

**NJS Presents****Invited Talks****In this Issue:**

*Architectural Connections at Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, NJ:*

*Defining the Legacy of Patrick Charles Keely*

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*The talk shared here is an update of a short presentation made on March 21, 2014 in New York at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Monuments Conservancy Symposium on Public Monuments, “Defining the Legacy of Patrick Charles Keely, Part II,” sponsored by art and architecture historian Donald Martin Reynolds. While the author’s research did not reveal an expected in-depth look into Keely, the College of St. Elizabeth did provide a broad perspective into Roman Catholic architecture of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. NJS is delighted to share this revised talk here in a nod to the location of the NJ Historical Commission’s November 2016 New Jersey Forum.*

The occasion of the 2016 New Jersey Forum held at the College of St. Elizabeth prompted reexamination of an earlier visit to the campus, made in November 2013 at the behest of a historian who indicated one would find there “complete” archives on the fine Keely main building, built as the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity and now their Administration Building. Of course, I did not. Historians rarely expect “complete” anything, with “completeness” a particular shortcoming for the work of the significant nineteenth century Roman Catholic ecclesiastical architect, Patrick Charles Keely. However, the well-preserved College documents aided a new understanding of Keely, and suggested his possible origins at Saint Elizabeth, while the documents and built environment also led to a number of architectural connections. These connections or links at Saint

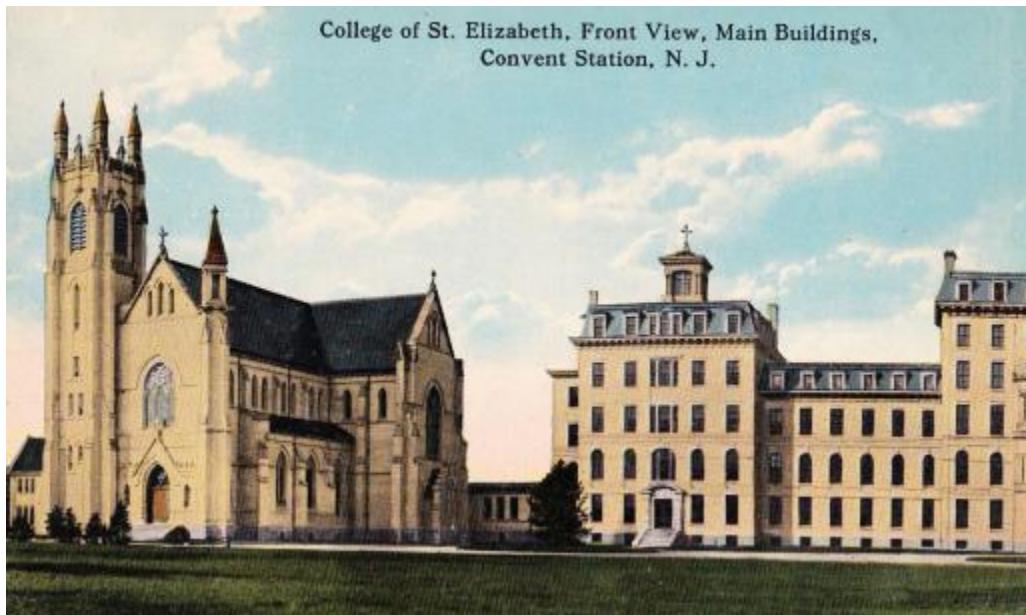
Elizabeth also help place Keely in the broader context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholic architecture and underscore that he is not the only neglected architect who oversaw the expansion of the Roman Catholic church in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the first connection when entering the campus from the Madison Avenue entrance is the Holy Family Chapel, a structure the size of a large parish church, which is attached to the Administration Building of the College. The chapel was completed in 1909 to a design by Thomas Houghton, Keely's son-in-law. The chapel and motherhouse are examined after Keely's background and the origins of the Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth.



