

23rd Annual Symposium on Public Monuments  
**Keely's churches in New Jersey**

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In 1998 Rutgers University Press asked me to prepare a book on the early religious architecture of the state; that was published as *The New Jersey Churchscape* in 2000. In the crunch to meet deadlines any suggestion that a church had an identifiable architect was seized upon, without much questioning. For the most part there was little interest in architects until the end of the 19th century—they were regarded as house-carpenters, not professionals. There seems to be even less interest today among clergy and parishioners. I have been met with blank stares when I informed some that their church was a product of Richard Upjohn or William Halsey Wood or Oscar Teale—as if that was supposed to be a matter of interest to them. This session today is an affirmation that the architects of the nineteenth century are indeed matters of interest.

For most of the last dozen years I have been seeking to understand *why* the churches, meetinghouses and synagogues of NJ look the way they do. By the 1850s congregations had a range of choices—Neoclassical Wren-Gibbs plans, Georgian, Greek Revival, Romanesque Revival—there had been octagonal churches and hexagonal ones, so the question is why a particular congregation chose to build in the style it did.

I came to that project as a photographer, not an architectural historian. In the process of trying to tease out a few generalizations about the factors that shaped the religious architecture of the state I have had to become conversant with construction materials and processes, with the folkways of the early builders who got part of their wages in beer or rum and preferred stout white oak, “cut in the full of the moon” for their major timbers; with liturgical movements, revivals, and schisms. And with the builders' guides and plan-books, often sponsored or endorsed by denominational authorities.

My sample is New Jersey, not the mid-Atlantic, so any generalizations ought to be qualified by that limited sample. To date, I have photographed and completed very basic research on almost 1,400 religious structures erected before 1900 that still survive in the state. That's about half the total that were erected from initial settlement in the 1640s to 1900. Fully half have been razed, burned down, or dismantled and carted off to be rebuilt as barns or other uses—most of which have been lost to the historical record.

Keely is represented in the state (by attribution) for least 17 churches, all Catholic, erected between 1846 and 1886. At least two of those are attributed to *Charles* Patrick Keely, his son. Firm identification is sometimes arduous work—Jeremiah O'Rourke's obituary credits him with a church that is surely Keely's, Keely is credited with one that is probably O'Rourke's; both Keely and L.J. O'connor are credited with the same church in South Amboy, and others, including a nondescript Baptist church in Jersey city, assert Keely's involvement on no evidence whatsoever.

I would hesitate on the basis of my sample to say there is a Keely style, as there is an Upjohn style or a Richardson Romanesque style. His work in New Jersey exhibits a substantial versatility, as well as close attention to materials, detail and craftsmanship. He designed pews, reredos and altars as well as the overall plan, paid close attention to materials, and in many ways seems to be a precursor of the Arts and Crafts Movement that emphasized the handcrafted over the manufactured. Some trace the roots of his work to Pugin; I am a bit skeptical. He is much less committed to the Gothic idiom than Pugin, or even the Ecclesiologists of the Anglican church.

I would like to begin by putting his work in the context of mid-Atlantic religious architecture, which I believe was shaped by three major forces: pluralism, refinement & immigration

**Pluralism.** There was no established church in the Jersey colony. Quakers and Presbyterians were simply too numerous and politically powerful, and too well organized by the time the Society for Propagation of the Faith in Foreign Parts was organized about 1701. Although early immigrants brought along their own building styles and traditions—the Dutch octagonal churches in Brooklyn served as models for several Reformed churches in New Jersey, for example—pluralism will be a determinant only in the nineteenth century, when congregations and denominational authorities urged more stylish churches as a means of *competing* with other denominations.

With the Second Great Revival early in the 19th century came a proliferation of prophets and sects, each competing for adherents. By the 1850s, denominational authorities were issuing planbooks, urging their congregations to build more stylishly in the realization that architectural style was one of the potent means of attracting members. Pluralism led to competition which spurred the interest in religious architecture.

