

St. Luke's History Magazine

In the Beginning...

(Part IV – “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5)

Submitted by Ted Latham

The thought, design and steps in creating a building provide us with limitless metaphorical connections to the creation of a human body and life (and vice versa). Not only are our bodies gifted with the ability to survive, our lives also are gifted with the ability to think, to reason, and to use technology to build things that reflect our spiritual, aesthetic and physical understanding of the world at any given time. Unlike in the Old Testament where temples, and to a lesser extent synagogues, were an important and essential part of worship, there are no references in the New Testament of Christian church buildings. The earliest Christians worshipped as two or more in whatever structure they could find. Early Christians, as we probably do today, considered the “Church” to be collections of people representing the body of Christ. Even today in our “Church” of St. Luke’s here in Metuchen, this metaphor is cleverly represented in the



poster art shown above, created along with our recent St. Luke’s Church directory. A small portion of this poster taken from just over the right shoulder of Christ is enlarged to the left showing some of the members of the Body of Christ here at St. Luke’s. The body of this poster Christ is made up of our bodies and our faces.

Typically congregations find cause for celebrating milestones in their own Church’s spiritual creation and/or physical history, and such is the case at St. Luke’s. Some of us were around to celebrate our 100th anniversary in 1968 and even more of us remember celebrating our 125th in 1993. It would seem that we should be celebrating our 150th 25 years later in 2018. So why are we celebrating our 150th in 2014? After all, our church building, according to the commemorative cornerstone fixed within the brick foundation of the church building, indicates that the building was completed and dedicated in 1868.

A recent vestry, recognizing that the physical church building was indeed created in 1868, reflected on the New Testament interpretation of “church” as “the body of Christ.” Shortly after the Civil War in 1864, on a date difficult to determine, a small number of the Body of Christ in Metuchen that identified with the Episcopal Church started to grow in size and in less than two years they needed their own building for corporate worship, they were a “Church” in need of a church building. Thus, the vestry recognized that the Episcopal “Church” as the “Body of Christ” in Metuchen existed before the church building, and the vestry adopted 1864 as the start of what would become St. Luke’s Episcopal Church.

In the waning months of the Civil War (probably late in 1864) an informally organized group of unrecorded Episcopalians began to travel on a regular basis to hear the Rev. R.M. Abercrombie’s preaching at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in nearby Rahway. They could have walked to Rahway along the Essex-Middlesex Turnpike (Rte 27), travel by horse or carriage, or they could have jumped on a train at the old Metuchen Station on Lake Avenue, and after a few minutes of riding exit at Rahway Station, and walk the very short distance remaining to St. Paul’s. The formalization of a group that would worship in the parlor of Mr. Henry Hardy, at the corner of Amboy Avenue and



[St Paul's Rahway](#)
[Dedicated 1836](#)

Main Street, started in early 1867. Names of the first families of Episcopalians to form an arm of the “ Body of Christ” to organize Sunday worship on a regular basis in Metuchen were; the Hardys, Clarksons, Strongs, Robins, Garrisons, Smiths, Cookes, Aldens, Thornes, Garrisons, Mockridges, Paddocks, Yinglings, Moss’, Holy’s and Boyds. As the list of families grew the meeting place was temporarily housed at the Dutch Reformed Church of Metuchen, and then in bigger rooms at the Presbyterian Church. The services were celebrated by part time, itinerant Episcopal priests. Anticipating further growth of this congregation, Rev. Abercrombie encouraged the group to raise funds and begin to plan on constructing a Church building. Before the vestrymen accepted the gift of land from Mr. Thomas W. Strong at the corner of what is now Rte 27 and Oak Avenue, sites across from the current location of the St. Francis CYO, the location of the current Bank of New York, and atop the hill where the Metuchen First Baptist Church is on Rte 27, were all considered but were too expensive. The Boyd family was the first to kick off the fund drive with a contribution, and when the pot grew to \$2,500.00 the newly elected vestry felt confident enough to take out a mortgage to start designing and constructing a church building that would eventually cost \$10,000.

A congregation was growing, a vestry was formed, a building fund was started, a mortgaged was promised, the land was donated, and the next thing to do was to design a church building. Although there were probably many opinions on what the new church building should look like, and a committee could be formed to design the new building, the vestry wisely

opted to seek the services of a professional architect of a “Carpenter Gothic” style church building. The architect would need to be one of the very best in the world and be famous for having a good knowledge of beautiful aesthetic physical design elements of a building that would reflect the spiritual components of “modern” 19th Century Episcopal theology and liturgical practices, an understanding of current structural design practices, access to the most advanced construction technologies, employ the best skilled laborers, and use local cost effective materials that were indigenous to the surrounding land categorized as a “temperate deciduous forest.” Oh yeah – the architect had to work cheap, in fact he needed to work for free. It was a long shot, but someone like the famous church architect, Richard Upjohn, would do.

