

AN ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION OF THE SANCTUARY BUILDING
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

GLENDALÉ, OHIO

BY: Addison H. Clipson, Architect

The records show that the Session engaged Mr. A. C. Nash, Architect, sometime in 1872 to develop construction drawings for a new Sanctuary Building, the Congregation having outgrown the Chapel Building erected in 1860. Mr. Nash resided in Bromley, Kentucky, and had an office at Second and Vine Streets in Cincinnati. He was well known in his time, and had designed residences for prominent Cincinnatians, some of which still stand in Mt. Auburn. We will note some examples of Mr. Nash's skill as a Designer of the Sanctuary Building elsewhere in this analysis.

The period of Romanticism in Art and Design reached its peak in the 1860's and 1870's, and in England this included fashionable new building exteriors in the Gothic vernacular known as the "Victorian Restoration" and in this country the action was called "Gothic Revival," lasting from 1840 to 1890. Mr. Nash was not indifferent to the Gothic Revival movement, but instead used the idiom to create the perfect companion piece to the already existing Chapel Building, executed in a similar style.

Mr. Nash must have been familiar with English Country Parish Churches, for we will see some direct correlations with his work in Glendale with those built in England at the close of the 13th Century, which are classified in the "Decorated Period." This was the age of varied and graceful spires.

Some basic features seen in the Glendale Church can be found in the ancient English churches. The floor plan is in the form of a Latin Cross, signifying that the Church is the Body of Christ. The building is laid out with its orientation from rising (Chancel) to setting (Narthex) sun, a custom older than Christianity. There are five doors, for the five wounds in Christ's body. They include the North Narthex entry, the South Narthex entry, the South Porch entry into the Guild room, the Belfry Porch entry into the Choir Vestry, and the North Transcept entry into the Kite Session room. This door is on the north, or "dark" side, and was known as the "Devil's Door," which was opened during the exorcism of Baptism. The Nave (where worshippers sit) - Latin, Navis: a ship - symbolizes the voyage to heaven. There is a triangular cap stone above the South Narthex entry in which is carved a three circle figure called a triquetra, expressing the Trinity, while its continuous shape denotes eternity. The Baptismal Font has eight sides, for eight is the number of Resurrection and New Life.

The two small spires flanking the western facade with its great wheel window, have their counterparts in those of Peterborough Cathedral built in 1118. The spire on the south side is cross-shaped in plan, and was skillfully transitioned into the eight-sided stone capital by the inclusion of a miniature Norman arch at the top of the internal corners. The four cusps at the top of the pinnacle are old symbols of the sheltering yew, which shaded worshippers at outdoor services in ancient times.

Recent detailed examination of the building structure showed a great deal of skill in engineering present in Nash's design. Although sitting on a clay overburden constantly wetted by underground springs and surface run-off from higher ground to the westward, there is no evidence of differential settlement or other foundation failure. Joints in the skillfully worked hammer-beam trusses supporting the roof remain tight and true, attesting to the technical skill possessed by Nash in proportioning connections and truss components. Practical considerations in construction details separate the Glendale building from its English cousins. These include the use of metal (zinc) trim, band courses, scuppers, parapets, dormers, and similar items usually rendered in cut stone. These are found above the top of all masonry work as a rule. An unusual detail is the horizontal band course three brick courses below the top of the Nave wall. Such a detail is almost always executed in stone or brickwork. A. C. Nash taking advantage of the fantastic skills of metal working firms such as the Witt Cornice Co., in Cincinnati, had these traditionally stone details executed in sheet zinc and tangleplate. Details almost exactly like these are to be found on Wise Temple in downtown Cincinnati. Nash knew that whole elements of the building could be made lightweight, and being prefabricated in the tin shop, the cost of construction could be reduced without greatly affecting durability. The metal pinnacle on the south spire is almost exactly like the heavier Saxon layered stone pinnacle on St. Dunstan's.

In this new age of awareness of the architectural heritage in America, evaluations pro and con of the architectural importance of the Glendale Church have been made. Although made by architects, lay persons, preservationists, and others, no evaluation has been made lately accompanied by some sort of artistic analysis. Such an analysis is the purpose of this paper. Purposefully ignoring the various alterations made on the building since it was built, we plunge into the premise that this building is worthy of preservation as an architectural monument, and otherwise one of the finest examples of its type anywhere. We have only to compare visually the so-called sharp Gothic or Gothic Revival churches erected elsewhere in country towns in America, with the Glendale specimen. From about 1850 to 1880, these buildings are everywhere, some even in downtown Cincinnati, and, they are all alike, except for physical size. They are characterized by a hold-over from the wooden meeting houses in New England. The transition is clumsy. Buttresses are sham and shallow on the side walls, and steeple proportions are vague.

These buildings are usually brick, with some stone trim, principally on the front wall. Other walls are left plain as any warehouse. They were built in the Gothic Revival Age without benefit of imagination and the liturgy was crammed into a shoe box plan. Not so in Mr. Nash's Glendale project. The floor plan contains a fluidity that is unusual for the 1870's, and has served in good stead as liturgical requirements changed over the past century. Internal modifications have been limited to relocation of appurtenances, such as organ and chancel equipment, seating arrangements, and so on, but without structural modifications. Fluidity of plan allows the re-naming of spaces from former uses without extensive alteration of the structural fabric. Nash was apparently quite knowledgeable about the careful use of variety in the shapes and heights of the elements that make up the building. The various towers, gables, shallow lines, when viewed from any angle, form an interesting "scenigraphic" composition lately recognized as being important in the success of Bavarian and Disney costles. Using uniquely American materials and methods, A. C. Nash "broke out of the box" when he designed this modestly budgeted but richly massed building. Homey touches still exist from the Building's construction days. Recent removal of paint from the brick masonry revealed that a tapered stone trim part was installed backward on the west dormer of the Belfry. The circular stone counterweight used to poise the jib crane on the top of the tower for erection of the spire and the great bell remains in the cellar at the base of the tower, too heavy to cart away.

Sensitively designed stained glass windows of high quality and recent vintage, fill the old rose brick openings, protecting the musically and intrinsically valuable antique Koeninger & Grimm pipe organ, and the congregation from the elements. It is fitting, that in its 100th 1973 year, this structure be recognized for its architectural excellence, as well as its historical and human values, such that its viability of yesterday will continue to reach into tomorrow.