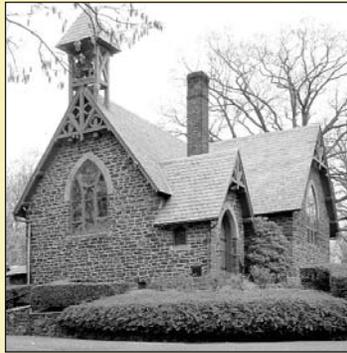


FIGURE 2: All Saints Chapel in Navesink (built 1864) is a very stylish stone and brick building designed by Richard Upjohn.

FORCES AT WORK

There were several factors that came to fruition between 1850 and 1879: Steam-driven machinery and greatly-improved transportation systems caused a complete shift from artisan work to an industrial system that brought costs down and made available materials and mill work that otherwise would have been affordable only for affluent congregations. Prior to this period every molding added to a window frame and every hour spent planing a surface added to the cost of a structure. Steam-driven power changed all that. “The change in production of materials turned skilled custom handcraft operations into standardized mechanical ones, increased specialization in the building trades, and reduced the importance of master craftsmen. The prefabrication of materials in woodworking factories and brickyards and the introduction of simpler wood-framing techniques usurped many of the skilled operations formerly the province of the master carpenter, joiner or brick maker.”² The proliferation of elaborate brackets on modest wooden-frame churches gives ample evidence of the impact of the steam engine.

The increasing centralization of the denominational authority that began earlier can now be seen in the concerted efforts to encourage congregations to build more stylish churches. Financial support was made available, plan books were issued and architects designated to provide guidance for affiliated congregations. The General Convention of the Congregational Church by

1853 dispensed money to build missionary churches, and required prospective applicants to submit their designs for review.³ In 1856 a book of designs for churches was published by a Methodist minister (George Bowler) and endorsed by the Boston Conference of Methodist Ministers. This was “particularly significant because it came from the denomination that had earlier condemned *any* interest in church architecture because of its strictures against the pride of materialism and the assumption of debt.”⁴ In 1869 architect Charles Sholl published a detailed pattern book, *Working Designs for Ten Catholic Churches*, that was widely accepted among the Catholic hierarchy; there was latitude for individuality, but all plans “drew from a unified architectural vocabulary.”⁵

Architect Benjamin Price, who lived in Atlantic Highlands, was beginning to work closely with the Methodist Board of Church Erection to make available inexpensive sets of plans and specifications, and Philadelphia architect Isaac Pursell had a similar relationship with the Presbyterian church.

The accumulation of wealth, a by-product of the state’s industrial growth, resulted in the emergence of a mercantile-industrial class in cities like Trenton, Newark, Paterson, Jersey City and Elizabeth—and even in much smaller industrial centers like Phillipsburg and Millville. Some of that wealth trickled into charitable giving, the bulk of which has always gone to religious institutions. There was a boom in missions and chapels as well as larger and more elaborate churches, especially among the more established and culturally-elite Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations. One observer said “the hunt was up, far and wide, for architectural forms to suit the ever-increasing demand for ostentation and grandeur”⁶ that was characteristic of this



FIGURE 3: Church of the Holy Innocents in Hoboken was erected in 1871 by the Stevens family.

new merchant-industrial class. Splendid churches and chapels, designed by established architects with national reputations proliferate, often funded by a single individual or family. The Church of the Holy Innocents in Hoboken, erected by the Stevens family as a memorial to a lost infant, was begun in 1871 by Edward Tuckerman Potter, but not finished until 1884. [Figure 3]

The general rising affluence of the population paralleled a shedding of old Calvinist attitudes of frugality, self-denial and simplicity. People increasingly wanted their churches to reflect a greater level of comfort and style—a sense of refinement and gentility. “The natural-

ness and rudeness of the Spirit-moved man was abandoned in favor of the ordered and ornate.”⁷ Even the Quakers were affected—a member of the Friends in Trenton, commenting on the 1873 renovation, said “the building was greatly improved . . . with some features worthy the attention of Friends who may wish to make their meeting houses more comfortable.”⁸ A visible refinement in religious architecture and the fittings (comfortable pews, carpeting, heating, and a quality pipe organ) became an acceptable measure of piety. Cultural historian Richard Bushman noted that “Genteel values spread so widely in the population and infiltrated so deeply into religion and the organization of neighborhoods that gentility shaped the structure of society. Refinement and vulgarity became the palpable signs of class, for many the very definition of class.”⁹ “In the 1850s and 1860s, the same [Baptist] congregations that had held worship in plain houses, barns and groves began to emphasize the importance of church buildings . . .”¹⁰ Beauty and comfort, it seems, were no longer regarded as a foe to reverence or piety. [Figure 4]