*Top: Originally the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity, this edifice, connected to the Holy Family Chapel, is now their Administration Building.*

*Bottom: The Holy Family Chapel.  
Photographs by the author.*





*Postcard showing the same chapel and attached motherhouse/administration building, with view unobstructed by automobiles, c.1912, from the author's private collection.*

Patrick Charles Keely, born August 9, 1816 in Thurles, Ireland to a father who apparently was a builder or carpenter, emigrated to America around 1840. While working at St. John's in Newark, he was "discovered" around 1847 by the Rev. Sylvester Malone of Brooklyn who, impressed with Keely's work, would become his advocate and patron, the force who propelled the architect's career. After Malone convinced Archbishop Hughes to permit him to use the unknown Keely for a new church, the architect's design for Malone's Sts. Peter and Paul in Williamsburg, brought him acclaim and the start of a following. Keely bought a Fort Greene, Brooklyn row house at 257 Clermont Avenue, which became his lifelong residence and office. Keely's first cathedral, the acclaimed Immaculate Conception in Albany, New York, built in 1849, helped cement his reputation and build his business as bishops and clergy who attended the dedication would consequently call on Keely, a practice that continued throughout his career.<sup>1</sup> His twenty-one

<sup>1</sup> Francis W. Kervick, *Patrick Charles Keely, Architect: A Record of His Life and Work* (South Bend, IN: Privately Printed, 1953). This first serious work on Keely remains the best Keely biographical source.

cathedrals, which constitute the best-documented part of his oeuvre, include St. Patrick's Pro-Cathedral in Newark. The Diocese of Brooklyn was unable to complete his greatest cathedral design, the massive Immaculate Conception, which was begun near his home in Brooklyn. This unfortunate failure cost Keely the acclaim that would have followed its completion.<sup>2</sup>

The search for Keely's first tie to the Sisters uncovered an interesting, not well-documented and obscure start. Founded in Emmetsburg, Maryland by Saint Elizabeth Seton in 1809, the Sisters of Charity opened a branch in New York in 1846.<sup>3</sup> Keely, who at the time was remodeling St. James Pro-Cathedral on Jay Street, also erected for the Sisters of Charity a school across the street from it called "the Castle." However, they did not occupy it, preferring to use other nearby quarters.<sup>4</sup> The Sisters' first major construction project was their 1859 motherhouse Mount St. Vincent in Riverdale, New York. They were forced to relocate as their earlier home of the same name at Fifth Avenue and 110<sup>th</sup> Street was taken-over by an emerging Central Park. Their architect was Henry Engelbert, a major figure of Catholic design in his time, but one forgotten a century later.<sup>5</sup> Engelbert's numerous commissions for the church in New York include St. Agnes on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Our Lady of Sorrows on Pitt Street, and the reconstruction of the fire-damaged original St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street. Engelbert moved to Detroit, and has important works there and in Chicago, but suffered the indignity of being called "an obscure designer-builder whose name appears in no recognized compendium or index of America's architects," admittedly by a

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin F. Decker, "*Grand and Godly Proportions: Roman Catholic Cathedral Churches of the Northeast, 1840-1900*" (PhD Dissertation, University at Albany, 2000). This provides detailed background of Keely's cathedral work. Dr. Decker has indicated a willingness to make his work freely accessible to Keely researchers.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Agnes Sharkey, Sr., *The New Jersey Sisters of Charity Mother Mary Xavier Mehegan: The Story of Seventy-five Years 1859-1933, Volume I* (New York: Longmans Green and Company, 1933).

<sup>4</sup> John K. Sharp, *History of the Diocese of Brooklyn, 1853-1953* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1954).

<sup>5</sup> Norval White and Elliot Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City, Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

writer with an anti-preservation ax to grind.<sup>6</sup> Engelbert provided a second connection, sharing with Keely status as an overlooked Roman Catholic architect.

In 1859, sisters associated with Mount St. Vincent opened a separate motherhouse in New Jersey under the auspices of James Roosevelt Bayley, the nephew of Saint Elizabeth Seton and the first bishop of the Diocese of Newark, which had been established six years earlier.<sup>7</sup> Their New Jersey community is known as the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. While most of the sisters' early New Jersey locations were purchased buildings, they built the four-story St. Mary's Academy in Newark - its architect unknown - across the street from St. Mary's Abbey Church. St. Mary's Abbey had earlier been attributed to Keely prior to the discovery by Fr. Augustine J. Curley that the building was an Engelbert design.<sup>8</sup> Frank Greenagel, who has studied and written extensively on 19<sup>th</sup> century New Jersey ecclesiastical architecture, recently reported that the St. Mary's interior may have been designed by Keely, a revelation that underscores the obscurity that often envelopes early Catholic architecture.<sup>9</sup>

