

ST. ALBAN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH (originally Church of the Holy Comforter) 76 St. Alban's Place, Borough of Staten Island. Built 1865; Architect R.M. Upjohn. Enlarged 1869-1872; Architect R.M. Upjohn.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island, Tax Map Block 5239, Lot 48 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the St. Alban's Episcopal Church and the proposed desingation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 19). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received a letter in suport of designation from the Vestry of St. Albans Episcopal Church.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Located in the old village of Eltingville, near the southern tip of Staten Island, St. Alban's Episcopal Church is one of the finest examples of a mid-19th-century rural church of wood construction remaining in New York City. The picturesque building, originally known as the Church of the Holy Comforter (Episcopal), was designed in 1865 by the prominent architect R.M. Upjohn. In 1872, the small church was moved to its present site and then enlarged. R.M. Upjohn was probably responsible for this enlargement which repeated the style of the original church structure. The church is a late example of a building constructed with board-and-batten siding, a technique favored by American architects beginning in the 1830's. The design of St. Albans takes full advantage of the versatility of wood, using the material in a highly picturesque and ornamental manner, on both the exterior and interior, to create an exceptionally handsome ecclesiastical structure.

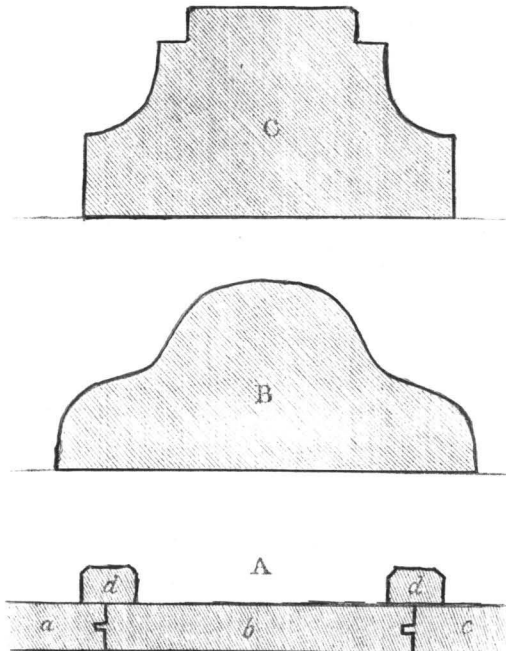
When the Church of the Holy Comforter was incorporated in 1865, the Eltingville area, then known as Southfields, largely consisted of farms and small houses laid out on or near Amboy Road. The congregation was organized by local residents headed by Albert Journeay, who was "assisted by the women of the surrounding neighborhood."¹ A small church was built in 1865 on land donated by Journeay. It opened for worship on October 8, 1865, two weeks before the church was officially incorporated.² This board-and-batten church was designed by R.M. Upjohn and is illustrated in a contemporary engraving (see plate 1).

Architect Richard Mitchell Upjohn (1828-1903) was the son of the noted church architect and Gothic Revivalist Richard Upjohn (1802-1878). Although born in Shaftesbury, England, R.M. Upjohn lived most of his life in Brooklyn. In 1846 he entered his father's architectural firm; he was made a partner in 1851 and the firm's name was changed to Upjohn & Co. (renamed R. Upjohn & Co., in 1853). While associated with his father, R.M. Upjohn assisted on many major projects and is thought to have been the primary designer of such buildings as the Green-Wood Cemetery Gates (1861) and St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1867), both in Brooklyn; St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Albany (1859-1860); Trinity Church, New Rochelle (1863); and Boston's Central Congregational Church (1865-1867). After his father's retirement in the 1870's, R.M. Upjohn continued to practice independently. R.M. Upjohn is known primarily for his Victorian Gothic Style buildings, many of which use eccentric angular details; this is particularly true of his most famous work, the Connecticut State Capitol at Hartford (1872-1879). Like his father, R.M. Upjohn was a confirmed

Gothicist. Even after Henry Hobson Richardson had popularized the use of the Romanesque Revival style for Episcopal churches, with the construction of Trinity Church, Boston (1873-1877), Upjohn continued to work in a fresh and original Victorian Gothic manner, designing such idiosyncratic churches as St. George's Episcopal Church (1887-1889) in Brooklyn, a designated New York City Landmark.