That might have been for naught had the Puritan idea prevailed—that meetinghouses ought to be as simple and unadorned as possible.

**Refinement.** Richard Bushman's work (*The Refinement of America*) really brought this concept to the forefront a numbers of years ago. He argued and convincingly demonstrated that after the Revolutionary war, many people in the settled areas were buying tea sets, silver spoons, and fancy furnishings and clothes. They built homes with parlors and imported wallpaper, and sent their daughters to dancing school. Stoves were added to unheated churches, and decorative elements, including stained glass windows were no longer anathema to even Puritan congregations. The Calvinistic traditions that everything be as simple as necessary was eventually overwhelmed by the rising affluence and a desire for gentility. Eventually this spirit could be seen in the churches—elaborate and decorative work could be justified as being to the glory of god, Refinement could be identified with piety. And a lack of refinement might be considered an insult to god.

In that attitude, even the most rigidly Calvinistic church could adopt elements of the high-styled Catholic and Episcopal buildings, which they looked at with no little envy. As long as the emphasis was on the pulpit rather than the altar, just about any excess could be justified.

**Immigration.** This may be the single most significant factor in American cultural history. Until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, American cultural life was based on an Anglo-Saxon Protestant populace. I am ignoring, of course the substantial black population that existed in New Jersey, significant parts of which were enslaved as late as the 1830s. In architectural history their meetinghouses and churches hardly rate a footnote. Immigration brought thousands of Irish and German Catholics to America before the Civil War, and several times that many from additional counties in middle Europe in the 1870s and 1880s. There was a need in New Jersey for dozens of new churches, many of them Catholic.

There had been early 19th century Catholic services of some sort in New Jersey—perhaps by a furtive priest from New York or Philadelphia ministering to an individual family, but not until the state's constitution granted full civil and political rights to Catholics in 1834 were they free to acquire property, build churches and hold services.

Now let's look at Keely's work in New Jersey.

The churches are organized chronologically.

I suspect there are other churches by Keely that I have not identified.

It is entirely possible that a couple I will show may not be Keely's work, although he is commonly credited with all of these.

Like Mark Twain, who is credited with a number of aphorisms he never said, it seems any Catholic church of the last half of the 19th century might be attached to Keely if the actual architect was unknown.

So let us be cautious in cases where the data is missing or equivocal.



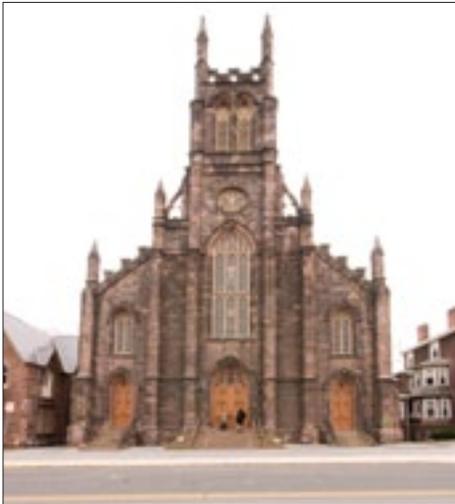
### **St. Patrick's pro Cathedral**

Newark

Began in 1846; there was a 2 year hiatus because the contractor-builder disappeared, then construction resumed in 1848 and continued to completion in 1850. The church is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

It stands in a prominent location, very near the center of town, and was the second Catholic church built in the city. Father Moran, who was a bit of an architectural historian and probably carved some of the decorative elements of Newark's earlier Catholic church, St. John's, gets much credit for the church, but Keely clearly had the major hand in the design. He had been “working in obscurity for the Diocese of Newark since the early 1840s,” so was well-known to the local Catholic establishment. Incidentally, Jeremiah O'Rourke (Keely's major rival in New

Jersey) later became a member of this parish and was responsible for the 1870 renovation and alternations.



