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# *The Griffin*

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## Brunswick Street Gothic: Saint Patrick's Church

by Wallace Brannen

*NOTE:* The congregation of Saint Patrick's was recently told by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast that the doors of their historic church will close in November of this year. The parishioners have been hard hit by this decision. They stand to lose a gracious symbol of personal faith as well as a powerful marker of community history and culture. With the loss of this provincially registered building we could all stand bereft of an exemplary piece of our fast disappearing built heritage. Saint Patrick's is in peril. We must rise to the occasion and rally for the cause.

GOTHIC style was born in twelfth century France during a time of rapid urban growth, increased wealth, advancement in learning and a new freedom to travel. This progressive period can be compared to the nineteenth century when similar developmental conditions prevailed. Gothic style was widely copied and adapted at that time, nowhere more enthusiastically than in Great Britain and her colonies. The strongest characteristic of North American building in this period was the use of a wide range of historical styles, modified to suit the needs of the day. Even though Gothic Revival

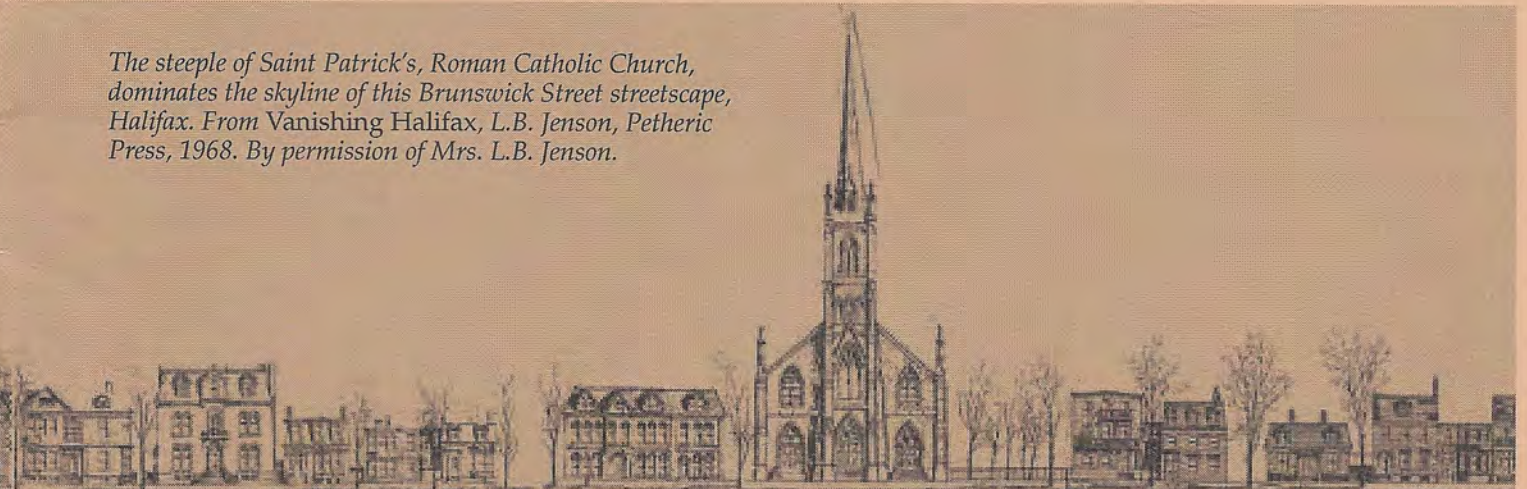
churches from this architectural episode cannot be mistaken for true Gothic churches they do, nonetheless, offer a romantic vision of our heroic past.

In Halifax, neo-Gothic or Gothic Revival churches of both the French and English variety are abundant even though all the churches north of North Street were destroyed in the great explosion of 1917. Saint Patrick's, a Catholic church dangerously near the south side of this demarcation line was, perhaps by the grace of God, spared in this phenomenal catastrophe. The church building stands today as a remarkably intact example of numerous stylized highlights of French Gothic church architecture; a convenient amalgam of the original form, built at a time when the parish church was the religious community's most valued possession.