The culmination of the transition from master carpenter to builder-contractor to architect, who is now seen as a necessity if one wants a quality church, is essentially complete.¹¹

There is a noticeable search for a “brand” (to use today’s parlance) as the Episcopal and Catholic churches adopted the Gothic style, and Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists search for attractive alternatives, which many of them find in the Romanesque or in a modest version of the Wren-Gibbs style. Later several will locate their identity in a variety of eclectic styles that might include shingle, Queen Anne, or stick.

In addition to those general influences, it appears to me that there are several memes—regional or denominational ideas of what an ideal church should look like—that can be identified during the era. Trenton’s First Presbyterian church served that role for Reformed churches (and others) in the 1850s, Old St. George’s church in Philadelphia served as another ideal for the Methodists well into the 1880s, and the Presbyterian church in Westfield was clearly looked to as a model, especially for Reformed, Presbyterian and Methodist congregations in central

Jersey. To what extent an influential architect or builder, or a common set of plans was responsible I have not been able to determine. But from the testimony of the minutes of several congregations, they were very conscious of other churches in their region and often asked their architect/builder to make their new building resemble a particular church. [Figure 5]

[Figure 5]

Architectural historian Gwen Steege summarizes several of these factors, saying “By mid-19th century, education and increased wealth had broadened public taste, while at the same time the Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on sensation and imagination over intellect and reason, permeated every level of American culture.”¹² Increasingly, she continues, “the creative arts, including architecture, exhibited a fascination with the past and with nature, a fascination expressed in architecture by irregularity, roughness and asymmetry.”

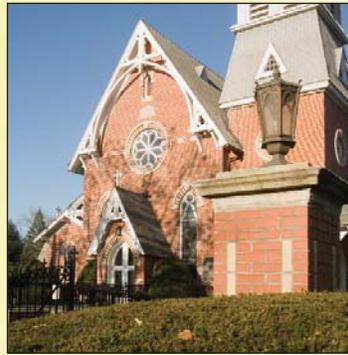


FIGURE 4: The Scotch Plains Baptist Church, built 1870, in Union County, is a polychrome delight. When the baptist congregation embraced ornateness, they went all the way.



FIGURE 5: The Presbyterian Church of Westfield, built in 1860 (Union County) was copied by more than a dozen congregations in central Jersey over the next dozen years.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Let’s begin our analysis by looking at what’s happened to the religious affiliation of the population. Up to 1750, the Presbyterians were the most numerous denomination in the colony, followed by the Quakers, Anglicans, and Reformed congregations. Less than 10 percent of residents were associated with any church at that time; a hundred years later almost half the population had some sort of relationship to a church, even if it was simply dropping in for an occasional service. In 1750 there were no Methodist congregations—the first one was not founded until the late 1760s. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they had become the most numerous denomination here, and in the country. They had progressed from a scattered counter-cultural sect, hived off from the Church of England, to a highly-centralized denomination with hundreds of indifferently-educated preachers working circuits in essentially every township in the state. 172 of the churches erected between 1850 and 1879 were built by Methodist congregations, almost twice the number of any other denomination.

Many—certainly the great majority—were modest wooden-frame structures put up by impecunious congregations in the rural areas of the state. But a few were grand Gothic or Romanesque edifices that challenged the social and cultural preeminence of the Presbyterians

and Anglicans. And whereas they had once been relegated to the outskirts of town (with the early Catholic and black congregations), now they were building in aggressively-prominent locations. Fine examples of stylish Methodist churches can be found at central locations in Morristown, Madison, Absecon, Millville, and New Brunswick.

[Figures 6 & 7]

Presbyterian congregations erected 93 new churches during this 30 year period, many of them replacements for earlier buildings they had outgrown. Among the better examples are the Presbyterian churches in Caldwell, Salem, East Orange, Westfield, Orange, Newark (the High Street, and South Park churches), Trenton, Englewood, Morristown, Newton, and Bridgeton. Most were substantial, even stylish buildings, often of brick or stone, and often the grandest church in town. A schism over abolition, personality conflicts with a minister, or in some cases, I suspect, because the rising middle class wanted to sit in more prestigious pews up front—pews that were still owned by the first families of the town, led to new churches within hailing distance of the old. Where one sat in church was a measure of one's social status and seniority.

