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News Letter

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY'S MIDTOWN CAMPUS, PART I: ST. FRANCIS XAVIER CHURCH

by David J. Simmons

Editor's note: This article picks up the architectural history of St. Louis University from four articles published in these pages in 2001 and 2002. It also marks the beginning of the church's 125th anniversary of serving St. Louis in its present location. The celebration will include a speaker series, concerts, liturgies, and an exhibition of College Church historic artifacts at the Saint Louis University Museum of Art.

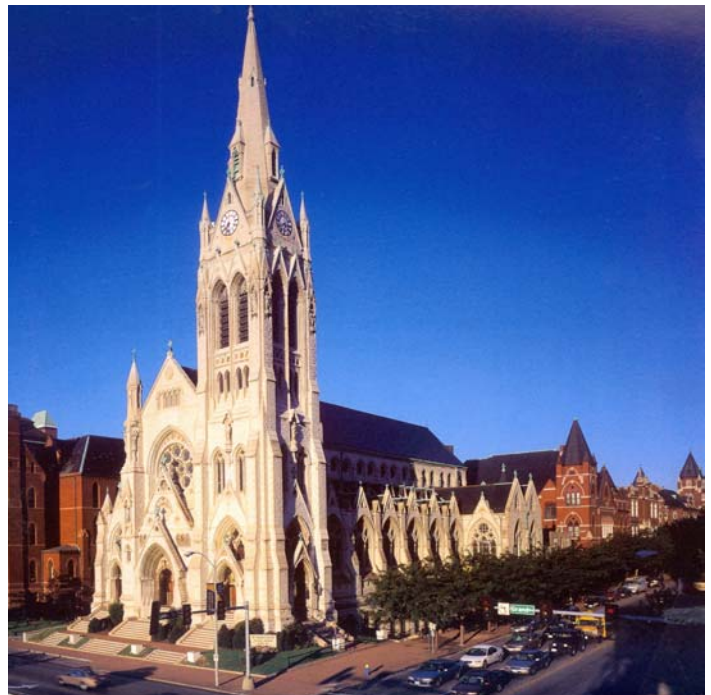
After the Civil War, St. Louis University sought to purchase a new site for their day school operations. In 1867 school officials acquired a tract of three and two-thirds acres at a cost of \$52,650. This property occupied the former site of Lindell's Grove, an entertainment center popular in St. Louis before the Civil War. The site fronted on the west side of Grand Avenue between Lindell and Baker (now West Pine) for 446 feet and extended west for 360 feet.

Ultimately, this property proved to be the very best location in the city for a college campus. Within a very short time, Lindell Boulevard emerged as the principal east-west corridor of wealth in St. Louis. Lined with magnificent mansions of St. Louis' rich and famous, it served as a perfect background for the new school.

Following the failed attempt to erect the boarding school campus at College View Farm near O'Fallon Park, the university concentrated on relocating the day school to midtown. This resolve was further strengthened by the decision in 1881 to eliminate the boarding student operation.

School officials needed the permission of the archdiocese to move the school and the St. Francis Xavier parish to the new Grand Avenue location. Archbishop Kenrick supported the school relocation but opposed the transfer of the parish from downtown. He argued that falling parish revenue and declining church membership did not justify the request of school officials to relocate the parish to a new area. Furthermore, he reminded them of the plight of the displaced parishioners, who would be reas-

signed to other churches. They would naturally resent having their home church taken from them and would blame the archbishop. After four years of deliberation, however, Archbishop Kenrick acquiesced in the school's request. In a letter dated June 30, 1879, he reluctantly gave his final approval to the parish relocation.



St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, popularly known as the College Church, Grand at Lindell. Photo from St. Louis University's 2002 calendar.

All that remained to insure the project's success was the sale of the downtown campus, the proceeds of which would help finance the new campus. On August 24, 1883, the university trustees authorized this sale, fixing the price at \$1,200 a front foot on Washington Avenue, \$583,800 in total. Four years passed before Charles Green and Edward Martin, local real estate developers, purchased the property for only \$950 a front foot or \$462,000, a real estate bargain. Terms of the purchase contract dated August 24, 1886 required Green and Martin to provide an immediate down payment of \$60,000. The school would continue to occupy the downtown campus for two more years. During this period Green and Martin were obligated to pay the school an additional \$200,000. After the school vacated the premises, the buyers could convert the remaining balance of their debt into notes bearing an annual interest rate of six percent.

