St. Mary's (1820–1830), Halifax: An Early Example of the Use of Gothic Revival Forms in Canada

J. PHILIP McALEER Halifax, Nova Scotia

Early Gothic Revival architecture in Canada, particularly from the period prior to the 1840s, when the influence of A.W.N. Pugin and the Ecclesiologists began to be felt, has been little studied. This paper reconstructs a lost monument—St. Mary's, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as erected 1820–1830—which may have been the first ambitious essay in the Gothic Revival style, especially as it apparently precedes by a few years the single and most famous monument of this time, the parish church of Notre-Dame in Montréal, itself often considered the starting point of the style in Canada.

Although the exterior of St. Mary's was modest—essentially it was an exemplar of the rectangular box with "west" tower, definitively formulated by James Gibbs, and ubiquitous since the 1720s—with Gothic detailing replacing Baroque, the interior, known only from one watercolor and partially surviving today, is of greater interest. Divided into nave and aisles by piers of clustered shafts, the piers' form, plus plaster vaults and pointed arches, helped create an aura reminiscent of the Gothic period. The interior was dominated by the design of the sanctuary (now destroyed), where an unusual congregation of architectural forms suggests both the appearance of illusionistic architecture, with a possible connection to New York, and a further transformation of Baroque forms into their Gothic equivalents, with a possible connection to Québec City. Tenuous, circumstantial evidence will be provided to substantiate the plausibility of such sources.

This paper also attempts to place St. Mary's in the context of the Gothic Revival in North America c. 1820–1830. As a result, it will be seen that its exterior, although without precedents in Canada, is typical of Gothic Revival churches of the period in the United States. By contrast, the interior design, especially of the sanctuary, suggests it was one of the more imaginative creations in either context. It therefore emerges as a more significant monument in the history of Canadian and North American architecture than heretofore suspected.

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1. The honorific title of "Basilica" was granted on 15 August 1950. The diocese was first formed in 1817 as the Vicariate Apostolic of Nova Scotia. The Diocese of Halifax was created 15 February 1842; on 21 September 1844 it was divided between Halifax and Arichat (the latter see was later transferred to Antigonish, 23 August 1886); it was raised to an archdiocese by a Papal Bull of 4 May 1852. The church as initially founded was dedicated to St. Peter; it was officially renamed on 15 January 1833, at the time a new building was consecrated as the cathedral. The early history of the church and archdiocese is recounted by W. Foley, The Centenary of St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax, N.S., 1820–1920, A Souvenir Memorial, Halifax, N.S., 1920, 17–27; see also J. Burns, "Notes on the Early History of St. Mary's Cathedral," The Catholic Reference Book and Parish Register, 1932, 3, 4, 7.

2. The involvement of P. C. Keely with the cathedral was first reported by the Acadian Recorder, 17 March 1860, p. 3, col. 2: "Among the passengers by the last steamer from Boston was Mr. Keely [sic] the architect . . . brought here by the Archbishop of Halifax to draw plans and specifications for the enlargement of St. Mary's Cathedral." Keely had established his practice in Brooklyn after arriving in New York in 1841. He became a specialist in church architecture, ultimately being responsible for over 500 Catholic churches and cathedrals, mostly in New York State. See: H. F. and E. R. Withey, Biographical Dictionary of Architects (Deceased), Los Angeles, 1970, 333; F. W. Kervick, Patrick Charles Keely, Architect, South Bend, Ind., 1953.
Fig. 1. P. C. Keely, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax, 1868–1874, façade, c. 1900 (Gauvin & Gentzel).

Fig. 2. P. C. Keely, St. Mary’s Cathedral, Halifax, 1862–1864, interior (Toman/TUNS).
terminates in a polygonal apse of five sides. The design of the interior is also primarily due to P. C. Keely and was executed in the years 1862–1864, before construction of the façade began. The nave, aisles, and apse were not the product of a totally new campaign of building, however. Basically, an earlier church of 1820–1830 survives as the core: its original northern termination was demolished and the church was extended four bays and a polygonal apse constructed (Fig. 3). In other words, Keely based the design of his extension on the parti of the early building, and, after removing the galleries over the aisles, he added foliage to the arcade capitals and ribs to the vaults. When later, at the south, the original façade was augmented by the present structure which forms a shallow narthex, the upper, visible stages of the tower were rebuilt.

The alterations involved in the extension of the earlier church can be observed on the exterior and have been noted and described in a guide pamphlet:

Opposite the back door of the present Rectory one can see where the church was lengthened to two hundred feet. The older stone work ends at the eighth window. Originally there were two rows of windows, the upper ones were pointed, the lower ones were square. The present windows were formed by filling in the top of the upper ones and cutting away the stone work separating them from the lower ones.3

The seam between the old work and the new, and the transformation of the windows, and therefore the survival of the original nave, are not evident on the interior precisely because Keely chose to elaborate and extend the earlier design. In this way, the building of 1820 has become a “lost” monument. And because the existence of part of the early church in the present structure is not immediately obvious, it has become a lost monument in a second sense. Its position in the Gothic Revival movement in North America and its importance to the architectural history of Canada have gone unexamined and, as shall be seen, unrecognized.

