St. Monica's Church

Jamaica, Queens, New York City, New York, United States

Built in 1856-57 Saint Monica's Roman Catholic Church was constructed by roaster mason Anders Peterson under the supervision of the Reverend Anthony Farley. Marked by its distinctive central campanile, a feature reminiscent of the Romanesque architecture of northern Italy, Saint Monica's is one of the earliest surviving examples of Early Romanesque Revival architecture in New York, and one of the only Roman Catholic Churches in the city executed in this style.

At the beginning of the 19th century the Roman Catholic Church of America included about 50 priests, 50 churches and a congregation of 100,000 members. Since Maryland was the only one of the thirteen original colonies to tolerate Catholicism, Baltimore was the chosen seat for the first American bishop who was appointed in 1789.

By 1808 the growth of the new nation had attracted many more European Catholics, and New York was made one of four new Catholic dioceses.

From the three churches in New York City the priests journeyed by horse and boat to the Catholics throughout the neighboring countryside. Finally in 1822 St. Paul's church was built in Brooklyn, and it shared the duties of ministering to the out-missions.

By 1838 Jamaica had acquired a sizeable Irish Catholic population. Many of the large farms employed Irish laborers, and the construction of the Long Island Railroad along Jamaica Avenue in the 1830s brought an increasing number of Irish workers to the area.

In October of 1838 Father Michael Curran of Harlem offered the first Mass to about 200 area Catholics in the home of John McLaughlin, a blacksmith. Within a few months of this first gathering, the village of Jamaica became an out-mission of St. Paul's in Brooklyn.

Recognizing the needs of the Catholics in Jamaica, St. Paul's priest, Father Richard Waters began a campaign in June of 1839 to collect money for the establishment of a church. A newspaper notice stated their case:

The Catholics of Jamaica, L.I., respectfully inform their brethren in New York, Brooklyn and elsewhere, that they are gathering subscriptions for the erection of a Catholic Church-in Washington St., Jamaica, as the inconvenience of being without a place of worship is severely felt by the Catholic population of that neighborhood as well as by casual residents and visitors.

In July of 1839 the Augustine priest Janes O'Donnell succeeded Father Waters and continued the project at Jamaica. Land was secured, not far from the present church site and on June 2, 1840, a small frame church was dedicated to Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine. When a resident-pastor was finally secured in 1848, St. Monica's established out-missions of its own at Flushing, Southold, Westbury, Cold Spring and Far Rockaway.

Between 1841 and 1850 crop failures in Ireland prompted the arrival of nearly 100,000 Catholic immigrants to the United States. A large proportion of these people settled in New York and as a result of the increasing importance of the diocese , it was elevated to an archdiocese. Under New York's nationally prominent archbishop, John Hughes,a substantial building program was initiated. Besides the architectural master pice of St. Patricks' Cathedral in Manhattan, Hughes left an archdiocese of 150 priests, 35 churches, 3 colleges, 50 schools and over 400,000 parishioners when he died in 1864.

One of these churches was a new brick structure designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style for St. Monica's in Jamaica.

In 1854 at the age of 40, Father Anthony Farley, who was bom in County Cavan, Ireland, began his influential term as pastor of St. Monica's. Arriving in this country at the age of six, Farley studied in Montreal and received his religious training at the College and Seminary of St. Vincent de Paul in Jefferson County, New York.

Upon his arrival at St. Monica's, Farley began plans for the construction of a new church on five lots of land on Washington Street (new 160th Street) . Four of these lots, near the old frame church, were given to the church by a French woman from New York and Farley purchased the fifth.

The priest selected Jamaica master mason Anders Peterson, a Dane who also owned a local grist mill, as contractor. Peterson figures prominently in contemporary building history of the area and was also responsible for the fine masonry of the First Reformed Church (1861-63) and of Grace Episcopal Church (1861-63).

Some accounts suggest that Farley produced the design for the church but until more definite proof can be found, we must assume he only supervised the work.

The corner stone of the building was laid in 1856 and on August 15, 1857, Bishop Loughlin, the first Bishop of Brooklyn, presided over the dedication of the church.

Father Anthony Farley was a strong leader within the Jamaica community as

well as within his church. He was a friend of ex-Governor John A. King and was a scholar of French Catholic writing. He especially admired the Abbe Bougard, the Vicar General of Orleans and was responsible for translating two of Bougard's works into English. One of these, which was entitled Life of Saint Monica, was published in 1885.

Built in brick for $25,000, St. Monica's is a basilica-shaped church, 49h feet wade and 97 feet long. The design which is an example of the Early Romanesque Revival in .America is characterized by its tall central campanile, round-arched openings, corbel tables and pilaster strips.