A major portion of the Upjohns' practice consisted of the design of small Gothic Revival style churches for Episcopal parishes of modest means located in rural areas. Since wood was the most plentiful building resource in America, most small 19th-century churches were built of this material. In the mid-19th century, church architects, particularly those designing for the Episcopal Church, were looking to England for design ideas. England, however, had no tradition of ecclesiastical construction in wood, thus American architects had to formulate an original method of building, while following certain design principles espoused by English architects. Board-and-batten siding became a leading building technique used by these architects.

Board-and-batten siding is a simple method of providing a strong, weather-tight facade for a building. In this technique boards are connected to one another by the tongue and groove method (see illustration below). The joints formed by the boards are then covered by projecting battens that are nailed to the facade. These battens can take any number of forms; they can be cut in a simple square manner, they can have chamfered corners, or they can have rounded or stepped profiles, so long as they fit securely over the vertical joints.



From: Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850), p. 51.

a,b,c - boards tongued and grooved; d - the most common form of batten. B,C - other forms of battens.

The first significant use of board-and-batten siding was in 1836 when Alexander Jackson Davis designed the Blithewood Gatehouse in Barrytown, New York.³ The design of this "rustic cottage" was published in Davis' Rural Residences of 1837. It undoubtedly influenced Davis' associate Andrew Jackson Downing who illustrated board-and-batten sided buildings in his first house pattern book, Cottage Residences (1842). This book was followed in 1850 by Downing's major treatise, The Architecture of Country Houses. In this work Downing began his section entitled "On Materials and Modes of Construction" with a discussion of what he called "vertical boarding." Downing favored the use of vertical boarding, or board-and-batten siding, "because it has an expression of strength and truthfulness"⁴ which horizontal siding (clapboard) lacked. The belief that materials should be used in a truthful manner was a major philosophical tenet of mid-19th century architectural theory in the United States, as well as in England where the influential architect and writer Augustus Welby Pugin demanded the use of truthful construction techniques and modes of ornamentation.⁵ To Downing, vertical boarding was truthful because it echoed the vertical nature of the main timbers that frame and support a wooden building. Downing felt that the horizontal nature of clapboard siding was inappropriate to a wooden building, since horizontality was more expressive of brick and stone construction which is supported by walls laid in horizontal courses.

In addition to its truthfulness, Downing felt that vertical siding was a "bolder mode of construction... /that/ better expresses the picturesque."⁶ The board-and-batten technique was particularly favored by the architects and theoreticians of the picturesque movement in America who believed that the three-dimensionality of board-and-batten siding created a textural quality that was expressive of their ideals. The simplicity and honesty of this mode of building also followed picturesque ideas, as did the fact that the vertical battens lent a rustic feeling to a building, a feeling that was reflected by the surrounding vertical tree trunks. The projecting battens also created a shadowed effect on a building's facade that added to its romantic and picturesque qualities.

Downing's discussion of board-and-batten siding is the clearest statement in support of its use for rural buildings. Downing was primarily interested in the design of residential structures, but his arguments in support of board-and-batten are even more applicable to the construction of gothic revival style churches since the verticality of this construction technique gave added expression to the upward thrust inherent in Gothic architecture. As early as 1845 board-and-batten siding began to appear on ecclesiastical structures. Richard Upjohn pioneered in the use of board-and-batten siding for churches with the design for the First Parish Congregational Church in Brunswick, Maine, built in 1845-1846. This structure is generally considered to be the first major church built with this type of facade. The First Parish Church, a large building with particularly complex interior detailing, was built for a Congregational service. Thus, it was not a model for the small wooden Episcopal churches that were Upjohn's specialty. Of greater importance to the development of the small Episcopal church is Upjohn's contemporary design for St. Paul's Episcopal Church, also in Brunswick, Maine. The strikingly simple Gothic Revival style design of St. Paul's was the prototype for the hundreds of small board-and-batten churches designed in America in the succeeding three decades. The church clearly reflects the needs of an Episcopal congregation; it is composed of clearly delineated nave, transepts, and chancel, and the entire structure is an honest reflection of wood construction. The church is lit by modest lancet windows and there is unnecessary ornament to interfere with the simplicity of the structure.

In 1852, Upjohn published a book entitled Upjohn's Rural Architecture in which he illustrated a board-and-batten church that is similar in design to St. Paul's, although with a corner tower. Upjohn's purpose in publishing this book was "simply to supply the want which is often felt, especially in the newly settled parts of our country, of designs for cheap but still substantial buildings for the use of parishes, schools, etc."⁷ This popular pattern book spread the idea of the small board-and-batten church throughout America. Even after the publication of this book, Upjohn & Co. continued to receive commissions to design board-and-batten churches, although the firm did not always superintend their construction. Among Richard Upjohn's and R.M. Upjohn's finest board-and-batten churches are those located in Hamilton, New York (1847); Copake Falls, New York (1851-1852); Delafield, Wisconsin (1815-1853); Clermont, New York (1857); Charlestown, New Hampshire (1863 and 1869); and Eltingville, New York (1865 and 1869-1872).

