

**315 Bunker Hill Street, St. Francis deSales Church (1859-1862)**

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



from J S Sullivan, *One Hundred Years of Progress*, 1895

The St. Francis deSales Roman Catholic Church is a large building constructed of blue/gray stone with edges trimmed with lighter colored stone, dominated by a 181 foot octagonal tower. It is composed of a vestibule, nave, and small side chapel (on N. Mead Street). The nave is enclosed by a broad cast iron-crested gable. The main façade has a projecting center entrance segment.

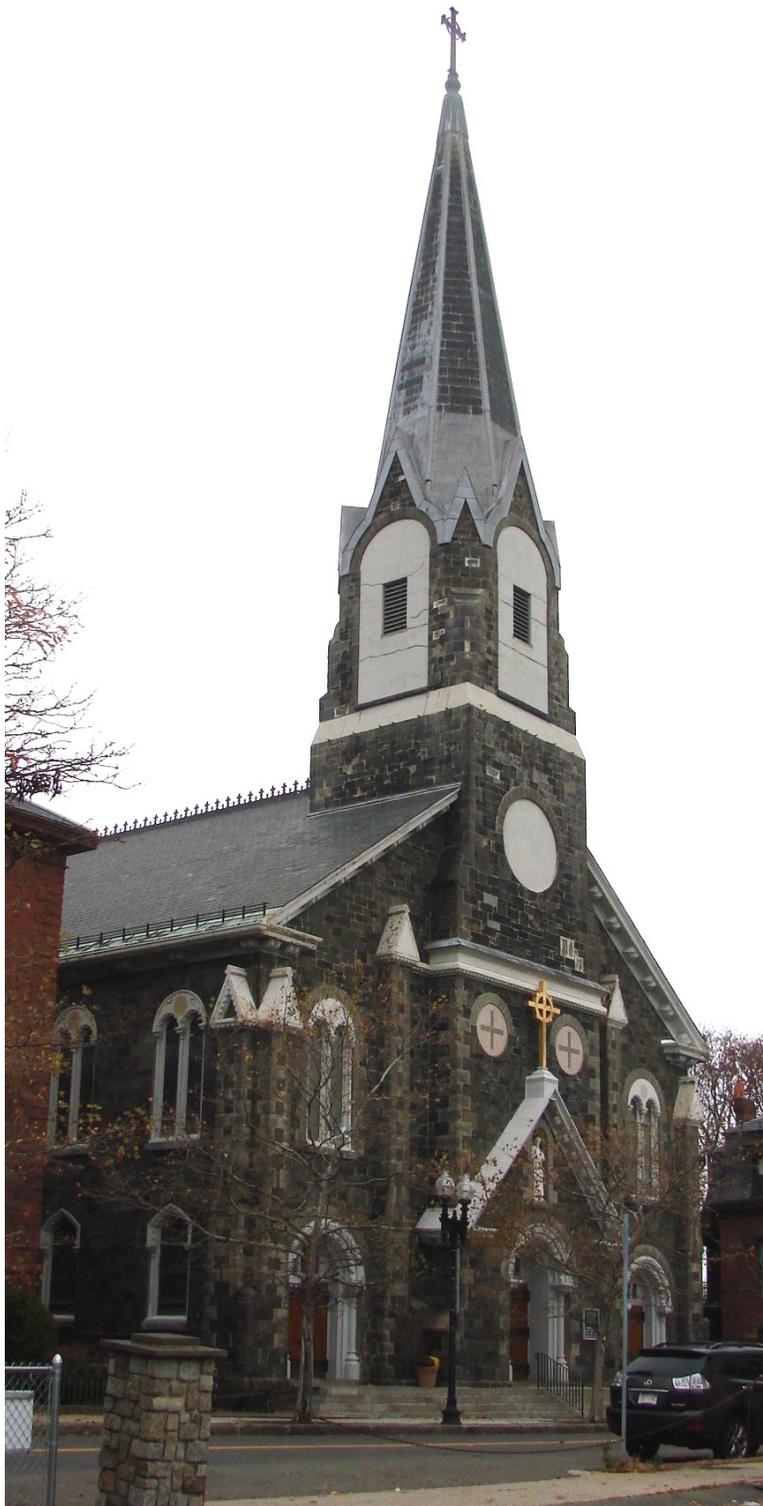
There are three round arch entrances at the street level with cast iron enframing including engaged columns and sawtooth cast iron arch edging. Still intact are massive entrance doors with Celtic Revival hardware. A statue of St. Francis DeSales appears in a niche over the main entrance, below a decorative gable with modillion blocks.