The initial appearance of this ghost building, particularly of its destroyed parts, can be reconstructed from two small oil paintings, a lithograph, and three watercolors, all executed c. 1840, a decade after the structure was completed. Just as the greater number of the preserved views represent the exterior, so it will be discovered that the exterior design has the most

numerous parallels among known buildings from the period, while the interior, depicted in only one view, appears to have been much more extraordinary, if not unique, in character, perhaps partly due to the paucity of surviving examples or documents concerning the interiors of churches at this time. Furthermore, and still apropos of the interior, it will be seen that it is the design of the sanctuary in particular that provides the primary basis for this characterization.

The exterior will be described and evaluated first; then attention will be turned to the interior, with particular focus on the sanctuary design.

The exterior

The original exterior of the first St. Mary’s is recorded in the two oil paintings and the lithograph. The small paintings are unsigned; the lithograph was drawn by J. S. Clow and published by Sarony & Major, New York sometime after 1845. Essentially, the paintings—although they are not absolutely identical—and the lithograph may be considered as one, since they agree in all important details and show the exterior of the church from the same angle, a point on Barrington Street to the south, so that the façade and part of the east wall are depicted (Fig. 4). This earlier façade was rather modest in character: three pointed arches, of equal size, contained the doors; above, there were three identical windows with similarly proportioned pointed arches. The central bay projected

4. The two paintings are very similar, but one does not seem a direct copy of the other. The differences are small. One includes two figures, a man in a hat walking up the hill and another walking downhill with a dog; of the church, six of the upper side windows and three of the lower are shown. The other painting has more figures—two horsemen at left, a group of four people by the Glebe House on the corner—and only five upper side windows and two lower ones are visible. In the early 1930s, when the photographs of them now in the

Public Archives of Nova Scotia were acquired by the Provincial Museum, both paintings were reported as being in the possession of the Glebe House, Report on the Provincial Museum and Science Library for the Fiscal Year 1931–32, Halifax, N.S., 1933, 45–46, acc. nos. 7287 and 7288. Now only the former as described above (no. 7287) is in the possession of the diocese: at the time of writing, it is in a small museum behind the apse of the present church. When it was exhibited in 1949, J. S. Clow was identified as the artist; A. S. Mowat, 200 Years of Art in Halifax: 1749–1949. An Exhibition prepared in honor of the Bicentenary of the Founding of the City of Halifax, N.S., Halifax, N.S., 1949, 12, no. 41. The second painting (no. 7288) has mysteriously migrated to a private collection in Halifax.

A copy of the lithograph is now in Special Collections (J. J. Stewart Collection), Killham Library, Dalhousie University; it is reproduced in C. P. de Volpi, Nova Scotia: A Pictorial Record, 1974, pl. 106. Another copy is in St. Mary’s Glebe House. The former is lightly hand-tinted; the latter is in poor condition, being water-stained, and is untinted. A third battered and trimmed copy is in the Archdiocesan Archives, Chancery Office, Halifax. The publisher of the lithograph was active as Sarony & Major between 1845 and 1857; H. T. Peters, America on Stone, Garden City, N.Y., 1931; reprint ed., New York, 1976, 350–351.
slightly and formed the base for the tower, which was embraced by the roof and gable of the façade. On the main face of the tower was a series of three windows, again of about equal size, one directly above the other. The top of the tower was flat and there was a battlemented parapet with pinnacles at the four corners. The church front appears to have been of cut stone with quoins, and all the windows had thin wood mullions that formed three pointed lights with thin wood transoms for the standard rectangular window panes. Of the side of the church, all the views show five or six bays of two tiers of windows: the lower ones were nearly square; the upper had pointed arches and wood mullions forming pointed lights, as on the front. The side wall is also shown as if of drafted masonry, with conspicuous quoins gracing the lower square windows. A wide, flat belt course ran completely around the building between the lower windows or portals and the upper windows; another was placed at the top of the wall and was continued across the front, thereby defining the base of the gable. The three stages of the tower implied by its windows were not made explicit by means of stringcourses.

This building was begun by the Rt. Rev. Edmund Burke (1753–1820) soon after his consecration as Bishop of Sion and first Vicar Apostolic of Nova Scotia. In an oft-quoted letter of 20 June 1820 to the Archbishop of Dublin, he reported: “We have just begun to build a cathedral here which will cost us at least 10,000 pounds sterling. The extreme length of it is 106 feet, the breadth 66, the whole line and stone, cut stone on the whole front.” Sadly, Bishop Burke did not live to see the construction advance far, for he died 29 November 1820; however, the work was carried on by his successors. “The Minute Book of the Wardens and Electors” allows us to gain a rough approximation of the progress of construction, although it is frustrating that the references refer to minor events for the most part, whereas significant stages apparently were unrecorded. For instance, no designer’s or builder’s name is mentioned for the initial construction of the church. The main body of the church seems to have been finished by late 1829 when it is recorded that the pews of the new church were to be let and the accounts of the old church were to be closed by 25 October.

As seen in the depictions of the exterior (Fig. 4), the church begun in 1820 was of a quite unexceptional form: a simple rectangular box with a façade tower. The tower was flat-topped and projected only slightly beyond the plane of the façade. The only other architectural features were the pointed windows, the quoins, and the pinnacles and parapets of the tower. As a whole, the building was basically a version of a type of church that had appeared in great numbers in England during the 18th century and had already appeared in Halifax 70 years earlier, as can be seen at the still-surviving Anglican church of St. Paul’s, located a short distance north of St. Mary’s, on the Grand Parade.