The church's history, compiled by the late William Kelly and present day historian Blair Beed, is succinct but telling. In 1843 the church was founded as a mission of Saint Mary's, now the basilica church of Halifax. The Irish community, which eventually formed the parish, first worshipped in a nearby stable. In 1845 the congregation began to gather in an unused Dissenters' Meeting

*Continued overleaf*

*The steeple of Saint Patrick's, Roman Catholic Church, dominates the skyline of this Brunswick Street streetscape, Halifax. From Vanishing Halifax, L.B. Jenson, Petheric Press, 1968. By permission of Mrs. L.B. Jenson.*





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House cum Anglican Garrison Chapel. The cornerstone for a new church was laid on this site in 1883. The church history records that "on December 27, 1885, parishioners attended mass in front of the old altar in the newly opened church."

Saint Patrick's sits on the east side of Brunswick Street. In his book of heritage building illustrations, **Vanishing Halifax**, L.B. Jensen calls Brunswick Street "the most varied and interesting concentration of domestic architecture remaining intact in Canada." The church history tells us that "by the time the new church was built the street had developed into a fine residential area as local merchants built stately homes amongst the original cottages" and that "with eight church buildings close together the street was known unofficially as 'church row'". Four of the eight remain today; all but one is in a medieval revival style. A combination Presbytery and Glebe House was built on the north side of the church in 1889. Its width matches the frontage of the church and it is built with the same materials, as one might expect, in the neo-Gothic style. This two-and-a-half-storey building, made possible by the bequest of Henry Peters, Saint Patrick's builder, is resplendent in its near excessive display of lancet windows all properly finished with granite hood moulds. The most notable connection of the Presbytery-Glebe House to the church is invisible in its function. To protect the parish priest from the weather, and perhaps the gaze of the ungodly, a spacious tunnel of some twenty feet connects the basement of his residence to the basement of the church.

In its heyday Saint Patrick's was the centre of a parish operation that served 5,600 souls and included the Presbytery-Glebe House, a nearby social centre and across the street, a boys' and two girls' schools. Today it is underused and to some, a redundant church property. Yet, thanks to the diligence of the small membership, it contin-

ues to serve as a beacon in its neighbourhood. The upward thrust of the centre spire is outstanding in the streetscape. The ratio of street level width to the top of the spire is roughly 1:2.5, not far off that of the High Gothic Amiens Cathedral at 1:3, and in dramatic contrast to the more earthbound churches of the English Gothic. Surely this tall and slender spire made it clear to Irish merchants and labourers alike exactly where God and Heaven were located. The spire is the centerpiece of a perfectly symmetrical west-facing façade, a robust configuration, particularly in comparison to the plain quality of the stuccoed north and south sides.

Construction is of brick with Nova Scotia granite trim. The octagonal spire is embellished at its base by four small lancet windows that provide light for the bell tower. The top of the square tower is decorated by corner pinnacles bearing stylized crocket motifs. The bell sounds through equal openings on each side, all looking like squat lancet windows. If these window frames remained open we might be reminded of the great pierced towers of Notre Dame. Instead, in a Victorian effort to keep out the weather if not the draft, the frames are closed by louvres set in faux tracery woodwork. A trio of small lancet windows sits tight together over a very Gothic gable that tops off the façade's tallest window. This window, like all the others of the church, is made in the Early Gothic plate tracery style. Similar but slightly smaller windows appear in the wall of the church but are set somewhat lower in relation to the angle of the roofline. The tower, extending slightly from the church wall, is decoratively buttressed. This embellishment has greater height than the pinnacle-topped corner buttresses of the building. All these aspects speak of verticality, a Gothic architectural ideal: from the triangular configuration of the buttresses and main windows to the gable on the tower, the Gothic

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### **Editorial Committee:**

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David Rollinson, Sandra Sackett,  
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Submissions are welcomed.  
Deadline for the next issue:

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Please send your  
submissions to

*Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia*  
P.O. Box 36111,  
Spring Garden RPO,  
Halifax, N.S. B3J 3S9

Tel: 902 423-4807

E-mail material to  
[heritage.trust@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:heritage.trust@ns.sympatico.ca)  
website: [www.htns.ca](http://www.htns.ca)





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arch openings at the bell and finally, to a spire given greater upward thrust by the quartet of pinnacles at its base.