Popping up all over the 37 States in the early and mid 19th Century were a new breed of fashionable church buildings imported from England known as “Gothic Revivals.” If stone was readily and cheaply available from the local environs, the church would be built from stone and be known as a “Stone Gothic Church.” If wood was the primary resource for building the structure, it would then be known as a “Carpenter Gothic



Presbyterian Church built in 1836

Church.” Two church buildings that preceded the building of St. Luke’s already set the fashionable trend for the Carpenter Gothic style here in Metuchen. Their physical design elements were consistent with the spiritual, aesthetic and physical design of a church building that reflected the Gothic Revival movement. Although they no longer exist due to demolitions and fires, they were the old Presbyterian Church and the old Dutch Reformed Church, places



Dutch reformed Church

our small, earliest congregations were temporarily using for Sunday worship. St. Luke’s vestry was also interested in constructing a third Carpenter Gothic Church building here in Metuchen, but it would need to be distinguished from the first two churches with a different organization of those elements that defined a carpenter gothic structure. In the late 17th Century, the Episcopal Church in England was moving away from any effect that the Protestant Reformation may have introduced into our liturgical practices and the church buildings that were recently designed throughout other parts of Europe to accommodate those Reformation worship practices. The Protestant Reformation church buildings were constructed in such a way that the building was dictating the form of liturgical practice and those practices were no longer relating to the spiritual feelings, theological dogma, and traditional liturgical practices in the early church in Europe. It was thought that by building gothic style church buildings, Anglicans would no longer be distracted with the Protestant Reformation thoughts and practices, and the Church of England might return to some more desirable fundamental

Built in 1858



Christian worship practices. Modern architects/designers/artisans to this day are always debating whether or not to create a structure where “form should follow function” or, “function should follow form.” In contemporary terms, when form and function are creatively balanced, the concept is called an “ergonomic fit.” If not given the full freedom to create an ergonomic fit, a designer/artist who wants to make a living will allow the customer paying for the job to make the call and creativity is lost to economy and/or some other practical expediency. A brief description follows of the Gothic Revival movement shown below from a biography of the best known Carpenter Gothic Church designers, Richard Upjohn:

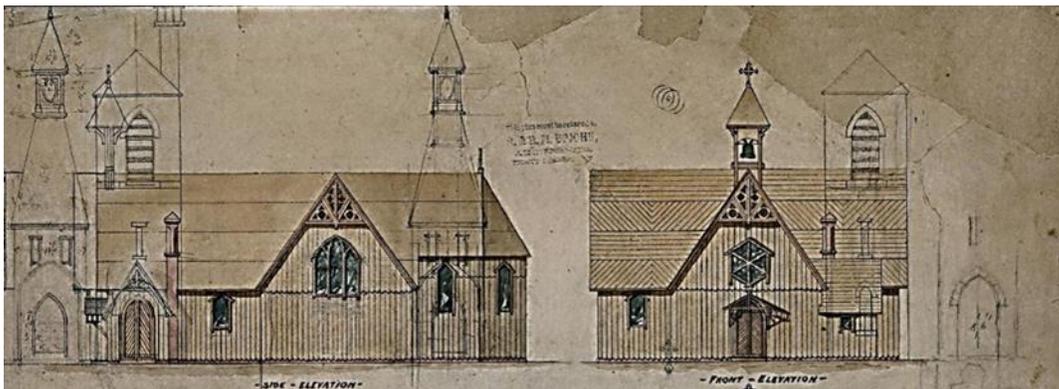
“In England, and especially at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the architectural Gothic revival had become identified with another revival, the return to earlier forms of worship in the Anglican church. Antiquarians looked back towards plainsong and the pointed arch, studying the pre-Reformation Gothic parish churches that they went on to restore and imitate. The Oxford movement and the Camden Society looked for certain architectural features that would embody ancient rituals. Among such features would be a deep chancel, often housing a choir, where the celebrant and the altar would be somewhat removed from the congregation; aisles for a ceremonial approach to the altar through a long, narrow nave; an interior with “dim religious light” and intense colours meant to transport the mind, through a more mystic approach to worship than had been current in 18th century England. To these practitioners, who dubbed themselves “ecclesiologists,” Gothic architecture was “sacramental”, that is, a visible manifestation of an inner truth: it was the only true architectural expression of the Christian faith, the architectural counterpart of the forms of worship they believed in. The work of building or preserving a Gothic church was work in the service of God.”