Once these developers gained control over the property, they fought over its disposition. Martin believed that more money could be made by dividing the property into lots and selling each lot separately. Green wanted to sell the property as one unit. Green offered to buy out Martin's share of the property for \$1,500 a front foot or \$364,500. Martin declined the offer. A court-appointed referee divided the land between them, and both men reaped huge profits from its sale. Buildings erected on the site of the old university included:

- Mallinckrodt Building, 1892, 901 Washington, by Shepley Rutan & Coolidge
- Hargadine-McKittrick Building (Lammert), 1898, 911 Washington, by Eames & Young
- Martin Building, 1895, 921 Washington, by George R. Mann
- Sullivan Building, 1899, 1007 Washington, by Isaac Taylor
- Mercantile Building, 1899, 1013 Washington, by Eames & Young.

Even before the downtown campus property was put up for sale, school and church officials decided that St. Francis Xavier church would spearhead the move to the new campus. University officials had donated the southwest corner of Grand and Lindell as the site for the new church and pledged modest funding (about \$17,000) to get the project started. Most of the financial resources needed to build the new church would have to come from the new parish.

Plans called for the immediate construction of a basement chapel which would serve as the foundation of the new church structure. The chapel would be operated as an auxiliary branch of the downtown church. Once the school moved to the midtown site, the old church would be demolished. When the new parish had accumulated enough funds, they could erect the church's superstructure.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, St. Louis Catholic organizations built a large number of religious structures. The small group of local architects who designed most of them consisted of Thomas Brady, Adolph Druiding, James McGrath, James McNamara, John F. Mitchell, and Thomas Walsh. Of this group, Druiding had the most experience at church design, be it Gothic or Romanesque. He erected many churches in the Midwest region. This experience, however, did not get him the commission.

After a period of deliberation, school officials decided to engage Thomas Walsh to design the new campus. Because of his active participation at one time or another in

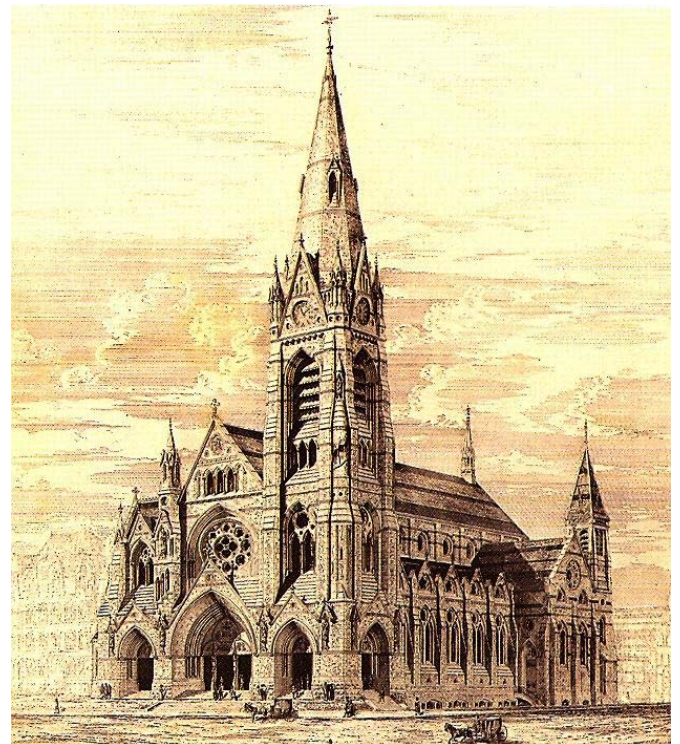
several Catholic organizations, his selection came as no surprise to his fellow architects or to most of the Catholic community. In Catholic circles he was liked and respected both as a person and architect.

Walsh desperately wanted the commission and solicited university officials to get it. This commission represented an opportunity for him to redeem his architectural career from the shadows where it was languishing, tainted by controversy and scandal. Certainly, his architectural experience was quite impressive. His church experience embraced the expansion of St. Joseph Catholic Church, the reconstruction of St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, and the creation of St. Peter's Catholic Church of Belleville, Illinois. No less significant, his college design experience included the normal schools at Carbondale, Illinois and Warrensburg, Missouri and the college building at the University of Missouri at Columbia.

At the close of his life, Walsh considered the St. Louis University campus to be the crowning achievement of his architectural career.

