

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Church of the Ascension (Protestant Episcopal)

and or common

2. Location

street & number 36-38 Fifth Avenue

not for publication

city, town New York

vicinity of

state New York

code

county New York

code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Church of the Ascension

street & number 36-38 Fifth Avenue

city, town New York

vicinity of

state

New York

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. New York County Hall of Records

street & number 31 Chambers Street

city, town New York

state

New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978 federal state county local

depository for survey records National Park Service

city, town Washington

state

DC

7. Description

Condition

excellent

good

fair

deteriorated

ruins

unexposed

Check one

unaltered

altered

Check one

original site

moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Built in 1840-1841, the Church of the Ascension is a very handsome, fieldstone church in the Gothic-Revival style. One of the earliest churches designed by Richard Upjohn, it has a large central, square tower with an entrance in the center of the tower crowned by a triple-arched window above the door. The large central window is framed by a shorter lancet on each side. Directly over this tri-partite window is a small lancet which is repeated on the towers sides. The upper part of the central tower contains a louvered belfry with a running frieze above. The top of the tower wall is capped by crenelations. Four stone piers reinforce the corners of the tower and are capped by gablets which in turn carry four-sided pinnacles which are crowned by stone finials.

The plan is traditional Gothic with the entrance through the central tower. The nave is higher than the side aisles and is opened up for light by clerestory windows. The side walls are punctured by stained glass windows. The walls are supported by flying buttresses which are capped by gablets.

The magnificent stained glass windows are in excellent condition and especially those by the painter, John LaFarge, who also painted the great oil on the interior altar wall, "The Ascension." Below this large fresco, Louis Saint-Gaudens carved the magnificent bas-relief on the same subject.

Everard Upjohn, in his book on his great-grandfather describes the church:

Like Trinity Church, the entrance is through the single tower in the center of the facade, leading to a three-aisled interior which had a clearstory and galleries. The design lacks some of the liturgical character that forms the most significant of Trinity's contributions to American architecture. Nor is the style of the Church of the Ascension so pure as that of the more famous edifice. The simple braced roof with its four centered arches carrying a flat ceiling can be paralleled in many churches of the Perpendicular period in England, and in its directness it is perhaps superior to the false vault of Trinity, though far less imposing in effect. These braces or trusses are carried on stone wall-shafts which rest on corbels carved in the form of heads, a favorite Upjohn motive. The simple, members piers with moulded capitals is another device which, with variations, runs through the entire course of his career.

But if the piers and trusses may best be described as Perpendicular, the very plain tracery of the aisle windows and the rather personal form of the belfry windows are more closely allied to the Decorated style. The boldest feature of the building is the tower, its corners buttressed but rising foursquare, with no offsets at all to interrupt the severity of its lines. Such a device is extremely unusual in Gothic architecture. The great Bell Harry of Canterbury has, to be sure, no offsets in its buttresses, but that is an isolated and remarkable case--one, moreover, in

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
	<input type="checkbox"/> invention			

Specific dates 1840-1841 **Builder/Architect** Richard Upjohn (1802-1878)

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Church of the Ascension in Greenwich Village in New York City is an early design by Richard Upjohn and retains outstanding integrity today. Commissioned and designed during the years he did Trinity Church, his most famous commission, the Ascension was one of the very few parish churches that made Upjohn's reputation and developed his knowledge and style. Trinity Church, along with James Renwick's Grace Church on Broadway, was the largest and most elaborate expression of the Early English Gothic while the smaller and more modest "missionary" churches followed the same plan. A rectangular plan was arranged behind a square tower and was set squarely on a longitudinal axis. This concept of Gothic was drawn from A. W. N. Pugin's True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture, 1841, in which a beautiful drawing was published of an imaginary Gothic church, (Plate H), a drawing that Upjohn knew well. The Church of Ascension is sustained by an an active congregation and their house of worship is beautifully maintained.

The history of the Episcopal churches in New York reflects the development of the burgeoning metropolis as it swelled and enveloped residential neighborhoods to the north. In the early nineteenth century nearly all of the communicants lived within walking distance of a parish. In fact, it was custom to "chain off the street" on Sundays during services so the clatter of horses and carriages did not disturb the worshippers. The Church of the Ascension was an "uptown" parish in a fashionable part of town. The nearby Washington Parade Ground which was originally a potters field for the burial of criminals and paupers and a place of public execution was renamed Washington Square and became the hub of this elegant parish. There were prominent parishioners: Samuel Ward, a banker; Henry Boocaem, a silk merchant; Peter Jay, a son of the Chief Justice John Jay and a distinguished lawyer; and Frederick de Peyster, a Master in Chancery. John Tyler, President of the United States, married Julia Gardiner here in June, 1844.