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Eltingville, and St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Charlestown, are illustrative of a late version of the small board-and-batten parish church. Both of these buildings reflect the design influence of R.M. Upjohn. R.M. Upjohn retained the simple form of the board-and batten church that his father had established in the 1840's and had popularized in his book, but he added design elements reflective of the Victorian Gothic movement then gaining in popularity. R.M. Upjohn's wooden churches make greater use of asymmetry and unusually proportioned forms; they use angular and frequently eccentric details; and they introduce a sense of polychromy, particularly in the treatment of the roof. Like his father, R.M. Upjohn was sensitive to the attributes of the material used and continued to take full advantage of the versatility of wood construction.

St. Luke's Episcopal Church provides an excellent comparison to St. Alban's as well as insights into the design of the Staten Island building, since the New Hampshire church has a history that is very similar to that of St. Alban's. In addition, both of these churches have a large number of identical design features; both began as small buildings - St. Luke's was designed two years before St. Alban's - and both were enlarged a few years after the completion of the original structure.

The original building that housed the church of the Holy Comforter (St. Alban's) was a board-and-batten structure with the vertical members sawed to form a zig-zag pattern. The church had a steep pitched roof covering the nave, an entrance porch with a pitched roof and wooden struts at the gable, a polygonal apse lit by a pointed-arched windows set within enframements constructed of sticks, a shallow vestry, and a steep bell cote. A contemporary Staten Island critic described this church as being "one of the architectural ornaments of the island, a beautiful specimen of the rural Gothic."⁸

Although a beautiful building, the church soon proved to be too small for the needs of the Eltingville congregation and in September 1869, the vestry organized a committee to obtain plans for the addition of transepts and a bell tower.⁹ It is likely that the committee proceeded to request plans for the enlargement from R.M. Upjohn who had designed the original structure, although no written evidence of his involvement has been found. This request came to Upjohn at about the same time that he received the commission for the enlargement of St. Luke's, Charlestown. This would explain the similarity between the two churches. Although the enlargement of St. Luke's was completed in 1869, work did not begin on St. Alban's until 1872. In order to enlarge the Eltingville church, the vestry needed to acquire additional land. Talks with Albert Journeay, who owned the adjacent property, were unsuccessful and in December, 1870, the vestry established a committee to investigate moving the

church building.¹⁰ By January, 1871, land had been obtained nearby, but financial difficulties led to postponement of all plans until 1872.¹¹ On May 5, 1872, the final services were held on the old site. The small church was moved 272 yards to its present site, reopening for services on May 26. On August 4, the church was again closed. Work then proceeded on the enlargement of the building which was reopened on February 16, 1873.¹² The expansion of the church entailed the separation of the chancel and nave and the construction of transepts between them. The bell cote was removed from the roof, and a bell tower was constructed at the northwest corner of the building. The church probably had a polychromatic slate roof similar to that on St. Luke's Church and it would have been painted brown as prescribed in Upjohn's Rural Architecture.¹³

As it now stands, this picturesque church has board-and-batten siding enlivened by zig-zag patterns at the base and along a projecting band that runs around all sectors of the facade with the exception of the entrance porch. It was probably R.M. Upjohn who introduced this jagged element into the design of R. Upjohn & Company's wooden churches. The motif appears as early as 1857 on St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Clermont, New York, a building that R.M. Upjohn helped to design.¹⁴ This motif also appears on St. Luke's, Charlestown.

The massing of St. Alban's reflects the liturgical needs of the Episcopal service. The building has a relatively long nave with a steep gabled roof, a clearly delineated polygonal chancel set at the east end (the polygonal chancel was an angular form favored by R.M. Upjohn), an entrance porch at the southwest corner, north and south transepts, a modest vestry room located behind the north transept, and a tower that rises above the roof line of the building. Most of the window openings on the church have shallow pointed arches and are framed by projecting sticks. On the side of these windows, the stricks drip below the sills and echo the battens. The use of these simple enframements adds a particularly rustic and picturesque detail to the building. The most impressive windows are the three hexagonal openings located on the gables of the transepts and west front. By making full use of simple wood elements such as straight tracery bars and stick enframements, R.M. Upjohn created an extremely complex and sophisticated design motif on these windows. Of particular note are the tracery bars that are chamfered along much of their length, but widen in the center to form a star. Above each of these windows, at the peak of the gables, are wooden struts that were originally connected by quatrefoil forms, only one of which survives.