The church sidewalls are characterized by ranges of round arch windows. These windows have cast iron enframements, similar to those of the main entrances, with jagged sawtooth detail. There have been alterations to the spire. A photo in Leahy's history, 1891, shows several features which are presently covered over including the Rose window, round arch louvered windows with a clock on each side and original slate shingles.

Architect: Patrick C Keely

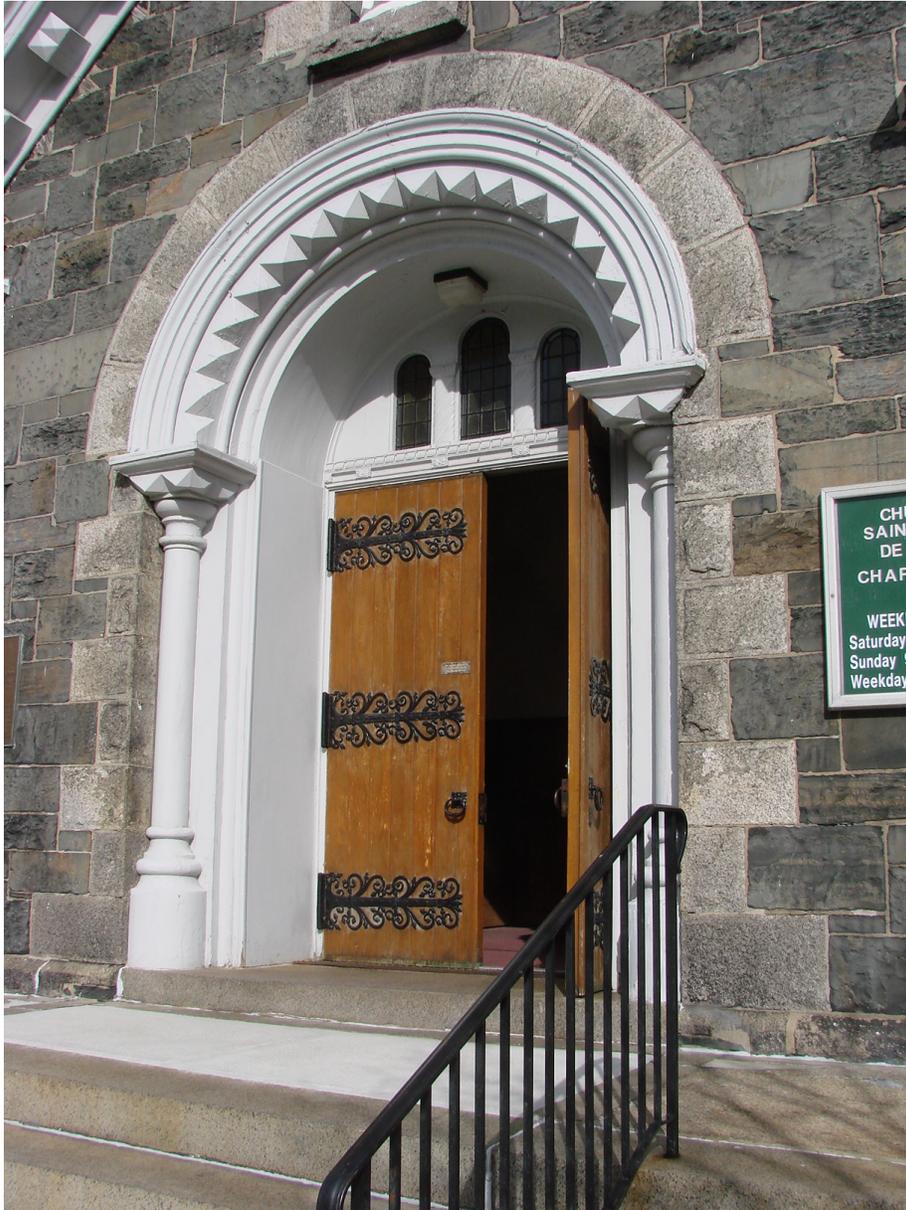
Original owner: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston

The St. Francis deSales Roman Catholic Church is Bunker Hill's most visible landmark. Its 181-foot spire towers above even the Bunker Hill Monument. Architecturally it is something of an anomaly with elements of the Romanesque Revival, Gothic Revival, and "Celtic Revival". It is an important work of Brooklyn New York-based architect Patrick C Keely, a noted designer of Roman Catholic churches. It has significant



St. Francis deSales Roman Catholic Church, 2015

historical associations with Charlestown's Catholics and their mid-century struggle to establish themselves in the New World.



