

CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION AND PARISH HOUSE, 205-209 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.

Built 1864, architect Emlen T. Littell; restoration 1882, architects D. & J. Jardine. Parish house, built 1905-06, architect Edward P. Casey.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 865, Lot 18 and 19.

On May 8, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Church of the Incarnation and Parish House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The vestry of the church has expressed its approval of the designation.

The Commission previously held a public hearing on the designation of the church and the parish house in 1966.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Gothic Revival church and adjacent parish house occupy a prominent corner site at Madison Avenue and East 35th Street. Designed by architect Emlen T. Littell, the church was built in 1864. The present parish house was originally built as the church rectory in 1868-69 and given a new facade, designed by architect Edward P. Casey, in 1905-06. Together they form an impressive complex and are an important reminder of the development of the Murray Hill area during the mid-19th century.

→ The congregation of the Church of the Incarnation had its beginnings in 1864 as a chapel of Grace Church, meeting in a building at the corner of Madison Avenue and 28th Street. By 1852 the congregation had grown so much that it incorporated as the Church of the Incarnation with the Reverend Edwin Harwood as rector. A new church building was deemed necessary by about 1860, but the Civil War intervened. However, in 1863 the church was able to buy a site at Madison Avenue and 35th Street in the Murray Hill section. Murray Hill, which took its name from the country estate of Robert and Mary Murray, had been developed as a residential area in the 1850s. A number of churches followed in the wake of this development. A limited competition was held for a new Church of the Incarnation, and designs were submitted by three architectural firms: Gambrill & Post, H.G. Harrison, and Emlen T. Littell. Littell's design in the Gothic Revival style was selected.¹

Emlen T. Littell (1836-1891),² born in Philadelphia and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, attained a professional reputation as an architect of ecclesiastical structures. His churches were built in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York State, primarily for Protestant Episcopal congregations. The Church of the Incarnation is virtually his only New York City commission to survive. Another may be seen in the Stuyvesant Square Historic District at 231-235 East 17th Street--the eastern section of the St. John the Baptist House, now partially altered. Littell was an active member of the American Institute of Architects, serving as secretary in 1862-63 and president in 1890-91.

The cornerstone of the new church was laid on March 8, 1864, by Bishop Horatio Potter of the New York Diocese. Construction must have progressed very quickly, for the first service was held in the new building on December 11, 1864, with the rector, the Rev. Henry Eglinton Montgomery, preaching. Formal consecration services were held on April 20, 1865.³

The rector also urged the construction of a rectory on land north of the church building. This project was agreed to by the building committee of the vestry in 1868. They called for a house 24 by 50 feet, three stories high with a "French" roof, to be ready for occupancy by April 1869. The architectural design was to be in keeping with that of the church. A photo of 1869 shows the rectory to be a polychromatic Victorian Gothic design with mansard roof.⁴ According to the records available in the Buildings Department,⁵ the architect of the rectory was Robert Mook. Mook was active in New York City during the 1860s and '70s and designed many commercial buildings in the Greenwich Village and SoHo-Cast Iron Historic Districts. However, a list of Littell's commissions, published in 1868, attributes the rectory design to him.⁶ In that year both Littell and Mook had their offices at 111 Broadway, as did several other architects.⁷ Perhaps Mook filed plans on behalf of Littell.

Fire broke out in the church building on March 24, 1882, and sections of the roof, the south and west windows, and the east end were destroyed, although the walls and tower were not significantly damaged. Plans were made immediately for rebuilding, and the contract was given to D. & J. Jardine.

David Jardine (1840-1892), a native of Scotland who immigrated to the United States at the age of 20, headed this extremely well-known architectural firm. He practiced with architect Edward Thompson until the Civil War and later formed a partnership with his brothers John and George, and John J. Nordin. They designed the B. Altman & Co. building (1876) at 19th Street and Avenue of the Americas, a number of buildings in the Greenwich Village and SoHo-Cast Iron Historic Districts, and many rowhouses on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

In the restoration the architects followed Littell's design but lengthened the nave and added a transept to the north side to contain additional pews and an upper gallery. The chancel was deepened and an entrance was made in the south wall near the chancel. Internal changes were made in the chapel building at the east end of the church with provisions for the Sunday School and for week-day services.⁸

In its present configuration, the Church of the Incarnation is an impressive Gothic Revival structure dominated by a striking corner tower. Faced in beautifully-laid vermiculated brownstone with lighter contrasting sandstone coping and trim, the church appears today much as it did upon the rebuilding after the fire of 1882. Because of the corner site, Littell designed the structure so that only two sides would be visible, with the shorter gabled end containing the main entrance on Madison Avenue and the long side on East 35th Street. The shallow brownstone entrance porch has a steep slate-covered roof with an intersecting gable. The underside of the gable is lined with carved bellflowers. Two openings with modified chamfered arches--which Littell called square-headed trefoils--resting on colonnettes with carved leafy capitals flank the central opening with a steep pointed arch which also rests on colonnettes with carved leafy capitals.

