St. Joseph Cathedral and the American Gothic

An Honors Thesis (AHS 480)

by

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Abstract

Gothic architecture was made famous by the great European cathedrals from the 12th through 16th centuries. Surviving into the 18th century, the Gothic style began to appear in American architecture and became the preferred choice for ecclesiastical buildings. Decades of development, the influence of materials, urbanization, and immigration shaped the American Gothic Revival and created a distinct style. In Columbus, Ohio, St. Joseph Cathedral is a result of such development, and its consecration in 1878 makes it an early example of major Gothic Revival architecture in Ohio. By studying St. Joseph Cathedral firsthand, researching its history, and comparing it to American Gothic precursors, various characteristics that are typically found in the American Gothic Revival become apparent as well as several deviations from the standard.
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Hidden from the mainstream architecture of America, St. Joseph Cathedral has been sitting on the corner of East Broad and Fifth Street in Columbus, Ohio since the 19th century. Its creation was monumental, making history as the first seat of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Columbus as well as an early example of major Gothic Revival architecture in Ohio. As the population grew and industry demanded more structures, the Cathedral’s grandeur was gradually overpowered as the density and height of the city overwhelmed its original striking character. In the modern day, to notice this splendor is to view St. Joseph’s Cathedral with new eyes, allowing the context to confirm its importance and proper place in the history of the Gothic revival. The Cathedral standing today has brought with it a story intertwined with religious and ethnic influences as well as the immigration and urbanization of America in the 19th century. Most of the qualities of St. Joseph Cathedral can be attributed to a Gothic revival precursor; however, it also exhibits several uncommon features. When the proper context is established, St. Joseph Cathedral is brought to life to take its place within the Gothic style in America as well as reveal its distinctive architectural characteristics.

The effect of St. Joseph Cathedral has been shaped far beyond the beginning of the Gothic style America. In the 12th century, the Gothic style erupted in Europe, and cathedrals and churches in that style were erected, especially in France and England. This period of Gothic favor was characterized by a demand for height and verticality. These requirements were fulfilled through an obsessive use of the pointed arch; designs with tall towers and even taller spires pushed the vertical to the forefront of the viewer’s experience. Also, the Gothic style called for an emphasis to be placed on light, especially through the elaborate designs of stained glass windows. For the English, lancet windows were preferred while in France the large rose window took full priority. In either case, Gothic cathedrals relied on the ability of the architects
to design a structure with proper weight bearing qualities to allow the thinnest tracery and walls with the largest amount of light pouring into the cathedral. In an ideal Gothic design, the stained glass would develop to a point where the stone walls would disappear altogether, much like what is seen in Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.

As the 17th century approached, the Gothic style slowly faded. In Europe, the style was associated primarily with the Roman Catholic Church, and for England, the Reformation caused a decrease in the demand for new churches as well as a decreased use of the Gothic style (Loth 4). It was at this time, around 1600 that English architecture transitioned into the Classical style of simple forms, pediments, and domes. In North America, Gothic architecture remained a foreign style throughout the 17th century, and most of the architecture was comprised of simple rectilinear halls of the Puritan style (Loth 5). Occasionally Gothic elements would appear earlier in the 19th century, but the Greek Revival of the 1820s was not easily rivaled (Loth 19). In order to have a revival, the Gothic style must have survived in some capacity before returning to popularity. Immigrants who received training under English and French Gothic revival architects brought their influences from various European countries into America.

Leading the charge for the Gothic style in America was Benjamin Latrobe, who arrived in Pennsylvania from England in 1798. As a trendsetting and influential architect, Latrobe’s legacy as the first proponent of the Gothic style in America can be documented in his design of the Sedgeley mansion in 1799. Although Sedgeley merely called for Gothic details applied to a basic geometric form, it may still be considered the first Gothic building in the United States (Loth 28). In New York, Josiah Brady was working in the Gothic style as early as 1824 when he built St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Rochester. The brick church demonstrates a remarkable boldness in the Gothic style with a symmetrical design featuring a central tower as well as
pointed arch windows with split y-tracery above rounded arch doorways. Training under Brady, Andrew Jackson Downing gained an appreciation for the Gothic style and went on to pursue it throughout his own architectural career. This is how the style continued to survive and eventually gained popularity; pupils were trained under European architects immigrating to America, and in turn, used their own work to take risks in the use of Gothic elements, while spreading from larger cities in the east to developing cities farther west.