As sure as the parishioner's gaze and imagination were directed to heaven by the church façade, the three front portals marked the beginning of the important journey to the altar. Just as in twelfth century Laon Cathedral, the centre portal is perfectly aligned with the nave while the side portals exist in a similar relationship with the aisles. The centre differs from the sides only by being somewhat larger. A glazed woodwork tympanum, again in replication of plate tracery, is contained by a granite Gothic arch. The jambs of the double wooden doors are also of granite and pretend to be columns with carved foliate capitals. The portals open to a narthex of porch-like anterooms. The remaining exterior of the church building requires little description. Tall lancet windows fill the stuccoed sides but are covered in wood frame 'storms' not built for appearance. North and south side doors are capped by small arched windows. The back of the church is of the same texture but supports an extension for the sacristy and the apse. The building sits on sloping land that gives exposure to the basement level and foreshortened lancet windows aligned with those of the main level. Saint Patrick's is a town church, not intended to be viewed in a field of green like English Gothic predecessors such as Salisbury Cathedral. This church is built into a streetscape that was filling rapidly in its day. Side views were not to be had.

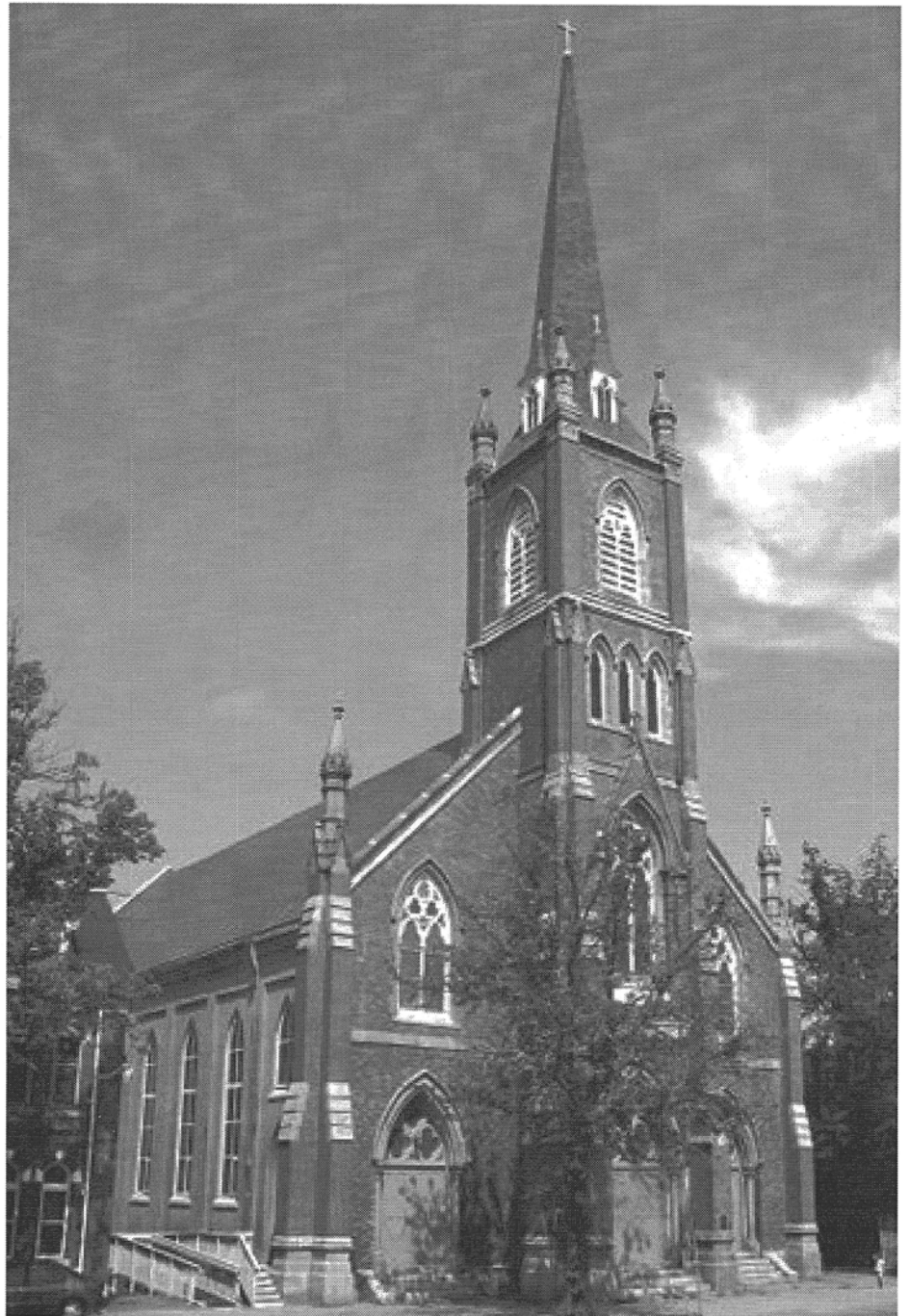
The interior architecture of Saint Patrick's offers a medieval welcome; one might expect to hear Latin at its mass. In its interior this late Victorian replica of things Gothic seems to move toward Rayonnant style with, as is so well described in *Snyder's Medieval Art*, "sophisticated articulation of the mouldings, the tracery and the colonettes that provide the basis of

