



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

### John Henry Hopkins, Early Gothic Revivalist

When a building is demolished we forget its initial impact. The second Trinity Church in downtown Pittsburgh was called “one of the largest and most important new churches in America”<sup>1</sup> and “the first building of special architectural pretensions erected west of Philadelphia.”<sup>2</sup> Although it was replaced in 1872 by the present church at 328 Sixth Avenue, its earlier design by Reverend John Henry Hopkins (1768-1868) was groundbreaking. According to his son’s detailed biography of him, Hopkins had a hand in seven other Western Pennsylvania churches.<sup>3</sup>

Three of Hopkins’ churches came to light during the writing of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*: Trinity Church (1825), Christ Church (1827-1828) in Meadville, Crawford County, and St. Peter’s Church (1832) in Waterford, Erie County. Recently a fourth church was revealed, St. Paul Lutheran Church (1826) in Zelienople, Butler County. Although St. Paul’s was not Episcopal, Hopkins was linked to the congregation by marriage. Only two of these four churches are extant, but the search is on for other early Hopkins designs in Greensburg, Blairsville, Butler, and Kittanning.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1792, Hopkins moved with his parents in 1800

to New York City and then Philadelphia. By age 11, he had studied Latin and Greek at a boarding school in Bordentown, New Jersey. Although Hopkins’ interest was law, friends advised him to study mineralogy and related sciences because they thought the War of 1812 would create more profitable jobs in iron-making. At 21, Hopkins took work as

an iron master at Detmar Basse’s iron furnace near Zelienople, Butler County. There he met Melusina Müller, whom he married in 1816; a decade later, he designed a Gothic Revival church for St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, her family’s congregation.

While at the Bassenheim furnace, Hopkins so impressed General James O’Hara

**Bishop John Hopkins.**  
Library of Congress, LC-BH82-5243A.





**St. Paul Lutheran Church, Zelienople, Butler County (1826).**

Photo by Lu Donnelly.

that he was asked to run the Hermitage Furnace in Ligonier, Westmoreland County, where he worked from 1815 to 1816. There he was struck by a “beam of divine truth” and began Bible readings and preaching in his rooms.<sup>4</sup> However, Hopkins’ friends were mistaken: the times were not propitious for iron making, and the Bassenheim and Hermitage operations failed. Hopkins returned to Pittsburgh discouraged, in debt, and with a growing family in tow.<sup>5</sup>

While in Ligonier, Hopkins developed his interest in law, and back in Pittsburgh, he completed his legal studies and was admitted to the bar in 1818. He was a principled lawyer and an intense worker who eventually made nearly \$5,000 a year—but apparently needed every penny as his family grew to seven children.<sup>6</sup>

While pursuing his law career in Pittsburgh, Hopkins saw a copy of John Britton’s *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain*, published between 1804-1814. Because these works were large, unwieldy, and expensive, the owner allowed Hopkins to copy images that most interested him. Several years passed before Hopkins published his drawings, but in the meantime he put them to good use, helping small parishes design churches in what he considered an appropriately dignified style.

The Gothic Revival had become acceptable for English Anglican churches, not just for Roman Catholic churches. Hopkins copied several examples of the Perpendicular Gothic Revival, known for its square towers, battlements, and vaulted interior ceilings. In this region of small rural congregations,

Hopkins knew that the best designs needed to be simple enough to be copied by local builders. In 1836, he published these drawings as *Essay on Gothic Architecture, With Various Plans and Drawings for Churches: Designed Chiefly for the use of the Clergy* with the caveat that he was *not* a trained architect. The book contains detailed drawings of architectural embellishments, floor plans, and renderings. Two of the churches are or were located in Western Pennsylvania: St. Peter’s in Waterford and Trinity Episcopal’s 1825 church.<sup>7</sup>

John Henry and Melusina attended First Presbyterian, but because of Hopkins’ musical training, Trinity’s rector sought him as choirmaster. Hopkins became an avid member of Trinity, and membership increased. When the pastor resigned in 1823, the congregation asked Hopkins to take the




**St. Peter's Episcopal Church,  
Waterford, Erie County (1832).**

Photo by Lu Donnelly.



pulpit, which he took as a sign from God. He studied for Holy Orders and was ordained a priest in 1824, giving up his lucrative law practice to oversee Trinity Church.<sup>8</sup>

Hopkins' first order of business was to design a fitting church for the congregation. In 1825, the 1,000-seat church built by contractor Thomas Liggett rose on the site of the present Trinity Cathedral on Sixth Street in downtown Pittsburgh, causing a sensation both by its size and style. According to Hopkins' biography, requests for designs poured in from across the country. He also founded a seminary at his home, enlarging it in a Gothic Revival style. Either he or his acolytes preached in Blairsville, Greensburg, Meadville, Butler, Erie, and Kittanning; most of these towns built churches using his designs.<sup>9</sup>

Less than a decade later, this talented lawyer, artist, musician, writer, preacher, and educator was called to Trinity Cathedral in Boston (before H. H. Richardson's beautiful church was built), and then was ordained the bishop of Vermont, a post he held for 36 years. 

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**Lu Donnelly** is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.