Entry door detail

2015

Architecturally, this church is difficult to categorize. Unlike most Boston area churches of the period, it is constructed of a blue stone (of local origin?) rather than the more commonly

utilized brownstone or pudding stone. At the time of the church's completion, pudding stone was just beginning to be widely used for church construction, e.g. Hammatt Billings' church at the corner of Tremont and West Concord Street in the South End, circa 1861-62. In addition, Keely's use of cast iron for entrance enframements is something of a novelty and he blends round arch Romanesque elements with pointed arch elements. William A Leahy notes that this church "is built of blue stone, in peculiar style..... modeled we would say, after..... the ancient chapels built in Ireland before the 10th century." (e.g. Cormac's Castle, on the rock of Cashel). James S Sullivan, M.D., describes this church's design as "Celtic architecture", composed of a vestibule and long nave. It measures 50 feet 7 inches. Its spire rises to a height of 181 feet.

This church possesses a rich inventory of original features, including the massive double doors and Celtic Revival hardware of the three entrances, unusual cast iron entrance enframements (arches accented by a saw tooth cast iron work), a statue of St. Francis DeSales in an niche above the main entrance and cast iron cresting along the gable roof ridge. Unfortunately, alterations to the spire and its two stages have resulted in the loss of a rose window, double round arch louvered openings, four clocks, and the octagonal steeple's original slate shingles.

St. Francis deSales Church's architect, Patrick C Keely (1816-1896) was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, the son of an architect, with whom he was associated in practice for a number of years. In 1841, Keely migrated to the US, subsequently settling in Brooklyn. Keely's specialty was Catholic church architecture-he is reputed to have built at least 500 Catholic churches and cathedrals in New York State alone, exclusive of New York City. In addition, he built churches in New England

and in Canada. Keely was active in Boston church/school design from 1847 (Notre Dame Academy, Roxbury) through the early 1890s (St. Mary's, Charlestown, 1892). Douglas Shand Tucci notes that he designed "thirty- some local churches." Important Boston examples of Keely's work include two South End churches: Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Washington Street (1866-1876) and the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Harrison Avenue, 1871. Examples of Keely's work are located in virtually every Boston neighborhood.

During the 1840s, the Catholic population of Charlestown increased rapidly because of the opportunities that existed for work on the docks and in the Navy Yard. By the late 1850s Charlestown Catholics had outgrown St. Mary's Church (the predecessor to the present church on Warren Avenue, built ca 1890- see form). The archdiocese of Boston purchased the land on Bunker Hill's summit for a new Catholic church, from Deacon Hunnewell, (amid protests on the part of the Protestant local citizenry-the destruction of Charlestown's Ursuline convent was still well remembered). Bishop Fitzpatrick laid the cornerstone on September 11, 1859-"a mammoth tent was erected over the site and into it crowded 5000 people". The church was dedicated on June 22nd 1862. This location was utilized by the archdiocese of Boston to strike a conciliatory note both in the press and during the dedication ceremonies

James S Sullivan, M.D., provides a detailed description of this church in 1895, he notes that:

The interior is worthy of the exterior. Two galleries run from the choir of loft along the walls, one on each side of the nave.



On each side of the nave fluted pillars rise, sweeping into arches which support the clerestory. There are ten arches on each side. Under each gallery are seven stained glass windows, and there is one on each side of the vestibule. On a level with each gallery are twenty stained glass windows, long, arched, and narrow, and set in pairs, and over each pair is set a circular pane of stained glass. In the sanctuary above the altar is a large, round window of stained

glass, picturing Christ. On the reredos of the main altar are three paintings. The middle piece represents angelic hosts adoring and enwrapped in the effulgence of the God-head; the one on the epistle side represents the Annunciation and the one on the right, the Nativity. On the left side of the altar itself is a statue of the Sacred Heart and on the right, one of St. Joseph, and each statue rests on a pedestal fronted by a statue of an angel bearing a torch. On the epistle side is an altar to the Blessed Virgin and on the gospel side one to St. Francis deSales. Over each side altar is a small, round stained glass window, and beneath each of these windows is a painting representing a sacred theme. The organ in the choir is black walnut in finish, with gilded pipes. Along the walls of the nave are the stations of the cross. The contour of the roof is a long, half cylinder or tunnel formed arch. The general tone of the decorations is buff. The roof is pink in color with buff borders. The seating capacity of the church is about 2,000 and the congregation numbers upwards of 5,500 souls.

#### Bibliography:

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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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