

2000

St. John's Church: A History and Appreciation: Produced on the Occasion of the Jubilee 2000

St. John's Catholic Church, Bangor, Maine

Richard W. Judd

Follow this and additional works at: https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/books_pubs

Recommended Citation

St. John's Catholic Church, Bangor, Maine and Judd, Richard W., "St. John's Church: A History and Appreciation: Produced on the Occasion of the Jubilee 2000" (2000). *Books and Publications*. 344.
https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/books_pubs/344

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections at Bangor Community: Digital Commons@bpl. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books and Publications by an authorized administrator of Bangor Community: Digital Commons@bpl.

St. John's Church:

A History and Appreciation



By Richard W. Judd

Produced on the occasion of the Jubilee 2000

**St. John's Catholic Church
207 York Street • Bangor • Maine**

The Pastors of St. John's Church

1836-1839	Rev. Michael Lynch
1839-1853	Rev. Thomas O'Sullivan
1853-1860	Rev. John Bapst, S.J.
1860-1867	Rev. Henry Gillen
1867-1868	Rev. James Murphy
1868-1869	Rev. Eugene Vetromile
1869-1874	Rev. Clement Mutsaers
1874-1908	Rev. Edward McSweeney
1908-1919	Rev. Patrick J. Garrity
1919-1959	Rev. Msgr. Thomas J. Nelligan
1959-1977	Rev. James H. Keegan
1977-1985	Rev. Raymond P. Bertrand, S.J.
1985-1987	Rev. Thomas J. Fitzpatrick, S.J.
1987-1993	Rev. Maurice T. Lebel
1993-1997	Rev. James P. Brewer
1997-	Rev. Gerard G. Gosselin

The history of St. John's Church is very much a part of the history of Bangor. The town's first permanent dwelling, a log cabin built by Seth Buswell in 1769, was sited downhill and to the left as you face the Church, on a parcel of land later used for St. John's Sisters of Mercy Convent and school. In 1798, as Jesuit missionary Rev. Jean Louis Lefebvre Cheverus, assigned to Pleasant Point, returned from a Penobscot Indian village upriver, he was offered hospitality at Buswell's cabin. The following morning near the cabin he celebrated an impromptu mass -- the first recorded Mass in Bangor.

Rev. James Conway, pastor in Old Town, celebrated Bangor's first formal Mass in December 1828, across town at the home of James Carr on Court Street. For the next few years Bangor's few Catholics received only occasional visits from Jesuit missionaries. Often they traveled to St. Anne's chapel upriver in Old Town for worship; some were even buried in the Catholic cemetery on Indian Island.

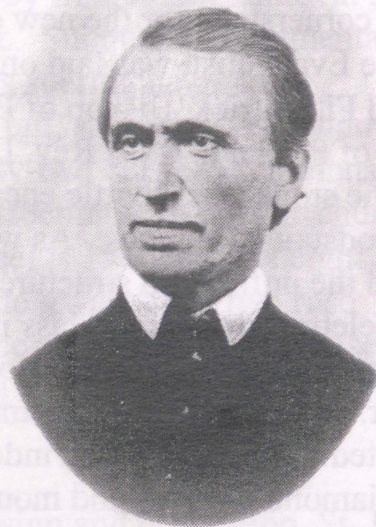
Beginning in the 1830s, however, a steady flow of Irish immigrants boosted the Catholic population of Bangor, and in 1832 the Irish and native Catholics welcomed their first resident pastor, Rev. Patrick McNamee. Two years later the fledgling parish built its first church, "among some noble trees" located between Court and Ohio streets. The modest white structure was named for the patron saint of the parish's new pastor, Rev. Michael Lynch. St. Michael's was dedicated by Most Rev. Benedict Fenwick, Second Bishop of Boston.