Overall, the first quarter of the 19th century saw a modest commitment to the Gothic style, and architects reverted to its use mainly for decorative motifs (Davies 4). In doing so, the architect could use a widely accepted Greek-inspired structure while presenting separate options for the surface if the patron preferred a more Gothic result (Loth 50). These decorations varied slightly, but never strayed far from the widely accepted crenellation, pointed arches, and capitals shown in pattern books. In the mid 19th century, the use of the style as a decorative motif further developed and brought the Gothic style into the structural realm.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the Gothic style became more popular thanks to the devotion of several architects who worked primarily in the style (Davies 5). Major cities in the east were the first to fully embrace and explore Gothic design in ecclesiastical buildings. Philadelphia was a major hub for the development of the Gothic until the style’s eventual spread to the west. John Notman, a Scottish architect, moved to Philadelphia in 1831 and pursued an Italian Gothic style in primarily brownstone churches. Demonstrating the progression of the Gothic style at mid-century, Notman’s 1849 design for St. Mark’s called for the use of stone, clerestory, and a tower placed beside the south aisle (Stanton 122). Also in Philadelphia was the first church in America constructed under English supervision and according to medieval plans, St. James the Less (Brooks 286). This church showed a great appreciation for its stone materials and benefited
future Gothic designs and concepts in America by exhibiting European accuracy. In New York, Englishman Frank Wills produced Pugin-inspired buildings throughout an area so large as to include New Jersey, Tennessee, Connecticut, and Canada. Creating major buildings in New York City were Richard Upjohn and James Renwick, who both worked in the 1840s and 1850s.

Upjohn’s English background was brought to bear on many of his buildings, especially Trinity Church (1839-46) and St. Peter’s Episcopal Church (1859). Upjohn filled the design for Trinity Church with traditional Gothic elements: an incredibly tall spire, crockets, pinnacles, and fan vaulting. St. Peter’s shows a more French influence and demonstrates an asymmetrical elevation with its tower placed on the southeast corner. In Burlington, New Jersey, his designs for St. Mary’s Church were completed in 1848 and transitioned the parish church revival into a mature phase with its asymmetrical elements on the exterior and use of stone (Stanton 76). In New York, James Renwick is well known for the creation of Grace Church in 1843 in the English Gothic style, as well as St. Patrick’s Cathedral between 1859 and 1879. St. Patrick Cathedral is ambitiously Gothic, mixing English, French, and German elements in the symmetrical towers, thin tracery, and sculptural qualities of the layered elements in the west façade. Renwick also moved the Gothic style into the collegiate realm, by designing the Free Academy Building at the City College of New York in 1849. Also working in the 1840s and 1850s, Alexander Jackson Davis, Brady’s pupil based in New York, pushed the Gothic style further into the Midwest through country house designs with the help from his partner, Andrew Jackson Downing.

By the second half of the 19th century, architects had established their freedom to create individualized interpretations of the Gothic, resulting in the Victorian Gothic style. As cities developed and growth progressed across the United States, the Gothic style in residential work decreased, but maintained its market in church design (Loth 121). After the Civil War, the
Gothic style was refreshed and driven by the writings of John Ruskin (Brooks 343). Although his ideas published in *Seven Lamps of Architecture* in 1849 were similar to Pugin’s, Ruskin successfully communicated the spirit of the Gothic movement and his book was well received. Ruskin’s love for color and beauty, his praise of the detailed stonework in Venice, and belief that ornament in architecture could satisfy man’s spiritual and imaginative needs inspired a new wave of commitment to ornamentation (Clark 201). Many examples were secular buildings, but First Congregational Church in Connecticut (1873) and the Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati (1863-1865) demonstrate Ruskinian influence and provide examples of Victorian Gothic elements in ecclesiastical buildings (Loth 123).

As the Gothic revival progressed in America during the 19th century, the style began to shift into collegiate buildings. The collegiate style can be traced back to 1829 and Kenyon College in Ohio, but was not fully embraced until the latter half of the 19th century. Gothic architecture made major appearances at Boston College, Yale, the University of Chicago, and Princeton. Robert Brookes, the second architect of St. Joseph Cathedral, was himself involved in the design of Towers Hall at Otterbein University in 1871. At the University of Pittsburgh in 1934, the collegiate Gothic was used in combination with structural steel and decorative ironwork at the Cathedral of Learning. A steel skeleton allowed architects to build higher and then use applied ornamentation to add more authentic Gothic elements. Massive projects being built well into the 20th century, such as the Washington National Cathedral and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, kept the Gothic revival prominent after its peak.

At the time the designs were drawn for St. Joseph Cathedral in 1866, the American Gothic revival was still developing from an experimental and noncommittal phase into a style of its own, with specific standards and characteristics. Excitement for the Gothic was found
primarily in the east, but eventually worked its way into budding cities farther west, such as Cincinnati and Columbus. The Gothic was in transition from an earlier phase of applied decoration unrelated to the structure, symmetrical forms, and more traditional building materials, most commonly brick, to the later Victorian Gothic phase (Stanton 3). In the 1850s, the patterns and repeated characteristics in the Gothic style of America were ornament directly from Gothic books, the use of stone instead of brick, and the embrace of more asymmetrical designs (Stanton 3). St. Joseph Cathedral demonstrates this shift from early to more mature Gothic style well.