**LEFT:**

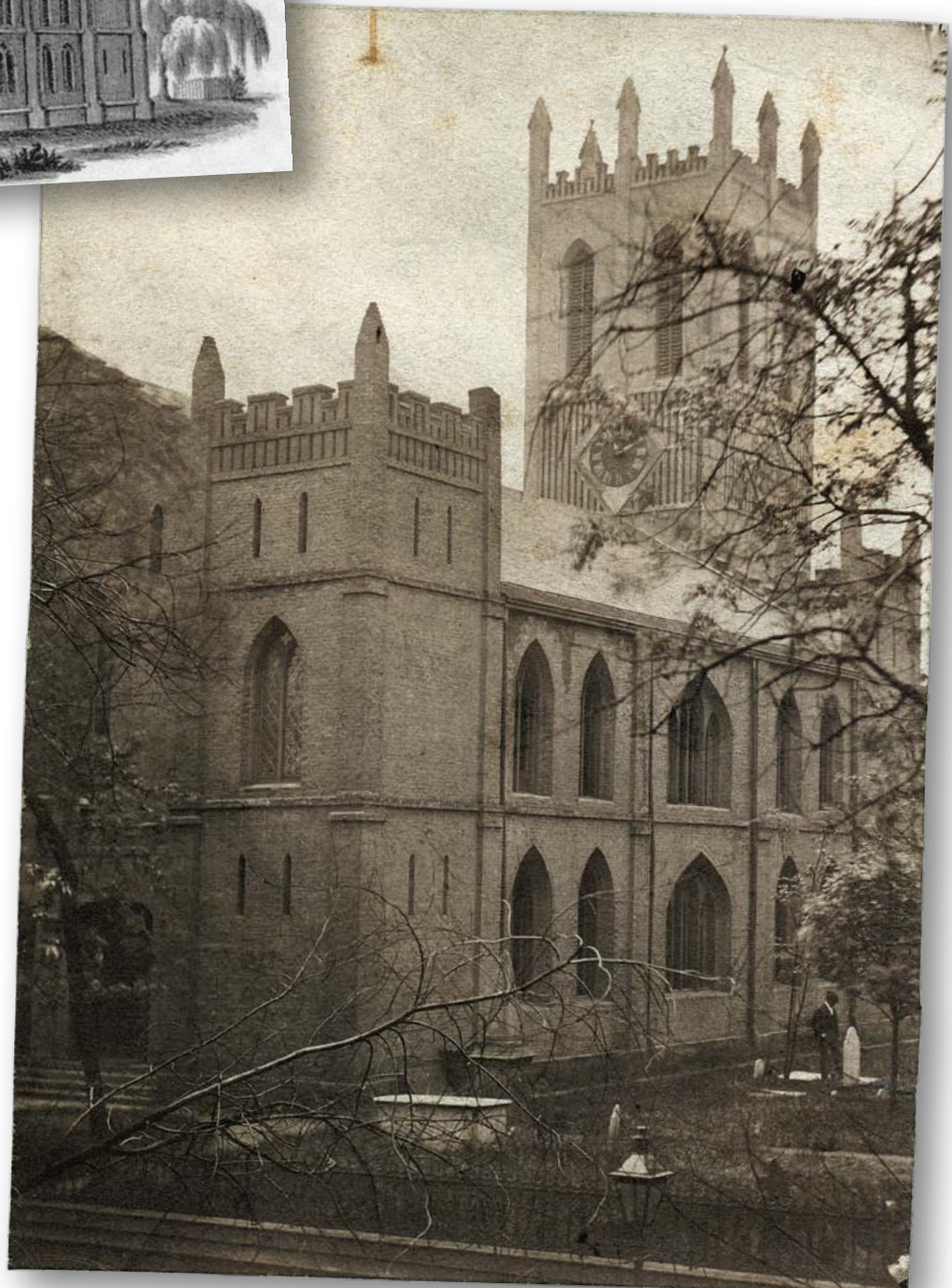
Trinity Church, Pittsburgh, portrayed on plate 5 in John Henry Hopkins D.D., *Essay on Gothic Architecture, With Various Plans and Drawings for Churches: Designed Chiefly for the use of the Clergy* (Burlington: Smith & Harrington, 1836).

Public Domain.

**BELOW:**

Second Trinity Episcopal Church, built 1825.

HHC L&A, GPC, B001, F063.



<sup>1</sup> William H. Pierson, Jr. *American Buildings and Their Architects, Volume 2 Technology and the Picturesque, the Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles*. (New York: Oxford University Press, p. 170).

<sup>2</sup> John Newton Boucher. *A Century and a Half of Pittsburg [sic] and Her People*. Pittsburgh, 1908, Volume 2, p. 371.

<sup>3</sup> John Henry Hopkins, Jr. *The Life of the Late Right Reverend John Henry Hopkins, First Bishop of Vermont and Seventh Presiding Bishop*. (New York: F. J. Huntington, 1873), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Hopkins, Jr. *Life*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>5</sup> Besides his wife and young child, his sister-in-law and mother Elizabeth lived with them.

<sup>6</sup> Eleven children survived to adulthood. One Hopkins infant is buried in Trinity's graveyard.

<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, Jr. *Life*, pp. 71, 73 and 129. "Architects being then very few, and no member of that honorable profession in America having as yet thought it worth while to pay any attention to the 'Gothic style.'"

<sup>8</sup> James O'Hara had died by this date, but his children agreed to pay Hopkins' remaining Hermitage Furnace debt from their father's estate freeing Hopkins to accept the smaller salary (1/5 his lawyer's salary) without the burdensome debt.

<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, Jr. *Life*, pp. 73 and 129. The above cities are located in Indiana, Westmoreland, Crawford, Butler, Erie, and Armstrong Counties. Reports on possible Hopkins' churches in Blairsville, Greensburg, Butler, and Kittanning have yet to be verified.