This arch is outlined by a drip molding terminating in bosses. The end blocks of the chamfered arches are incised with leaf and flower motifs. Handsome wrought-iron grilles with Gothic motifs close the porch openings. Three paneled doors corresponding to the three porch openings are set in the rear wall of the porch and are reached by flights of steps. A low arcade runs above the porch, but most of the gable is filled by a large pointed-arch window with traceried head. Full-height buttresses flank the gable, setting off a wall section to the north of the porch, which contains a very tall slender pointed-arch window with stained glass, and the corner tower to the south. The tower is supported by a series of buttresses at the corners and is pierced by narrow openings on three levels. A pointed-arch opening, with colonnettes supporting the arch, is reached by a flight of steps lined with handsome wrought-iron railings with Gothic motifs. These railings are similar to the one enclosing the church site. The opening originally provided an entrance directly into the tower, but in 1929 it was filled with a stained-glass window and the base of the tower converted to a chapel. The upper level of the tower has a large traceried pointed-arch opening on each side, and each arch is outlined by a drip molding terminating in bosses. The tall crowning broached spire is of brownstone and is pierced by four narrow gabled openings. Although a spire was called for in Littell's design, it was not added to the tower until 1896 and then was built from the designs of Heins & LaFarge.⁹

The long side of the church facing East 35th Street is pierced by a series of tall slender pointed-arch openings containing stained glass and flanked by buttresses. The eastern bay corresponding to the end of the nave contains the entrance which was added by D. & J. Jardine. The projecting gabled enframing of sandstone is filled by a large pointed-arch opening. The impost blocks of the arch rest on carved leafy capitals. The wooden entrance doors are reached by a flight of steps lined by handsome wrought-iron railings with Gothic motifs. The head of the arch above the doors is filled with stained glass. To the left and above the doorway are pointed-arch windows. The 35th Street side terminates in an intersecting gabled section with three levels of windows. The lower level windows have incised chamfered arches like those of the front porch openings. Above are three rectangular windows and a circular window all enclosed by a large pointed arch rising up into the gable.

The steep slate-covered gabled roof over the nave is pierced by a series of gabled dormers on both sides. Each gable contains two windows set beneath a quatrefoil opening. These provide additional light to the nave. Before the fire of 1882, the main roof and the roof of the entrance porch were covered with multi-colored tile, as indicated in a photo of 1869.¹⁰

Although not covered by this designation, the interior of the church has a number of significant features. After its completion, Littell gave a description of it.¹¹ A photo of 1874 shows it to have been decorated in polychromatic Victorian Gothic fashion with slender decorated cast-iron columns along the aisles supporting the roof.¹² The present appearance largely postdates the 1882 fire, but the cast-iron columns have been retained although the pew and aisle configuration have been changed. Works by a number of noted 19th-century artists enhance the sanctuary.¹³ This includes windows by, among others, John LaFarge, Louis C. Tiffany, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones. John LaFarge also painted the murals in the chancel depicting the Adoration of the Magi. The altar is by the architects Heins & LaFarge. Christopher LaFarge of the firm was the

son of John LaFarge. The design of the carved oak chancel rail is by sculptor Daniel Chester French. French also designed the bronze portrait bust for the Arthur Brooks Memorial dedicated to the third rector of the parish. The architectural design of this memorial is by Henry Bacon. Of special interest is the Henry Eglinton Montgomery Memorial, dedicated on November 25, 1876, to the second rector. Designed by the great American architect, Henry Hobson Richardson, it is believed to be the only such Richardson project actually executed.¹⁴ The bronze portrait is by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

For reasons unrecorded, the rectory was given a new facade in 1905-06. The design is by architect Edward Pearce Casey (1864-1940), a graduate of the Columbia School of Mines and a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Casey had practiced in New York since 1891. Between 1892 and 1897 Casey supervised the completion of the Library of Congress. In Washington he also designed several monuments and memorials. He was associated with Arthur D. Sneden in the design of several churches in New York and New Jersey.

Casey replaced the Victorian Gothic facade of the rectory with one of neo-Jacobean design. Five stories high the building is faced in red brick with contrasting limestone trim. The limestone base at the ground floor with quoins at the corners has an impressive entrance portico composed of banded fluted columns and pilasters supporting an entablature. Resting on the entablature is a pediment composed of three pedestal-like elements with a central sphere and two pyramids. The sphere is flanked by elaborate strapwork-like consoles resting on their sides. This doorway treatment is especially reminiscent of Jacobean architecture of 17th-century England. Square-headed windows with keystones and wrought-iron grilles flank the doorway with its glass and wrought-iron door. The second and third stories are handled as a unit with a central two-story tier of windows. The windows are set with casement sash and have transoms above and the stone enframing surrounding the tier is keyed to the brickwork. A drip molding encloses the heads of the third story windows. Keyed stonework is set at the corners of the building and rises to the roof line. A string course sets off the fourth story which also has a group of windows set beneath a drip molding. This group is flanked by two smaller windows. The fifth story with mansard roof rises above a modillioned cornice. A parapet with a central pedimented and gabled dormer of Jacobean form is set in front of the mansard. A pair of windows with keyed enframing is set beneath the pediment. The pediment is crowned by a stone sphere.