As the white population expanded west into new territories, urbanization took hold in the Midwest, in particular Ohio at first, and cities were developed. At first, Columbus was a town of approximately 240 German Catholics arriving in the 1830s (Schlegel 57). Columbus’ growth can be attributed also to the creation of the Columbus feeder canal to the Ohio River in 1831, and the National Road built through Columbus in the following two years. The influx of German immigrants was challenged by a simultaneous growth of Irish immigrants to Columbus. The prominence of German and Irish Catholics fostered a relationship characterized by a high level of tension, especially in the religious realm. The existence of St. Joseph’s Cathedral is indebted to this conflicted relationship, in particular the increased Irish presence in the population. Holy Cross Catholic Church was dedicated in 1848 as a place of worship for the entire Catholic community, but the Germans outnumbered the Irish four to one. The disproportionate ethnic relationship at Holy Cross caused the growing Irish community to voice its unhappiness and desire for a church of their own (Lee 643). The request for change was heard by Reverend John Furlong who went about finding a plot of land for an English-speaking church to appease the Irish within the congregation. Upon the creation of St. Patrick’s Church in 1852, the congregation of Holy Cross Church was split. Soon enough, St. Patrick’s was outgrown, and
plans were started for a new and larger church. Again, a leader in the clergy led the charge for a new church. This time it was Reverend Edward Fitzgerald, the pastor of St. Patrick’s, who was the proponent for St. Joseph’s Church and was able to gain approval for its creation (Lee 348).

Selecting an architect for St. Joseph’s Church was no challenge for the committee when considering Michael Harding. Harding had a presence in Columbus, both as an established member of St. Patrick’s and as an architect. Harding had previously drawn plans for Catholic churches in Chillicothe and London, Ohio, as well as St. Mary’s Academy, the Town Street Church in Columbus. He was also selected to design St. Patrick’s Church with John D. Clarke (“Death of a Pioneer Citizen” 4). With such an impressive résumé in Columbus and a commitment to St. Patrick’s church, Michael Harding was the obvious choice.

The decision influenced Harding’s career, but at the same time, Harding’s previous work and heritage largely influenced the design of the cathedral. Harding was from Tipperary County, the south central part of Ireland. He had immigrated to America and settled in Columbus in 1848 at the age of twenty-five (“Death of a Pioneer Citizen” 4). Having most likely completed much of his studying and training in Ireland, Harding brought with him the style of Irish castles and churches, which were largely influenced by their relationship to England. His designs fused the Irish Gothic with the American style by displaying crenellation, square towers, lancet windows as well as a central tower, use of brick, and a simple floor plan. In St. Joseph Cathedral, another fusion of styles takes place between Harding’s Irish American influences and Bishop Rosecrans’ English preference. English qualities are found in the shaped windows of the side aisles, south façade, and clerestory, and the interior’s banded nave arcade and clustered shafts. The architect’s Irish heritage makes an appearance in the handling of the stone, keeping the interior smooth with little ornamentation, as well as the two-part elevation. The original plans showed a church 193
feet long and 90 feet wide, snugly fitting into the plot of land purchased in 1866, which was 200 feet down Fifth Street and 120 feet along Broad Street (O’Neil and Joseph 145). After marking the ground according to the plans and beginning a brick foundation, the cornerstone was laid in November 1866, accompanied by a large, celebratory parade (Lee 644).

The winter of 1866 brought a major change for the church when the Diocese of Columbus was created, and Sylvester Rosecrans was assigned as Bishop to the diocese. Having traveled to Europe and studied in Rome, Bishop Rosecrans had experienced the great cathedrals of the 12th to 16th centuries. His leadership position in the new diocese, combined with a preference toward an overwhelming visual experience in church architecture, led to a transformation of St. Joseph’s from a parish church to a cathedral. This would require even more European elements and grandeur in order to make a statement about the direction and status of the Diocese of Columbus. The most obvious change made at this time discarded the intended brick in favor of sandstone from Licking County. Such a decision called for a completely fresh start because the new stone would require a stronger, deeper foundation if the Cathedral was to be structurally sound. Under Bishop Rosecrans’ eye, the construction of the Cathedral began once again, and the first foundation was torn up and replaced with stone. At this time, Robert T. Brookes was brought in from Detroit as the second architect to oversee the changes. Although he was the architect during a time of major decisions about the layout of the Cathedral, the ultimate impact of Brookes on St. Joseph Cathedral cannot be proven, only speculated. Few recorded changes were made to the plans of the Cathedral, and Harding’s floor plan was respected and remained the same. In 1870, Joseph Hartman took over very briefly as head architect; finally General William Rosecrans was assigned to the Cathedral later the same year. Throughout the
following years, St. Joseph Cathedral was constructed into its final form, being 193 feet long and 90 feet wide. (Lee 648).

In its finished and consecrated state, in 1878, the exterior appeared nearly identical to the façade seen today. Picking apart Harding’s design, while leaving the floor plan as the original, Brookes moved the tower and baptistery from the center of the Cathedral’s front to the southwest corner (Lee 649). Regardless of the motivation, the decision to move the tower was a major change in the design, which affected the entire experience of the Cathedral. Although it was not a predetermined action, the tower’s 250 ft spire was never completed, and the top of the structure was merely left squared off, adding to the changes from Harding’s plan. In the twelve years of stone on stone construction, St. Joseph Cathedral was brought to life to the best of their ability with the budget and resources available, even though its reality differed from the intended structure. All of the modifications in the tower, spire, and materials demonstrate the evolving nature of architecture and style, even as construction was underway. The Cathedral presented in 1878 represents the Gothic style in America well in some regards, while also contributing some new elements that were uncommon.

