

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 23, 1982, Designation List 153
LP-1245

SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, CHAPEL, LADIES PARLOR, and RECTORY,
253-269 President Street and 358-366 Court Street, Borough of Brooklyn.
Chapel built 1851, architect unknown; Church built 1857, architect unknown; Ladies
Parlor built 1889, architect Frederick Carles Merry; Rectory built 1893, architect
Woodruff Leeming.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 345, Lots 31 and 40.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the South Congregational Church, Chapel, Ladies Parlor, and Rectory and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The South Congregational Church is Brooklyn's most notable surviving Early Romanesque Revival style building.¹ Located on a prominent corner in Carroll Gardens, one of Brooklyn's oldest residential neighborhoods, the church is a bold brick structure articulated by a memorable series of recessed brick arches expressive of the finest and most sophisticated Early Romanesque Revival design of the pre-Civil War period.

The idea of founding a Congregational church in the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn is attributed to Henry Ward Beecher, the minister of the nearby Plymouth Church and one of the best-known preachers of the period. In 1850 Beecher is reputed to have stood in a grassy field at what is now the corner of Court and President Streets and said, "Here, the next Congregational Church should be built."² In that year, local residents James Freeland, H.C. Bowen, and John T. Howard purchased, for \$7,500, the five lots that Beecher had indicated, and in 1851 they built a chapel with \$6,500 of their own funds.³ In February of that year the South Congregational Church was officially organized as it was believed "that the large and rapidly increasing population of this vicinity will, as soon as a faithful pastor can be obtained, find it easy to sustain public worship."⁴ During the following month, H.C. Bowen noted in the church vestry minutes that the founders were not disappointed by their endeavor. By 1857 the congregation was successful enough to erect a substantial brick church in front of the original chapel. The design and construction of the church probably had been planned by Bowen and his associates in 1850, prior to the official incorporation of the congregation and before records were kept. Thus the name of the architect remains unknown.

The chapel of 1851 and the church of 1857 appear to form a single unified building designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style. The style is Germanic in origin and is often termed "Rundbogenstil," after the Romanesque Revival style popular in Germany early in the nineteenth century. German Rundbogenstil designs

were known in America from illustrations in German publications and from literary and personal contacts.⁵ Ultimately the Rundbogenstil can be traced back to medieval Lombard buildings and in America the style has been called Lombard Romanesque. It is also frequently referred to as Norman, Byzantine, or Round Arched.

One of the great popularizers of the Early Romanesque Revival style in America was Robert Dale Owen, whose Hints on Public Architecture, published in 1849, advocated the use of the "Norman" style for buildings. Owen felt that the style held a number of advantages over the Gothic:

It exhibits more mass and breath than the true Gothic; it has more of simplicity and severity of outline; it is less cut up with adventitious and ambitious ornament; altogether it has less air of pretension and more appearance of solidity. Its aspect is imposing rather than ornate...Its entire expression is less ostentatious, and, if political character may be ascribed to Architecture, more republican.⁶

The Early Romanesque Revival style was first used for an American church by Richard Upjohn at the Church of the Pilgrims (1844-46) on the corner of Henry and Remsen Streets in Brooklyn Heights. This church was the first to prominently display round, rather than pointed arches. Upjohn believed that the Gothic was appropriate only for Episcopal churches and he turned to a non-Gothic style when confronted by the problem of designing a church for a Congregational society. Upjohn's church was widely influential during the late 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. While the Church of the Pilgrims was constructed of stone, the more common type of Early Romanesque Revival style church was a rectangular structure constructed of brick with towers of unequal height, the taller being placed at a corner site.

This Early Romanesque Revival style was seen as being appropriate for "dissenting" Protestant sects -- i.e. Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Unitarians and Universalists -- since it eschewed the specific doctrinal symbolism of the Gothic, which was more appropriate to Episcopal and Roman Catholic services. The simplicity of the style held a particular appeal for the dissenting Protestant congregations since their churches did not need apses, chancels, choirs, side aisles, and other liturgical areas used for ceremonial purposes. The services of these sects were based on preaching and it was imperative that their churches be built so that every member of the audience could both see and hear the preacher. The rectilinear form of the Early Romanesque Revival churches, which were generally unadorned on both the exterior and interior, were functionally ideal for their services and also appealed to the American sense of utilitarian design.

This new church style allowed these Protestant sects to abandon the symbolic forms of the Gothic and replace them with a non-emblematic church form. The bold massing and austere detailing of the Romanesque-inspired buildings did not necessitate the abandonment of the traditional idea of a church building, but allowed a church congregation to erect a suitably representational structure without having to resort to Gothic detailing. The link between the Romanesque Revival style and republicanism, noted by Owen, was particularly relevant to the dissenting sects, for in republican America they had found a fertile land for the dissemination of their beliefs. All of these sects were thriving in America during the mid-nineteenth century and it is not surprising that in Brooklyn, where the dissenting sects were particularly successful, many of their church buildings were designed in the "republican" round-arched style.

The design of the South Congregational Church fits into a general pattern of towered Early Romanesque Revival style churches, but is unusual for the extraordinary manner in which the brick is modeled on the facade. The rhythmic pattern of the inset arches and corbeled cornice of the main gable are especially notable. This gable end, which faces onto Court Street, also contains a rectilinear entrance with stone lintel, a large arched window, and a round window. The gable is flanked by square towers with pinnacles. Particularly memorable is the detailing of the corner tower with its triple-arched arcades subsumed by a larger arch. Also of note is the five-bay wide rhythmic arcade of the side facade which merges with the three-bayed chapel. The chapel exhibits a rectangular entrance, round arches, and recessed panels. A continuous corbeled cornice links the church and chapel. The raw power of the brickwork on the exterior of the South Congregational Church distinguishes it as one of the outstanding ecclesiastical buildings in Brooklyn, "the city of churches."