WALSH'S ORIGINAL PLAN

In the fall of 1881, Walsh made preliminary sketches of the new church. His university clients impressed on him the need to create a church elegant in detail and modest in proportions to serve the university Jesuit community and the surrounding up-scale Catholic neighborhood. The fixed the cost at \$200,000.



Thomas Waryng Walsh's 1881 design for St. Francis Xavier. Barely visible on the left in this touched-up copy is Walsh's early design for DuBourg Hall in Second Empire style.

As usual, Walsh disregarded his client's instructions and sought to create a cathedral which would glorify God and himself. His church vision embraced nothing less than the archdiocesan cathedral, a new seat for Archbishop Kenrick. Obviously, he was living a pipe dream, as he soon discovered.

Walsh's original plan for St. Francis Xavier Church calls for a structure on a massive scale. It fronts 120 feet on the west side of Grand Avenue and runs west 230 feet along the south side of Lindell Boulevard. Two towers give emphasis to the church. The front one located at the northeast corner of the church soars to 281 feet while its rear counterpart at the northwest corner rises to 115 feet. Both the front and rear of the church including the towers have a limestone exterior. The side walls use brick trimmed with limestone. Church design emulates Early English Gothic architecture with large openings for doors and windows, massive buttress piers, and simple Gothic ornamentation.

The church façade displays three large entrances separated by four plain buttress piers. Each entrance features a lancet-arched opening, very deep jambs, and gable framing. Its central entrance measures 36 feet across, with 12-foot jambs. On the piers rest statues of the four Evangelists, Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.

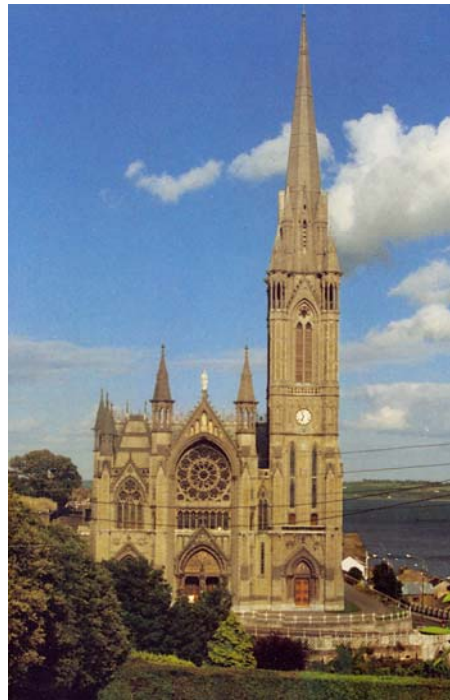
Above the entrance tier are three large windows deeply set in lancet-arched openings. Massive buttresses flank the windows, and step configurations occupy the space below them. A rose window twenty-four feet in diameter dominates the central aperture. A series of gables ascending to the roofline define the church's upward thrust. At the north end an octagon-shaped spire crowns the great tower. In the tower a massive lancet-arched opening with louvers houses the church bells.

Side walls of the church rise from the basement in two segments. The lower wall exhibits two tiers of lancet-arched windows with plate tracery. Large buttress piers flank the windows, and gables frame them. An inclined roof connects the upper and lower walls. Large round windows in lancet-arched openings decorate the upper wall. A steeply pitched roof with a fleche at the west end completes roofline. At the west end of the church the transept features a rose window placed in a gable.

In Walsh's design, the church's interior is dominated by the great three-story nave. West of the nave the transept ends at the five-sided apse. On the lowest level of the nave twelve cluster piers on each side support lancet arches. Between the arches, ribs spring from corbels. These ribs ascend to the center of the vaulted ceiling 85 feet above the floor. At the second level (the monk's gal-

lery or triforium), pairs of cluster columns frame double lancet arches supported by three single columns. A third level (clerestory) contains rows of large round windows separated by vaulting ribs. Panels decorated with Christian symbols have been placed between the ribs of the vault.

The sources of Walsh's design were not named at the time, but it seems certain that he was influenced by the recently completed Church of the Messiah located at Garrison and Locust on Piety Hill and designed by the Boston architectural firm of Peabody & Stearns. The tower of that Unitarian church closely resembles the tower designed by Walsh for St. Francis Xavier Church.



