

St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church.
New York City.
New York Co.

HABS No. 4-3
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

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Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

ST. PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
No. 31 Barclay Street, New York City.

(at the southeast corner of Church Street)

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Historical Introduction

This is the second St. Peter's Church on this site. A brief history of the founding of the parish, including the building of the first church is a desirable introduction to a consideration of the present structure.

The first St. Peter's was the first Roman Catholic Church erected in New York City; although, as early as 1685, King James II, himself a Roman Catholic while professing to uphold the State religion in England which was Protestant, sent Thomas Dongan, a Roman Catholic, to be governor of New York Province, and he permitted services to be held secretly in Fort James, at the foot of Broadway in 1687. During the Dongan administration, the first Roman Catholic families settled in this city; but the prejudice against them was so strong, - after the abdication of King James in the Protestant Revolution of 1688 in England, which had its repercussions in the Leisler Rebellion in New England and New York in 1689, - that oppressive laws were passed against Catholics under subsequent governors until the American Revolution and the passage of the Constitution of New York State in 1777. After the war, when the independence of this country was acknowledged, full toleration was enjoyed, and every man was allowed to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

See Chronology in Stokes's Iconography of Manhattan Island, Vol. IV, under those dates.

The Roman Catholics in New York City took immediate advantage of this, and in November 1783, a congregation was formed under the ministry of Rev. Andrew Nugent, who, it is believed, was sent there by the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Maryland. Their place of worship was in a building in Vauxhall Garden, an entertainment resort extending from Warren to Chambers

Street along the North River.

One of the most active men in this enterprise was Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, the Consul of France for New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, who with Jose Roiz Silva, James Stewart and Henry Dufflin, became incorporated on June 10, 1785, by the name of "The Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church in the City of New York." As the Vauxhall Building was not entirely suitable for a place of worship, they applied to the Common Council of the City for the use on Sundays of the large room in the Exchange at the foot of Broad Street, but when the petition was not granted (because the building was insecure) they resolved at once to build a church of their own.

Father Charles Whelan obtained from the Corporation of Trinity Church a ground lease of five lots on the south side of Barclay Street at the southeast corner of Church Street. A carpenter-shop on this land became a temporary church for the Roman Catholics on Manhattan Island.

Chronology in Stokes's Iconography, V: 1201, under April 30, 1785; Shea, Life and Times of the Most Rev. John Carroll, 1888, pp. 266-67; Catholic Encycl., XI: 21, title "New York."

The project of erecting a Roman Catholic Church in New York was advanced not only by the energy of the French Consul-General but also by the patronage of Don Diego de Gardoqui, the Spanish Minister to the United States. Father Whelan and the trustees undertook to build the church by bravely adopting a plan beyond their actual means, and hopefully looking forward to future progress. It was to be a handsome brick structure 48 foot front by 81 feet in depth, with a square tower. They addressed petitions for aid to the Kings of France and Spain, the latter being forwarded through Don Diego.

Results were so encouraging that Don Diego laid the cornerstone on October 5, 1785, and named the church St. Peter's. The trustees were not able, however, to proceed with the work at once, but continued to collect funds for the purpose in New York and in Europe.

Stokes, cited above, V. 1205, under date of October 5, 1785; citing Shea, 280; the N.Y. Packet, October 10, 1785; and Ecclesiastical

Records, VII: 1451.

An advertisement, published on May 26, 1786, announced that the church was to be built by contract. "Any master Carpenter or Mason, willing to undertake the building of said Church, may see the proposal and plans by applying to Lynch and Stoughton, No. 9 Princess Street."

Daily Advertiser, May 26, 1786.

Notice was published that the consecration would be held on November 4, 1786. But the ceremony was postponed until further progress was made in the building. Instead, as that day was the anniversary of St. Carlos (the feast day of King Charles III of Spain, and in honor also of the heir apparent to the Spanish throne who bore the same name), a solemn mass was held in the unfinished church by the Rev. Mr. Nugent, the rector, assisted by the chaplain of the Spanish minister and the Rev. Jose Phelan.

Independent Journal or General Advertiser, Nov. 4, 1786.