Baptist congregations erected 66 new churches during this period, a few grand ones such as those in Elizabeth, Trenton, Scotch Plains, Morristown, Jersey City and Newark, but mostly middling-sized replacements. Anglican congregations erected 55 new churches, almost



FIGURE 6 (above): Absecon Methodist Church, built 1856, in Atlantic County, is more Georgian than Greek Revival, but it was a sign that the Methodists in south Jersey were no longer going to take a back seat to any denomination when it came to building in an elegant manner.

FIGURE 7: The Madison Methodist Church, just off the campus of Drew University in Madison, was erected in 1870. It is a Romanesque-based plan that resembles a plan prepared by Richard Upjohn for a Congregational church.



all in the Gothic style, and most of stone or brick. Smaller board-and-batten Gothic churches became popular with smaller congregations. Richard Upjohn often sold plans for these to less affluent congregations; some today refer to their “mail-order” churches. “By 1852 many requests for plans were coming in from small parishes, more in fact than he could easily accommodate. To meet this need he published a book, *Upjohn's Rural Architecture*, which gave plans and specifications for a small wooden church and an even smaller chapel.”¹³The larger stone Gothic churches were the churches of the merchants and industrialists; Newark, Navesink, Bordentown, and

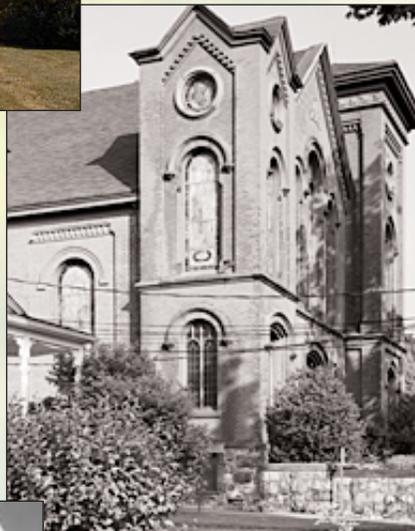
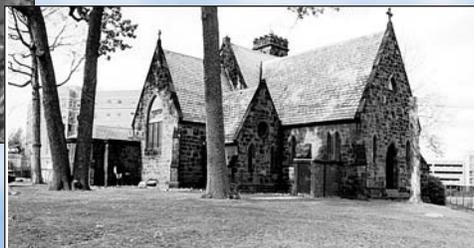


FIGURE 8 (left): The Church of the Holy Cross in North Plainfield, built in 1868, is a board-and-batten church that may have been designed by Richard Upjohn or Franks Wills.

FIGURE 9 (below): St. Barnabas Church in Newark is a cruciform plan Episcopal church that embodies all important precepts of the New York Ecclesiologists. It was designed by Newark architect Thomas Roberts and built 1864. It is listed on the National Register.



Jersey City have fine examples done by established architects: Richard Upjohn, Frank Wills, Detlef Lienau, Otto Gsanther, and others. The 29 Reformed congregations that erected new churches in the 1850s are concentrated in Somerset, Hudson and Essex counties. There were 15 new AME churches, and certainly a handful of black Baptist churches which I have not enumerated separately. That growth is much less than I would have expected, but perhaps because many of the congregations have since replaced their earlier churches. Nine Quaker meetinghouses were built during these 30 years, all but two the result of the Hicksite schism; none of them were new congregations. In fact, there was a net loss of Quaker meetinghouses during this period, as a

number of meetings were “laid down” (discontinued). In spite of the substantial German immigration during the period, there were only eight new Lutheran churches, all but two in small towns. Many of the German immigrants were Roman Catholic, of course. For whatever reason

the Lutherans flowing into the industrial cities chose to join other congregations, probably Reformed and Presbyterian, rather than remain in the confessional church of their origin. There is a scattering of minor denominations (Christian, Congregational, Protestant Methodist, even Mormon) and union churches, many of which were eventually to fold. [Figures 8 & 9]

Roman Catholic parishes erected only 46 new churches, but that is a misleading figure in that most of their churches were several times as large and served much larger populations than their Protestant counterparts. Gothic was their style and Patrick Keely was their architect; Jeremiah O'Rourke, L. J. O'Connor and a few others also designed churches, but the period really belongs to Keely. Among his credits are three churches in Jersey City, and at least one in Newark,