The Church of the Ascension was officially incorporated on October 2, 1827. The original church building was on Canal Street just east of Broadway in what was then a marsh. This small Greek-Revival building was designed by Town and Thompson, architects, and was consecrated in 1829. In a very short time all of the pews had been sold or rented, as was the custom. The church was always known as intensely Protestant and resisted the Catholic idea of a highly organized visible church with an ecclesiastical hierarchy. These "evangelical" Episcopalians were militant, passionate, eloquent preachers, vigorous proselytizers, and conspicuous philanthropists.

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which the tower rises above the crossing of the church rather than directly from the ground and in which the detail is, of course, far richer. The avoidance of pinnacles on the exterior body of the church, the very plain ones, with battlements between, on the tower, the rugged simplicity of the windows, and the total avoidance of applied decoration produce an impression of almost Puritan austerity, though without losing the churchly aspect. This desire to avoid display as inconsistent with the sacred purpose of the structure recurs again and again in Upjohn's later work.

The somewhat heavy trusses and the woodwork generally are prophetic in the importance they give to wood even when the body of the church is made of stone. Did his early training breed in him so thorough a knowledge of woodworking as to prejudice him in its favor and thereby impel him to make it a feature of his interiors? Certainly it became so in his fully developed work.... the trusses rest on the wall shafts which are in this instance free of the wall, with a consequent loss of strength. The same type of corbels, carved as heads, support these shafts, again with some stylization of manner. These heads were in part modeled after some members of his family, if tradition is to be trusted.¹

It should be noted that the Church of the Ascension was considered to be one of the most drab interiors of the Episcopal parish churches in New York in the 1880s, some said even ugly. Under the aegis of the Reverend E. Winchester Donald, the interior was gradually transformed into the beautiful, tranquil church you see today. Dr. Donald raised the money and chose the artists with the assistance of Maitland Armstrong, a well known contemporary artist and diplomat.

In 1885, the north and south galleries were removed admitting more light, the blank windows were gradually replaced by stained glass and the interior came aglow with radiant color. The magnificent chancel and reredos was designed and supervised by Stanford White and includes the enormous oil painting by John LaFarge. This "Ascension" was called one of the great religious paintings produced in our time by no less than the critic of the New York Herald Tribune, Royal Cortissoz.

LaFarge was also responsible for some of the finest stained glass windows in the church. Beneath the large painting, Louis Saint-Gaudens had modelled the beautiful flying angels in high relief and the altar and reredos, of richly veined Sienna marble, were designed by D. Maitland Armstrong. Surrounding the altar, Armstrong also created a wall embellished with rich mosaics in an early Romanesque style.

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There are other works of note on the interior including paintings and objects:

"In the House of the Carpenter," hanging at the East end of the North aisle, is the work of Edwin Howland Blashfield. Loaned in 1939, it became the Church's property at the time of Mrs. Blashfield's death in 1947. "A Sad Inheritance," or "The Procession of Invalids," hanging at the East end of the South aisle, is the work of the Spanish painter, Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida, and was given in 1941 by John E. Berwind.

"The Angel with the Flaming Sword," was painted in Paris by Edwin Howland Blashfield, in 1890-1891. Given by the artist and Grace Hall Blashfield in 1935 in memory of the Rev. E. Winchester Donald and the Rev. Percy Stickney Grant, with the understanding that it would not be hung in the church because of the La Farge mural, so it was first hung in the Parish Hall. However, the artist finally agreed to having it in the gallery. It is considered to be the artist's best work.²

The stained glass windows represent various styles, from traditional to modern, from John LaFarge in 1886 to Henry Lee Willet in 1963. Among the glass designers represented are J. Alden Weir, Frederick Crowninshield, and D. Maitland Armstrong. The pulpit was designed and given by the architect, Charles Folen McKim and was carved by Joseph Cabus. The organ was built in 1894 by the Hutchings Organ Company. It was enlarged by the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company in 1931 and consists of 69 ranks, distributed over great, swell, choir, solo, pedal, and echo divisions.

The All Saints Memorial Chapel on the North side of the church was designed by Merritt Farren and was consecrated November 8, 1936. Between the Sacristy and the Chancel, there is the Louis Guerineau Myers Memorial Library which was dedicated in 1946. The church and its adjacent rectory continue around the northeast corner of West Tenth Street.

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After a decade of growth the church was well established but was destroyed suddenly by a devastating fire that broke out on Sunday, June 30, 1839 during services. No life was lost but the building was gone. When rebuilding began, a new site at Fifth Avenue and 10th Street was purchased for \$32,000.

The genesis of the new church is described as follows:

The celebrated Richard Upjohn was architect of the new church edifice which was completed in November, 1841, at a cost of \$46,459.75, a budget which included even the smallest items, such as a lantern and a bit of zinc. The church building was described as "a remarkably chaste and beautiful edifice of the Gothic Style, the proportions faultless, with the interior finished in a style of appropriate solemnity and grace." The building was consecrated on a clear autumn morning, Friday, November 5, 1841, by Bishop Onderdonk....