St. Colman's Cathedral (Roman Catholic), Cobh (pronounced Cove), 1868-1915, by Edward Welby Pugin and George Ashlin, showing its setting on a steep hill overlooking Cork Harbor. It is generally recognized as the most impressive Gothic Revival building in Ireland.

Several scholars have pointed to St. Colman's Catholic Cathedral in Cobh, Ireland, overlooking Cork harbor, as its possible main source. No evidence from that time exists to verify this assumption. A comparison of the revised design and St. Colman's, does, however, reveal many similarities, particularly the arcade of the nave. There are also some differences, and some of the similarities could be coincidental.

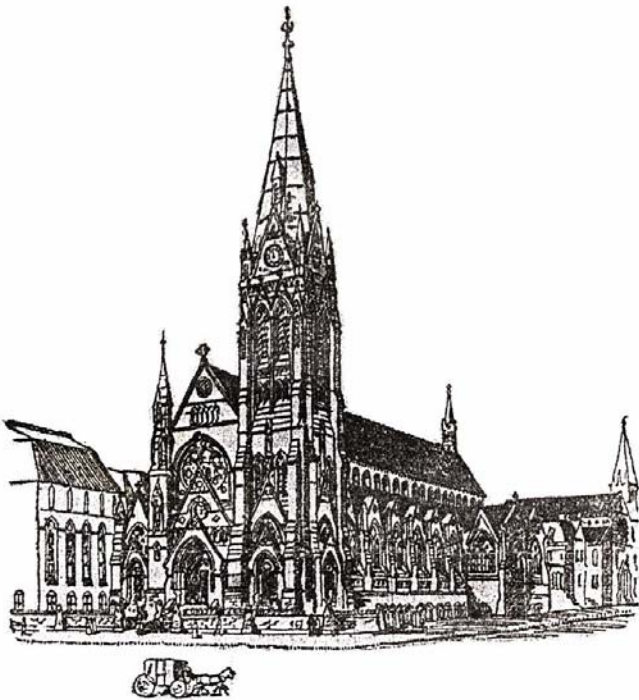
Walsh's designs typically drew from three or more sources. St. Colman Cathedral could have been one of these sources, but Walsh's St. Francis Xavier Church should not be considered a copy of this or any other church. The most important difference is that St. Colman's depicts French Gothic architecture, while St. Francis Xavier depends on English Gothic with French influences.

When he presented his church plans to school officials, Walsh received an unexpected response – an erupting stream of criticism. The Jesuit officials condemned his design for its large size, massive openings, heavy buttresses, simple and repetitive ornamentation, and squat appearance. They demanded a major revision of the plans, and Walsh agreed.

WALSH'S REVISED PLAN

To reinvent his church design, Walsh turned for inspiration to the English Gothic style of the Transitional Period of the late thirteenth century, enriched with certain French Gothic influences from Normandy. Emphasis of the vertical line dictates the character of the structure. To achieve this effect, Walsh reduced the dimensions of the building several times, introduced more gables, narrowed doors and windows, changed ornamentation, and slenderized buttresses.

During the process of revision extending through 1884 into 1885, the church front declined from 120 feet to 100 feet. Later it decreased to 93 feet. Height of the main tower went from 281 feet to 231 feet and stopped at 201 feet. Mean width of the structure started at 100 feet, moved down to 93 feet, and then to the final 85 feet.



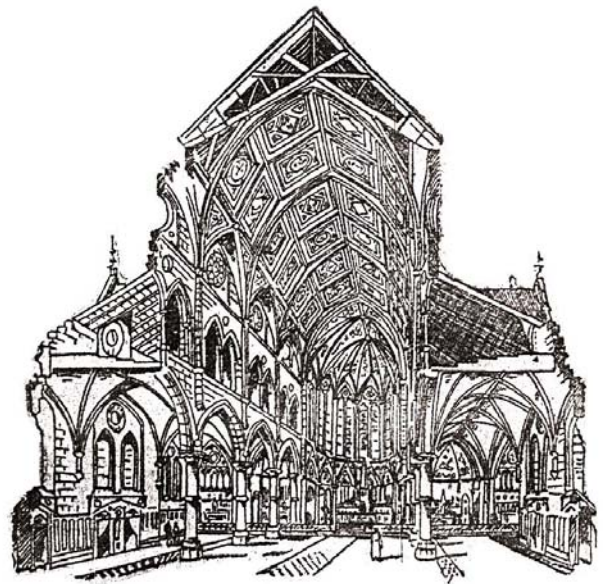
THE NEW ST. XAVIER'S.