Father Lynch left Bangor in 1839, and during the pastorate of his successor, Rev. Thomas O'Sullivan, St. Michael's was twice enlarged. Bangor's population increased from 8,627 to 14,432 between 1840 and 1850, and much of this addition came in the form of Irish Catholic immigrants. As the nation's leading lumber exporter, Bangor offered a wealth of job opportunities for its new arrivals. The Irish community quickly put down roots: Those with capital invested in small clothing, tailoring, boot-making, or dry-goods businesses; others acquired wagons and became teamsters. Most worked as mill operatives, construction hands, day-laborers, dock-workers, or domestics, living in a cluster of houses, shanties, tenements, and boarding houses extending north from the mouth of Kenduskeag Stream along the river to the site of St. John's Church and beyond.

In 1853, Rev. John Bapst, S.J., was sent to replace Father O'Sullivan. Bangor's first non-Irish pastor, John Bapst was born in Switzerland in 1815 and arrived in this country in 1848. In 1853 he was placed in charge of a vast nexus of Jesuit missions stretching from Rockland to Eastport. Shortly after his arrival, the physically frail priest was subjected to a particularly vicious form of anti-Catholic nativism, which was rampant throughout the eastern United States in the early 1850s. On October 14, 1854, he was abducted from the home of a host in Ellsworth, stripped, tarred, and feathered. His wallet and silver watch were stolen. News of his treatment outraged Bangor's leading citizens, who offered moral support and bought him a new watch and chain. But back in Bangor, local know-nothing agitators threatened the little church on

Court Street. With the aid of Old Town's Penobscot Indians armed with guns, clubs, and tomahawks, parishioners held off angry rioters.

Rev. John Bapst, S.J.



These incidents, along with the increasingly crowded conditions in the Court Street Church, convinced Father Bapst that local Catholics needed a larger building -- an edifice that conveyed the impression Catholics were here to stay. Initially he planned to build the church on a lot he purchased at the corner of Broadway and Somerset streets. When Protestant residents objected, he sold the lot to a neighborhood association at a sizeable profit and bought another on York Street, the church's present location. The land was less suitable, falling away in the back into a deep ravine, but it was

also cheaper, providing a surplus to begin construction. The parish rose to the challenge of funding the massive project, creating in the heart of the Irish community a splendidly visible expression of their stalwart faith.

The cornerstone for the new church, which was named for St. John the Evangelist, was laid on December 8, 1854, by Most Rev. Bernard Fitzpatrick, Bishop of Boston, and the soon-to-be first Bishop of Portland, Most Rev. David W. Bacon, D.D. Placed under the stone was a bottle encasing a piece of tarred, feathered, and bloodstained cassock. As with St. Michael's, parishioners guarded the unfinished structure at night against vandalism. Father Bapst celebrated the first Mass in the church in the basement on Christmas 1855, and construction continued through the spring and summer. Shortly before Christmas Eve, 1856, the roof was completed. The large side windows were filled with guzzle glass of small diamond patterns and mounted in sashes of lead. The tower stood only 100 feet, but it was, according to a contemporary article, "of great solidity and well adapted for the support of the spire" - which was finished in 1873, adding (with the cross) 80 more feet to the structure.