the style." Faux finish paint surfaces suggest three colours of marble. The stained glass lancet windows are tall, plentiful and offer light on all sides of the rectangular interior. Even the apse window is lit with stained glass. The church history calls this "a rare use in Canada of stained glass in an apse window." We also discover the likely reason for this use in the historical text, where we are told that the Halifax cathedral church, Saint Mary's (1829), has one as well.

We are left to wonder how the interior of Saint Patrick's escaped the modern day iconoclasm of Vatican II. In *Every Popish Person*, J. Brian Hanson's chronicle of Catholic Nova Scotia, we learn that as a result of this late 1960s council it was asked "of the Cleric that he declericalise his image of the church." Evidence of this request is clear in the painted-over and cleaned-up look of Saint Mary's Cathedral. Saint Patrick's church history refers to the moving

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*Below, St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, Brunswick Street, Halifax. All photos: Arianne Pollet-Brannen*



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around of some devotional figures and slight changes to the altars but not much else that might have been prompted by the encyclical. Saint Patrick's seems to have been off the iconoclastic radar by being, according to Hanson, the city's second most prestigious church. Church historian Blair Beed is succinct in his own conviction that Saint Patrick's simply could not afford the officially sanctioned changes.

The interior of Saint Patrick's is impressive in both depth and height. Slender piers with applied colonettes form elegant colonnades that contain a spacious nave. This feature gives visual transport to the altar while carrying our gaze upward. Ribbed quadripartite vaults extend from cast faux marble, gold banded capitals and abut an elegant rib ridge. The capitals alternately show three different foliate motifs. Not surprisingly one is of the shamrock, a perfect symbol of the trinity in the hand of Saint Patrick. Smaller quadripartite vaults decorate lower ceilings above the aisles. Piers nearest the centre portal are partly covered in the function of carrying a choir balcony housing an outstanding Cassavant organ that is recognized as a national heritage treasure. Two pier positions near the altars are not filled but are elegantly finished off with bound capitals. The frontmost piers merge with the wall on each side of the apse. The interior of the apse is a tribute to the expressive linearity of the vaulted ceilings. Colonettes pretend to be piers and project a flattened imitation of the quadripartite ceiling vaults. Atop this display is the unique-in-Canada stained glass window illustrating the Ascension. This striking configuration is infilled by the 1950s addition of a sectional mural by Nova Scotia artist Joseph Purcell. Space between the 'ribs' and the 'colonettes' support painted images of an earthbound Jesus prior to his ascent into a more visually profound realm of stained glass.



*Altar boys tasked with ringing the bell stopped on their long climb to the belfry to autograph door frames outside the choir loft. The earliest signature is dated Christmas 1888.*

In addition to that of the apse, Saint Patrick's is lit by twenty-six other stained glass windows. The windows of the west façade as well as those over and next to the side doors are "of rich ornament" and not part of the lengthy narrative presented by the remainder. Abbot Suger, supervisor of the creation of the Abbey Church of Saint Denis, the first great monument of the Gothic, suggested that the primary function of the window was to promote heavenly ascent "urging us onward from the material to the spiritual." This most desirable effect is achieved by the sheer abundance of stained glass in Saint Patrick's. The narrative group presents a familiar lesson for the congregation in its description of Jesus' time on earth. From the "Presentation of Mary in the Temple" to "The Faithful Women at the Empty Tomb" the same story, so often illustrated in the Gothic church, is told again. All but one of the narrative group is topped with a rosette showing an angel. A large south side window, installed by the Charitable Irish Society, that pictures Jesus giving Peter the keys, shows instead the venerable Saint Patrick in its rosette.