On a personal note, this description above that “Gothic architecture was **sacramental**”, reminds me of the question that Bishop Banyard asked me from our 1950’s Catechism that I was supposed to recite in order to be confirmed at St. James in Edison. His question: “What is a sacrament?” Miraculously, that was the last question I memorized 5 minutes before the service and I replied, “It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Of course I had no idea of the meaning of what I just said. The Bishop smiled, then he slapped me lighter than the rest of the confirmands, and I was in. Coincidentally, only this week I enjoyed a sermon on “icons of the church,” which seems to suggest that any physical thing that a human creates to the glory of God or to an understanding of our spiritual faith (church building, icon, poem, law, hypothetical construct, rubric, pair of shoes, etc.) is in its own way “sacramental.”

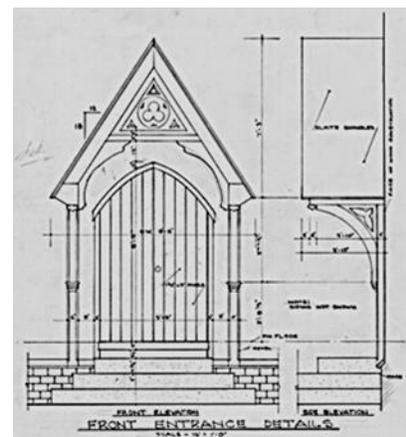
If the vestry in fact prayed for a famous and talented church architect to work for free, their prayers were answered. Richard Upjohn would provide the plans for constructing another, different looking carpenter gothic church in Metuchen, and there was hardly a charge. He also would probably never set foot in Metuchen. Upjohn was born in England in 1802 and raised as an Anglican. Although expected to choose the priesthood for a vocation, he apprenticed as a

carpenter. As a young man he immigrated to the United States and settled in Boston where he began to train himself as an architect specializing in carpenter gothic revival churches. In 1839 he was invited to relocate in New York City and was commissioned to renovate, redesign and reconstruct Trinity Church. The success of this famous Church project would spotlight his talents as an architect and his reputation was secure.

Upjohn totally immersed his architectural style in the gothic revival movement and began to create a catalogue of images and plans for gothic revival designs that could be adopted by even the poorest congregation in need of building a church. He knew he was doing the work of God. He indeed believed he was creating “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” The picture shows a catalog image of one such fundamental carpenter gothic design with variations in hand drawn options making the construction unique for a given congregation.



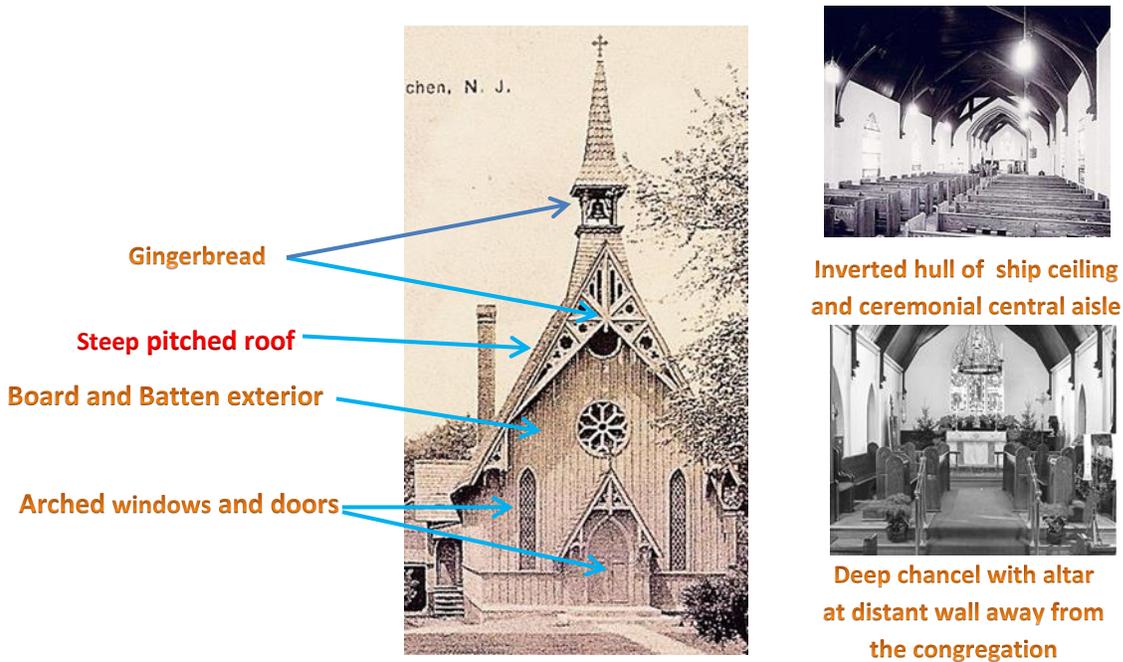
The carpenter gothic elements represented as being typical of such a church are all represented in this image. Pointed arches are fundamental elements used in windows, doors and passages from the nave to the chancel in the interior of the church. A steep roof which when viewed from the interior resembles the interior structure of the hull of a large ship or ark. This example has an exterior covered with a “board and Batten” covering, just like on St. Luke’s. Shingles and clap board were also acceptable. Although not necessary, the church was also trimmed in later churches with a fancy woodwork referred to as “gingerbread.” The gingerbread was added after the mid 19th Century invention of the powered scroll saw and was not initially appreciated. Many thought it cheapened the look of the building and was overused and gaudy. For larger buildings, if enough money was available, they were constructed with a cruciform floor plan characteristic of the great European gothic churches. Beside aesthetic sketches of interior and exterior views of the church, Upjohn also