Following the success of Richard Upjohn's introduction of the style to the United States with his Church of the Pilgrims (1844-46) in Brooklyn and Janes Renwick's Church of the Puritans (1846) in Manhattan, the Early Romanesque Revival became a popular mode for building curing the 1850s and 1860s. This style, which had become so well regarded by the non-Anglican (Episcopal) Protestant sects, was extensively adopted in New York.

Because the Gothic Revival style had become so closely identified with the Anglican Ecclesiological movement in England and the U.S. other denominations turned to the earlier raid simpler forms of the Romanesque from which to adapt a style to modern needs and taste. Germany writ.; its strong Calvinist tradition took the lead.

In order to disassociate the new style from the medieval Romanesque, the Germans call their adaptation the Rundbogenstil or the round arch style. As the German term implies, the new style, though based on the round-arched Romanesque, drew motifs from all styles utilizing the round arch. The German architects had during the early 19th century enthusiastically pared down their Classical Revival forms to simple geometric shapes and they approached the medieval style in a similar manner.

Books such as Karl Mollinger's Elemente des Rundbogenstiles (1846) and the English publication by William Whewell, Architectural Notes on German Churches (1842), reveal the bold outlines of the style. "Round-arched openings and corbel tables were set in high flat brick walls which were derived from the Lombard style, the Romanesque of northern Italy.

The strong vertical emphasis node evident by tail symmetrical towns on the facade was further reinforced by flat pilaster strips making no reference to a base or capital. Elaboration was held to a minimum. Motifs such as corbel tables and window openings were finished with simple square edges.

The Germans also borrowed motifs from later periods. From the early Gothic they adopted the lobed quatrefoil which corresponds with their frequent use of

the Venetian window with its lobed head. During the 1830s such well-known architects as Schinkel, Gartner and Ziebland were making the Rundogenstil popular throughout Germany.

In 1849 Robert Dale Owen, in collaboration with New York architect James Renwick, published a highly influential book entitled Hints on Public Architecture which helped to publicize both Renwick's new masterpiece, the Smithsonian Institution and its round arch style.

Owen chose to call the style "Arch architecture" thereby disassociating it from the Romanesque and aligning it with the German movement. Robert Owen identified New York as the leader in producing early specimens of "Arch Architecture" or as we now term it, Early Romanesque Revival. Richard Upjohn's design for the Church of the Pilgrims set the style in Brooklyn and soon many others followed: Plymouth Church (1849), South Third Street M.E. Church (1855), and South Congregational Church (1857).

Saint Monica's was definitely in the vanguard of churches to adopt the new style. The three-bay facade of Saint Monica's is marked by a four-story central entrance tower which projects from the gabled basilica. The tower is linked to the church by a double belt course with cross bar.- which runs alcove the entrance portals. The tower is flanked by pilaster strips cut by round-arch panels. In the first three stories of the tower there is diminution of the fenestration.

A marble plaque above the second story window reads "St. Monica, 1856." The top of the tower which is necked by a belt course is pierced on the front by a round-arche triad which originally contained louvers. The structure is crowned by a bold flat end gable cornice.

A corbel table runs along the eaves and thin pilaster strips provide a prominent vertical emphasis separating the bays and emphasizing the corners. A square cut reveal is the only elaboration of the round arched openings.

Early photographs show that the corbel table once ran along the raking of the facade and supported the round arch triad at the too of the tower. Between 1891-93 an apse was added to the eastern end of the church and the interior was remodelled. Four gabled darners once lined the roof.

Because of its strong verticality and importance to the facade, the tower is reminiscent of the traditional Italian campanile, or bell tower. On the other hand the tower lucks the square plan of a campanile and because of its flatter rectangular plan suggests the English gabled bell-cote. The bell-cote, a smaller scaled element than the campanile, was a popular Gothic Revival motif employed in England by Augustus Welby Pugin and in the United States by

Richard Upjohn.

While Pugin most often placed the bell-cote as a minor motif on the ridge of the roof, Upjohn characterized his facades with a low relief central projection which rose to receive the gabled bell-cote. It is interesting to note that while architect William Keely of Brooklyn promoted the Gothic Revival as the appropriate style for American Catholic Churches, St. Monica's and St. Patricks Roman Catholic Church (1856) in Brooklyn presented alternative designs, characterized by a central campanile and a symmetrical design program.

In 1973 when the City of New York took over St. Monica's as part of the York College Urban Renewal Site, the Roman Catholic Congregation was forced to abandon their 123 year old church. Although the campus development has suffered some delay, St. Monica's with its spacious interior will adapt easily to many college needs and remains an integral part of the development, program. St. Monica's will also provide the college with an important link to the area's tradition of fine building.

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