

A History of The Cathedral of All Saints

The Cathedral of All Saints was the first Episcopal cathedral in America to be conceived and built on the English model of church, hospital, convent and school. The brainchild of William Croswell Doane (1832-1914), first Bishop of Albany, the Cathedral was intended to recreate and literally imitate its English prototypes right down to the ancient pavements and stones.

Bishop Doane's Vision

Bishop Doane's vision was to recreate, as perfectly as possible, an English or European cathedral in America. The Bishop sums it up in his own words. "We want in America, to do everything today; and to finish instantly whatever we begin. The result is poor churches, badly built, cheaply furnished inside and out with stucco and staining. The great churches of the world are the growth of centuries sometimes, and the man who builds a tenth part of a Church well, leaves a truer and better monument than he who builds it all, meanly. I had rather put an unhewn pillar in, rough with scars of its splitting from the virgin rock, and let a third generation shape the shaft and carve the chapter (capital), till the faces on it speak and the flowers in it smell; than shape, out of sanded wood or moulded plaster, the fairest lie that ever seemed to support what would crush its unreality into powder, if the weight rested on it. ...and now the building waits its final completion by some other hands, with only this one satisfaction in my heart, that it never can be built in any mean or small and narrow way, but it must be the carrying on of the great plan so far attained.

The cathedral service is the very highest ideal of the earthly worship of Almighty God. The buildings seem so full of age and song, that the old echoes are awakened, to become the chorus to the anthems of today. The carved Angelic corbels lean over the surpliced singers, till one wonders whether they are listening to, or making, the music of the services. The Psalter, as they chant it, furnishes, in every verse, with the thoughtful modulation and adaptation of organ and voice, a comment on its meaning, as though a Seraph sang a sermon on the words, awakening and satisfying the most intense idea of penitence or of praise. And this, I confess, I hope to begin a reproduction of, here. Nay, I account this unattractive building and this simple service the cradle of an American Cathedral."

America and Albany: the Imperial Age 1880

Settled as early as 1611, Albany is the oldest continually occupied city of the original thirteen colonies. Unlike the first English settlements in America, Beverwyck, as Albany was first known, was founded entirely for profit. The beaver was an important staple for European fashion in the early seventeenth century, and through the trading of pelts Albany

became a powerful early center for commerce and later industry. Located on the Hudson River midway between the port of New York and the St. Lawrence River, the city was long coveted by European powers. During the American Revolution, Albany was the target of a major British invasion that culminated at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. The victory for the American forces was the turning point of the conflict and led directly to recognition of the United States as a new nation. Albany became the Capital of New York State in 1788, which further enhanced the city's commercial importance, and gave it a preeminence in government affairs that it maintains to this day.

In 1825 the Erie Canal opened at the Port of Albany. The canal, the longest built since the Roman Empire, accelerated Albany's growth, and the city rapidly expanded to become a leader of the Industrial Revolution. The first railroad in the country originated in Albany in 1831, and within a few years had developed into the New York Central Railroad. During the American Civil War, Albany and the Capital District supplied a majority of the armaments, uniforms and materiel used by the Northern forces. After the war, Albany helped to rebuild the South with Adirondack pine shipped down the Erie Canal and out of the Port of Albany. With the peace of 1865, the nation entered into an era of renewed greatness and prosperity. For the next forty years, Albany, as capital of the nation's then wealthiest and most industrialized state, was transformed from a small provincial town into a city, which reflected the new imperial attitudes of the late nineteenth century. The architectural splendor and appointments of the Cathedral of All Saints stand as a monument to this age.

Mrs. Pruyn's scrapbook, or the Grand Tour of 1872

In September of 1871 John VanSchaik Lansing Pruyn and his young wife Anna sail from Albany to Europe and the British Isles. For the next nine months the Pruyns immerse themselves in the British and Continental social scene culminating with Anna Bruyn's presentation to Queen Victoria in April of 1872. While a guest of the Duke of Argyll in Scotland, Pruyn receives word of the tremendous loss of life and property from the Great Fire of Chicago. One week later to the day he is in Junius Morgan's banking house in London laying the groundwork for a new railroad from New York to Chicago. During the trip Pruyn appears to have hired a photographer especially to make a meticulous record of the great cathedrals of England. These views, developed as albumen prints from glass plates, were then hand tipped into an especially created leather-bound scrapbook that still resides in the cathedral archives. These photographs, never formally published, depict the facades, towers, vaults and arcades of many English cathedrals and churches now changed significantly or lost altogether. Most importantly, this photographic record was later used by Bishop Doane, the architect Robert Gibson and Mrs. Pruyn as a source-book of architectural prototypes to be used in the design of the Cathedral of All Saints. It is clear, for example, that the designs for the pulpit and the rood screen in the cathedral were derived from those at Ely cathedral, and