New Brunswick, Union City, Mount Holly and Phillipsburg (and I'm sure I have overlooked several). Catholic churches were also built in smaller towns where before there had not been a sufficient concentration to support a church. The large Gothic churches had an influence on the state's religious architecture far beyond their numbers. [Figure 10]

The story of the pre- and post Civil War era is one largely written by the Methodists. Clearly the Methodist system of circuits and revivals had been working. Many were small congregations, but they had a tightly-centralized organizational structure, and its orientation was beginning to shift from concentration on the rural areas of the state to the cities. During this period we also see the church acquiring property at the Jersey shore where their first permanent summer camp was being laid out. Architecturally they were followers,

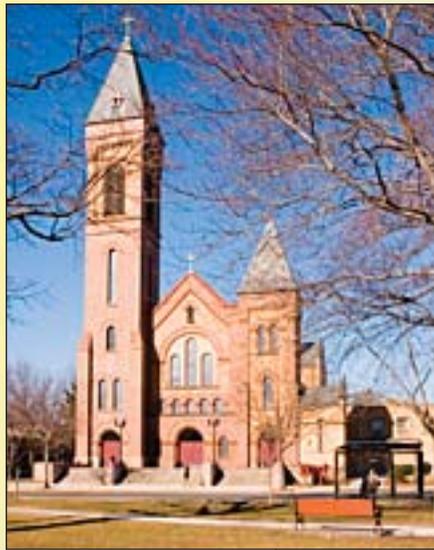


FIGURE 10 (left): The Church of the Sacred Heart dominates an important thoroughfare in Bloomfield. It was designed by Jeremiah O'Rourke in a Romanesque fashion rather than Gothic, and was built in 1878

FIGURE 11 (below): Bishop James Tabernacle [Methodist], Ocean Grove, was erected in 1877. It is a polygonal wooden-frame building.

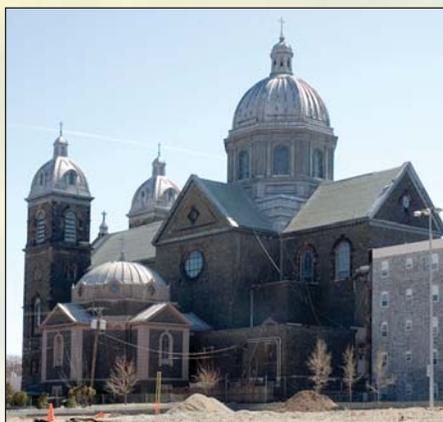
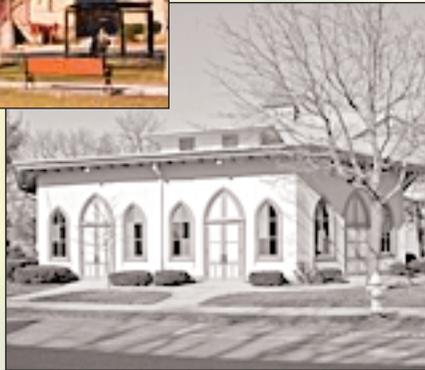


FIGURE 12 (above): St Michael's Catholic Church/Jesu Passion Monastery, Union City (built 1869) Hudson - Patrick Keely, arch.



FIGURE 13: Presbyterian Church of Caldwell (built 1874) Essex County - James Carpenter, arch.

adopting any style that was popular at the moment. Their plan books favored Gothic embellishment, but they were in no sense purists, as the Anglican bishops were. [Figure 11] Compared to the Methodists and the Presbyterians, the Roman Catholics erected fewer churches, but most were much larger, and by 1860 the Catholic church was the largest denomination in the state. That had several implications for our architectural history. First, it meant that a number of large Gothic and Renaissance Revival edifices would be seen here, with their elaborate statuary, *tromp l'oeil* frescoes, and exotic stone. The state had seen Gothic structures before, but not on this scale. Perhaps just as significant, there was a strange attraction-repulsion going on. Anti-Catholic politics (and riots) and the vilification of the Pope that was common in many Protestant churches was juxtaposed with the attraction of the ornateness of the Catholic churches and the ceremonies and other trappings of their services. This attitude eventually begins to show up in mainline Protestant churches and services. Presbyterian, Methodists and Reformed congregations soon began to erect elaborate Gothic churches in the Oranges, Newark and Caldwell, although not as large as the urban Catholic ones. [Figures 12 & 13]