Glistening sandstone immediately draws attention to itself: a light, organic material amid steel buildings jutting up from the monotonous concrete street. During the conversion from a church to a cathedral, St. Joseph’s replaced brick with a local sandstone that creates a variation in color throughout the entire structure. The color provides the Cathedral’s surface with visual movement and warmth that differs from the brick churches in America and the grey stone used for the Gothic cathedrals of Europe. Light sandstone set St. Joseph Cathedral apart from the commonplace brick church and satisfied the goal for this seat of the diocese to be greater than just an average church. Local quarries in Licking County were affordable, convenient, and
reflected the city pride well. The American Gothic style was born from an ability to take European ideas and conform them to the materials and labor available here. Stone was a standard for Gothic architecture in Europe, but American architects faced challenges with this because wood and brick were far more realistic materials (Stanton 189). For this reason, the use of sandstone in St. Joseph Cathedral demonstrated a conscious, and expensive, decision that would elevate its status. Adding a textural element to the sandstone was done through the boasted ashlar technique, which puts a rough finish on the stonework. Although the marks would normally be irregular, the outside walls of St. Joseph’s Cathedral have equally spaced, horizontal lines chiseled into each stone (McKenzie and Melvin 10). The purpose of using boasted ashlar sandstone was to bring life from the stone by freeing it from a completely flat state (Lee 649). Boasting the stone covers the Cathedral’s surface with a faint dance of shadow and light, which successfully revives the potentially dead appearance of the yellow, sandstone walls. While a subtle effect, this treatment presents the viewers with a horizontal theme to mitigate the Cathedral’s threatening height as they drawn near to its entrance.

Along East Broad Street, St. Joseph Cathedral welcomes passers-by with its three entrances. The incorrect orientation of the Cathedral causes the liturgical west to face south, with the liturgical east towards the north. The south façade hosts a number of architectural elements, some of which fall into the American Gothic standard, while others are more puzzling. An overarching battle of horizontal and vertical elements is revealed with every careful look at the Cathedral. The division and elevation of the south façade differs slightly from most churches in the American Gothic style. Instead of the more common symmetrical design with a central tower, the St. Joseph Cathedral façade is an asymmetrical design with a steady rise from the side aisle to the right, up to the nave, and finally to the tower at the left in the southwest corner.
Gothic churches from the 1850s such as Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia and St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in New York had just begun to break into the asymmetrical realm. Taking into account the time for the asymmetrical trend to make its way into smaller cities such as Columbus, it could be considered a current development in Gothic architecture at the time the plans St. Joseph Cathedral were being drawn.

St. Joseph Cathedral clearly divides its south facade vertically into three main sections with the help of five buttresses. Two act as corners, and the two inward on either side from these create a distinction between the tower, nave, and side aisle. The center is home to the thin buttress placed between two of the entrances. The steady rhythm formed is thrown off by this buttress’ placement and width, because it is the only one that varies in size. The three entrances are framed on either side by a buttress, and pointed arches are above each door. Two doors fit neatly into the middle nave section, but between them is a thin buttress that obstructs the center of the cathedral. The third door is found on the southeast section under a small circular window. Uneven spacing between the entrances creates a disjointed appearance that breaks the traditional grid used in previous American churches and cathedrals.

Pushed to the forefront of noticeable characteristics in the south façade, then, is the buttress standing directly in the center. Thinking about the changes made under Brookes, the buttress was most likely not included in Harding’s original plan. The tower and baptistery, meant for the center of the cathedral, would have been in the place of what now is visually awkward (Lee 649). If the original plan had been seen to fruition, it would have produced a symmetrical layout similar to Harding’s previous church in Columbus-and the mother church of St. Joseph Cathedral-St. Patrick’s Church. Brookes’ motivation to move the tower could have been an effort to update the Cathedral’s design, but the change could also be credited to personal influence,
patron preference, or perhaps an inventive idea meant to break the norms and create something more distinctive for the new diocese. Perhaps the addition of the central buttress was a design choice made by Brookes. Yet, when considering the overarching rules of architecture, chiefly the expectation of a void at the center of any façade, this choice does not align itself with professional architectural practice. The central buttress proves this unspoken rule to be true, as it overcrowds the south façade and stands tightly between two of three entrances.

Looking past the unsettling nature of the central buttress, there is a competitive relationship between vertical and horizontal elements that encompasses the entire façade. A presence of horizontal elements may betray the vision of the European Gothic, but for the Gothic Revival occurring in America, these lines are anything but rebellious. The tower’s abrupt and leveled roof is a major hindrance to the Cathedral’s ascendant stretch. Strong horizontal elements such as this compete with the equally prominent vertical elements, creating tension throughout the exterior. The overall effect is one of slight, unresolved strain in the relationship. Proportions of the buttresses are visually uncomfortable, and the asymmetrical imbalance allows the Cathedral to grow without a final vertical release where the spire should have extended.