### **St. Peter the Apostle**

New Brunswick

Sited on the edge of the Rutgers campus, built in 1854-1865. The church recently got major state grant for restoration. Twelve years ago the church was credited to O'Rourke on the church's website; Someone (besides me) questioned that attribution (O'Rourke was working as an apprentice and it is doubtful that he would have been given the responsibility for a major church). The website was revised to credit Keely, perhaps on the basis of an exceptional investigation and report by a friend of mine, Dennis Bertland. National Register applications for NJ now have been scanned and are available online. This was prepared

by Bertland and is an excellent example of historical scholarship.



### **St. Mary's Abbey Church**

Newark

Built in 1857, and associated with the Benedictines. Listed on the National Register.

The earlier church was the one that was burned by the Know-Nothing mob in 1854.

There is a persistent myth that the plans for the church had been brought by monks from Bavaria, but recent research has firmly established that Keely designed the interior. The architect was Henry Englebert of NY. Tower was based on drawings and sketched (not plans) from St Boniface in Munich. Elaborate painting and stained glass from Mayer Atelier, Munich.



**St. John's Church/ Cathedral of St John the Baptist  
Paterson**

Built 1865-1870. Listed on the National Register  
It was know as St. John's Church until 1938 when Paterson was named separate diocese, and then became a cathedral. The stated intention was to build the most impressive church in the state, which was a reach because the members of the parish were mostly laborers in the many factories and mills of Paterson, and they could not count on many wealthy donors. The cost was \$100,000. It is built of local stone

It is worthwhile to note that over the 20 year period from 1846 to 1865, Keely was apparently involved in only 4 churches in New Jersey. There were 18 Catholic churches erected in the state during that period. Although it is sometimes asserted that Keely monopolized Catholic church-building in the middle of the 19th century, that is not quite the case in New Jersey.



**Monastery and Church of St. Michael the Archangel  
Union City**

Erected for the Passionate Fathers in 1869-75.  
Listed on the National Register  
Keely did the church and the dormitories. The NR application says the building is a "combination of Early Christian, Romanesque, Byzantine and Renaissance." It strikes me as basically a provincial Neo-classical church, nothing whatever Gothic about it. Keely apparently did not have the passionate attachment to Gothic that Pugin, Upjohn and O'Rourke did, although that seemed to be his major architectural style (or that of his clients). At this time there was substantial German Catholic immigration in the Jersey City area, and the Church was making an effort

to bring in and promote more German priests.



**St. Michael's parish church**

Jersey City

Built in 1869-1876

Red brick building with a strong neoclassical facade.

St. Michael's has been combined with several other parishes in the city—Now called Parish of the Resurrection. Services in English and Vietnamese.

Ted Furey remarked that the church is very similar to St. James the Greater in Boston, erected in 1873.



**Sacred Heart**

Mount Holly

Built 1872

Catholics at the time were relegated to the outskirts of the town, with the blacks and the Methodists. There was a new minister from Ireland and this was his first parish.

He persuaded Keely to take on the project; years later he moved on to Trenton and again engaged Keely in a much larger project. This is a red brick building in the Gothic manner.

It was never intended to have a steeple atop the tower. It served until sometime in the 1960s, and is now used for community meetings, recreation, etc.



### **St. Joseph's church**

Jersey City

Built 1872-1873

There is no mention of Keely on church's website or of any other architect, but widely (and correctly, in my opinion) credited to Keely. It stands across the street from the City Hall/Courthouse, which was the locus of the Irish/Democratic political machine that gave Jersey's electoral votes to McClellan instead of Lincoln in the 1864 election (according to James McPherson, the leading Civil War historian--his book, *The Battle Cry of Freedom* is the best single volume history of the Civil War).



### **St. Patrick's Church**

Jersey City

Built 1871-1877

The National Register application says this is Keely's only known commission in Jersey City, which is obviously incorrect. O'Rourke's obituary on the front page of the *New York Times* incorrectly credits him with this church. It is an exceptionally large building, and there is a cluster of associated buildings--residences, school, etc.



