

31 Devens Street, St. John's Episcopal Church (1841)

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



St. John's Episcopal Church, 31 Devens Street

2015

St. John's Episcopal Church is an early Gothic Revival Church. Its main façade is dominated by a low square crenellated tower containing the vestibule. The tower and main façade are composed of dark ashlar granite. The tower's Devens Street façade has an entrance set within a broad pointed arch. Still intact are Victorian multipanelled doors with pointed arch panels. Above the door is a transom with stained glass. The

second level of the tower has a tall pointed arch window, and the third level has quatrefoil windows.

Abutting the tower is a rectangular nave with brick and granite-trimmed sidewalls. The nave is enclosed by a broad gable roof. The nave walls flanking the tower have tall pointed arch windows containing stained glass. The nave's Devens Street wall culminates in crenellation echoing that of the tower. The brick sidewalls have a low granite faced basement with four regularly spaced basement windows which correspond with tall pointed arched windows directly above. In general, the church's windows are edged with granite borders and have wooden tracery and stained glass, mostly intact. The rear wall of the nave has a single pointed arch stained-glass window. The sidewalls culminate in a shallow dentillated corbel table.



St. John's Church entry detail

2015

Prominently sited on a large corner lot, together with the stick style parish house, and located across the street from the High Victorian Gothic Harvard School (1871), St. John's church forms a picturesque vignette of a mid-19th century Charlestown Church.

Architect: Richard Bond

Owner: Trustees of St. John's Episcopal Church

St. John's Episcopal Church is architecturally significant as a well-executed example of the early Gothic Revival style. Built in 1841, it is the oldest existing church building in Charlestown and part of a now greatly reduced collection of circa 1830s-40s Eastern Massachusetts Gothic Revival churches, characterized by the use of dark ashlar granite, pointed arch and trefoil windows and above all, a crenellated tower. St. John's Episcopal Church is said to possess the earliest figured stained-glass window in Charlestown (Memorial window to brick manufacturer Peter Hubbell, above the altar). Built in 1841-St. John's Episcopal Church is a product of the later years of the early Gothic Revival style in American and ecclesiastical architecture. As early as 1805 the Gothic Revival style was used by Benjamin Latrobe in the design of Christchurch in Washington D C. The Maximillian Godefroy-designed St. Mary's Chapel (1806) in Baltimore, Maryland is another early example of this style.

St. John's is the first Episcopal Church organized in Charlestown. Among the founders of this church were George A Kettel, merchant and developer of Chestnut Street, Charlestown, and Charles W Moore, editor of the *Bunker Hill Aurora*. Perhaps the Church's best-known pastor was Philo Woodruff Sprague. He was rector of this church from 1884-1924 and the rector emeritus 1924-1927.

St. John's Episcopal Church represents the work of Boston-based architect Richard Bond. He was active in Boston area architectural circles from circa 1830s-1860s. Evidently Bond started out as a draftsman-he is first listed as an architect in 1848. He is credited with having planned and/or built a number of important buildings in Boston and vicinity. He is probably best known as the architect of Gore Hall at Harvard College. This Gothic Revival library, designed by Bond in 1848, stood on the site of the present Widener library. Bond is said to have designed the old Tremont Bank in Boston, the granite courthouse on Federal Street, in Salem (1839) as well as Salem's City Hall at 93 Washington Street (1837-38). Bond is also credited with Lewis Wharf (14-40 Lewis Wharf 1836-38) and 28-32 Atlantic Avenue. He is known to have submitted plans for the Chapel at Mount Auburn Cemetery (plans in collection of SPNEA). Above all Bond seems to have been a church architect-he was responsible for the first Methodist Church on Temple Street, Boston (1835-36), Federal Street Baptist Church (1847), 13th Congregational Church, Beech Street and Harrison Avenue (1848), Rowe Street Baptist Church (1847), Bowdoin Square Baptist Church (site of the present New England Telephone Company building, 1848), and the Winthrop Church, Green Street, Charlestown (still extant but in an altered state). According to B P L architects file information, Bond was at one time associated with Boston architect Charles E Parker.