Vertically, St. Joseph Cathedral has many components working to its advantage. The lancet windows pull the grounded stone toward the sky by employing the most characteristic element of the Gothic style: the pointed arch. The pointed arch motif is also seen in the framing around each window and the repeated arches above the entrances. Split Y-tracery in each window divides the stained glass into narrower sections: three divisions in the center windows and two for the windows in the tower. On the buttresses, subtle pointed arches are repeated in thin relief on every horizontal level. The slender and lengthened proportions of the central windows emphasize the verticality of the pointed arch. Extending the buttresses past the roofline
and into the sky with pinnacles breaks through the solid form and lifts the stone upwards against its will.

Tying down the lift created by lancet windows and extended buttresses, prominent horizontal elements are distributed throughout the south façade. For each slender buttress and pointed arch, there is a firm line parallel to the street demanding attention. The buttresses are segmented by moldings, which break up the long stretches of vertical lines that otherwise allow the design to consistently flow skyward. The idea of a grid employed for vertical divisions can be used horizontally as well, splitting the cathedral into four levels by means of strategically placed moldings that divide the buttresses. The lowest floor extends the entire width of the façade and is marked by the three entrances and the lowest window on the tower. The second level is defined by the double lancet windows in the center section, the small rose window, and the second tower window. Moving up, the third level includes the last window on the tower, but loses the eastern section. The two large lancet windows and their ornamentation in the center section are stretched upward to encompass both the second and third horizontal levels. Featuring lancet windows on the south façade speaks to English inspiration as opposed to the imposing rose windows favored in French cathedrals. The tracery is thin, delicate, and intricately designed in a split Y format. Climbing above the last stained glass windows is the final, and highest point on the cathedral. A fourth tower opening, mimicking the shape of the lower windows, is not filled with stained glass.

With the horizontal lines competing with the vertical, St. Joseph Cathedral does not rise quite like several of the Gothic Revival cathedrals in New York and Pennsylvania. In response to subtle additions above the windows and entrances, rectangular shaped sandstone blocks as well as the boasted ashlar technique on the individual stones create contrasting, horizontal lines. As a
whole, the battle of linear elements is not resolved in a definite way. In one moment, the narrow windows seem to pull everything up, while in the next, the squared off sections are permanently anchored in the foundation. The tension is released only as one enters the nave of the cathedral, which provides a well-balanced and open space.

Staying true to the standard characteristics of American Gothic churches, the south façade exchanges highly sculptural qualities, as found in Europe, for more relief-like decoration. Each pointed arch of the two central lancet windows and the three entrances is matched with a curved ogee arch and cross floating above each element. For the windows in the tower, a more delicate and thin motif is adopted that hovers very closely to the edges of the glass. The molding is incredibly thin and abruptly turns 90 degrees away from the window and runs parallel to the ground as the curve of the arch falls into its straight vertical sides. The surface of the façade is neither bare, nor too ornate, but the crosses and raised adornment above the entrances and center windows do not push the surface into three-dimensional layers. This is a prime example of how glaringly different the American Gothic style was from the emphasis of layered masonry of English and French Gothic cathedrals. Lincoln Cathedral emphasizes sculpture especially in the impressive line of figures across the west facade while Laon Cathedral has immense depth in its entrances and sculptural elements on the towers. Although some American structures mimicked the European complexity in layers of tracery and sculpture, such as St. Patrick’s Cathedral and Grace Church in New York, most American churches were not so elaborate. Especially in smaller, less established cities like Columbus, the resources and labor required for a cathedral of that nature would far exceed the available budget. In sculptural qualities, St. Joseph Cathedral relates more to the styles seen in the stone churches of Ireland. Dublin’s Christ Church, from the 11th century, and St. Canice’s Cathedral in Kilkenny, from the 13th century, both have relatively
plain stone exteriors pierced only by the windows. The stone becomes its own decoration, and
the design enables the material to shine. When comparing the Irish elements to those of St.
Joseph Cathedral, it becomes clear that the elaborate English and French examples are not a
primary inspiration for the designs of Harding or Brookes. It is true that at the time of the
Cathedral’s design and construction, Ruskinian concepts were gaining popularity and being
applied to buildings across America, but Ruskin’s appreciation for detailed stonework and
ornament would have pushed the designs to show more sculptural elements in the south façade
than what was in fact applied to St. Joseph Cathedral.

Aside from the small foliage elements around the entrances, there is no pictorial sculpture
on the exterior. The crosses above the gently curved motifs on the three entrances and two main
lancet windows are applied to the surface in a way that does not seem truly genuine to the
materials as opposed to being intricately carved to unify the stone walls and decorative elements.
Overall, St. Joseph Cathedral favors the American Gothic approach to using applied decoration.
The Cathedral seems a somewhat lesser structure, which lacks an overpowering, lasting
impression when compared to the American cathedrals more closely inspired by French or
English structures. However, in the context of the American Gothic as well as the Cathedral’s
location in a less prominent city of a newly formed diocese, the façade is notable and should be
considered a modern standard for its time.

