

**St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, 53, or 55 Warren Street
(1887-1892)**

From Boston Landmark Commission's Charlestown Historic
Resources Study 1981*:



55 Warren Street

2015

St. Mary's is a large, late Gothic Revival church with a rugged exterior of light colored Rockport granite with brick trimmings. It has an essentially long rectangular form with a low tower at the Warren/Winthrop Street corner. A small rectangular wing projects from the rear portion of the Soley Street wall.

There are two main entrances on Warren Street, reached by flights of granite steps, with replacement wood outer doors at both entrances. The entrances are set within broad pointed arches. The upper portions of the arches contain bands of four quatrefoil strained glass windows with large circular panels above, containing four quatrefoil windows with smaller circular windows. All openings are edged with brickwork trim. A crucifix-topped entrance arch projects upward into a great pointed arch window at the head of the nave.

The corner tower is characterized on the upper levels by lancet windows set within wider, recessed pointed arch panels. A pointed arch at the top level of the tower features oculus windows (repeated on four sides of the tower) and there is also an oculus window near the apex of the Warren Street gable. The pinnacle of the buttress at the Warren/Soley corner is no longer extant-its base and finial-surmounted pyramidal cap are missing.

The building's sidewalls add considerable interest to the Winthrop/Soley Streetscape via rhythmic repetition of short and tall stained glass windows and in particular the buttresses above the pointed arches of the second level. Between the buttresses are interrupted courses of large dentils with a continued large dentil course below the eaves of the nave's

gable roof. The pinnacle is partially intact at rear of church's Winthrop Street side.



Soley Street wall

2015

Architect: Patrick C. Keeley; on site interior design work conducted by Keeley's son C P Keeley

Builder: Holmes Brothers- contractors; D D Taylor, "Supt. Of the work" (*Charlestown Enterprise*, Act 22, 1887)

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church is a good example of late Gothic Revival ecclesiastic architecture. It was designed by the

important Brooklyn, New York-based church architect Patrick C Keeley. He was also the architect of Charlestown's St. Francis DeSales R C church on the summit of Bunker Hill (1859-1861). This church's parish was the first set off from Boston's Roman Catholic Cathedral, in 1828. The present St. Mary's R C Church is the successor church building to the first St. Mary's Church in Charlestown located on Richmond Street (now Old Rutherford Avenue), between Union and Austin Streets.

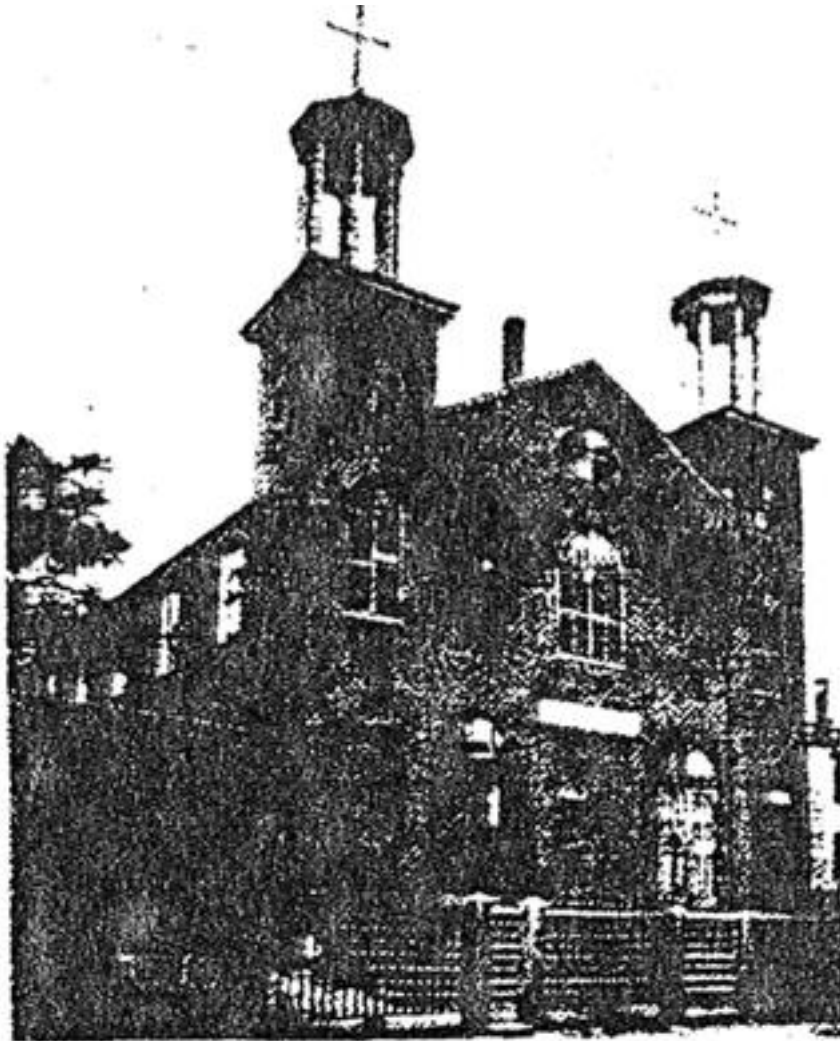
St Mary's R C Church architect, Patrick C Keeley (1816-1896), was born at Kilkenny, Ireland, the son of an architect, with whom he was associated in practice for a number of years. In 1841, he migrated to the U. S., subsequently settling in Brooklyn. Keeley's specialty was Catholic Church architecture. He is reputed to have built at least 500 Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals in New York State alone, exclusive of New York City. In addition he built churches in New England and Canada. Keeley was active through the early 1890s (St Mary's was dedicated in 1892). Douglas Shand Tucci notes that Keeley designed "thirty-some local churches." Important Boston area examples of his work include Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Harrison Avenue, in 1861.