**St. Joseph's**  
Washington (Warren County)  
Built in 1872-1873.  
A wooden-frame church with clerestory; atypical.  
Now Catholic Charities.  
The church's website says "plans were made by John A. Keely, the famous Brooklyn architect." Randall Gabrielan says there is a similar church in North Carolina.



**St. Philips and St. James**  
Phillipsburg  
Original church designed by O'Rourke and built in 1860. This church designed by Charles Patrick Keely, was built in stages around the original walls.  
Doubtful that anything of the original survives.



**St. Mary's Church**  
South Amboy  
Built 1873-1876.  
Note the polychrome belt courses  
Although sometimes attributed to Keely, I have seen no documentation of that. The church is also claimed for NY architect Lawrence J. O'Connor, who did the excellent church in Morristown. I am inclined to accept O'Connor as the architect, mostly on matters of style.

**St. Bridget's**



**Jersey City**

Built 1882-1890

The church complex occupies an entire city block with school, residences. The first church was built for Irish laborers on the Erie Lackawanna RR tunnel; this is the congregation's second church. A 1995 history (of dubious credibility) says the architect was someone named Rossi, but no other details. I have not been able to find a 19th century architect by that name. Other sources give Keely credit.

**Church of the Sacred Heart**



**Trenton**

Built 1884-1889. Listed on the National Register.

The priest from Mount Holly graduated to this parish shortly after the earlier church burned. He again sought out Keely to built this large Neoclassical building in a most prominent location. It reminds me of churches in Montreal. *Trompe l'oeil* paintings by a fellow named Baroldi. Stained glass by John Morgan & Sons of Brooklyn



**Church of the Sacred Heart**

**New Brunswick**

Built 1883-1886; tower added in 1907.

Firm attribution (contracts & buildings documents) to Keely. After some troublesome years, the church is reaching out to the largely Hispanic population in the area.

**Church of the Holy Cross**



Rumson (Monmouth County)

Built 1885

A large wooden-frame church on prominent property. The church website says architect was Charles Keely.

### Holy Cross



Harrison (Hudson County)

Built 1886

It has been attributed to Keely, But I believe it is more likely to have been design by O'Rourke. In some ways it presages the design of the cathedral in Newark O'Rourke was to begin in a few years.

What should we take away from Keely's work in New Jersey?

his versatility

his attention to detail and materials – part of Arts and Crafts mentality

a need to verify attributions--do not accept the standard assumptions

Seven of Keely's buildings in the state are listed on the National Register (St Patrick's Pro Cathedral, Trenton's Sacred Heart, Paterson's St John's Cathedral, New Brunswick's St Peters, Union City's St Michael's church and monastery, and Newark's St Mary's Abbey church). That reflects as much on the energy and motivation of the parishioners as on the quality of the buildings.

In their location, scale and quality Keely's churches established that the Catholic Church was a legitimate participation in Christian America. The buildings asserted that legitimacy in that they were fully the equal, and often the preeminent church in the city. In most cases, even the Gothic piles of stone erected by the Episcopalians had to yield pride of place to the Catholic church.

Newark, Trenton, Paterson, Camden, Elizabeth, Jersey City—even smaller towns like Morristown, Red Bank, Lambertville have large, well-designed Catholic churches that set a standard that the old-line Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist and even Episcopal churches had to try to measure up. In that, they performed a valuable service. They could no longer be relegated to the outskirts of town.

Keely's churches provided a largely immigrant population a source of pride, an identification, a marvel of elegance and for some, a trace of an architectural style from the old country. The Catholic churches were the locus of community, language, festivals, customs, employment, and even political power. Not a bad legacy that.

For more information on the 1,350 surviving churches in the state, see my website. To purchase any of the 13 books I have written on the early architecture of the state, go to Amazon or to my main publisher's website.

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