The consistency and order that is somewhat lacking in the south façade is picked up
along the flanks of St. Joseph Cathedral. The buttresses march down the side, alternating with the
stained glass windows of the side aisles and clerestory and forming an intentional line leading to
the back. The rhythm of the pinnacles brings a pointed finish to each buttress and adds a further
dimension to the Cathedral that floats above its roof. Below the roofline, the squared nebule
molding continues from the south façade, interrupted only by the buttresses between the clerestory windows. The pointed arch motif also continues down each side of the Cathedral in the pinnacles and in the shape of the side aisles windows, as well as the clerestory. During the summer of 1870, General William Rosecrans, the bishop’s brother, came to Columbus to give his critique on the finer details of St. Joseph Cathedral (O’Neil and Joseph 149). Although he was a successful engineer and not an architect, General Rosecrans is credited with designing the shape of the clerestory windows, which imitate those in the side aisles, helping create continuity and order (Lee 650).

Rounding the corner to the north end of St. Joseph Cathedral, the viewer is met by an unenthusiastic conclusion to an otherwise rhythmic, orderly, and interestingly ornamented structure. It is here where the boasted ashlar texture and coloration of the sandstone become a crucial element in maintaining an interesting aspect and cohesiveness of the entire Cathedral. The only rest from solid sandstone is the rose window, which is the focal point of the apse, and three lancet stained glass windows, two of which are not visible from the interior. The reason for such an anticlimactic surface could be attributed to a tight budget or possibly a building previously behind it. Regardless of the motivation, the slight bends suggesting the apse and the minor change in depth midway up the wall do little to establish an equal comparison with the south façade or the Cathedral’s flank.

Through the doors beneath the imposingly high sandstone walls, the vestibule provides a cool space that contrasts with the bright exterior. The space is small, and immediately seems as though it should evoke a feeling of constraint and tightness. Instead, the morning and afternoon light softly beams into the vestibule from small stained glass windows in each of the large wooden doors, creating a peaceful and quiet environment. Acting as a space of preparation for
entering a place of worship, the vestibule allows for an exhalation of the city’s hurried pace and a
breath to be taken before entering the nave. In St. Joseph Cathedral, four entrances welcome
churchgoers into the vestibule, but only two give entry into the nave. The far west door, nearest
the street corner, opens into a staircase leading to the music library and organ, which sits directly
behind the lancet windows of the “west” façade. Facing perpendicular to the three entrances, on
the eastern side, is a delicately pierced cast iron gate separating the vestibule from the baptistery.
Originally, the ability to directly enter the baptistery before the nave was highly valued because
baptism was believed to be the only way into the Catholic Church. Therefore, unbelievers or
non-Catholics could enter directly from the street to be cleansed and baptized without first
entering the sacred space of the Cathedral. Since changes in 1975, the baptistery has been
repurposed as the reconciliation room and vestment closet for visiting priests, and access from
the vestibule has been permanently sealed (St. Joseph's Cathedral).

Elements pulled from the Gothic style are found throughout the vestibule: in the iron gate
closing off the reconciliation room, holy water fonts, and doors. Quatrefoil patterns appear on
each door handle, and the iron gate uses the same element to create a delicate, grid-like pattern.
In the three fonts, foliage elements from the small capitals and entrance ornament are repeated in
a more generous and dense manner, both above and below the font. These details, in combination
with the height and narrow width of the vestibule, create an environment of brevity, where there
is not much reason to linger, but rather to pass through into the nave.

Even with the vestibule’s preparation, the interior of St. Joseph Cathedral is immense and
overwhelming with its high vaults, vertical lines, and bare walls that highlight the freedom found
in the expansive space. The order and minimal use of decorative elements release any tension
created outside by the south façade. Proportionally, height is favored over width, which gives a
buoyant characteristic to the stone. A two-part elevation emphasizes this quality by stretching the proportions in the nave arcade, minimizing the amount of uninterrupted stone, and providing additional light from the clerestory windows. Between the nave arcade and clerestory, the stone forms a smooth surface that highlights the vertical line of the shafts from the columns to the vaults. The consistency in the clerestory, nave arcade, and side aisles encourages visual order that allows the space to feel expansive and the details to shine. Considering Michael Harding’s childhood and training in Ireland as well as the Irish Catholic congregation for which the Cathedral was designed, the influence of Irish cathedrals is a great possibility. Harding would have experienced St. Canice Cathedral, remembering both its bare stone and two-part elevation.

In St. Joseph Cathedral there is no transept, and the floor plan remains generally rectilinear, sending the nave straight ahead without interruption. This plan is similar to very early ecclesiastical buildings in America, even though in bigger cities, additional chapels and spaces jutting out from the nave are seen. Given the available budget, space, and location in a minor city like Columbus, this floor plan is expected and efficient. St. Joseph Cathedral is not nearly as rectilinear as the Puritan style buildings of the 17th and early 18th centuries, but when including the secondary spaces such as the chapels at the end of the side aisles, vestment room, and walking area behind the apse, the plan as a whole takes a distinctively simple, rectangular form.