St. Mary's R C Church's site at Winthrop/Warren/Soley streets possesses an interesting and ironic (given its present religious Association) pre-revolutionary war history. Prior to the revolution, a distillery was located on this site. As early as 1650, Walter Edmunds owned and operated a distillery on St. Mary's site. He had been "apprenticed in England to the distilling of strong liquors" Edmunds descendants owned this distillery until 1726. Peter Calef, a leading Charlestown physician owned it from 1726-1735 and his son Joseph, a tanner, owned it from 1735-1750. Later owners included James Turnbull (1750-82) and Jesse and John H Brown, hatters

(Hat and Cap Store at 15 city square). By circa late 18th-century Francis Hyde, original owner of 32 Cordis Street (see form) operated the old Edmunds distillery as a soap factory until 1843. Hyde then sold it to Samuel Kidder and Company, a firm well known in Charlestown as manufacturing chemists. Kidder later sold this property to his partner Daniel White. Evidently White built a brick commercial/residential block on the portion of the lot bordering St. Mary's Street (shown on the 1868 Sanborn insurance as three contiguous brick structures (three stories) with one story wooden ells. To the rear of this lot was a large brick structure-presumably the old distillery/soap factory. This property was sold by White to Edmunds and Stowell in 1868 and it was, for a time, known as "The Chemical Factory".

In 1883, St. Mary's R C Church's future site was sold to leading Charlestown/Boston contractor/real estate speculator Patrick O'Riordan. For a short time the dry goods and "wool rags" dealing Klous family members rented the commercial-residential building on this site for their "old rags business". In 1885 Archbishop Williams purchased this lot for the construction of the present St. Mary's R C Church. In 1887 the commercial/residential block and the old distillery/soap factory/chemical factory was demolished to accommodate the church.

St. Mary's parish in Charlestown was established in 1828. It was the first parish set off from the Cathedral and the second Catholic Church to be built in the Boston area. The first St. Mary's R C church in Charlestown was located on Richmond Street, now Old Rutherford Avenue. Joseph Fenwick, the second Bishop of Boston, in founding the parish said "it was for the greater convenience of the workmen employed at the Navy



*Exterior of Old Saint Mary's Church,
Rutherford Avenue*

Yard and at the glassworks in East Cambridge". According to an article in Charlestown's *New Enterprise* dated March 8, 1884, "St. Mary's was designed to embrace the territory of what is now Cambridge, Somerville, Arlington, Medford, and Malden, as well as Charlestown". The first St. Mary's church building was described as "an exceedingly plain and unpretentious edifice constructed of brick. The style of the building is Roman".