The square bell tower is divided into three sections. The base, with its projecting zig-zag band and shallow pointed windows and entrance door, is visually connected to the main body of the church. The second level has steeper, pointed arched windows divided into paired lancets. Each of these windows is set within a field of board-and-batten siding that is surrounded by a smooth wooden enframement, providing the type of unusual textural contrast that R.M. Upjohn favored. This second level is crowned by a small steeply sloping roof that supports a louvered belfry with cusped ornamentation. This level is surmounted by a tall sloping roof and a cross.

Although the interior of St. Alban's is not the subject of this designation, it is worth noting since it too reflects R.M. Upjohn's sophisticated use of simple design elements. The building has an open timber roof that is typical of the wooden churches designed by the Upjohn firm beginning with St. Paul's, Brunswick, Maine. These timbers, however, are supported by unusual brackets composed of a series of simple moldings arranged in the angular and eccentric manner favored by R.M. Upjohn.

Also of interest, is the separation between the nave and chancel which is marked by a series of intersecting horizontal, vertical, and diagonal chamfered beams. Each of the vertical beams is ornamented with a pair of stylized bosses. The church also retains its original low-slung pews and original doors.

In 1951, the parish, then known as the Church of the Holy Comforter, merged with St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Great Kills. After the merger, the name of the church was changed to St. Alban's. The united congregation has remained a vital part of the Eltingville community ever since. In the past two decades Eltingville has seen a tremendous amount of change due to increased residential and commercial development. This development has brought new families to St. Alban's Church and this new membership combined with the interest that the church has in maintaining and restoring its historic building will insure that it remain a major New York City example of mid-19th century wooden church architecture.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Ira K Morris, Morris' Memorial History of Staten Island (West New Brighton: Ira Morris, 1900), Vol. II, p. 308.
2. Church of The Holy Comforter, "Vestry Minutes," October 24, 1865; and Morris, p. 308.
3. Robert Jensen, "Board and Batten Siding and the Balloon Frame: Their Incompatibility in the Nineteenth Century," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 30 (March, 1971), 41; and William H. Pierson, American Buildings and Their Architects, Vol. IIA: Technology and the Picturesque, the Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1978), p. 304.
4. Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850), p. 51.
5. See Augustus Welby Pugin, The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture (London: John Weale, 1841).
6. Downing, p. 52.
7. Richard Upjohn, Upjohn's Rural Architecture (New York: George P. Putnam, 1852), preface.
8. Church of the Holy Comforter, miscellaneous newspaper clippings, c. 1865.
9. "Vestry Minutes," September 17, 1869.
10. "Vestry Minutes," December 6, 1870.
11. "Vestry Minutes," January, 5, 1871 - September 5, 1871.
12. "Vestry Minutes," Memorandum, 1873.
13. Upjohn, p. 3. Old photographs of the church show that it was painted a dark color.
14. Both Everard Upjohn and William Pierson note R.M. Upjohn's input at St. Luke's, Clermont.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that St. Alban's Episcopal Church has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, St. Alban's Episcopal Church is a rare example in New York City of a mid-19th-century church of wood construction; that it is built with board-and-batten siding, which, while a popular building technique in the 19th century, is unusual to find surviving in New York City;

that the design of the church exemplifies the principles of the picturesque as espoused by Andrew Jackson Downing and other mid-19th century architects and writers; that the building is one of a series of small rural Episcopal churches and the type popularized by architect Richard Upjohn built throughout the United States; that it was designed and later enlarged by Richard Upjohn's son, R.M. Upjohn, one of America's most prominent Victorian architects; that its detailing is reflective of R.M. Upjohn's unusual and frequently idiosyncratic design vocabulary; and that St. Alban's Episcopal Church is one of the few buildings remaining from the period when Eltingville was an outlying rural village.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark St. Alban's Episcopal Church, 76 St. Alban's Place, Borough of Staten Island and designates as its Landmark site that part of Lot 48, Tax Map Block 5239, Borough of Staten Island, on which the described building is situated.

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St. Alban's Episcopal Church (originally Church of the Holy Comforter)
Original Building

From: Everard Upjohn, Richard Upjohn: Architect and Churchman (New
York: Columbia University Press, 1939) Fig. 106