The quadpartite vaulting system in St. Joseph Cathedral clearly signifies its post-Civil War date. In the early and mid-19th century, churches were designed with timber roofs instead of a stone vaulting system. St. Mary’s in New Jersey, Holy Cross Church in New York, and St. Michael’s Chapel in Maryland all have timber roofs, and use the timber’s color to contrast with unadorned plaster walls as a main design feature and focal point (Stanton 77). However, in Philadelphia, St. James the Less in 1846-1849 challenged this roofing system and wall treatment
after the architect called for the walls to be kept unplastered and unpainted in the manner of the English blueprint they acquired and used the build the church (Stanton 103). St. Mark’s, also in Philadelphia, pushed forward again, leaving stone walls bare, having a clerestory, but still featuring exposed timber beams as a decorative feature (Stanton 123). St. Joseph Cathedral is a step further down the line of evolution with its clean, bare stone, clerestory, and vaulting system.

In 1878, the interior walls of the Cathedral were void of additional adornment or art with the exception of stained glass windows. The bare walls could be credited either to inspiration from Irish stone interiors, such as St. Canice Cathedral, or to a lack of funding. While influence from other styles and examples is viable, the Cathedral’s original unadorned state is most likely a result of budgetary restrictions. Considering the choices made at the time of the 1914 renovation, which added various works of art and other ornamentation to the interior, the original committee probably would have also preferred to have the Cathedral decorated in a manner to match the grandeur and excitement of its architectural creation. All of these later decorative elements would not have been part of the initial experience of St. Joseph Cathedral, however, should not be considered when critiquing its original form. Regardless, the minimal embellishment works to the design’s advantage because it creates an effect of enlargement of the space that does exist.

Another beneficial decision for the interior space was to maintain a soft, smooth stone for the walls, columns, spandrels, and ribs. The surface treatment of the interior stone creates a very different effect compared to the boasted ashlar sandstone on the exterior. Without the heavy texture and sunlight bringing out the yellow of the sandstone, the interior looks to be made from a completely different type of stone. However, both the interior and exterior are made from Black Hand sandstone (McKenzie and Melvin 10). The effect of this slightly different sandstone is astounding and allows the design and masonry to truly shine. The small amount of stone that is
carved in the upper wall of both side aisles on the northern end, capitals, and the keystones, are all emphasized by contrast with the smooth texture of the surrounding stone. At the northern end of the side aisles, the upper wall has been carved into a pattern of several shapes including a variety of elongated and curved quatrefoils, which echo the shapes in the vestibule and in the circular window seen on the southeast corner of the exterior.

Along with the sculpted stone, the interior of St. Joseph Cathedral has well-defined vertical elements that create an illusion of higher vaults and a more spacious nave. Continuous lines are created vertically with shafts that are carried up from the piers into the ribs of the vaulting system. At the abacus above the capital, the pier's many shafts split to form the banded element of the arcade arches and the vertical shaft running up into the vault. The grouping, a cluster of three rounded shafts, clearly defines each bay, which contains only one clerestory window. As the shaft reaches the stringcourse on which the clerestory windows sit, a small capital imitating the shape of the abacus below provides a base for the ribbing to begin. The vaulting system is quadpartite and therefore requires the shaft to open into one transverse rib and two diagonal ribs. Additionally, subtle banding contours the place where the exterior wall and vaulting meet to form a pointed arch, framing the clerestory windows and mimicking the banded arches in the nave arcade.

The simple plan of each bay creates a balance between the creation of an impressive, even stunning, effect without being overstimulating or dense. The simplicity enhances the entire space and provides an atmosphere that answers the need for spiritual rest and refreshment. The architectural elements establish directions and divisions, and never waver from the consistent order initially purposed. Visually, the shafts carry the vertical element, which is started in the columns, up into and through the vaulting with a continuous line that creates consistency and
uniformity to the composition as a whole. Contrary to the vertical lines, the stringcourse is carried all the way around the apse, creating a continuous line from both sides of the nave. Above the horizontal band is a small rose window, referring of course to the most prominent element of the French Gothic style. Although setting itself apart by its shape, the rose window matches the height and style of the clerestory windows. Similar to the stringcourse wrapping around the apse, the rose window rounds off the line of clerestory windows and brings a sense of completion to the stained glass windows. The rose window is necessary to pierce through the otherwise solid northern end of the nave. The only other attempt to break up the sheer face of stone is five shallow, window-shaped niches set into the apse, directly below the stringcourse and above the height of the capitals in the nave arcade. In 1878, these areas were empty, but considered finished. However, the most recent addition to the Cathedral, in 2001, was a set of paintings shaped as pointed arches in order to fit the niches created in the original design.

Being the only color originally within the walls of St. Joseph Cathedral, the stained glass in the side aisles, clerestory, apse, and south façade is a powerful element. In the middle of an expansive space made of monochrome stone, the only source of light and color draws attention. In the side aisles, eleven windows portray saints or moments from Jesus’ ministry. An unusual subject among otherwise typical subjects is the Death of Joseph, for whom the Cathedral is named. In the clerestory, sixteen double windows depict symbols of Mary, the Trinity, and the Four Evangelists.