provided detailed architectural plans with dimensions for all elements of the church with an example shown above. Does it look familiar?

The original vestry just needed to purchase the Upjohn catalog, chose the gothic options that they wanted and could afford, follow the dimensioned plans, and construct a church building. The options chosen for St. Luke's Church included a board and batten exterior finishing and that gaudy gingerbread added to the exterior, and a modified cruciform floor plan. Technically, St. Luke's Church is a "Board and Batten Carpenter Gothic Revival Church with Gingerbread Decorations." In the early 20th Century, Sears and Roebuck would offer for sale pre-cut home kits and assembly instructions to build a house. The neighborhood in Metuchen known as the "Radio Section" (in the area of north Main Street) still have many of these cute little cottages that were provided to house workers employed by Gulton Industries, fabricators of electrical and electronic components on Durham Avenue.

Here is a map labeling all of those carpenter gothic features listed above when St. Luke's Church building was completed in 1868.



After St. Luke's Church was constructed, and up to the present time, new ideas in liturgical practice continued to evolve reflecting new theological views and changes were suggested and sometimes completed in "rearranging the furnishings" within the building to be compatible with those new views. Some renovations were popular with the congregation and in other cases were so unpopular they were soundly rejected. With all of the changes that were made, somehow St. Luke's never lost its fundamental aesthetic identity as a Carpenter Gothic

Church. For this reason St. Luke's is considered as a very important and rare artifact of the gothic revival period of our country's church history.

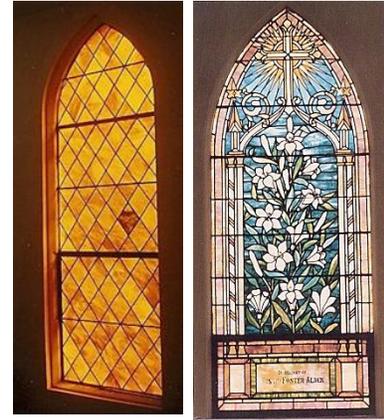
Carpenter Gothic architecture was not reserved for only church buildings. The style found its way into many different types of structures from churches to barns. They ranged from small buildings to large boats. The top building is a small Carpenter Gothic church that still serves in a rural area. I bet our St. Luke's gardeners would love to have a garden shed that looked like this. City folk might worship in a larger version of a carpenter gothic building, and there are even church buildings that everyone can not agree are actually carpenter gothic, or something else. The Seamen's Church Institute was founded in 1834, to serve the spiritual and personal needs of iternant sailors entering New York Harbor from distant lands. Some sailors could not leave their ships so the Institute built a carpenter gothic church to go to the sailors confined to their ship. The one shown here is the second "Floating Church" constructed in 1866. Mother Crafton spent several years as the Chaplain to these sailors using a more modern form of water transportation to visit the sailors, which also allowed transportation for some sailors into New York and New Jersey. The carpenter gothic style invaded the private homes in many neighborhoods throughout the Country. Some of these homes may still be found in Metuchen, and many more in nearby Plainfield.



After St. Luke's was dedicated in 1868, there were periods of congregational growth that required additions be placed on the building. On other occasions the original building was renovated to conform to new thoughts on liturgical practices that were acceptable to the congregation, but maintained the Carpenter Gothic aesthetic. And in some cases, suggested renovations were soundly rejected because they went too far in changing the character of the building style, or were just too expensive, or clashed with still currently used liturgical practices.

