

Architectural Guide to
Charleston

ST. MARY'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
c. 1840
89 Hasell Street

"This Church represents the first established site of Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia. In 1788 the Rt. Rev. John Carroll, Prefect Apostolic of the United States, sent to Charleston Rev. Ryan, a very pious Irish priest, who found the Catholics few, poor, and timid. He rented on Hasell Street a meeting house formerly used by the Rev. Thomas Hill, a Methodist preacher".

"An Act of incorporation was granted by the legislature of South Carolina in 1791. It formed into one body the Roman Catholic Church in Charleston etc." x x x "The Act was amended in 1837 changing the name and style from Roman Catholic Church to St. Mary's Charleston". "In 1793 the Rev. Simon Felix O'Gallagher came to St. Mary's. He removed the wooden building, formerly the Methodist meeting house, and replaced it with a brick structure, the foundation of which was laid about 1801". x x x "This building was about 40 by 60 feet with a porch along the front sustained by four handsome columns." "It was destroyed by the fire of April 28, 1838. The corner stone of the present building was laid August 15, 1838. Christopher Kane was the building contractor". The foregoing is a summary quotation from a Brief History of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Charleston, South Carolina by Agatha Airmar Simmons.

By 1838 buildings were beginning to arise in Charleston in the Greek Revival manner but it would appear that the builder of St. Mary's was following the tradition established almost two decades earlier by Robert Mills. This tradition, more Roman than Greek, seems most appropriate for the Mother Church of the Roman Obedience in this region.

The interior shows the advantage of advance planning in following an ordered program for the acquisition of sacred paintings and stained glass. The Crucifixion over the high altar was painted in 1814 by a native artist John S. Cogdell. This focal painting was injured in the fire of 1838. Although not a Catholic, Cogdell restored the painting and presented it to the Vestry. Twenty-three paintings, copies of masterpieces were painted in Rome by Caesare Porta and installed in 1896. The stained glass windows preserve an unusual uniformity in the scale of the figures and the quality and character of execution.