Both of these churches, in regard to their basic form, may be counted among the many descendants of that most influential of buildings, St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London of 1721–1726, by James Gibbs (1682–1754). Its influence, both as actually built and in its preliminary designs, is accounted for by its publication by Gibbs in his A Book of Architecture containing Designs of Buildings and Ornaments, published in 1728, a work which Gibbs intended as a pattern book. Many examples—especially in North America, such as St. Paul’s—reduced St. Martin’s to its most basic elements: a galleried box, with a Venetian window at the sanctuary end and a tower rising out of the roof at the entrance end. These primitive and economical variants generally eliminated the so-

5. Although Halifax was founded in 1749, it was not until 1783 that the Catholics in the city were able to gain permission to build their own church. This church had been purchased by a William Meaney on the west side of Barrington Street, near Salter Street, was the site for the erection of the wood frame of a small church on Monday, 19 July 1784. This was the church of St. Peter which remained in use until 1829. It stood approximately where the apse and two north bays of the present church are, but it faced Grafton Street, so it was correctly orientated and thus at right angles to the existing church. The original cost of the church is not recorded, but in 1802 it was necessary for Rev. Burke to spend £1,000 on repairs to the church. See: Foley, Souvenir Memorial, 17; Burns, “Notes,” 3, 4.

6. Foley, Souvenir Memorial, 17.

7. “Minute Book of the Wardens and Electors of St. Mary’s Church.” The original manuscript is in the Chancery Office of the Archdiocese ("Papers and Accounts of Bishop Burke, 1801–1858"); a microfilm (“Account Book of Bishop Edmund Burke, St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, Halifax, N.S." ) is in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

8. “Minute Book,” f. 48r. Further references indicate that all work was not then accomplished; most especially, the upper stages of the tower had yet to be built and the decoration of the interior continued. In late 1836, a Signor G. E. Benzo, “a gentleman from Rome,” was engaged to proceed in the execution of “his design for ornamenting the part of the church over the organ” (f. 78v). It would appear that the tower must have been finished well before 21 July 1839, as that day it was “Resolved that the wardens in charge be a committee to superintend the repairs necessary to prevent leaks in the spire [sic] of the church” (f. 95v). (The use of the word spire is, in this instance, apparently an error; elsewhere in the “Minute Book” the tower is referred to as “steeple.” There is no evidence that the tower ever received a spire and did not always remain flat-topped.) Work continued on the interior after the completion of the tower, for on 5 January 1840 a committee was appointed to ascertain the expense of continuing the galleries to the end of the church and erecting pews in them (f. 99v). The double tier of differently shaped windows on the sides is evidence that galleries were intended from the beginning, even if not completed until 20 years or so after the church was begun; the flat-topped lower windows were an anticipation of the undersurface of the balcony.

9. Built in 1750, the exterior appearance of St. Paul’s has been greatly altered by the addition of aisles, a chancel, and Romanesque windows in 1868–1872. The original appearance is best seen in the engraved views of Halifax after the sketches made by Richard Short in 1759; F. St. George Spendlove, The Face of Early Canada, Toronto, 1958, 11–12 and pls. 22–27 (especially pl. 27).
phisticated elements of St. Martin’s, such as the Corinthian portico and the giant pilasters articulating the side walls. The tower is usually also much simplified in the copies. Indeed, the actual model for many of these reductions may have been another church by Gibbs, his Marybone Chapel, now known as St. Peter’s, Vere Street, almost exactly contemporary to St. Martin’s.10 In it, Gibbs has already made many of the simplifications noted in the later “Colonial” examples.

St. Mary’s represents a translation of the basic Baroque vocabulary of this Georgian formula into the equivalent Gothic forms. The Gothic elements of the fundamentally Gibbsian scheme were limited to the pointed arches of the windows and the battlements and pinnacles of the tower, which never seems to have had a spire. The Gothicization is, therefore, not very drastic and can be paralleled by a number of structures built in the Atlantic states since, at the latest, the Second Trinity Church of 1788–1794 in New York City, and still built in that city as late as 1827–1829: the Zion Church (now Church of the Transfiguration) of 1817–1819, or, without a west tower, the Northeast Reform Dutch Church (now Sea and Land Church) of the same years, or, a little later, All Saints Free Church (now St. Augustine’s Chapel) of 1827–1829.11 As an example of the developing Gothic Revival, St. Mary’s, like these buildings, was rather timid, especially if it is recalled that during these years in England, churches more completely imitative of historical Gothic forms were being built, utilizing the Perpendicular vocabulary.12 By comparison with the English buildings, even the most complex of the North American ones, in their use of Gothic forms, were altogether less archaeological in their massing and detailing.13 This can be seen clearly in the Gothic forms employed by the French-born architect Joseph F. Mangin in his design for the Old Catholic Cathedral of St. Patrick’s, built in 1809–1815 in New York (Fig. 5).14 St.

13. The situation may have changed slightly in the next decade, with America less far behind England, as demonstrated by St. Stephen’s, Philadelphia of 1822–1823, by William Strickland (1788–1854), which, with later churches by A. J. Davis and William Washburn, P. B. Stanton (The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture: An Episode in Taste, 1840–1856, Baltimore, 1968, 46 n. 28) found comparable to a formula popular in England in the 1820s; H.-R. Hitchcock (Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Baltimore, 1958, 102), however, thought St. Stephen’s “but a slight advance in plausibility” over Strickland’s earlier work.