Walsh's revised design as published in the Republic March 1, 1891, before Henry Switzer was hired by the university.

Nevertheless, the church's external measurements remain those of a building of great importance, with a length of 211 ½ feet, a width at the transept of 119 5/6 feet and a roof 89 feet high at the ridge.

Some of Walsh's changes dealt with the reduction in size and height of the rear tower, division of the transept into two gables, and the removal of its rose window, and the replacement of large windows in the clerestory with small ones. Walsh reworked the front by introducing another tier of gables, which partially obscure windows, reducing and elongating all openings, and inserting angle buttresses carried down to the sidewalk level on bases. Furthermore, he radically reduced the size of the south entrance area. Inside the church, Walsh replaced the cluster columns with single columns.

During the summer of 1885, Walsh gave the preliminary plans for the revised church to the Jesuits for review. They liked his plans and approved them for construction even though the plans were not complete. Since money was not available to erect the church superstructure during the remainder of Walsh's life, he never again worked on these plans.



INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH.

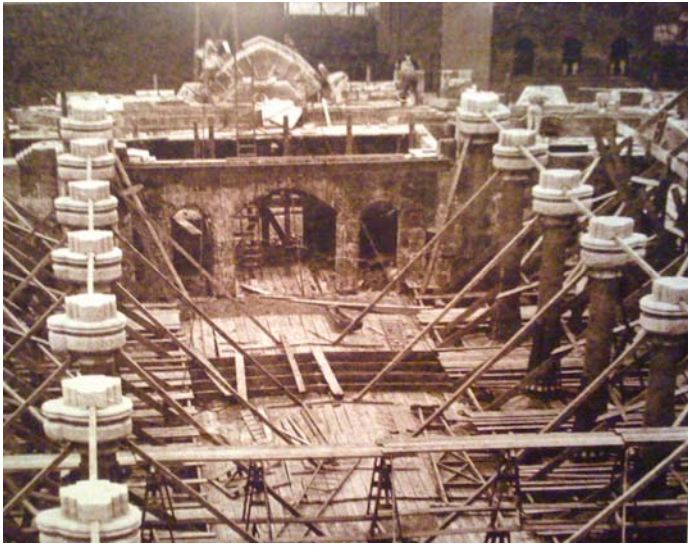
A cut-away drawing of the interior of the church as planned in 1891. Note that the ceiling is completely different than as built.

HENRY SWITZER

After Walsh's death on March 24, 1890, school officials had to find another architect to finish the plans and to make needed alterations. During a university trustee meeting on June 2, 1891, the name of Henry R. Switzer was proposed as Walsh's replacement. Switzer's university contract received final approval on February 9, 1892.

Switzer (1835-1915), a New Yorker by birth, started his St. Louis architectural career in 1866. Four years later he found employment with Thomas Walsh as a draughtsman. In 1871 he did design work for Walsh. Between 1872 and 1874 he participated in a partnership with Frank

Capitan, a new architect on the St. Louis scene. During this partnership, the firm entered the competitions for the County Poorhouse and the Merchants Exchange, but they secured neither. They did design and erect the Bircher Hotel at 6th & Chestnut in 1873.



College Church early in construction, showing the nave columns with uncarved capitals, looking toward the east.

After this partnership, Switzer continued to practice architecture alone. He worked for the City Building Department in 1879. Two years later, he joined Walsh's staff for a second time. He may have helped prepare preliminary sketches for the original plan of St. Francis Xavier during this one-year association. At some point he started an architectural career in Chicago. At the same time, he maintained his family residence in St. Louis, one block east of the site for St. Francis Xavier Church.



College Church under construction, showing the brick core of the walls and exposed lath of the vault webbing.

Switzer's choice as Walsh's replacement is directly related to his association with this architect. The St. Louis University Board of Trustees wanted an architect who would complete Walsh's plans, not someone who would create a new design. Switzer turned out to be the perfect choice because of his experience in Walsh's office.

Switzer's chief contributions to the exterior of the church relate to its side walls. He inserted a second row of gables between the upper and lower walls, enlarged the first tier of windows in the lower wall, and flanked these windows with narrow angle buttress piers which diminish in size as they ascend. In addition, he lowered the roof and removed the fleche from the rear of the roofline.