The original parish house of the church was located at 248 East 31st Street along with a mission chapel. After the death of H. Percy Silver, a rector of the parish from 1918 to 1934, the rectory was converted for use as a parish house and named in his honor.

While Gothic Revival churches are far from rare in New York City, the Church of the Incarnation continues to have a special significance. A skillful design, it was constructed at a time when the Gothic Revival was the expected style for Episcopal churches. Like many other churches, the Church of the Incarnation was built in an expanding residential area. By 1875 numerous church buildings were scattered throughout residential communities of midtown Manhattan, but with the forces of change and subsequent commercial development, many of these midtown

churches no longer had congregations to support them. As the congregations followed residential development elsewhere, their valuable midtown church properties were sold and redeveloped. The Church of the Incarnation is a significant exception to this trend. Because of the continued strength of the Murray Hill community, the church has continued to draw support from and serve the neighboring residents and is one of few midtown mid-19th century churches to survive. The Church of the Incarnation is an important example of Gothic Revival architecture, while the adjacent parish house with its Jacobean features exemplifies certain stylistic trends popular in the early 20th century. Together they form a striking complex and are an important reminder of the mid-19th century development of Murray Hill.

Report prepared by Marjorie Pearson,
Director of Research, with research
assistance from Peter Bartucca, Murray
Hill Committee

FOOTNOTES

1. J. Newton Perkins, History of the Parish of the Incarnation, 1852-1912 (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Frank B. Howard Press, 1912), p. 62.
2. There are discrepancies in the year of Littell's birth in published sources ranging from 1836 to 1840. The Avery Obituary Index of Architects and Artists (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1963) lists it as 1836.
3. Perkins, pp. 63-69.
4. New York City, Buildings Department, New Building Permit 745-1868.
5. John W. Kennion, The Architects' and Builders' Guide (New York: Fitzpatrick & Hunter, 1868), p. xxii.
6. Kennion, p. xxvii.
7. Perkins, facing p. 76.
8. Perkins, pp. 127-128.
9. New York City, Buildings Department, Alteration Permit 1206-1896.
10. Perkins, facing p. 76.
11. Perkins, pp. 63-64.
12. Perkins, facing p. 90.
13. Descriptive Pamphlet, Church of the Incarnation, Madison Avenue and 35th Street, New York (New York: Church of the Incarnation, 1919). A Tour of the Church of the Incarnation (New York: Church of the Incarnation, [n.d.]).

14. Perkins, pp. 114-115. James O'Gorman in Selected Drawings: H.H. Richardson and His Office (Cambridge: Department of Paintings and Graphic Arts, Harvard College Library, 1974), p. 186, discusses an unexecuted project for a George Minot Dexter Memorial, Trinity Church, Boston, between 1873 and 1877 and its relation to the Montgomery Memorial. Arthur Brooks, the rector of the Church of the Incarnation who succeeded Montgomery, was a brother to Phillips Brooks, rector of Trinity Church, Boston, the design of which established Richardson's career. It seems likely that Phillips Brooks recommended Richardson for the memorial project.

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 Church of the Incarnation and Parish House 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 Church of the Incarnation and Parish House form a striking complex in the Murray Hill area; that the church, designed by Emlen T. Littell and built in 1864, is a significant example of Gothic Revival architecture; that among its notable features are the corner tower, the entrance porch, the carefully-executed pointed-arch openings with stained glass, and the beautifully-laid brownstone facing; that the church was handsomely restored by D. & J. Jardine following a fire in 1882; that many notable artists have executed works for the church; that the parish house, originally built in 1868 in Victorian Gothic style as the rectory, displays neo-Jacobean features and is a handsome adjunct to the church; that the Church of the Incarnation is one of few midtown mid-19th century churches to survive; and that the Church of the Incarnation and Parish House are an important reminder of the development of the Murray Hill area during the mid-19th century.

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 Church of the Incarnation and Parish House, 205-209 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 865, lots 18 and 19, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Architect and Building News, 31 (1891), 162 (Emlen T. Littell obituary).

Architecture and Building, 14 (March 7, 1891), 121 (Emlen T. Littell obituary).

Descriptive Pamphlet, Church of the Incarnation, Madison Avenue and 35th Street, New York. New York: Church of the Incarnation, 1919.