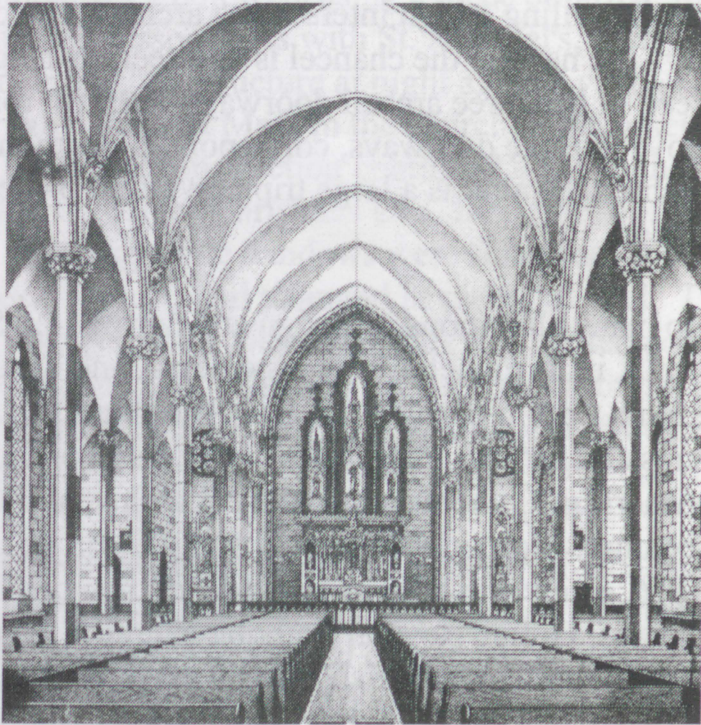
Father Bapst was called away from Bangor in 1859 and was replaced by Rev. Henry Gillen. As resourceful and energetic as his predecessor, Father Gillen focused on education, inviting the Sisters of Mercy to Bangor in 1865 and building a new convent nearby on Newbury Street. Within forty-eight hours of their arrival, the Sisters had three separate schools in operation: a day

school, a night school, and an Academy. In 1879, during the pastorate of Rev. Edward McSweeney (1874-1905), the Sisters opened a new convent and academy, St. Xavier's, off State Street behind the present St. John's school.

Like many parish churches built by Irish immigrants, St. John's plan is cruciform and Gothic in style. Subdued in ornamentation, it gains its sense of inspiration from its soaring height and monumentality, accented by twenty tall, stained-glass windows, each 24 feet in height, and the twenty-two clustered columns, from which spring the ceiling's high intersecting arches. The church's length through the nave to the chancel is 156 feet; its height in the nave is 58 feet. It has three arched doorways with two rose windows above the side doorways, corresponding with those in the transepts. Behind the altar is a large triplet window 34 feet high and 16 feet wide.

Subject to many alterations in design and decoration, St. John's remains faithful, in its graceful lines, fine detail, and balanced proportion, to its Gothic-Revival origins. The church was the first Maine commission for Patrick Charles Keely, perhaps the most celebrated American Catholic establishment architect of the nineteenth century. Born in Kilkenny, County Cork, Ireland, August 9, 1816, Keely was trained as a builder by his father, who worked on several Gothic Revival Catholic churches in Ireland. In 1842 Keely joined millions of Irish emigrating to the Western Hemisphere. He settled in Brooklyn as a carpenter, and was asked to design a Gothic-style church in Kings County in 1847. His

success widened his reputation among Catholic priests, and Keely received commissions for churches throughout the East, becoming known as the “Church Builder.” In addition to the cathedrals in all six New England states, including Immaculate Conception in Portland, Keely designed cathedrals for Albany, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Newark, Chicago, Erie, Cleveland, Charleston, and Halifax and St. John, New Brunswick, and several churches later elevated to cathedral status. At his death, he was credited with more than 600 church buildings, although only about 150 are documented.



A rendering of the church's interior from 1880

In addition to his reputation for completing work on time and within cost, Keely was well regarded as a church builder for several reasons. His structures were suited to New England's immigrant parishes -- poor but large congregations that needed sizeable halls. His capacious, hall-like naves, most without galleries, accommodated large numbers at fewer masses. St. John's, for instance, could seat over a thousand communicants. The main church sits over a basement of equal size, ideal for the many parish functions that were so much a part of immigrant culture.

Keely's buildings were simple, and being made of brick they were relatively easy to build. Moreover, he maintained a limited repertoire of plans, recycling details and avoiding experiments that could prove expensive for a poor parish. All Keely's churches have similar features: the naves express a soaring impression of height, with tall aisles and lack of clerestories; most have tall but thin arcade piers, usually octagonal with cherub, bell, or foliage capitals; all have plaster groin vaults with arches that spring from the capitals; most have a symmetrical single bell tower in an axial position. Still, no two are alike; Keely excelled at skillful variations on a few themes. A man of sincere and deeply-held faith, he saw his service to the church as a religious obligation.