From the very beginning our building was in constant need of repair, the church ceiling fell in, the belfry dangerously near collapse due to rotting timber needed to be reconstructed in the 1890's, newly installed steam heating systems rarely worked, and the vestry tried to convince the congregation to move the Church property to the corner of Main Street and Rte 27, and at the insistence of the congregation a new stable was constructed to "park" their horses adjacent to a newly constructed privy. How would you like to be a resident on the other side of the fence of that combination? The earliest major renovation to the building was the

removal of the original amber colored windows with the replacement of stained glass images of Biblical symbols integrated with decorative geometric patterns. Whether or not the vestry ever planned on replacing the amber windows with the new windows that we enjoy today, an opportunity to begin the replacement resulted in a catastrophe of nature, or, perhaps and act of God. In 1906 all of Metuchen experienced a severe hail storm which broke out much of the original amber windows. The only amber windows still remaining is the one above the door exiting to Fryer Hall and in the small room to the left of the altar housing the organ. The new stained glass windows were gradually replaced over a period of time from parishoner contributions made as memorials to past and recently departed loved ones. The commemerations remain at the bottom of the windows. An original window and one of the “newer” stained glass replacements is shown above.



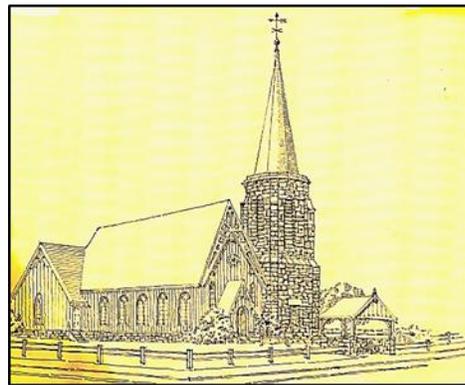
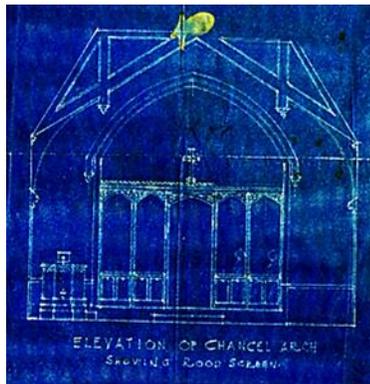
As music became a more important part of worship and a choir began to grow, there was a necessity for building an addition to the chancel in order to provide a space for the choristers. Parishoner Georger S. Silzer (formerly a governor of NJ in the 1920’s) chaired a building fund campaign in 1934 and within a week raised beyond the \$10,000 needed to extend the building. As a result of the extension, the altar was pushed further to the back of the church and of course further away from the people in the nave. The photograph (circa 1980’s at Christmas time) shows the final results of the construction completed in 1935.



The Chancel renovation shown above remained consistent with the Gothic Revival liturgical practices up until the 1990’s when acceptable modern liturgical practices in newer churches motivated us to bring the altar forward. This allowed the celebrant to be nearer to their congregation and face them at the same time. There will probably be further renovations to the chancel in the future, the current layout is provided in the view to the right.



Parishoner and well known local architect , Clement W. Fairweather, redesigned the chancel in the original 1935 renovation. At about the same time he also designed a traditional “rood screen,” also known as a chancel screen, jube, or choir screen. A rood screen is an ornate screen placed between the chancel and the nave and was consistent with traditional Gothic Revival furnishings. Possible reasons for its rejections may have included cost or a tradition that it was no longer valued. He also included an addition to the original church that included a new stone belfry and tower which would have allowed for the removal of the current steeple and belfry. I wonder why this one was rejected? Fairweather’s rejected designs are shown below.



Fairweather’s proposed “Rood Screen” and Stone tower with belfry”

Who knows what the future holds for our pretty little church building. I’m betting that there will be changes to it in the future. I wonder if those future “ecclesiologists” will propose changes that will be argued within the congregation based on the view that a church building should be viewed as a sacramental or iconic visual manifestation of an inner truth? Will economy force the rejections of such desired improvements? Will new technologies present themselves to help in order to maintain the acceptable character of this sacrament. Will changes be influenced by current trends for attracting new members? Will someone’s or some group’s personal view of aesthetics prevail with the support of the congregation? Will time take its toll on the building causing it to deteriorate beyond preservation? Will the congregation grow so big that we must tear down this little gem and replace it with a modern, trendy, or cost effective cathedral like structure? Who knows? More importantly, do we share the faith that the “Church,” not as a building, but as the “Body of Christ,” is more important, and that it is important enough that we help that concept of “Church” to prevail forever.