In the smaller cities and towns, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Baptist, and Reformed congregations built replacements for earlier, smaller, less-refined churches that the congregations had outgrown. In Harmony, a small town in Warren County, the Presbyterian church noted in its centennial publication that "other congregations were erecting new houses of worship, and it is creditable to the Harmony congregation that it desired a *better* church." [my emphasis]¹⁴

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

Turning explicitly to matters of architectural style, 223 of the 547 I have designated as *vernacular*—often an adaptation of architectural elements that borrow from historical styles, but not in a systematic way; a vernacular church might combine a couple of features from the Greek Revival with Gothic-arch windows, for example. Another 118 churches are simple meetinghouses, not distinguishable from a small school or town hall. Both “styles” might reasonably be described (with exceptions) as no style. Combined, these churches account for 340 of the total—mostly wooden frame buildings of modest size, reflecting the rural populations, particularly in south Jersey. The majority are Methodist. [Figure 14]

In the late 1830s and throughout the 1840s, Greek Revival had become the great national style. Although the state’s churches were late to embrace the style, in the 1850s almost every denomination erected temple-fronted houses of worship. There were 44 Greek Revival churches built in this period, three-fourths of them erected

during the 1850s. Many more lack the columns of the prototypical Greek Revival temple, but picked up a few elements—usually the shallow-pitched roof line, the accentuated pediment, and perhaps corner pilasters from the Greek idiom. By 1856, the temple-based Greek Revival form is dead. It had been especially popular among Reformed churches in Somerset county, but used by most other denominations from Essex to Cumberland. [Figure 15]

We saw in the previous issue on the early nineteenth

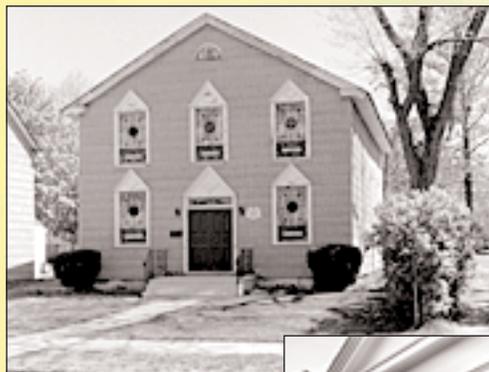


FIGURE 14: Mt. Moriah African Methodist Episcopal Church, Mount Holly (built 1862) Burlington County.

FIGURE 15: Cokesbury Methodist Church, Tewksbury Township (built 1851) Hunterdon County

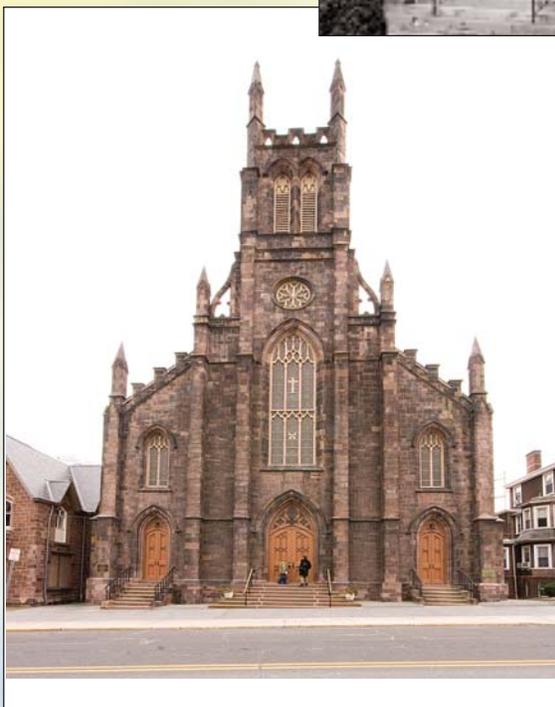


FIGURE 16: St. Peter the Apostle Roman Catholic Church, New Brunswick (built 1856) Middlesex County Patrick Keely, arch.

century architecture the emergence of the Gothic style, initially in the Episcopal denomination, but by the 1840s in the Catholic churches. The New York Ecclesiological Society published critiques of new churches and vetted architects, which was important to the Episcopal hierarchy. That meant that the bulk of the new Episcopal churches would follow the lines of the thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English parish church, or the board-and-batten cottage style of Downing, Davis, Wills and Upjohn erected during this period. There are 120 churches that are clearly Gothic, including almost all of the Catholic and Episcopal

churches, and a few Methodist and Presbyterian. The distinguishing features are the pointed-arch windows and entrances, buttresses, pinnacles, an articulated chancel and side aisles. There were usually built of stone, and were designed by a handful of architects. Between them, Brooklyn architect Patrick Keely and Jeremiah O’Rourke of Newark probably designed more than half the large Catholic churches of the period. [Figure 16]

Upjohn and Wills were responsible for several of the upscale Episcopal churches in Newark, and local architects John Welch and William Kirk for Gothic churches for Reformed and Presbyterian congregations in Newark.