In 1860, the Sisters moved into the original Seton Hall College which had opened four years earlier in Madison. In 1863 they employed Jeremiah O'Rourke to design their new academy, an architect who would also design their St. Joseph Preparatory School for Boys which opened in 1866.<sup>10</sup> O'Rourke was born 17 years after Keely but during much of his career worked as the latter's contemporary. His significant oeuvre earned him stature as arguably the second foremost Catholic architect of the era. He appears to have had a greater number of New Jersey commissions than Keely, but O'Rourke is also neglected by history. His massive New York magnum opus, the

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<sup>6</sup> "The Case for Tightening Reins on Landmarking," *New York Times*, February 21, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Sharkey, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Augustine J. Curley O.S.B., *Notes on Henry Engelbert, Architect of St. Mary's Church*, n.d. Fr. Curley is the prior and archivist of Newark Abbey, a community of monks in that city.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Greenagel, e-mail message to author, March 6, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Sharkey, 90-95.

Church of St. Paul the Apostle, would be instantly recognizable if located on Fifth Avenue rather than Columbus. O'Rourke, unlike Keely, had the good fortune of seeing his principal cathedral design become a reality, Sacred Heart in Newark, albeit not without a lengthy gestation period, major acrimony in the planning and construction, and extensive interior design change.<sup>11</sup>

Beginning around 1860 the Sisters started to assemble land in Morris Township to plan what would become the present college.<sup>12</sup> Their dreams for a new academy and motherhouse at the “top of the hill” which began around 1870 would take several years to fulfill.<sup>13</sup> With no prior known work for the Sisters, one must infer or speculate how and why Keely was chosen for this major project. A clue may be provided by the largest church in northern New Jersey, St. John the Baptist, which was dedicated around the time the Sisters began to plan. Keely designed St. John’s as what was then a large parish church, but an edifice proportioned for cathedral use in anticipation of the future establishment of a Diocese of Paterson. The cornerstone of St. John the Baptist was laid on September 11, 1865. The church, which was dedicated July 31, 1870, was designated the cathedral when the Diocese of Paterson was formed in 1937.<sup>14</sup> The construction of Keely’s great motherhouse (Administration Building) began March 25, 1878, after which the cornerstone was laid on July 15.<sup>15</sup> The building was dedicated on November 25, 1880.<sup>16</sup>

The core of the motherhouse complex was built in stages, but lacking documentary evidence, their precise timing is not clear. The 1909 Holy Family Chapel is connected physically by a passage from the motherhouse convent, and architecturally, as was noted, though designed

<sup>11</sup> Brian Regal, *Gothic Pride: The Story of Building a Catholic Cathedral in Newark* (New Brunswick: Rivergate Books, 2012). This remarkable book tells the complete account of the long history of Sacred Heart’s construction and the 19<sup>th</sup> century growth of the Catholic church in New Jersey.

<sup>12</sup> Sharkey, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>14</sup> Msgr. Raymond T. Kupke, *Living Stones, A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Paterson* (Clifton: Diocese of Paterson, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Sharkey, construction, 143; cornerstone, 149.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Herald*, November 25, 1880.

by Keely's son-in-law, Thomas Houghton, who after his beginnings in Keely's office developed a major practice of his own. In addition, the new chapel was spiritually linked with the chapel previously located in the motherhouse as the side altars were relocated from the original as were the windows now at the narthex. However, the Houghton tie with the sisters was brief. Houghton began work for them over a decade after Keely's 1896 death, but following completion of the chapel, there was no other commission in the short span prior to his passing in 1913. In the time between the Keely motherhouse and Houghton chapel projects, the Sisters employed William Schickel to design Xavier Hall, the first building planned for their girls' academy, begun in 1896 and completed in 1900.<sup>17</sup> Much of Schickel's oeuvre was for German congregations, including Most Holy Trinity in Brooklyn, a large, magnificent work. His St. Patrick's, modeled after the cathedral in Cologne, would be an acclaimed landmark in a major city, but is little-known in an obscure section of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Links at Saint Elizabeth reveal Schickel as a fourth neglected Catholic architect.