In 1887, artists from the Boston studio of Charles J. Schumacher gilded the interior walls and ceilings with richly textured frescoes and paintings, some of which are still visible today. In 1906, on the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of St. John's, the bronze and onyx rail to the left and right of the altar and the marble floors were

installed, and the church was wired for electric lighting. These changes came during the long and productive pastorate of the Rev. Edward McSweeney, an Irish immigrant who came to Bangor in 1874 and served as pastor of St. John's Church until 1905. During a time of deep industrial depression, with church revenues down, Father McSweeney used his administrative talent to put the affairs of the parish in order. In addition to the frescoes, the steeple (with its 3,400-pound bell), the St. Xavier Convent, and St. John's distinctive stained-glass windows, Father McSweeney had a parochial residence built adjacent to the church, and had St. Teresa's Church constructed in South Brewer.

The Tyrolean stained-glass windows along the sides of the nave are among the finest of St. John's architectural treasures. The church's oldest windows, the three rose stained-glass windows mounted above the main altar, date from 1855-1856, and the three in the back of the church from the early 1960s. The side windows were made and mounted in 1885-1888. Gothic Revival in design, they are the work of Austrian artist Franz Xavier Pernlochner, born in North Tyrol in 1847. Having studied in Rome and Munich, Pernlochner was forty-eight years old when he created the windows. His work emphasizes a subdued but detailed realism, a quiet, simple sense of drama, and the use of Biblical characters to render a moral message. In the tradition of the craft, he composed his designs according to the wishes of the pastor and the style of the church. Each was an original, never to be reproduced. Pernlochner's full-size drawings were executed by Tyroler-Glasmalerei, a well-known stained-glass workshop in Innsbruck.

(The firm, incidentally, was still in existence in the 1960s when they were contacted about the history of the windows.) Like all great stained-glass renderings of the age, St. John's windows are meant to keep the great mysteries of the faith alive. A form of catechism, they instructed parishioners who perhaps could not read or understand the Latin-language liturgy -- a form of "poor people's bible."

Facing the altar, you will see three lancet-windows (named for their shape) high in the back wall of the sanctuary, featuring in the center the risen Christ with his right hand raised in the gesture associated in the ancient Church with the authority of the teacher and the ruler. To the left is the Blessed Virgin Mary, with hands crossed in a sign of humility and receptiveness. On the right is the church's patron, Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist. These three are the oldest stained-glass windows in the church. The Pernlochner windows begin with the tall window just to the right of the sanctuary (the south wall). Note that there is a plaque here on the south wall describing the windows in greater detail.

Moving clockwise around the church, they are:

- (1) Christ appearing to St. Margaret Mary, showing his Sacred Heart
- (2) [in the alcove] The Nativity
- (3) The presentation in the temple
- (4) Christ praying in the temple
- (5) Christ in the workshop as a child
- (6) The wedding feast at Cana
- (7) Christ suffering the little children
- (8) The penitent woman (Mary Magdalene)
- (9) Christ praying in the garden
- (10) The Ascension of Christ
- (11) St. Paul brought as a prisoner to Tarsus
- (12) [on North wall] Christ giving the keys to St. Peter
- (13) The Resurrection
- (14) Christ stilling the waves
- (15) The Prodigal Son
- (16) The widow's mite
- (17) Jesus and Nicodemus
- (18) [in the alcove] St. Edward the Confessor
- (19) The Visitation; *and*
- (20) The Annunciation



The affectionate detail in "Suffer the Little Children" (pictured above) is particularly poignant, the faces in this and other scenes being more individualized, detailed, and expressive than in most stained-glass scenes. (Note the disgusted look on Mary Magdalene's face!) Each window, top and bottom, contains floral and leaf designs, and in the neo-Gothic tradition, the dress is mostly medieval, rather than Biblical.