The chancel of the new church building was very shallow, for Dr. Eastburn, a low churchman, according to a persistent tradition, insisted on this so that there "would be no room for high church doings," although the architect, Upjohn, wanted the usual deep chancel found in Gothic churches.³

Although Upjohn got his deep chancel at Trinity, Ascension was Low Church and the rector, Dr. Eastburn, purchased the land immediately behind the church in order to foil any attempt to introduce a deep chancel like that at Trinity. Aside from this difference of opinion, the church was a great success, although somewhat austere. Embellishment was not addressed until late in the century.

By the 1870s, the congregation included such names as Edward Delafield, Samuel F. Appleton, Francis Leland, William C. Rhineland, William B. Astor and August Belmont, but New York's wealthy were moving northward toward Central Park. Ascension retained a faithful group of parishioners, many of them part of a group of artists and craftsmen that gave Greenwich Village its reputation. The church became closely identified with the arts and this new element was described by D. Maitland Armstrong who was one of them:

Even in this relatively genteel and tradition-filled neighborhood, where there are still dim recollections of Henry James and Mark Twain, the Church of the Ascension is dwarfed to pitiful insignificance by the adjacent buildings. Indeed, it becomes harder and harder to realize that only one hundred years ago its simple tower rose high and almost unchallenged above the urban scene....

The Gothic style may seem a trifle anachronistic for Fifth Avenue, but Upjohn's building of 1840 is ... [an] original architectural achievement.

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For all its pinnacles and crenelations, what impresses the modern eye is the clean-edged severity of its form - the stark geometry of the tower in its isolation from the body of the church, the bareness of the wall surfaces punctuated only by the regular beat of Gothic windows, the tidy side elevation with its precise distinction between aisle and clerestory, the extreme clarity of the massing.... And, in addition, we can admire the intimate scale of the building which makes us feel like people instead of Lilliputians.

Inside the church, the simply-defined volumes of nave and side aisles, the geometric and vertical accents continue the lucidity and discipline of Upjohn's exterior design....

The glass... speaks of the later 19th century's efforts to revive (under the stimulus of a sanctified vision of the Middle Ages) the arts of the Medieval craftsman.... But instead of the more brilliantly colored and incisive patterns of such modern glass makers, the panes and leadings of this church suggest the purplish aura of incense and most of the earlier pre-Raphaelites. (The Weir window, with its pale color and fragile forms; La Farge's more vibrant, but equally hazy, Good Shepherd.)

The chancel of 1888 is a revealing document of late 19th century attitudes. (La Farge, painter; St. Gaudens, sculptor; McKim, architect.) If the collaboration of three outstanding representatives of the three major arts recalls the glories of Florence or Rome, that is exactly the point. The chancel typifies most poignantly that peculiarly inflated state of self-confidence and grandiloquence which made so many American artists of the late 19th century think that they were participating in the greatest flourishing of the arts since the Renaissance. Stanford White's architectural setting, in its ostensible breadth, stability, and grandeur is meant to reawaken the spirit of Bramante; St. Gaudens' fluttering angels, Donatello; and La Farge's expansive symmetries, the idealized world of the divine Raphael.⁴

But it is now accepted that the La Farge painting is a genuine American masterpiece even though his vaporous landscape was done from sketches on a trip to Japan with Henry Adams.

The Church of the Ascension was always known for its open door providing sanctuary. Today its stained glass windows are illuminated at night presenting the same warmth and welcome it has been famous for since its beginning.

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Footnotes

¹Upjohn, Everard M. Richard Upjohn: Architect and Churchman. 1968, New York. DaCapo. pp. 69-70.

²Kennedy, James W. The Unknown Worshipper. Morehouse-Barlow. New York. 1964. p. 174.

³Upjohn, p. 69.

⁴Kennedy, p. 24.

⁵Ibid., p. 154.

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"The boundary encompasses just the urban lot on which the church is located and with which it has been historically associated."

All that certain tract piece or parcel of land situate lying and being in the Fifteenth Ward of the City of New York bounded and described as follows. Beginning at a point formed by the intersection of the westerly line of Fifth Avenue with the northerly line of Tenth Street and running thence northerly along said westerly line of Fifth Avenue 91 feet, thence westerly and parallel with Tenth Street 100 feet. Thence northerly and parallel with Fifth Avenue 3 feet 10 inches to the centre line of the block, thence westerly along said centre line 27 feet. Thence southerly and parallel with Fifth Avenue 94 feet 10 inches to the northerly side of Tenth Street; thence easterly along said northerly line of Tenth Street 127 feet to the point or place of beginning.