The South Congregational Church was a major ecclesiastical organization in Brooklyn during the nineteenth century, attracting a substantial middle-class congregation from the surrounding area. By 1889 the church had outgrown its facilities and it erected an addition at the rear of the church for use as a ladies parlor and Sunday school. The building was designed in the Richardsonian Romanesque style by architect Frederick Carles Merry, who previously had designed a mission chapel for the church.⁷

F. Carles Merry (d.1900) was born in England and came to this country as a child. He worked in Philadelphia before becoming the principal assistant in the New York office of Henry Hobson Richardson. It was undoubtedly in Richardson's office that Merry was educated in this mode of design. The Richardsonian Romanesque became popular in the United States following the construction of Henry Hobson Richardson's Trinity Church, Boston (1872-77). The style is differentiated from the earlier Romanesque Revival of the church building by massiveness of scale and the use of heavy masonry forms, wide transom and mullion bars, and ornamental Byzantine-style carving.

The ladies parlor and Sunday school building is a small-scale red brick and terra-cotta structure with the massive forms and Byzantine carving typical of this phase of the Romanesque Revival. The focal point of this two-story building is the entrance bay which is in the form of a tower. The round-arched entrance has a terra-cotta surround and original wooden doors with iron hardware. At the second level are nine small rectangular and square windows separated by heavy brick and stone bars. The tower is capped by a Byzantine-style cornice and a pyramidal roof with a finial. To the left of the tower is a narrow round-arched window with multi-paned sash, while to the right is a recessed bay with a large round-arched opening with ornate sash, two rectangular windows with multi-paned transoms, and a Byzantine cornice. A tall corbelled brick chimney rises to the rear of the building. Together, the church and chapel and the ladies parlor and Sunday school provide a perfect comparison between the restrained pre-Civil War Romanesque Revival and the heavier post-Civil War Romanesque Revival.

In 1893 the church built a rectory on President Street, adjoining the ladies parlor. This four-story and basement, neo-Gothic style structure was designed by Brooklyn architect Woodruff Leeming, and it forms a transitional link between the church and the mid-nineteenth century rowhouses to the west. Of particular note on the front elevation of the rectory are the rock-faced stone and brick facing, Tudor-arched entrance, ogee-arched windows, dog-legged stoop, pointed-arched gables, and wrought-iron railings.

Despite its age and the changes that the surrounding neighborhood has undergone since the 1850s, the church remains in surprisingly good condition. The site is still enclosed by the original cast-iron fence and the building retains the prominence that it has always enjoyed, being visible for many blocks along Court Street. Carroll Gardens is now largely an Italian neighborhood and the membership at the Congregational church has dwindled. Present plans call for an innovative conversion of much of the complex to apartments, with the congregation retaining the ladies parlor and rectory for continued church use, thus preserving the superb complex for future generations.

Report prepared by
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FOOTNOTES

1. Much of this report is based in Andrew S. Dolkart's "The City of Churches: The Protestant Church Architecture of Brooklyn, 1793-1917," pp.84-96, unpublished Master's thesis, Columbia University, School of Architecture, 1977.
2. Centennial Observance: Commemorating 100 Years of Service of the South Congregational Church, (Brooklyn, 1951), n.p.
3. Vestry Minutes of the South Congregational Church," March 31, 1851.
4. Centennial Observance....,n.p. Quoted from the "Report of the Committee to the Recognition Council," March 5, 1851.
5. Carroll L.V. Meeks, "Romanesque Before Richardson in the United States," Art Bulletin, 25 (March 1953), 21.
6. Robert Dale Owen, Hints on Public Architecture (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849) pp.74-77.
7. The South Congregational Chapel, now the Calvary Baptist Church of Red Hook, is located at 120 Fourth Place between Court and Smith Streets.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the South Congregational Church, Chapel, Ladies Parlor and Rectory have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that among its important qualities, the South Congregational Church is the most notable Early Romanesque Revival style church standing in Brooklyn; that the church building and earlier chapel display an extraordinary series of round-arched forms that exemplify the finest in brick construction; that the inset arches and rhythmic arcades create a powerful architectural statement; that the church is one of the oldest surviving in Brooklyn; that the ladies parlor added in 1889, is a fine example of the Richardsonian Romanesque; that the complex includes a fine neo-Gothic style rectory that forms a transition between the church and the neighboring rowhouses; and that together the church, chapel, and ladies parlor, illustrate the history of the development of the Romanesque Revival style during the nineteenth century in the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the South Congregational Church, Chapel, Ladies Parlor and Rectory, 253-269 President Street and 358-366 Court Street, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 345, Lots 31 and 40, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 20, 1857, p. 2; May 29, 1892, p. 17.

Centennial Observance: Commemorating 100 Years of Service of the South Congregational Church, Brooklyn, 1951.

Dolkart, Andrew S., "The City of Churches: Protestant Church Architecture of Brooklyn, 1793-1917," unpublished Master's thesis, Columbia University, School of Architecture, 1977.

Meeks, Carroll L.V. "Romanesque Before Richardson in the United States," Art Bulletin, 25 (March 1953), 17-33.

Vestry Minutes of the South Congregational Church, March 31, 1851-present.



SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND CHAPEL
358-366 Court Street
Church, 1857; chapel (to left), 1851

Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

Architect: Unknown



SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH LADIES PARLOR AND SUNDAY SCHOOL
267 President Street
Built 1889

Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

Architect: F. Carles Merry