that the piers of the nave and the triforium designs were taken from the cathedrals of Durham and Lincoln respectively. This uniquely American approach to cathedral design was the first time that photographs were used to facilitate the architect in his quest for an “instantly ancient” American cathedral.

The Bishop begins

Bishop Doane proposed to build a school, a convent and a hospital in that order. Only when they were established was he prepared to contemplate the construction of the cathedral. Shortly after his consecration as the first Bishop of Albany in February of 1869, Bishop Doane began to elicit support for a girl's school. The bishop felt strongly that there was a need for better education of young women in America. Although politically conservative, Doane was passionate in his belief that women should be educated to be self-reliant. St. Agnes's School, which he founded in 1870, produced some remarkable American women, including Alice Morgan Wright (1884-1977). Miss Wright was baptized in the Foundry Chapel of the Cathedral and graduated from St. Agnes in 1903. She rose to prominence in the Women's Suffrage Movement and was one of the founding members of the American League of Women Voters. Eleanor Roosevelt was a friend and frequent visitor to Miss Wright's home on State Street, which had been designed by William Gibson for Wright's father Henry. An important sculptor, she exhibited in the controversial New York Armory Show of 1912 and exerted a strong influence on cubism in the United States. On September 7, 1870 Bishop Doane opened St. Agnes School with sixty pupils in a rented house on Columbia Street, three blocks east of the current cathedral.

Over the next two years increasing enrollment strained the confines of the rented house and Doane began looking for a larger site for the school. “I needed to find some place in which the children could gather as a school formally for their worship”, Doane wrote. “I cast envious eyes upon a vacant lot near the house,[Bishop Doane had purchased a house on Elk Street, two doors up from J.V.L.Pruyn and one block from the future cathedral], which was an unused foundry, and I went up to Mr. Townsend the owner, to ask him whether he would sell it, and at what price.” Townsend wanted forty-five thousand dollars for the property, and Bishop Doane had no money to buy it. He then approached Erastus Corning, a legendary figure in Albany, who was then nearly eighty-five and in failing health. It was Corning who, in 1831, had first realized the enormous potential of the railroad in America, and who with J.V.L. Pruyn created the New York Central in 1854. “I went to old Mr. Corning, Erastus Sr., and laid my plan before him,” Doane wrote in January of 1872. “He was in bed, at the beginning of his last illness [he died later that year], during which I was in the process of visiting him. He was quite feeble in body but very strong and clear in mind. He said he must consult his son Erastus, so I went down to New York where Mr. Corning was, and begged him to come back at once with me and secure his father's consent, which he

did. He said he would buy the land if I could manage to get control of it without using his name, the money to be paid in three notes of \$20,000, \$10,000 and \$15,000, at nine, six and three months. I made the proposal to Mr. Townsend, telling him I could not give him the giver's name. He naturally concluded that it could only be Mr. Corning, and the agreement was drawn up which ended in the purchase of the land. When I reported to Mr. Corning that the land was his, he said in his droll way, 'Well, do you expect me to give it to you?' 'No,' I said 'I expect to incorporate the Corning Foundation for Christian work in the City and Diocese of Albany, and that you will deed the property to it.' 'Well,' he said, 'when you have raised \$50,000, put up your building and I will transfer the property' and this was the beginning of St. Agnes School."

Within six months Albany architect Thomas Fuller designed and erected the school building in the prevalent Eastlake style. At the same time, the old Townsend Foundry, which had incidentally built armaments for the Union Army, was refurbished as the Chapel of the Cathedral of All Saints, and both the Chapel and the new school building were consecrated on Sunday the seventeenth of November 1872. J.V.L. Pruyn remembered the day in his journal. "We went to All Saints Chapel in the AM. This is Bishop Doane's new chapel in the old Townsend Furnace Building near the new St. Agnes School on Elk Street. The Scholars took possession of the school building a few days ago and the chapel was finished about two or three weeks ago. The service was conducted by Bishop Doane and one clergyman who aided him. It was of a very highly ritualistic character...."