Behind you, as you face the altar, is St. John's magnificent E. & G. G. Hook organ, one of the finest such instruments in the country. Shortly before his pastorate ended in 1860, Father Bapst

commissioned the organ from the Boston builders. The Hooks -- Elias and George Greenleaf -- dominated the organ-building business in New England. Father Bapst's successor, Father Gillen, signed the \$4,000 contract, and in December 1860 the Hooks' powerful Opus 288 was brought up the Penobscot River to Winterport on a steamship. Taking two weeks to assemble, it was played for the first time at Christmas Eve High Mass. After more than a century of constant use, by 1979 the organ had degenerated to the point where it would no longer function. An *ad-hoc* committee of parishioners and organ enthusiasts took charge, and the organ was fully restored in 1981 by the Bozeman-Gibson & Company of Deerfield, New Hampshire.

St. John's Church was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. In 1981 a committee of eighteen began exploring the possibilities of renovation. Structurally, nothing had been done to the church for three decades, and the roof, the brick exterior, and the interior plaster had deteriorated alarmingly. Moreover, the time had come to accommodate the changes contemplated by the Second Vatican Council.

Fund-raising began under Rev. Thomas Fitzpatrick, S.J., and continued in 1987 under St. John's new pastor, Rev. Maurice Lebel, the major principles being to respect the historic character of the building, restore the architectural lines of the original design, and identify and protect those items of intrinsic or emotional value to the parish.

Urged by the renovation committee, with help from Parochial Vicar Rev. John Allen and Pastoral Associate Sister Patricia Mooney, the parish, in two phases, committed more than \$2 million to the project. On the day after Christmas 1990, the upper church was closed, and on November 15, nearly a year later, Rev. Lebel welcomed parishioners back into the restored church. The roof, steeple, and foundation had been extensively repaired; bricks repointed, and eighty percent of the wall and ceiling plaster replaced and redecorated. The treasured stained-glass windows were completely disassembled and re-leaded, and the altar, pulpit, tabernacle, marble aisle, and confessionals, along with many other original sanctuary appointments, were likewise renewed and preserved. The church gained new wiring, heating, and insulation.

In the sanctuary, the tiers of votive candles were removed, partly for insurance reasons. The brass and onyx rail, which originally extended across the front of the altar, was seen by some as a barrier between priest and congregation, especially in a time when more and more lay people were participating in the Mass. Following the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council, the traditional main altar was removed and replaced with a free-standing table. To address concerns about these changes, parts of the rail were used as a base for the new altar table; the tabernacle was kept in place, and the side rails were left intact.

On February 8, 1998, St. John's, under the pastorate of Rev. Gerard G. Gosselin, became the second church in Maine, after the Cathedral in Portland, to have a door blessed as a Jubilee Door. Most Rev.

Michael R. Cote, Auxiliary Bishop of Portland, blessed the door. The practice follows from Leviticus 25 -- the opening of a holy door in each of the four great Basilicas in Rome to allow Pilgrims to Rome to pass through during the Holy Year. The doors swing open, like the opening of our hearts and minds to Christ. During the Jubilee 2000, Mainers can pass through any of six blessed doors in six churches designated as pilgrimage sites: St. John's, Bangor; St. Luce, Upper Frenchville; St. Joseph's, Eastport; St. Peter and St. Paul, Lewiston; St. Patrick's, Newcastle; and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland.

The churches were chosen for their geographical location and their rich histories. At St. John's, the door at the top of the handicap access ramp, accessible to all parishioners and pilgrims, has been blessed.

"The history of [St. John's Church]...reveals the faith and generosity of the people of this special parish...Each generation has contributed its share...For all of this, we of today owe a debt of gratitude to the pioneers and builders that we can repay in one way only, and that is to continue without rest the divine mission of the church in St. John's parish."

Most Rev. Daniel J. Feeney

*Bishop of Portland, on the occasion of the 1956
renovation of St. John's Church.*