Inside the church, he added the Missouri red granite single columns of the nave, removed the decorative plates from the ceiling, and substituted rib vaulting in the nave. In the second story of the nave he introduced the three-lancet arched arrangement supported by four Missouri red granite single columns instead of the two-arched system of the original design.



The interior showing platform introduced by Kurt Landberg in 1990.

THE CHURCH AS BUILT

Soaring above the sidewalk, the asymmetrically placed church tower dominates the cityscape. It acts as the central focus of the church from which the structure radiates. Exterior construction relies on pitch-faced north St. Louis limestone trimmed with dressed blue Bedford Indiana limestone for jambs, margins, corners, steps, sills, caps, and weatherings. Portland cement bonds together the brick backing and stonework

French Gothic influences are seen in the gable framing of doors and windows, the façade's rose window, and the apse arrangement at the end of the nave. Walsh's design depends chiefly on the use of projections, lines, and recesses rather than ornament. Sculpture has been limited to the great tower and the spirelet immediately south of the central entrance. Remaining aspects of decoration deal with gables, openings (doors and windows), and buttresses.

The Grand Avenue front divides into three sections and features numerous tiers. Most windows and all doors contain lancet arched openings with deep jambs. Gables frame many of these openings. Angle buttresses and the spirelet fashion the vertical lines of the front. Gables and spires shape the diagonal roof line. On the bottom tier three entrances with saw tooth moldings vary in size. The largest entrance occupies the central section and the smallest entrance graces the south area. South entrance provides access to the baptistery while the other entrances gain access into the church vestibule areas.

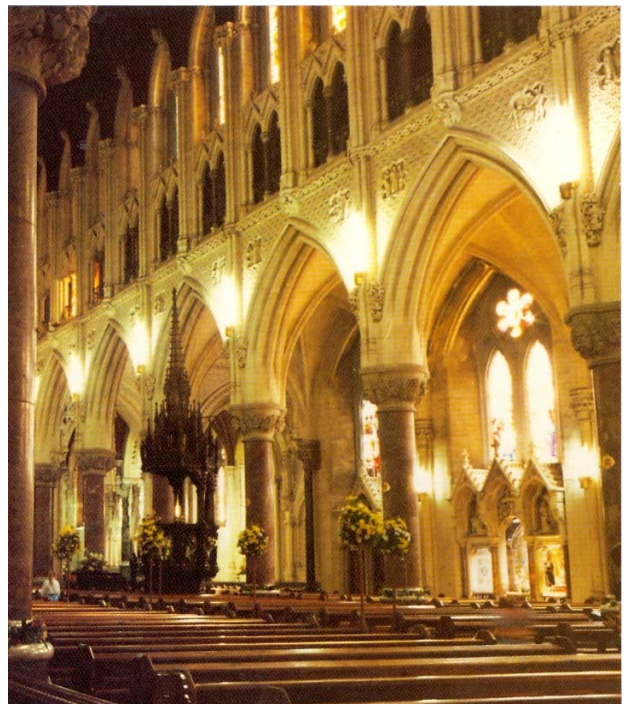


St. Francis Xavier today, looking southeast from the crossing.

Windows with paired, louvered apertures, gables with clock faces, pinnacles, and an octagon-shaped spire with small dormers adorn the great tower. Other special elements refer to the rose window in the central section, partially covered windows, and the grand staircases leading to the entrances. Even the spirelet, diminutive imitation of the great tower, adds its own touch of beauty. This church front presents a beautifully choreographed arrangement of ideas, which manifest interest, instill mystery, and create tension.

The Lindell Boulevard façade of the church constitutes a far less satisfying experience. After discounting the great tower, the rest of the structure sinks into monotony. Even the large lancet-arched windows crowned with gables and flanked by angle buttresses in the lower wall can't relieve this tedious sameness. Neither the double gable transept or the small tower immediately west of it add much to the design. Since the small tower is difficult to locate, most people don't know it's there. Most troubling, the second row of gables blurs the distinction between the upper and lower walls. This unneeded busyness confuses the eye.

Church basement rises 18 feet. Forty-one windows averaging in size four feet wide by nine feet high supply ample light for this area. It covers the entire space of the church superstructure. From the crypt of the basement spring the buttresses which support the church walls. Each buttress measures 5 ½ feet across and 6 feet deep. As they extend upward they diminish in size. The basement has four main outside entrances.



St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, Ireland, view of the nave.