Moving rapidly, Bishop Doane between 1872 and 1875 went on to found the Childs Hospital, one of the first hospitals in the nation devoted exclusively to "incurable" childhood disease; the Sisterhood of the Holy Child Jesus, an order of nuns created to care for children's hospital; and St. Margaret's Home for Babies, which also in turn created one of the first day-care centers in the country for working mothers. The idea of a permanent cathedral, however, was never far from the Bishop's mind, and as early as March 25, 1871 Doane wrote in his private journal, "The cathedral is not an interest just of this city, or of my own, but that of the NATION, and the most permanent results depend on the success of this enterprise of faith. A center which you will grant, will be a confluence of all Christian people, and a center which will gather, please God, about it the central elements of which the cathedral is simply the fulcrum." The "central elements" continued to take preference over the cathedral and it was not until 1882 that Doane was able to tackle his last and greatest challenge. The site for the future cathedral was problematical as the Townsend Chapel site was not large enough. "In looking the ground over carefully, " wrote Doane early in 1886, "we decided not to put it on the same site [which the old foundry occupied], because we wanted to go on using that for church service, and meanwhile, young Mr. Corning, (Erastus Corning II 1819-1893), who had already given me \$25,000 toward the \$50,000 I had to raise, concluded to buy the rest of the land on that side of Elk Street up to Swan, which he did, and shortly after we

began the building where it now stands. I vainly tried to persuade the Trustees to buy the rest of the land on the other side of the street,[the future site of the State Education Building] which of course could have been bought then at a very reasonable price.”

The War of the architects

In the spring of 1882, Bishop Doane announced a competition for the design of a new American Cathedral to be built in Albany. Over the next year various plans submitted were studied. Ultimately the choice came down to two men: Henry Hobbs Richardson, the dean of American architecture (1838-1886), and the relatively obscure Robert Wilson Gibson (1854-1927).

Richardson had studied under Henri Lebroste and Jacob Ignaz at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1859-1862. While there he conceived of a style based on a revival of elements of French and Spanish architecture of the eleventh century, the Romanesque style that had preceded gothic in European architecture. Richardson's style, like the man himself, was massive. It was characterized by stone walls and dramatic semi-circular arches, and displayed a new dynamism of interior space with continuity and unity consistent throughout. The project for All Saints Cathedral, which Richardson began at least to think about while he was in Europe, eventuated in the most elaborate design of his whole career. It was the only design of his for an important church later than Trinity, Boston. Richardson's early admirers usually regretted that his design was not built, and Richardson bitterly regretted the loss of the commission. He had, however, made little attempt to conform to Bishop Doane's desire for a gothic cathedral. Oddly enough, there are still to this day a few architectural historians who still believe that Richardson designed the Cathedral of All Saints!

Robert Gibson, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and winner of the coveted Soane Medallion had, after completion of his formal training, spent several years touring and sketching the cathedrals of Europe and developing a passionate love of the “primitive” early gothic style. His illustrated sketchbooks, with their humorous and witty comments, were published between 1878 and 1882 in various weekly architectural journals and caught the attention of Bishop Doane, who invited the young architect to Albany. There, in 1883, he designed and built two important commissions in rapid succession: the Albany Rural Cemetery Chapel and Lodge and the Evan-Pruyn House. With these designs the frail and delicate twenty-nine year old architect demonstrated that he was up to the task of designing All Saints. Gibson was sympathetic to the Bishop's desire for an “instantly ancient” cathedral, and even in its unfinished state, the cathedral evokes an ancient grandeur that is both timeless and modern.

The major news and architecture magazines of the day published the plans of the

respective architects, and their relative merits and flaws were avidly discussed in the press. As Bishop Doane describes it, “Mr. Robert Gibson, who had been living here in Albany, spent hours and hours with me in talking out the details of the plan. I first insisted that we should have a plan which would cover the entire property and be absolutely solid and substantial. Mr. Corning was very anxious to have Richardson made architect. I sent for him, talked the matter out with him, and he finally said he thought it could be built for \$150.000, so I said, ‘There is no use of thinking about that for I can’t get the money.’ ‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘you once start it and money will come from all sorts.’”