



# Built to Last

## No. 10

### Old St. Paul's Episcopal Church

233 North Charles Street, Baltimore (1854-6, Richard Upjohn, architect)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

*Old St. Paul's is the only surviving Richard Upjohn-designed building in Baltimore. Within the architect's oeuvre, the use of the Early Christian-Romanesque basilica style is unique. The present interior, dating largely from a 1904 redecoration program, contains stained glass, mosaic and decorative painting by Tiffany Studios, D. Maitland Armstrong, and Chase and Ames of Boston. The present building is the third church on this site, the first dating back to 1732, the second built in 1814 to designs by Robert Cary Long, Jr.*

The congregation of St. Paul's was founded at Patapsco Neck, the first of three Episcopal parishes in Baltimore County authorized by an Act of the Maryland Assembly in 1692. In 1731, the congregation relocated to Baltimore Town, purchasing the land upon which the present structure stands. This lot, the highest point of land within the boundaries of the town at that time, is the oldest continuously owned property in the city.

By the time the parish had contacted architect Richard Upjohn about designing a new building, the architect was already well known as the foremost American practitioner of Ecclesiological architecture. The Ecclesiological Movement, begun in Oxford in the 1833, advocated reform within the Anglican liturgy by returning to certain Roman Catholic practices that pre-dated the



**Nave, Old St. Paul's Episcopal Church. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.**

Anglican Church itself (that is to say, prior to the Act of Supremacy under Henry VIII in 1534). In order to achieve this, Ecclesiologists studied and reproduced “archaeologically correct” examples of medieval parish churches that would have accommodated the liturgical services that the movement hoped to revive.

The Ecclesiological demand for liturgical reform was inextricably tied with their advocacy of architectural reform. The premise was that pre-Reformation church design—specifically the Gothic parish church—had evolved in perfect expression of the true liturgy. The rigidly controlled massing of many

17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century churches was eschewed in favor of a more agglomerative massing, suggestive of a building's growth over time. In addition, the architectural component of the movement surely contained a dose of Romantic nationalism, proposing a return to an earlier, rural style of building in the face of unparalleled industrialization and urbanization from the 1830s onward.

The Baltimore parish of Old St. Paul's, traditionally more “high church” than evangelical, was moving toward Anglo-Catholicism in the 1840s. Bishop Whittingham was a

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reform advocate, and the dozen or so churches erected under his diocesan leadership are generally textbook Ecclesiological Gothic, resembling English parish churches transplanted to Baltimore neighborhoods. It is thus surprising that Upjohn, who is best known as the architect of Gothic Revival Trinity Church in New York, and Old St. Paul's—the “mother church” of an Anglo-Catholic diocese on the verge of an Ecclesiological building program—should end up with a very non-Gothic looking church.

One reason for the choice of the boxy basilica form is surely practical. The parish's wish to retain as much surviving fabric as possible from the Robert Cary Long church on this site (which burned in 1854) dictated a rectangular footprint and thick brick walls that were incompatible with the Gothic Revival style. The Ecclesiological aversion to the Classical tradition in architecture eliminated a vast array of stylistic possibilities. Even so, the unusual choice of a basilica form did not automatically dictate an Early Christian basilica style. The decision to express the basilica plan in a basilica style so closely resembling Early Christian models (by way of their Medieval emulators) seems logical, but was unprecedented in Ecclesiological practice.

The Baltimore church's Roman namesake, the Early Christian basilica of San Paolo fuori la mura (St. Paul's Outside the Walls, built 384 C.E.) may have provided the inspiration for Upjohn's design. Believed to have been one of the most perfectly preserved examples of an Early Christian basilica, the church suffered a catastrophic fire in 1823. The reconstruction of the basilica was renowned not only for its authenticity, but for the scholarly opportunity the work provided for the study of construction and

design of the Early Christian church. Further research into Upjohn's travels in Italy may confirm—or disprove—that the Early Christian St. Paolo in Rome provided inspiration for the design of its namesake in Baltimore. The fact that the Baltimore church burned in 1854 (as the Roman one had in 1823) and would be similarly “rebuilt” within surviving walls might have confirmed the aptitude conceptually of Upjohn's design for Old St. Paul's that had been in development since 1852.

In fact, the reformist impulse of the Ecclesiological movement logically might have led—Romantic nationalism in England aside—to early Christianity as the “purest” form of liturgy and supporting architecture, but it rarely (if ever) did, except at Old St. Paul's. Given the parish's status as the earliest in Baltimore, the idea of fashioning “The Mother Church” of Baltimore in the image of the earliest surviving Christian basilica—the very first basilica anywhere dedicated to St. Paul (as the Roman church is built on the site of his burial)—makes for a powerful rhetorical statement. In conjunction with the more conventional use of English Gothic models in the other diocesan projects of the period, the design of Old St. Paul's may be seen as an expression of an analogy: Old St. Paul's is to the other parishes of the Episcopal Church in Baltimore what St. Paolo fuori la mura in Rome is to the Church in Western Europe. Taken a step further, the reference may indicate that the diocese as a whole ultimately “looked to Rome” (rather than to Canterbury or London) for its starting point.

The facility with which Upjohn fulfilled all the Ecclesiological prerequisites—as noted above—into an atypically Ecclesiological building is not only a remarkable testament to

the architect's skill. The resulting building is unique in the architecture of both the Ecclesiological movement and the oeuvre of the architect.

*The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:*

[www.cr.nps.gov/habs/haer/habs/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/habs/haer/habs/)

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore's Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore's Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district's Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore's rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul's Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district's growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore's Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore's tremendously rich architectural heritage.