Upon entering the church from the Grand Avenue entrances, worshipers gain access to three rooms. Moving south to north, they are the baptistery, the nave vestibule (18 feet by 27 feet) and the tower vestibule (21 feet square). Both the baptistery and the tower vestibule contain staircases, which access the choir and organ loft, the wardrobe area, and the monks' gallery. The north staircase climbs inside the tower. Five doors lead from these antechambers into the main audience room. Distance from the vestibule to the west end of the church reaches 174 feet.

Moving east to west, the main audience room consists of the central nave flanked on either side by an aisle, a transept, and an apse with a robing room on the north and a sacristy on the south. Its central nave fills the room with a sense of spaciousness, excitement, and spirituality. The three-tier arrangement of the nave stretches across the church for a width of 34 2/3 feet and reaches a height of 65 5/6 feet at the central line of the ceiling.

On the lowest tier two rows of Missouri red granite columns separate the nave from the aisles. Each column, 22 1/2 inches in diameter, stands on a gray limestone base of a round neck and octagon-shaped plinth. A deeply molded cap of foliated design crowns each column. These columns support hooded lancet arches with drip stones. Between the arches in the spandrel areas, vertical ribs spring from the corbels. At the top of the tier carved stone angelic beings surmount these ribs.

The middle tier, called the monks' gallery or triforium, takes the shape of an arcade. Limestone cluster columns frame three lancet arches supported by four single Missouri red granite columns. Foliated caps serving as corbels decorate the tops of the cluster columns.

A series of round windows grouped in pairs and framed in lancet arch rib vaulting adorn the top tier called the clerestory of the nave. The groined ceiling of the nave also uses this lancet arch rib vaulting. Perfect proportions, harmony of parts, careful use of detail, and the uninterrupted upward sweep of this space make the nave a masterpiece and the central focus of the audience room.

Dimensions of each aisle are 19 1/2 feet wide and 32 feet tall. The groined ceiling features rib vaulting. On the outside walls, cluster columns and rib vaulting frame the large lancet-arched windows with six glass panels and bar tracery. Oak confessionals of unique design occupy the spaces below the windows.

A total of 1500 people can sit on the main floor in the nave and aisles. This seating consists of four sections traversed by three main passageways and two outer ones giving access to the confessionals. All seating on the main floor rests on wooden platforms one inch above the main floor. Grayish yellow and chocolate colored tiles cover the main floor. The central passageway is eight feet wide. An additional 500 people can be seated in the monks' gallery.

The transept and the apse together form the sanctuary at the western end of the church. This sanctuary measures at its extremities 68 feet by 118 feet. Five altars were situated here, but two have been removed, as has the communion rail of marble and onyx, parts of which have been reused elsewhere. The apse (38 feet wide and 155

feet deep) is a semi-octagon of five panels. Each panel displays the usual decorative features – cluster columns, large lancet-arched windows, groined ceiling, and rib vaulting. In the center of the apse area, the main church altar reigns. South of the apse is the sacristy (36 feet by 20 feet deep), and a similar north room is for robing.

CONSTRUCTION AND COST

After Thomas Walsh prepared the plans for St. Francis Xavier Church, construction of the basement chapel under his supervision commenced during the fall of 1883. Walsh projected the cost of the chapel to be \$35,000 and the total church price at \$200,000 as requested. On June 8, 1884, the cornerstone was laid. On All Saints Day of 1884 the Jesuits performed the first mass in the new chapel. It measured 80 feet by 100 feet and seated 900 people. Height came to 14 feet. Construction costs amounted to \$48,298 for the building, \$8,040 for the interior work, and \$4,117 for furnishings and miscellaneous expenses. Total cost of the chapel was \$60,455. Church debt at that point equaled \$38,991.



College Church basement, right, with DuBourg Hall under construction behind.

During chapel construction, Walsh prepared plans for the new church parish house. It would be located on the south side of Lindell immediately west of the church. This three-story stone building covered a frontage of 30 feet running back 55 feet. Under Walsh's direction, the parish house was completed in the summer of 1885 at a cost of \$10,500.

Thomas Walsh received a fee of \$3,778.63 for the plans of the new church and the parish house and for the architectural supervision of the chapel and parish house projects.

Under Henry Switzer's contract, he completed church plans and specifications for a flat fee and supervised the church's construction at two and one half percent of the building costs. To complete the church plans, Switzer received a fee of \$933. Church authorities paid him \$7,200 to supervise construction.

