

Church of Saint Mary

440 Grand Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 341 Lot 26

Built: 1833, altered 1864 & 1871

Architect (facade): Patrick Charles Keely

Style: Romanesque Revival

Proposed Action: Proposed for Calendaring December 2, 2025



Church of Saint Mary, LPC

The Church of Saint Mary, founded in 1826, was one of the earliest Catholic parishes to be established in New York City. Its formation grew from the needs of a growing Irish immigrant population, and it remains an important epicenter of Catholic immigrant life on the Lower East Side. The building was completed in 1833, ranking it among the oldest Catholic churches in New York City. Originally adorned with a Greek Revival facade, prolific architect of Catholic churches Patrick Charles Keely was engaged to design its current Romanesque Revival facade and flanking towers in 1864.

In colonial New York, the Irish had faced nativist and anti-Catholic discrimination and violence, including a prohibition of Catholic priests until 1784. While the law changed, anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment persisted well into the 19th century, and Saint Mary's first home, a former Protestant church on Sheriff Street, was deliberately burned in 1831. This and other instances of violence and discrimination directed at Irish Catholics led to the founding of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1836.

In 1832, the congregation commenced the construction of a new building nearby on Grand Street with a monumental Greek Revival facade, likely without the guidance of an architect, basing the design on pattern books and popular styles, completing it in 1833. The congregation thrived and within 30 years, engaged architect Patrick Charles Keely to enclose the portico and update the facade in the Romanesque Revival style. Like the majority of the parish, Keely was an immigrant from Ireland, arriving in 1842 and becoming a highly prolific designer and builder of Catholic churches throughout the northeastern United States. Despite having no formal architectural training beyond the masonry training he received from his father, he went on to design nearly 600 churches over the course of his career, including nearly all the cathedrals in New England. The Church of Saint Mary was further expanded to the rear in 1871.

The Church of Saint Mary embodies the history and diversity of immigration to New York City, particularly that of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was central to the earliest Catholics who came to New York from Ireland and continues to be an important community institution to more recent Catholic immigrants, including the many from Spanish-speaking communities who make up the congregation today. The church itself is a striking example of Romanesque Revival architecture, boasting original early 19th-century field stone side walls, an impressive facade and dual towers, as well as late 19th-century stained-glass with elaborate enframements. Saint Mary's remains an important reminder of the historical and cultural development of New York City's Lower East Side.