"A Group of American Architects." American Architect and Building News, 15 (February 16, 1884), 75-76, plate.

Kennion, John W. The Architects' and Builders' Guide. New York: Fitzpatrick & Hunter, 1868.

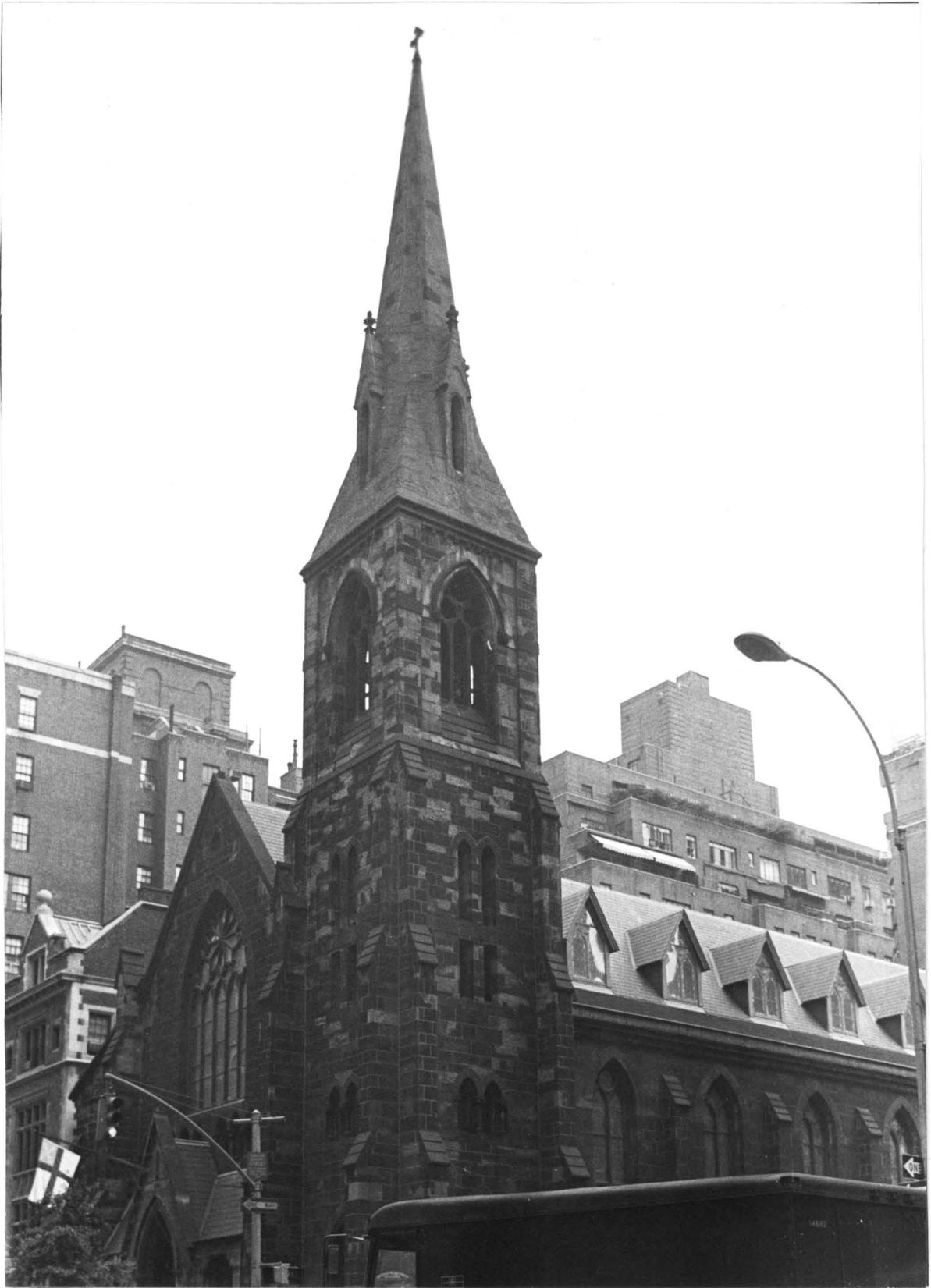
New York City, Buildings Department, Plans, Permits and Dockets. Municipal Building, Manhattan.

Perkins, J. Newton. History of the Parish of the Incarnation, 1852-1912. Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Frank B. Howard Press, 1912.

A Tour of the Church of the Incarnation. New York: Church of the Incarnation, [n.d.].

United States. Works Progress Administration. New York City. Inventory of the Church Archives of New York City, Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, Diocese of New York. New York: Historical Records Survey, Works Projects Administration, 1940.

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey Hennessy & Ingalls, Inc., 1970.



Church of the Incarnation
Built 1864-65

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Architect:
Emlen T. Littell