While each major Catholic practitioner at Saint Elizabeth merits greater historical recognition, the earlier visit was preparation for a Keely symposium titled "defining his legacy," a goal that requires a new major initiative to overcome of his continued obscurity. Keely's historic standing is marred by two factors, lack of identification and uneven output. Since as much as two-thirds of the Keely output of about 700 churches and church buildings may lack identification, some have questioned whether he produced that much. Even how to enumerate the Patrick Keely oeuvre lacks precision. Thus, let us look at his locations and numbers. The figure 700 surely does not represent 700 locations or even buildings, but is probably 700 jobs or projects. The examination of some Keely locations makes the viewer realize that he may perceive multiple projects at one

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<sup>17</sup> Sharkey, 195.

physical plant, for example a church, its expansion, a rectory, and a school. Although components of some sites may have been built separately employing different architects, evidence suggests that many were not. Even ancillary buildings have common Keely threads, such as the Second Empire style rectories that frequently accompany his churches. Multiple projects at single sites include buildings or complexes that were repeatedly expanded. Two Brooklyn examples are the massive St. Mary's Hospital and the Convent for the Sisters of Mercy. The College of St. Elizabeth is a third. In addition, 700 projects, or about 16 annually, placed in the perspective of his firm's production, does not appear to be an unreachable output.

One suspects that the 700 figure likely represents not only the work of Patrick, but also his two sons and perhaps partners. Charles Keely's obituary credits him with St. Mary's Cathedral in Trenton, which was destroyed by fire in 1956, and claims, albeit in a likely exaggeration, that he went to Chicago after the 1871 fire to rebuild all of the Catholic churches there. It also states that he designed nearly 100 churches.<sup>18</sup>

Work credited individually to his son John is not well-documented. However, one may suspect that churches by Charles and John Keely are included in the Patrick count. The sons' names appear in scant surviving documentation at some locations, evidence to bolster this argument. In addition, some Thomas Houghton work may have slipped into the Keely total.

A definitive Keely enumeration will require intensive research. One approach would be to document the origin of each church in Keely's time around his areas of known activity. This massive project will require a team, and will undoubtedly run into obstacles, but will reveal many more of his commissions. This research will also uncover other meaningful information, including which non-Catholic architects designed for the church and when. Such knowledge will refine the

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<sup>18</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 26, 1889.

traditional Keely narrative that he worked for the church during a period when non-Catholic architects refused, an awareness that should reveal when Catholic churches became able to choose freely among architectural practitioners. Closer attention must be paid to finding no-longer extant early works, often “starter churches” replaced by growing parishes. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported on March 11, 1877 that “Nearly all the Roman Catholic churches and several of the Protestant churches in the city were constructed from the plans of Mr. P.C. Keely, the architect.” Few Catholic churches of that date likely remain, many no-doubt replaced by Keely and Houghton. However, ascertaining them will need to overcome the challenge of missing Catholic building records at churches often unaware and/or uncaring about their architectural origins. While a Keely catalog raisonne would end skepticism created by the identification gap, the list would reveal many prosaic buildings of repetitive design of a quality that would not build a reputation for any architect. This “quality gap” is understandable as Keely frequently worked for strapped parishes, typically for a nominal fee, producing church designs that could be built on tight budgets. With respect to finding his non-Catholic output, the only identified Keely Protestant church in Brooklyn, the 1866 English Gothic Church of the Redeemer on Pacific Street, is slated for demolition.

To counter the uneven output, if Keely’s work had been published or publicized with focus on his superior designs, perhaps limited to his 50 or 75 best churches, he would be one of America’s better-known architects. While awareness of the entire output of Keely and his neglected contemporaries is essential for greater knowledge of the expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholic church, I believe that a well-illustrated book devoted to the major Keely works is a second route to the elevation of his stature. Keely’s middling reputation is understandable as he has been dismissed by some other architects, neglected by critics, and overlooked by the public. However,

his reputation can be raised through hard architectural detective work, a goal well-worth the undertaking.

This article primarily addresses the work of Patrick Charles Keely and attempts to present suggestions for further research to develop a comprehensive account of his architectural projects including his work at St. Elizabeth College. At the same time these suggestions might also be applied to additional research about Catholic architects Engelbert, O'Rourke, and Schickel, who share a Keely connection with the Sisters of Charity of New Jersey.

*Randall Gabrielan, after thirteen and one-half years as executive director of the Monmouth County Historical Commission, was appointed to the commission at his December 31, 2013 retirement and now serves as vice-chair. He also serves as the officially appointed historian of Monmouth County. Gabrielan has written many books on a variety of New Jersey subjects and places and has lectured extensively. He maintains an avocational interest in Roman Catholic architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, motivated, in part, by faith, which he inserts in his historical work when fitting and appropriate.*