St. John's Episcopal Church is by no means the earliest Boston area church of this type. Bond was evidently influenced by the similarly rendered churches of George Brimmer- e.g. Old Trinity Church on Washington Street, Boston (1828) and the Solomon Willard-designed St. John the Evangelist Church on Bowdoin Street, Boston (1831). St. Johns Episcopal Church in

Charlestown is very similar to St. John the Evangelist in terms of scale and form-particularly the proportions of the Bowdoin Street church's tower. Bond seems also to have studied Old Trinity Church for elements such as the broad pointed arch entrance, tall center tower window, quatrefoil tower window and crenellated tower and end-wall of the nave.

William H Pearson states that "in America the introduction of the Gothic style was associated with a period of notable expansion in the church, an expansion stimulated in part by the growth of the country at large. Moreover, during the first two decades of the 19th century the Episcopal and Roman Catholic faiths in particular enjoyed a period of consolidation and growth, which resulted in a substantial number of new churches. Many of these churches were designed in the Gothic Revival style and it was via these churches that the style first made its way into American architecture" Walter Kilham, writing in Boston during the late 1940s, asserts that "the Gothic style came into vogue because of a growing feeling that the Gothic style in any form was more appropriate for worship than the old meetinghouse type". The Gothic Revival style in America was a British import-inextricably bound to an interest or new awareness of medieval Christianity, the writings of John Carter, Augustus Welby Pugin, the novels of Sir Walter Scott, and the rebuilding of the English houses of Parliament in London (1836).

St. John's Episcopal Church's beginnings in Charlestown may be traced back to "a meeting of a number of gentlemen which took place at the home of the Navy Yard's chaplain in November 1838" this group listened to proposals for the establishment of an Episcopal Church in Charlestown set forth by Rev. Thomas Clark of Boston, later Bishop of Rhode Island. This group voted to hold a public meeting at City Square's

Fuller's Hall. The first Episcopal Sunday services were subsequently held at this Hall on November 28, 1838. The beginnings of St. John's are rooted, in part, to the Diocesan Convention of 1839-it was recommended to this convention that Episcopal churches be established in Charlestown and Worcester Massachusetts-rapid growth was the overriding reason for establishing churches in these communities. By January 1842 Episcopal services had been moved from Fuller's Hall to Charlestown's Town Hall.

The cornerstone of the present St. John's Episcopal Church was laid on May 5, 1841. This building was consecrated in November 1841. Among the founders of this church were Joshua Bates Jr, a public school teacher, George Adams Kettel, heir to the Nathan Adams estate and developer of Chestnut Street, Capt. Joel Abbott, Charles W Moore, editor of the *Bunker Hill Aurora* and *Boston Mirror*, and Samuel J Bridge.

St. John's interior's first major renovation, by architect A C Martin, occurred in 1876-77. Its earlier appearance was "distinctly low church, of the meeting house type, with the galleries on three sides and the organ in the rear and lacking the pointed arches that today set off a sanctuary and choir. Two straight-backed chairs and a communion table stood within the square communion rail and the box pews filled the nearly square auditorium." Hunnewell noted that "extensive alterations and improvements were made inside the church by A C Martin ... These fittings are neat and recently added chancel furniture is good and appropriate. Conspicuous behind the alter is the only memorial window of stained glass in the town, placed there in memory of Peter Hubbell, for many years the efficient senior warden, who died in January 1871".
(written circa 1888)