14. Burnham, New York Landmarks, 366; C. Loth and J. T. Sadler, Jr., The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America, Boston, 1975, 34–35. For Mangin, see Withey and Withey, Dictionary, 388–389. The exterior view here reproduced as Fig. 5 is from the New York Mirror, 7 (15 May 1830), 353.

Boston received its first Gothic Revival structure, the destroyed Federal Street Church of c. 1809–1811, by Charles Bulfinch (1763–1844), about the same years. Its second, St. Augustine’s Chapel of c. 1820 in South Boston, was small and plain to the point of austerity. Federal Street Church: Loth and Sadler, Only Proper Style, 34 (illus.). Hitchcock (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, 102) considered it not “of much intrinsic interest”; only the spire of the tower appeared to be fully Gothic in form. St. Augustine’s: D. S. Tucci, Church Building in Boston, 1720–1970, Concord, Mass., 1974, 15 (illus.).
John’s Cathedral in Providence of 1816, by John Holden Greene (1777–1850), has been described as “basically a standard Federal form onto which the pattern-book detailing is tacked.”

But its more vertical proportions, like those of Mangin’s St. Patrick’s, and the character of the detailing, “Batty Langley Early English,” are a departure from the Georgian forms still prevalent in the other, New York, buildings cited. Possibly the most successful in re-creating detailing faithful to the original period was Trinity Episcopal Church of 1814–1816, located on the Green in New Haven, an early work of Ithiel Town (1784–1844), now altered. But although these buildings would not pass muster by the standards of the most archaeologically inclined of the contemporary English users of Gothic forms—and certainly not by those of the later Gothic Revival in the late 1830s and 1840s (the Ecclesiologists)—they are no longer simply classical Georgian buildings with pointed-arched windows. Probably the most ambitious essay in the style before 1820 in the United States was Benjamin Latrobe’s (1764–1820) Gothic design for the Catholic cathedral of Baltimore, made in 1805. As events transpired, it was rejected in favor of his design in a “Roman” idiom, and so it was not built.

There does not appear to have been any significant use of Gothic Revival forms in Canada before 1820. The first large-scale example of neo-Gothic forms, and still the best-known, was indeed built only a few years later. The great parish church of Montréal, Notre-Dame (“La Paroisse”), was designed and started in 1823–1824, its architect an Irishman from New York City, James O’Donnell (1774–1830). Its Gothic forms, like those of Mangin’s Old St. Patrick’s, were loosely based on the English 13th century, not on the Perpendicular favored by the English architects. Nearer to Halifax, at almost the same moment as Notre-Dame in Montréal was undertaken, St. John’s (Stone) Church in Saint John, New Brunswick was begun. It was a chapel-of-ease, built for members of the Church of England who could not physically be accommodated in the parish church, Trinity Church, due to the growth of the congregation. Its construction was first decided upon in 1822, and building began in 1824; the church opened for use in 1825 and the following year the tower was finished. The architect was John C. Cunningham (1792–1872) from Dumfries, Scotland. The exterior appearance was similar to St. Mary’s, basically a box of conventional Georgian proportions, with a west tower articulated by two broad buttresses; the spire was never built. Its detailing—the parapets and pinnacles of the tower, and also those placed on the gable, and the ogee arch supporting a fleuron over the main portal—was somewhat richer than St. Mary’s, and also more reminiscent of historical Gothic.

Thus, although the exterior of St. Mary’s is rather routine and ordinary, when judged by developments during the first two decades of the 19th century in the United States, there does not seem to have been any structure in Canada, prior to 1820, that anticipated its scale and material or even its modest richness of detail. It is, therefore, very likely the first ambitious Gothic Revival structure in Canada, even if shortly followed by Saint John’s Stone Church and Montréal’s Notre-Dame. Each of these three monuments appears to be unrelated to the other two, Montréal’s Notre-Dame having connections with New York City, and Saint John’s Stone Church with Scotland. It is, indeed, to be regretted that no record has been found to provide information about the origins of St. Mary’s


18. For the first appearances of elements of the Gothic Revival style in Canada, see M. Brosseau, Gothic Revival in Canadian Architecture, Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History, No. 25, 1980, 8–12; the first example in public architecture is considered to be the National School Building, Québec City, of 1822 (Brosseau, 64, 65).

Perhaps readers in the United States should be reminded that the Canadian Confederation was not formed until 1867. In 1820 the British possessions in North America consisted of the provinces of Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Lower Canada, and Upper Canada, plus the western Indian territories and Rupert’s Land (to the north, around Hudson’s Bay).


20. E. Ward, The Story of Stone Church, 1825–1975: St. John’s (Stone) Church, Saint John, N.B., St. John, N.B., 1975, 2–4. The interior has a very broad nave, with widely spaced arcade piers—the arcade arches four-centered flat (Tudor)—and a gallery over each aisle. Originally it was flat-ended; a rectangular chancel was added in 1872. See also Brosseau, Gothic Revival, 9–10, 40 (where it is called Trinity Church).

