

The Rich History of St. Brigid's Church

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St. Brigid's may be the oldest Keely church still standing. It was constructed in an astonishing fifteen months. The vaulted ceiling was fashioned by shipbuilders as an upside-down boat. Sculpted faces abutting the corbels supporting the roof honor the shipwrights who built the church.

The rich history of St. Brigid's begins in the 1840s, with the increased influx of Irish immigrants escaping the Great Famine. Many settled in the area then known as the Dry Dock District (stretching east-west from the East River to Avenue B and north-south from Houston to 12th Street), and found employment as laborers at the East River Shipyards. When a temporary chapel at East 4th Street soon proved inadequate, plans were made to build a new church on the corner of 8th Street and Avenue B, dedicated to "the Mary of Gael," St. Brigid, and designed to serve the burgeoning Irish-American community.

The choice of architect for St. Brigid's was Patrick Keely, an up-and-coming Catholic Church architect. Born in County Tipperary in 1816, Keely emigrated to the U.S. at age 25 and settled in the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn, where he worked as a carpenter. Because Keely's formal training in architecture is undocumented, it is believed he learned design and construction from his father, a builder. After completing an altar and reredos (altar screen) for St. James Pro-Cathedral and going on to build St. Peter and Paul's Church in Brooklyn in 1846.

Keely's services became highly sought after, ushering in a "new era in Catholic building," to serve growing immigrant communities. At his death in 1896, Keely was said to have built over 600 churches and religious edifices, stretching north to Canada, south to South Carolina and west to Iowa. Locally, one can see examples of Keely's work at St. Francis Xavier on 16th Street and Mary, Star of the Sea on Court Street in Brooklyn, among others; major works elsewhere include Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Albany.

St. Brigid's may in fact be the oldest Keely church still standing. Its corner stone was laid on September 10th, 1848, and construction was completed in a somewhat astonishing fifteen months. Designed in the Carpenter's Gothic style, the building is without transepts or apse (that is to say, it is rectilinear rather than crossshaped), and features a nave (center seating area) flanked by a north and south aisle, each with a second-story seating gallery fronted by elaborate wainscoting. The vaulted ceiling above the nave is said to have been fashioned by shipbuilders as an upside-down boat; and indeed, one student of architecture sees this theory borne out in the "extraordinary flattening of the nave vaulting," which resembles the hull of a ship. Sculpted faces that abut the corbels supporting the roof are said to honor the shipwrights who built the church.

The stations of the cross were purchased in Paris in the 1870s, and one source lists them as the work of Th