In 1891 Father Henry C. Bronsgeest, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Church, enlisted the aid of twenty wealthy people in his parish to help finance the new church. Each parish patron pledged \$5,000 for the undertaking. Several construction contracts for the new church totaling \$189,768 were let by university trustees on September 15, 1892. Prior to awarding the cut stone contract, University officials decided not to complete the church tower during the initial phase of building. To finish the tower would have added another \$50,000 to the church's project cost. Erection of the superstructure began in October 1892 and continued seven years until November 1899. A financial panic in 1893 briefly interrupted the progress of the project in 1894. Things improved the next year with the influx of additional capital.

At the completion of the project, the Jesuits had spent \$311,725 on the church superstructure. This amount did not include finance charges for construction loans at five and six per cent per annum. By the spring of 1898 church debt had soared to \$191,584.

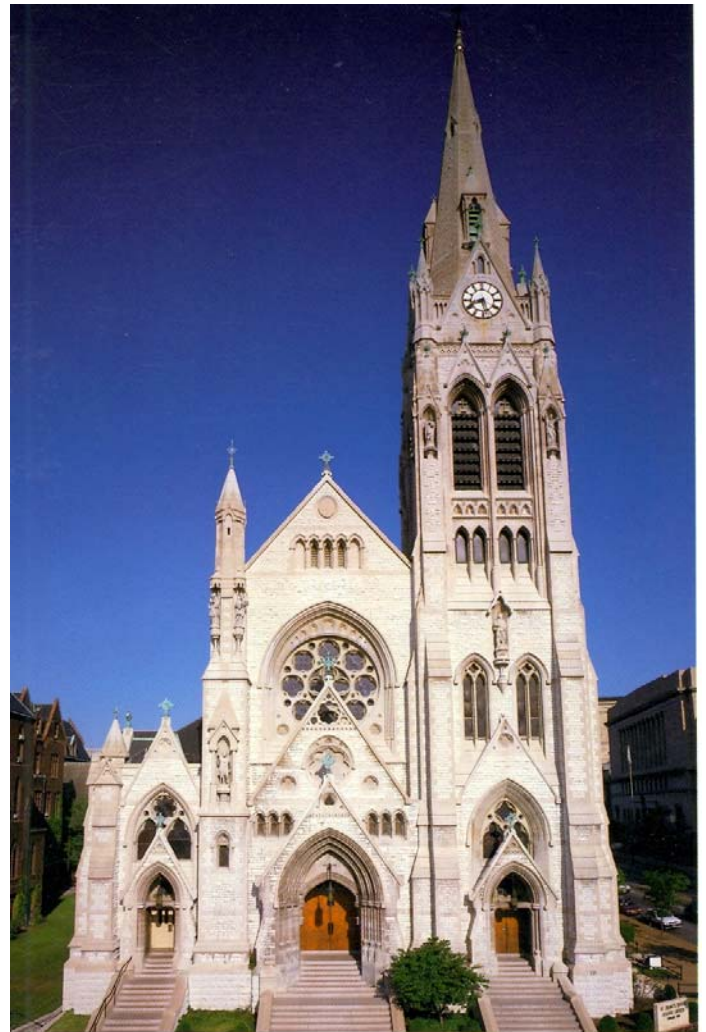


The College Church before completion of the tower and spire in 1915 (judging from the man on the right, casually standing in the middle of Lindell, this was also before Midtown had much traffic).

Donations to the church from various sources included the five church altars and the communion rail. Costing more than \$55,000, the main altar of Carrara marble was dedicated to God in honor of St. Francis Xavier. The altar's design came from the ateliers of Magry Brothers and Snickers of Holland. According to the church financial records, a donor purchased one of the side altars for the church at a cost of \$6,500. One of the church contractors gave the marble and onyx communion rail, for which he paid \$3,600. When all the expenditures are added together – donations, chapel, and church – this still unfinished church represented an investment of \$475,000. Thus it became the most expensive religious building erected in St. Louis during the 19th century.

Amid a large crowd numbering in the thousands, Archbishop Kain presided over the dedication of the new edifice on January 16, 1898. The *St. Louis Star* of that date hailed this new Gothic church as the finest American cathedral excepting St. Patrick's in New York. Walsh would have been proud.

Sixteen years later, Frein Masonry and Construction Company completed the tower for \$49,315, raising the total church expenditure to more than half a million dollars.



St. Francis Xavier (College) Church, façade