An ambitious example of a stone church in Upper Canada at this time is St. James’ Anglican Church in Maitland, Ontario, of 1826, in which the Gothic detailing is limited to windows, doors, and the wooden pinnacles and parapet of the tower. See: Brosseau, Gothic Revival, 48, 49 (where it is attributed to the master mason John Sheppard), and M. MacRae and A. Adamson, Hallowed Halls: Church Architecture of Upper Canada, Toronto and Vancouver, 1975, 119–121 (there attributed to an Irish-trained master builder, Arthur McClean).
architect or designer or builder. In this regard, some clues may be provided by an examination of the interior design.

The interior

If on the exterior St. Mary’s was timidly Gothic, reticent in the quantity of its detailing, it was rather otherwise with the interior. There the Gothic elements were stronger and more distinctive than the exterior might lead one to expect. The church’s appearance is preserved by a watercolor (Fig. 6), signed by J. S. Clow, the artist of the lithograph. It probably should be dated about 1840 when Clow is last documented as being in Halifax, but no later than c. 1850. At first, the view it presents appears to be very different from what can now be seen (see Fig. 2), but after a few moments’ examination parts of the present building become recognizable. Nave and aisles are present, divided by slender piers of slim shafts—recognizably the existing ones, but with plain molded “bell” capitals. The quadripartite vaults are also present, but without any ribs—in effect, groin vaults. Nave arcades separate the interior space into distinct nave and aisles. There is a gallery over each aisle, supported by part of the arcade piers. The shafts of the piers rise from the floor, those facing the nave rising continu-

Fig. 6. J. S. Clow, Interior of St. Mary’s Cathedral, watercolor, c. 1840–50, St. Mary’s Glebe House, Halifax (Toman/TUNS).

21. J. S. Clow is identified as Claphan J. Clow (died c. 1850). He first arrived in Halifax in 1831 and was there again in 1837, 1839, 1840, “and probably at later dates to 1850”; J. R. Harper, Early Painters and Engravers in Canada, Toronto, 1970, 68. The watercolor is in the possession of St. Mary’s Glebe House. When the photograph of it now in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia was obtained by the Provincial Museum, it was described as a washed drawing, 15.40 × 14.50 inches, inscribed with the name J. S. Clow but no date; Report on the Provincial Museum, 45–46, acc. no. 7267.

22. One cannot tell if it ran across the entrance end of the church, because the view is toward the sanctuary; presumably it did, as a gallery there would be a logical prerequisite for access to the aisle galleries, and a gallery at the entrance end is implied by the reference in the “Minute Book” (see above n. 8) to the “continuation” of the galleries.
Fig. 7. J. S. Clow, *Interior of St. Mary's Cathedral*, detail (Toman/TUNS).
ously and passing in front of the galleries' balustrades, the others temporarily interrupted by the abutment of the galleries. All the wall surfaces appear to be drafted masonry—no doubt, plaster lined in imitation of the real thing.

The system of the interior can be considered as the Gothic equivalent of the solution to the galleryed box as it had been developed by Gibbs in St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields or in the smaller St. Peter’s, Vere Street. Replace Gibbs’s Corinthian order by piers modeled on Early English Gothic, semicircular arches by pointed ones, and barrels or saucer domes by pointed groin vaults, with the vaults over the galleries a little lower than the nave vault, and one has produced the design of St. Mary’s: a very consistent translation of the late-Baroque forms into comparable Gothic solutions.

The sanctuary design

However interesting this transformation may be, the significant or fascinating aspect of the interior of St. Mary’s is the design of the sanctuary (Fig. 7). Compared to the relatively sober nave, the east end is a blaze of glory and, as drawn by Clow, rather difficult to interpret. There seems to be a flat wall in the same line as the aisle end walls. In front of it, there is an extravagant arrangement of six pairs of five shafts each, similar to the piers of the nave arcade, placed three on either side of a wide central space. Pointed arches join the piers and, at the same time, an ogee arch rises from each pier to join at the axis of the wall where they form the support for a Cross. Showing between the upper part of the arches is an inverted semicircle of gold. The outer bays of the design contain two windows, one above the other and widely separated, with Perpendicular tracery and stained glass. Small statue groups are shown immediately below the upper windows. Two statues fill each of the inner bays; the upper is colored black, the lower white, as if to represent bronze and marble, respectively. They are placed in tall niches with pointed arches. A high retable sits on or behind the altar, and over it, in the wide central bay, hangs a painting of the Virgin with a carved Crucifix above.

Initially, one could suggest that the schema of piers and arches was molded on the wall in relief, if it did not appear that behind the clusters of shafts there is another series of piers, or responds engaged to a wall, supporting similar sets of arches. Was there, then, a shallow apse with a screen of piers across it, the piers connected by the rib-like arches and supporting the ogee ribs that rose to form an openwork “crown” over the apsidal space, the whole echoed by an engaged duplicate? As construction, this seems unlikely; as modeled or even partly painted illusion, it is equally unexpected. A closer inspection (Fig. 7) reveals a further complication that makes spatial interpretation more difficult and the composition more amazing. The wall “behind” the piers is carefully depicted, with ruled lines, as if constructed of largish blocks of masonry which are variously colored pale green, blue, yellow, tan, and light tan. The horizontal lines of the coursing definitely imply a flat wall, except where they are, appropriately, shown slightly curved in order to suggest the form and space of the tall niches flanking the central bay. Further, it may be observed that the masonry immediately to the side of and below the windows is very distinctly left uncolored—or is shown grayish—and the coursing has a slight suggestion of diagonality. This encourages a reading that the windows are actually seen through arched openings (the bronze statue groups sitting on the ledges of the upper ones) and that there was an ambulatory space behind the flat wall.