The Gothic Revival drove a renewal of stained glass and other arts. Mayer and Company of Munich, the makers of these

windows, were dedicated to the reactivation of many medieval building trades. It was Mayer's New York studio that provided the original windows in the late 1890s and it was Mayer who was called upon to recreate virtually all of them after the explosion of 1917. It is clear that the business of ecclesiastical supply was organized and efficient during this period. The fine marble altar, resplendent in its display of miniature Gothic gables, is echoed between the large narrative windows in gabled renditions of the Stations of the Cross; all precisely cast and carefully hand painted but, nonetheless, eminently orderable. The Gothic Revival church was, in the aspect of its furnishings, well supplied. A proliferation of new churches required appropriate decoration. The parishioners of Saint Patrick's were generous in their effort to build a unique place of worship. We learn from Maud Rosinski's **Architects of Nova Scotia** that the plan presented by the Halifax builder Henry Peters and the architect G.H. Jost was chosen over submissions by two Americans, one notable for his design of the granite front and steeple of Saint Mary's Basilica in 1876. The Halifax team proceeded to fill the parishioners' order with an elegant extract of French Gothic architec-

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ture. We are allowed, in the spirit of the revival, to imagine that Saint Patrick's expressive apse design is the architect's signature as well as his personal blessing.

As plentiful as such church buildings might have been, few remain today; fewer still in fine original condition. So far Saint Patrick's has been spared, not only from catastrophe but also from the relentless drone of development. This prized neo-Gothic relic serves the same purpose today as it did in 1889. Saint Patrick's, then and now, clearly illustrates the remarkable depth of our history and culture.

*Wallace Brannen is a Halifax art appraiser and restoration consultant. He writes about art and related issues, studies art history and sits on the board of Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia.*



*Cast figure of Saint Patrick beside the altar, potted shamrocks at his feet.*

## April Lecture The Painted Room

On April 19, Joyce McCulloch presented a fascinating DVD about the restoration of a painted room in a Halifax home. There are a number of known painted rooms in Nova Scotia, as well as the famous room from the Croscup house in Karsdale, which is now on view in the National Gallery in Ottawa. This room, in an unidentified Halifax home, is another beautiful example of this type of decoration. Joyce gave a short introduction, speaking of the painted room tradition of the province and of how the DVD came to be made. The filming was carried out with funding from HRM, and represents an unusual collaboration between the new owners of the house, Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, filmmaker Peter Murphy of Seabright Films, Antigonish, conservator Michelle Gallinger, and the municipality.

The tradition of painting on walls goes back a long way, from prehistoric cave paintings, through the renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, to Nova Scotia in the 19th and early 20th centuries when itinerant painters decorated both public and private buildings. These included church decoration and domestic examples such as Maud Lewis's house. The Croscup house was one of several known examples in the Annapolis Valley.

The Halifax home that was the subject of the presentation has a dining room whose upper walls are decorated with scenes from rural Ireland, while the lower parts are treated with trompe l'oeil panelling. This work was done about 1914. The painting in one corner of the room had been badly damaged by a water spill from the bathroom above, and was in serious need of restoration. Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, working with HRM, was able to arrange for this to be done. While the mandate of the HRM grants programme did not allow direct funding for the restoration

itself, it was able to finance the recording of the restoration, which resulted in Michelle Gallinger being hired to carry out the necessary work, while Peter Murphy filmed each step of the conservation process.

The result was the fascinating DVD that we watched, showing the delicate work of conservation and restoration of this important piece of Nova Scotian heritage. The first step in conservation is the inspection of the work, the analysis of the original materials used and the selection of suitable chemicals to use in restoration. Following that comes the consolidation of the existing materials, reattaching any flaking paint to the wall. Then comes cleaning, followed by the infilling of bare spaces with matching paints to restore the original appearance. These were all very delicate tasks, made harder in this case because the damaged area was in the corner of the room, and high up, and it was difficult to work from a ladder in the corner. We were able to follow the process from the initial stages to the final result, a beautifully restored rural scene.

Michelle was present to answer questions from the audience, which led to some interesting discussion. She stressed that she uses only extremely dilute solutions of chemicals in this type of work, and that all the work that she does is reversible. She works not only with paintings but with other art forms such as Inuit sculpture. Joyce reminded us that there are many other painted rooms which might be recorded in a similar fashion. This seems like a good way to make available to the public images from private homes which would not otherwise be seen. JD