An unusual feature at St. Joseph Cathedral was cast iron columns in the original nave arcade. There is little commentary either on the motivation for using cast iron or the finished treatment of this medium, but they remained in the nave until 1914 when Salem Limestone replaced the columns (McKenzie and Melvin 10). Regardless of whether their exchange was due
to compromised structural integrity or an aesthetic choice, this is an uncommon use of iron in
Gothic revival architecture. Cast iron was used as a means to capture elegant detail in a cost-and
labor-effective manner. Translating the elegance of Gothic detail into cast iron was favored in
Europe for bridges, but the popularity in America for this medium exceeded European use. The
Chestnut Street Bridge in Philadelphia from 1866 and James Monroe’s tomb from 1858 are two
American examples of the use of cast iron that represent its diversity in architecture (Loth 87).
Although cast iron was used frequently in America, its use for columns in a nave arcade was
uncommon and provided St. Joseph Cathedral with a very distinctive feature.

The northern end of the Cathedral provides another surprising aspect for ecclesiastical
architecture in the United States during the 19th century. The apse is defined and shaped by a
wall constructed slightly in front of the exterior stone wall. This inner wall forms the side of the
Terce Chapel on the west side and the vestment room on the east side. Behind the angular apse,
there is a narrow walkway connecting the chapel to the vestment room. This design allows the
plot of land to be used in the most effective way by creating the largest interior space without
sacrificing a shaped apse. Modifying the traditional layout, which would require an apse
extending out beyond the nave, the builders adapted the Gothic style to the compact nature of the
city. For churches in America, especially in a less prominent city like Columbus, this method
should not be unexpected because there was a wide variety of floor plans and apse designs
throughout the 19th century. There was no preferred standard, and a range of simple, flat designs
were created for smaller churches, for example St. James the Less in Philadelphia or St. Mary’s
Church in Emotion, Maryland, along with more extreme examples found in larger cities like St.
Patrick’s in New York.
Similar to the effect on the exterior experience created by the modern city around it, the experience within St. Joseph Cathedral has been greatly changed through multiple renovations, additions, and Vatican decrees. Since the 19th century, St. Joseph Cathedral has gone through major renovations in 1914 and 1978 as well as minor renovations in the 20th and 21st centuries. These modifications have greatly benefited the structural integrity and use of the Cathedral, although they have changed the original experience of its interior. In 1914, the major changes that affected the experience of the interior space were the addition of pews throughout the nave, the replacement of the cast iron columns with limestone, new flooring, and the ordering of the new Munich windows. Twelve windows were ordered for the 1914 renovation, although World War I delayed the installation until 1918 (St. Joseph’s Cathedral). In 1949, the last window from the west side aisle, which depicted the Resurrection, was removed to construct a Blessed Sacrament Chapel, and placed in storage. Later it was lost in a fire. Mosaics from the Vatican School of Mosaics depicting the twelve Stations of the Cross added more decoration and color to the side aisles upon their installation and painted inscription in 1967. In 1978, as the congregation and city had grown, more pews were added which extended further up the nave and even intruded into the space of the side aisles.

Installation of an organ was not recorded until 1890, and the organ currently in use is from 2006. Although St. Joseph Cathedral might not have had an organ when it was consecrated, there has been some form of an organ for the majority of its history. However, the location and effect of the organ on the interior experience has varied due to its size. Earlier organs were moveable and considerably smaller than what fills the choir loft above the narthex today. Unfortunately, this placement and the massive size of the organ block the beautiful color and light cast by the lancet windows in the south façade. With modern lighting capabilities, this does
not significantly change the illumination of the interior, but to have the stained glass covered is not ideal. The overall original experience would have relied much more on the natural light from these windows emitting a dim, much softer light. Changes in the altar placement resulted from decisions and decrees issued by the Vatican. In 1965, the Vatican required the altar to be moved from against the north apsidal wall back toward the nave slightly, so the priest could officiate Mass while facing the congregation as opposed to facing the wall. With the altar against the wall, as it was before 1965, there would be an even greater sense of space for the congregation and depth of the apse. Other changes were made as a result of modern technological advances, such as removing the kneelers from the side aisles to create space for air conditioning units. Electrical lighting was set into the vaults and above the capitals, providing the immense space and high vaults with evenly distributed light.

Before all the changes to St. Joseph Cathedral, its original state represented the transitional phase of the Gothic style in America during the second half of the 19th century. As a whole, the Cathedral strikes a balance between the simple, plastered wall designs of small churches and those located in industrial cities with a substantial budget. Taking the middle road, St. Joseph Cathedral exhibits standard elements of the Gothic style, such as applied ornament, lancet windows, and thin tracery. Along with these expected characteristics, there are more uncommon features used: the placement of the center buttress, the choice of light sandstone, and the boasted ashlar technique used on its surface. There seems to be a feeling of disconnect between the façade and interior space because the slight visual tension of the center buttress and unfinished spire does not anticipate the orderly and open experience of the interior. This works to the Cathedral's advantage by magnifying the amount and quality of space inside the nave. Within the Cathedral, there are endless features that can be attributed to the Gothic style such as
banding in the nave arcade, bundled shafts, quatrefoil shapes, stained glass windows and quadpartite vaulting. The most unusual element of St. Joseph Cathedral was the cast iron columns in place until 1914, because cast iron was commonly reserved for decorative purposes, small structures, or bridges. The combination of these elements, both expected and not, show the evolving nature of the Gothic style in America as well as the Cathedral’s place within that development.
References