The present St. Mary's R C church was built under the leadership of Rev. John W McMahon, D D. On April 14, 1885. The deeds were passed for 15,000 feet of land on Warren, Winthrop and Soley streets, the price being \$32,000. The cornerstone was laid on October 23, 1887. The first religious service was held in the basement on May 26, 1889 and 10 years later the church was consecrated. At the time of consecration the total expenditure was not less than \$300,000. Patrick C Keeley of Brooklyn submitted three designs for St. Mary's R C Church, including one of Somerville stone, one of granite and the other of brick with stone trimmings.

According to an article in the *Charlestown Enterprise* written at the time of the church's dedication in October 1892, the style of St. Mary's R C church was described as "Tudor Gothic". The church's interior finish was described as "rich and unique". The *Charlestown Enterprise* reporter present at the dedication noted that "the ceiling is finished in wood, formed into bays and paneled in geometrical forms, molded and enriched with carved tracery. The trusses are exposed and are a marked feature of the ceiling, being finished in fine tracery and panel work..... as there are no columns, these trusses support the roof and the effect from the floor is very fine. On the king posts of each truss are conspicuous and finely carved figures representing the Angels of faith, hope, and charity, sacrifice, mercy and passion". The entire woodwork is stained and polished and all the tracery and moldings are covered with ornamental stucco work. The windows are connected by stucco mouldings, which continuing over the top are formed into canopies, enriched with fine tracery. Lower down on the walls, the space between the windows is occupied by Stations of the Cross. These stations are each 5 feet wide and 8 feet high and represent the work of Joseph Siebel, a New York sculptor. (These Stations of the Cross are identical to a set Siebel

designed for St. Joseph's Cathedral in New York City-the moulds for these stations were broken after use at Charlestown and Hartford Connecticut). The *Charlestown Enterprise* article dated October 1, 1892 went on to note that St. Mary's' were "richly tinted and gilded". Furthermore "all of the finish of the wainscoting and pews are in oak, highly polished. The vestry is well appointed with the double vestment case and alter boys' closets. There are 42 oak chairs for the alter boys, which are placed in the sanctuary. The latter is enclosed by a heavy rail of cast brass columns, with an oak top. There are 16 clusters of gas and a electric jets for illuminating purposes." This article notes that P C Keeley's son C P Keeley supervised the church's interior design work.

The windows of St. Mary's Church were made in Munich, Germany. It was noted in the *Charlestown Enterprise* that "unlike many stained glass windows they do not shut out the light of nature and the church is not made gloomy even in the darkest and gloomiest days". Particularly noteworthy are the three windows over the high altar. The central window was a gift of the Bishop of Hartford, brother of the pastor of St. Mary's. The *Charlestown Enterprise* article dated October 1, 1892 goes into considerable detail regarding the location and subject matter of the stained glass windows. This article also mentions that the altars were built by Charles E Hall and Company and "are the best Vermont statuary and Mexican and Algerian onyx-being highly wrought and carved". According to this article the side altars are of the same material as the high altar." It is interesting to note that the original altar at the first St. Mary's Church was the altar of the baptistry in the lower church. The basement of the church was completed May 1889 and was used shortly thereafter for services. The steeple was never built due to the danger of the foundation sinking from the additional weight.

Note: Further information on this church is provided in a *Charlestown enterprise* article dated October 22, 1887. At that time it was reported that "the design will be Gothic (length 153'6", with 80'10"), on the Soley Street corner will be a two-story projection 30 x 30' to be used as a sacristy or priests robing room. This center doorway is very elaborate with granite and pressed brick trimmings and ornamental pediment above. Two panicles rise in front to add to the general effect and two are placed in the rear. The roof will be hard southern pine, slated and supported by 18 granite buttresses. There will be 10 stained-glass windows on each side, 27 feet high and 6 feet wide. For the present, the tower will be capped at 88 feet and left unfinished. The basement is to be 130 x 72 Holmes Brothers have the entire contract for construction and D D Taylor is superintendent of the work". St. Mary's organ was built by Woodberry and Harris of Boston and ranked among the largest organs of the city. In 1887, the estimated cost of St. Mary's RC Church was \$200,000.

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*Digitized and edited, without change in content, from the scanned record in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, with the addition of current photographs. In the case of houses that have been altered since the survey, these photographs may not entirely correspond to the architectural description. If earlier photographs of suitable quality are available, these have been included.

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