The earliest representation of this building of 1820 from the north is found in a small watercolor by William Eagar (c. 1796–1839), which is primarily a view of St. Paul’s Church (Fig. 8). Although St. Mary’s is seen in the far distance, an apse with three windows is distinctly shown. The existence of an apse is confirmed by another watercolor, by Col. Alexander C. Mercer (1783–1868), dated 8 August 1841 (Fig. 9). It shows two windows—the axial and western one—and in this case tracery forms can be dimly made out. As a result, one can conclude that there was indeed an apse but that it must have been screened off from the nave by a flat wall pierced by arches which allowed the lateral windows of the apse to appear

23. The significant difference between these Gibbs churches and similar buildings by Christopher Wren was Gibbs’s use of a single tall order on pedestals to support the vaulted ceiling: the order, of course, passed in front of the face of the balconies. Summerson (Architecture in Britain, 212) stressed the importance of the single tall order on pedestals introduced by Gibbs, in contrast to Wren’s solution of two tiers of supports.


25. South end of Argyle Street, Halifax and the Roman Catholic Church from Mr. Creighton’s Door, now in the Public Archives of Canada (Picture Division), Ottawa. Although made from a point closer to St. Mary’s than Eagar’s, Mercer’s view is lacking in precise detail. I am grateful to Scott Robson for alerting me to the existence of this view. It might be noted that in both the Eagar and Mercer views only one tier of apse windows is visible, rather than two. The absence of the lower tier is probably explained by the fact that the church was placed on ground that sloped down from west to east and was, therefore, downhill of the line and level of Argyle Street. The lower windows are also likely hidden by the trees to the north of the apse.
and, on the lower level, served as access to the apsidal retrospace, which most probably functioned as a sacristy (see Fig. 3). It is, of course, possible to imagine this arrangement as an actual structure, but the presence of a retroapse does not help solve the structural or spatial interpretation of the clustered piers, the responds, and the “corona” of ogee arches. Were these elements in part freestanding, or molded in relief, or totally painted, or some combination of these possibilities? The spatial representation by Clow in his watercolor is not exact enough to confirm any one set of possibilities. From his rendering, it seems equally possible that there was a series of piers across the chord of the apse with a wall a few feet beyond on which painted or molded responses were placed, or that the wall stood on the chord and all the elements were illusionistically painted and/or modeled.

Altogether this appears to be a very extraordinary design, especially if one considers that it may constitute one of the very earliest, if not the earliest full-scale Gothic Revival interior in Canada. It would also be one of the earliest in North America about which we have precise information, because the interiors of other equally early Gothic Revival buildings still surviving usually have been heavily remodeled, often at a 

Fig. 8. William Edgar, St. Paul’s Church, Halifax, watercolor, c. 1834–1839, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (Royal Ontario Museum).

26. In Québec, during the previous century, some small single-naved parish churches followed the model of the Récollet Chapel in Québec City in which the space of an apsidal termination was utilized as a sacristy. In these buildings, the retable was part of a screen placed on a straight line across the chord of the apse; see L. Noppen, Leis églises du Québec (1600–1850), Québec, 1977, 15, 22, 23, 34. The practice tended to die out c. 1770, when exterior sacristies replaced the internal ones.

Fig. 9. Col. Alexander C. Mercer, South end of Argyle Street, Halifax and the Roman Catholic Church from Mr. Creighton’s Door, watercolor, 1841, Public Archives of Canada (Picture Division), Ottawa (C13715 Public Archives Canada).

later period in the Revival. This, plus the lack of any corroborative documentary evidence, makes it difficult to pinpoint any specific source for the design of St. Mary’s. This is all the more true if the most obvious source—a Catholic, rather than an Anglican, model—is sought. Certainly the cathedral of Québec was not the model, for in 1820 it was still basic Baroque, a product of several major renovations and restorations during the later 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. The diocese of Montréal was yet to be established and the new cathedral there, begun in 1823, was in any case not to be Gothic in style. This was also true of the Catholic cathedral of Boston, Holy Cross, Franklin Street, which had been designed by Bulfinch in 1799; he utilized the plan again a few years later for the New North Church of 1802–1804, which

27. For instance: the interior of the former Zion Church was remodeled in 1868 by Henry Engelbert; the interior of the Northeast Reform Dutch Church was not Gothic in detailing, but Georgian Ionic-Rococo; the All Saints Free Church also had a Georgian “Classical” interior (Huxtable, Classic New York, 20–25). The interior of Old St. Patrick’s Cathedral was rebuilt in 1868, after a fire, again by Henry Engelbert. The interiors of Trinity Church, New Haven and St. John’s Cathedral, Providence also have been remodeled. Latrobe’s Christ Church, Washington, D.C. also has been extensively altered and enlarged. Loth and Sadler, Only Proper Style, 39, 37, 31, respectively; but Hamlin (Latrobe, 347) states that Christ Church is “surprisingly little altered.”

