

## 27 Devens Street, St. John's Episcopal Church Parish House (1870s, 1901)

From Boston Landmark Commission's Charlestown Historic Resources Study 1981 (E. W. Gordon, Consultant)\*:



27 Devens Street

2015

Number 27 Devens Street is a picturesquely rendered parish house with an early 20th century ground floor and a Carpenter Gothic, Stick Style second-floor. The building was transformed from a 1 ½-story wood frame chapel to a two-story parish house with a new brick first floor in 1901. It has a four-sided projecting main façade segment attached to an essentially

rectangular rear segment. The first floor is composed of brick with a "zipper like" pattern of interlocking bricks at the corners. The first-floor windows are slightly recessed within the masonry wall with wooden frames and a 1/1 sash.

The second floor (original first floor) exhibits Carpenter Gothic/Stick Style surface treatment e.g. flush board sheathing overlaid with horizontal and vertical boards at the edges and a sill course. Window bays on three sides are carried through the roofline by apron panels with X shaped boarding within the panels to dormers with gable roofs with brackets, trefoil bargeboards and King posts. The building is enclosed by a steeply pitched pyramidal roof with copper edging and slate shingles, which are mostly intact. The roof originally had a copper finial. The second floor was painted with appropriate blue -gray color scheme in May 1987.

Bordering the curving tree shaded path of Devens Street, Saint John's Episcopal Church Parish House, together with the crenellated-towered Gothic Revival St. John's Episcopal Church, provides a picturesque glimpse of Victorian Charlestown.

Architecturally, St. John's parish house is a unique marriage of a stylistic early 20th century ground floor with an early 1870s Carpenter Gothic Stick Style second floor. The second floor with its pyramidal roof was originally a 1 ½-story wood frame chapel designed by the important Boston based architectural firm of Ware and van Brunt. It was built to house St. John's large Sunday school on this site circa mid-1870s. St. John's parish house's second-floor is the only example of the stick style in Charlestown. Characterized by flush board sheathing overlaid in the stick style manner with horizontal and vertical boards, the old chapel's three dormers have large apron panels

with X shaped "stick" ornamentation and trefoil barge boarding which clearly echoes the Gothicism of St. John's Episcopal Church next door. In a sense St. John's Parish House represents an interesting early 20th century historic preservation project -here, the old 1870s Chapel was hoisted up onto a new brick ground floor.

The St. John's parish house site, prior to its construction in 1872, was occupied by a bake house. This bake house appears as a 2 ½-story wood frame, vaguely Greek Revival, domestic scale structure with an open porch in an engraved frontispiece to *"The Convent of Massachusetts"*, published by Charlestown's St. John's church in 1860. The 1868 Sanborn atlas however shows the front (Devens Street-facing) portion of the bake house as one and one half stories with a rear ell composed of a long rectangular wooden stable and a small two-story segment labeled "Bake house, with special hazards".

Hunnewell's assertion that St. John's chapel was built in 1872 is challenged by the 1875 Beers Atlas of Charlestown-the chapel is not shown in the 1875 Atlas. St. John's Chapel may have been built at the same time as the 1876-77 interior renovation of St. John's Church. In any event St. John's Chapel is shown on the 1885 Charlestown Atlas.

The chapel, as noted above, is the work of the important Boston-based architectural firm of Ware and van Brunt. William R Ware (1832-1915) was born in Cambridge Massachusetts, educated at Exeter and Harvard (1852) and studied in the office of E C Cabot, architect of the Boston Athenaeum, and Richard Morris Hunt. In partnership with Henry van Brunt he built the First Church in Boston, the old Union Station at Worcester, the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Memorial Hall at Harvard, the Harvard Medical

School on Boylston Street (no longer extant) and many other buildings. In 1863-65 Ware established an atelier in Boston and in 1865 took charge of the newly founded Massachusetts Institute of Technology Architectural School. It was Ware who brought the French architectural teacher, Eugene Letang to teach at MIT. Ware moved to New York in 1881, after firmly establishing the Beaux-Arts system of education in Boston. From 1881-1903, Ware founded and taught at the School of Mines of Columbia College in New York City. Ware was widely regarded as the founder of American architectural education.

St. John's Chapel was transformed into St. John's parish house during the fall of 1901. It was completed at the time of the church's 60th anniversary in November 1901. It was completed under the leadership of Rev. Philo Woodruff Sprague, pastor of St. John's from 1884-1927. P C Barney is credited with the Chapel/Parish House transformation (further research is needed on P C Barney). F G Coburn and Company, contractors, was hired to work on this project. It was noted in a *Charlestown enterprise* article dated September 14, 1901, that "the structure (Chapel) will be raised one story and the present rooms allowed to remain. The improvements will be made on the lower floor. Six rooms are provided, for a choir room (20 x 19'), double parlor (28.5 x 14' and 16 x 28'), men's meeting room (20 x 17'), boy's room (21 x 19') and a kitchen (10 x 14'). The entrance will be from the side directly at the end of the passageway and as at present. The interior and exterior will be plain yet tasteful and the entire structure will be an attractive as well as commodious addition to the church property. The lower story will be of brick and the upper being of wood. It has distinctive features that finely harmonize with the quaint little granite church of which it is a part."

The committee in charge of the planning and work consisted of two church wardens-Dr. Joseph Williams and Dr. E E Allen, and of the treasurer, George Fottler. The improvements cost \$3200 of which \$2800 was paid to the builders.

Bibliography:

Maps- 1818, 1852

Atlases- 1868, 1875, 1885, 1892, 1901, 1911

*Charlestown Enterprise* Sept 14, 1901, p. 1

B.P.L. card file, Fine Arts Department

J F Hunnewell, *A Century of Town Life*

Walter H Kilham, *Boston After Bulfinch*, pp. 78, 79

\*Digitized and edited, without change in content, from the scanned record in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, and with 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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