Because of the strong identification of Gothic style with the Anglican and Catholic churches, many Protestant churches felt they needed an alternative—one that had the same level of elaborateness and even

medieval roots, but lacked that association with their rivals. They found an answer in the Romanesque. This is essentially a round-arch style, often with a row of false arcades along the raking cornice—mostly it was an avoidance of the cruciform plan and the pointed arch windows of the Gothic style. It may or may not have buttresses, but certainly would not have a fully-developed chancel; a semi-circular apse-like appendage would be acceptable, especially if used as a library or for social gatherings. There are 26 churches that people

generally classify as Romanesque because of round arch windows, the decorative arcades, and the generally restrained ornamentation, but many exhibit as many Gothic elements as Romanesque. It was a halfway house for those denominations not Episcopal or Catholic who wanted something of the elaborateness that Gothic plans offered. Towers, spires and belfries were obligatory, it seems. In 1853 the Congregational Church published *A Book of Plans for Churches and Parsonages* that included 18 designs by 10 different architects, including Richard Upjohn, James Renwick and Henry Austin. “*The Book of Plans* was so timely and so well received that it spawned the publication of similar books by other denominations and was thus an important catalyst in the general spread of Medieval styles and the Romanesque in particular throughout American church architecture.”¹⁵

There were 70 churches erected during these years that I classified as traditional or Wren-Gibbs- influenced in my database. They are symmetrical gable fronted buildings with a multi-tiered tower rising from the ground. Many have a shallow-pitched roof and delineated pediment common to the Greek Revival, and usually have rectangular or compass windows of the Georgian

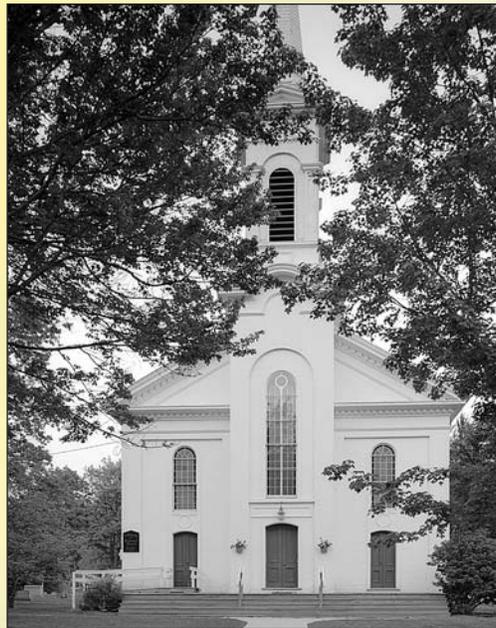


FIGURE 17: The Pottersville Reformed Church in Somerset County is almost an exact duplicate of the Presbyterian church in Westfield erected 9 years earlier. It is derived from on a Wren-Gibbs plan.

style. There was ample latitude for variation in the steeple, and one, two or three entrances may be found. Between 1860 and 1875 there were at least 15 close cousins of this plan, seemingly based on the Presbyterian church in Westfield. Examples include Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Blairstown, Newton, Tranquility, Liberty Corner, Perth Amboy, Clinton, Whitehouse, Oldwick, High Bridge, and Pottersville. [Figure 17]

The new affluence of the population, competition among the denominations, a demand for refinement, a turn towards Romanticism, the florescence of the professional architect, or the meme of the ideal church—all have been advanced to explain why the churches look the way they do. Smith sums up this period quite succinctly, arguing that “The spontaneous, Bible-verse-based worship that had once taken place in plain buildings began to seem out of place in a world of comfortable middle-class homes, elegant stores and cultured diversions. Churches, jostling for a place in an increasingly market-based society, began to experiment with more theatrical touches.”¹⁶ And that will be the story of the last decades of the century.

ENDNOTES

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