The interior of Town’s Trinity Church, New Haven is known from an old print. It was divided into nave and aisles by shafted piers, with galleries over the aisles, and plaster vaults with flat “ribs”; the east end was dominated by a large five-light window. Greene’s St. John’s, Providence was nearly square with a coved circular ceiling. See Piersson, American Buildings, Figs. 89 and 84, respectively.


still survives (as St. Stephen’s Church). However, as has been noted, the new cathedral of New York City was considered to be Gothic in style.

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Québec had visited New York and its new Gothic Catholic cathedral (see Fig. 5) in September 1815. He wrote enthusiastically in his journals about the illusionistic painting of perspective architecture on the end wall of the church that made one think the church was twice as long as it actually was: “The wonderful effect produced by this perspective makes this church pass for the finest in the United States.” Such illusionistic architecture seems quite unusual for the period, and one wonders if that indeed could be the most plausible explanation of the complex forms shown behind the altar of St. Mary’s, Halifax, which are otherwise so difficult to interpret structurally, at least on the basis of the evidence provided by Clow’s watercolor. The bishop who reacted so favorably to St. Patrick was J.-O. Plessis, the same bishop who three years later, on 5 July 1818, consecrated Edmund Burke as Bishop of Nova Scotia. It was, after all, Bishop Burke who laid the cornerstone for the new cathedral, the first stone church in Halifax, two years later, on 5 June 1820. Although Bishop Burke died only seven months after, the choice of Gothic forms most probably was his. Could he have been inspired by Bishop Plessis’s enthusiasm for the new cathedral of New York? Could the idea of illusionistic architecture have been remembered by Bishop Burke from conversations between the two men at the time of his consecration and planned by him for the new cathedral in Nova Scotia? The possibility of enlarging or rebuilding the small wooden church (St. Peter’s) of 1784 was already being discussed as early as

1810. Bishop Plessis visited Halifax in July 1815, at which time it appears that the desire or need for a larger church was a topic of conversation between the Bishop and Rev. Burke and his congregation. It was later that fall, after his visit to Halifax, that Bishop Plessis was in New York admiring its new cathedral. The sequence of events between 1810 and 1820, admittedly circumstantial, suggests the possibility that the sanctuary design of St. Mary’s, Halifax was at least inspired

30. J. L. Eldredge, Architecture Boston, Barre, Mass., 1976, 32–34. The new cathedral of Holy Cross on Washington Street, dedicated in 1875, was designed by P. C. Keely, the architect of the extensions to St. Mary’s Halifax.


For St. Patrick’s, see J. M. Farley, History of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York, 1908, 88. The church, as first built, was apparently a considerable success: “This grand and beautiful church, which may justly be considered one of the greatest ornaments of our city, and inferior in point of elegance to none in the United States, is built in the Gothic style, and executed agreeably to the design of Mr. Joseph F. Mangin, the celebrated architect of New York. It is 120 feet long, 80 wide, and between 75 and 80 high. The superior elegance of the architecture, as well as the novelty and beauty of the interior, had for some months past excited a considerable degree of public curiosity, and crowds of citizens of all denominations daily flocked to it, to admire its grandeur and magnificence . . . ”; N.Y. Evening Post, 11 May 1815.

32. “Minute Book,” f. 33r.


34. Bishop Plessis arrived in Halifax on 14 July. His visit with Rev. Burke was brief, as the latter sailed for Europe on the 16th; the meeting only took place because the sailing had been delayed by adverse winds. Bishop Plessis wrote that the church of St. Peter was inferior to the others in the city but that “in a few years it will surpass them all, if the members of the congregation persevere in their project of building a stone church upon a much larger plan”; O’Brien, Memoirs, 87, and also 96, 98.
by, even if clearly not based directly upon, Old St. Patrick's, New York.35

The wonderful effect of the perspective painting in Old St.

Patrick’s can no longer be judged, because in 1838–1842 its

sanctuary was extended 36 feet, or two bays. At that time the

architectural illusion was destroyed, and therefore it does not

appear in the earliest interior view of St. Patrick’s (Fig. 10),36

made before a fire in October 1866 necessitated the total re-

building of the interior to a new design. Nonetheless, from

Bishop Plessis’s description, the effect of the illusionistic

painting, one of increasing the apparent length of the church,

may be partly imagined from the later interior view, as the

illusion must have involved the painted continuation of the

design of the nave arcades. Although there is no description of

the design that terminated the view between the illusionisti-
cally extended arcades, it seems safe to say that it was different

in nature from the sanctuary design of St. Mary’s, Halifax.

The latter did not involve any illusion of increased length.

Rather, it created the impression of a sumptuous baldacchino

over the high altar, a baldacchino flattened out and thus con-

verted into a screen or gigantic retable, thereby forming a

fusion of several forms. What was the source for this design as

distinct from the idea of illusionistic painting or relief?