Four views of the first St. Peter's Church, which was in Georgian or early Federal Style of architecture, are mentioned by Mr. Stokes in his Iconography, above cited. One is an original drawing, without date, by John McComb, Jr., the architect of the City Hall, entitled "Front View of St. Peter's Church with intended Steeple," which is filed with the McComb collection in the New York Historical Society. This clearly indicates that McComb was the architect of the First St. Peter's. The second view ^{is} a glimpse of the spire as it appears in a view of the City in 1802, reproduced on plate 77, Vol. III of ibid., and described on pp. 468-69. The third is plate number 18 of the Bourne Series of New York Views of 1831, listed in ibid., III: 597. The fourth is a scarce vignette view looking west from the Astor House on Broadway, inserted in the border of the Colton Map of 1836-1840, now hanging in the upper corridor of the New York Public Library, and reproduced and described in ibid., Plate 124, III: 687-88.

The Present Edifice: Its Date and Design

All the foregoing is preliminary to an account of the present edifice. By 1836, after the first church had been in use for 50 years and was getting into a ruinous condition, it was thought necessary to rebuild. As the congregation had outgrown its capacity, however, it was decided to take it down and this was done. The corner-stone of the new church was laid on the same site on October 26, 1836, by Bishop DuBois, and the present substantial edifice of stone, in the Ionic Style, was built, having more than twice the capacity of the former church.

Greenleaf, History of the Churches of New York., 1846, p. 335.

In September, 1837, public worship was commenced in the basement, and, on February 25, 1838, the principal auditorium was consecrated by Bishop Hughes.

Ibid.; also Farley, History of St. Patrick's Cathedral, 1908, p. 13; The Evergreen, 1849, p. 321.

The present church is a fine example of the Greek Revival period in architecture. The building faces north. Six immense Ionic columns of granite, four feet in diameter at their base, and with the entasis in the fashion of the Parthenon, form a majestic portico. Above its cornice of wood there is a pediment across the entire front. In a niche in the center of the pediment, a carved wooden statue of St. Peter is recessed and secured to the masonry behind it by a heavy bolt. On the ridge of the roof near the front is a huge cross, constructed of heavy wood timbers which carry through the roof and are securely framed and bolted to the attic beams.

The front of the church is built of dressed granite blocks. Granite steps lead up to the level of the nave, and on either side of them are great granite "cheeks" which receive the ends of the steps at right and left, the first few steps at the bottom returning against the fronts of these blocks of stone so these steps can be mounted from the side.

The exterior walls of the chapel, shown on the east elevation, are of rusticated brownstone and granite, with pilasters at the extreme north and south ends.

The west elevation has an area below the sidewalk level along its entire length, and the stonework here is all granite with no rusticated stone.

The four exterior walls are originals except for slight changes in some of the doors and windows. There are three huge pairs of oak entrance doors the upper sections of which are fixed. Above the tall center doors is a marble tablet bearing an Italian inscription; and flanking the others are inscribed bronze tablets.

Although many changes have been made in the interior, the original ornamental ceiling of the nave has been largely preserved. There are 12 large stained glass windows, and a fine marble altar.

A new organ loft has been installed in the chancel. The original gallery for slaves, extended along the two sides and rear of the nave. This gallery has been replaced by a single gallery across the rear. On this gallery the original organ front has been set back against the rear wall.

As originally built, the chapel occupied the basement floor (with sacristy and boiler-room) the floor being dipped toward the front and the sanctuary floor being approximately on a level with the rear of the chapel.

One relic of Old St. Peter's remains -- the bell. It hangs under the roof of the present church, although its tones have been silenced for many years. It bears the following inscription: "Made under the inspection of Charles Sherry at Nantes, 30 of June, 1806."

(From field notes of Frederick Kayser, architect, New York City.)

A marble tablet in the church states that the building was consecrated November 22, 1885; renovated and reopened June 4, 1905; grand altar consecrated June 4, 1905; and side altars consecrated December 30, 1905.

Written May 1st, 1934, by
Thomas W. Hotchkiss
Thomas W. Hotchkiss,
118 Pine Street, Peekskill, N.Y.

Approved: *Wm. Dewey Foster*

Reviewed 1934, H.C.