Hubbell was a well-to-do brick manufacturer who lived on Monument Square and evidently built numbers 1 and 2 Laurel Street. The Hubbell memorial window replaced a stained glass window of unfigured diamond-shaped panes. Cutler notes that prior to 1876 "there was no chancel in the church, but only a very small slightly raised sanctuary bounded on three sides by a common rail and containing a communion table, two chairs and a lectern. Cutler observes that the pointed arches at the altar were added in 1876-at that time the organ was brought down from the gallery and raised choir stalls were installed in the chancel along with the clergy stalls, a lectern and pulpit. In 1926, Vaughn and O'Neill, of Boston, restored several stained glass windows. This firm was hired to "restore the original firmness and brilliancy of the memorial altar window and two others with the addition of heavy protecting glass on the outside of each to preserve for many years." The 1926 window restoration involved leading, soldering, carpentry and painting-tasks completed at a cost of \$550. At that time "a new illuminated cross, 8 feet tall was erected on the front of St. John's just below the quatrefoil window of the tower's Devens Street façade. In 1928 a bronze tablet memorializing Philo Woodruff Sprague was installed in the church. This tablet reads "in sacred memory of Philo Woodruff Sprague, beloved Rector, 1884-1924, Rector emeritus 1924-1927, prophet of social righteousness, friend to the community, inspired preacher in whom the love of God was made manifest". Philo W Sprague was a descendent of the Spragues who first settled Charlestown in 1629. The Sprague tablet was designed by the office of Cram and Ferguson and was executed by the Gorham Company of Providence, Rhode Island for St. John's congregation. This tablet represented "the best we could secure in artistry and religious feeling". In 1941, Siberian elm

trees were planted in front of the church. Tall Lombardy poplar trees had been planted at the rear of the church in 1939. The hurricane of 1954 blew down the Elms in front of the church, "but they were pushed back up again".

In 2003, with grants from historic Boston and others, lighting for the church steeple was installed. More recently, the altar area and railings were reworked so that the original altar could be brought into the center of the platform; the step up to the altar was considerably widened and hand rails installed. In doing this work, two shoes were found in a small cavity, a tradition at the time; however, what was unique about the shoes was that one was a man's and the other a woman's shoe. Pictures were taken and the shoes were put back into the wall. The nave was also repainted at this time, in neutral colors, but the narthex (entry) repainting was done in one of the historic colors and the stenciling on the wainscot was reproduced.

John's Episcopal Church was founded on the eve of Charlestown's mid-1840s population/building boom. By 1840 Charlestown had, in 40 years, grown from a community of 2700 people to one of 11,500. Until as late as 1800, there had been only one church in Charlestown-the first Parish Church on Harvard, or Town Hill, Street. By 1840 there were 10 congregations divided among six denominational bodies.

From: A Brief Architectural History of St. John's Episcopal Church in Charlestown, September 22, 2016:

For over a century the parish was served by only three priests. The Rev. Thomas R Lambert served from 1856-1883; the Rev. Philo W Sprague served from 1884-1923, and the Rev. Walcott Cutler served from 1924 to 1959. The Rev. Mr. Cutler left a lasting legacy in his work to

preserve Charlestown's historic neighborhood and in his slide collection of Charlestown scenes and people, which is available for viewing through the Boston Public Library. Mr. Cutler is also primarily responsible for the lovely garden behind the church and parish house. St. John's current (2016) rector, the Rev. Thomas Mousin has led St. John's for the past five years.

Devens Street was the outermost street in Town Hill's organic 17th-century street pattern. In colonial times it was called Crooked Lane and was known as Bow street until March 1882- at that time it was renamed Devens Street-evidently in honor of merchant and ship-owner Richard Devens, and early 19th century resident of Bow Street (in 1835 he moved to a brick house at the corner of Chelsea and Prospect streets. He died in October 1847). Mr. Devens was one of the original members of the Unitarian Society and Church. For several years he was a director of the Bunker Hill Bank. Charles Devens, Civil War officer and Atty. Gen. of the US in the cabinet of Pres. Rutherford B Hayes (late 1870s) lived nearby at 31 Union Street.

Note: For further information on Richard Bond see 1984 Boston University dissertation on Alexander Parris By Edward F Zimmer.

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*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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