It may be that the answer lies in the cathedral of Notre-

Dame in Québec City.37 This building had been completely

gutted in the course of the British siege of Québec City in

1759. It was reconstructed under the direction of Jean

Baillargé (1726–1805) between 1766 and 1771. It was not until

1786–1795 that the interior was decorated, however. One no-
table feature of the work carried out at that time by Jean and

his son François (1759–1830) was the design and construction

of a baldacchino. It is a most extraordinary design, one attrib-

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35. It would seem that at this time there was a regular passenger

service between New York and Halifax, where connections for Eu-

rope were made; O’Brien, Memoirs, 105–106. Halifax, therefore, was

not as remote from New York in the early 19th century as might be

thought; indeed, travel between Nova Scotia and the New England

states was easier and more convenient than journeys overland to other

Canadian cities.


uted solely to François Baillairgé (Fig. 11). The choir was relatively long and narrow, and the altar was placed against the curving wall of the apse. Rather than bringing the altar forward and constructing a typical freestanding baldacchino of four to six columns over the altar, François eliminated the columns and, in a brilliantly inventive fashion, placed the six arches of the canopy directly against the wall of the apse. Thus, the acanthus-covered, rib-like ogee arches, supported by the cornice of the entablature aided by angel caryatids placed like volute brackets, rise over the entire space of the apse to climax in a great orb surmounted by a figure of Christ, conspicuously displaying the Cross, set against a cherubim-filled burst of rays (Fig. 12). The entire structure was gilded and completed in 1793.

Could this dazzling construction have been the inspiration for the flat screen-like baldacchino of St. Mary’s in Halifax, its Baroque forms translated into Gothic ones and the design simplified? Does the Baillairgé baldacchino help re-establish the possibility that the anonymous one at St. Mary’s was partly freestanding, or can it still be maintained that, given the different artistic traditions, it was illusion? Regardless of the answers to those questions, it is enticing to recall that when the Rev. Dr. Edmund Burke was consecrated Bishop of Sion and Vicar Apostolic in 1818 at the hands of Bishop Plessis of Québec, that ceremony took place in Notre-Dame, in front of the high altar, under François Baillairgé’s sheltering baldacchino. Perhaps for the man who was to begin the construction of St. Mary’s two years later, after at least five years of planning and anticipation, a memorable event in his life was made more memorable by Baillairgé’s soaring, embracing canopy, as later it would be commemorated in the sanctuary of his new cathedral—a building which he lived to see just scarcely begun but which, when completed, truly served as a memorial to the first bishop.

Despite the fact that, a few years later, there was little discussion or controversy surrounding the choice of a Gothic style for Notre-Dame in Montréal, it is disappointing that the church records of St. Mary’s reveal nothing about the designer, design, or construction of the church during the crucial years 1820 to 1830 or the reasons for the choice of the Gothic style, and make no mention then or in subsequent years of the painting of the sanctuary. It has been pointed out that the exteriors of early Gothic Revival buildings, if not actually preserved, were frequently the subject of painted or engraved views, and that, by contrast, the interiors are less well documented. St. Mary’s, Halifax reminds us that the often rather similar and formulaic exteriors of these early Gothic Revival buildings may have contained far more imaginative designs than their exterior appearance suggests. Additionally, it is on the basis of its interior that one might elevate St. Mary’s, Halifax to the position of a significant monument in Canadian, and North American, Gothic Revival architecture.

38. Noppen, Notre-Dame, 167-171; also Noppen, “François Baillairgé, architecte,” in D. Karel, L. Noppen, and C. Thibault, François Baillairgé et son ouvre (1739-1830), Québec, 1975, 70. Baillairgé’s original drawing is in the Université Laval Archives (Chenevert Collection), Québec City; L. Noppen and M. Grignon, L’art de l’architecte: Three Centuries of architectural drawings in Québec City, Québec, 1983, 148-149, no. 21. The original baldacchino was destroyed along with the entire interior of the church by a fire in 1922. The interior, including the baldacchino, was faithfully re-created, 1922-1924.

39. The specific sources for Baillairgé’s design are not known. As early as 1828 it was said that the apsidal choir of Notre-Dame was too narrow to make a conventional freestanding baldacchino practical; Abbé J. Demers, Précis d’architecture, quoted in Noppen, Notre-Dame, 271. Baillairgé himself recorded in his journal only that he was working on plans for the decoration of the choir “suivant une idée grossière qui Mavoit été Communiquée Par Mr Germain Lun des Marguillers” (quoted in Noppen, Notre-Dame, 259).

40. The separation of Nova Scotia from the Diocese of Québec was resolved at a general session of the Congregation of Propaganda 11 December 1815; this separation was reaffirmed, and Dr. Burke appointed Vicar Apostolic, on 19 May 1817. The Papal Bulls authorizing his elevation reached Dr. Burke too late in 1817 for him to proceed to Québec City for consecration which was consequently delayed until July 1818; O’Brien, Memoirs, 112-115.

41. Toker, Notre-Dame, 76-77. The choice of the Gothic style appears to have been the suggestion of the architect, rather than the request of the wardens of Notre-Dame.

42. With regard to the choice of Gothic for Notre-Dame, Montréal in 1823-1824, Toker (Notre-Dame, 75) suggested that it was “hard to conceive that the acceptance of the Gothic style in Canada was not in some way aided by Plessis.” He points out that Bishop Plessis made his first trip to Europe in 1819-1820 and recorded in his journals “intelligent, succinct, and enthusiastic accounts of the Gothic churches he visited” (ibid., 74). On the basis of his earlier appreciation of the Gothic Revival (Old St. Patrick’s in New York) and his later enthusiasm for European Gothic, one may suspect that Joseph-Octave Plessis, Bishop of Québec (1808-1825), was the primary inspiration and force behind the selection of Gothic forms for the design of St. Mary’s, Halifax.