

A BRIEF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF IMMANUEL CHURCH¹ CHRISTOPHER M. AGNEW

Immanuel Church is located on what was the king's land. Originally an English blockhouse occupied the site and most likely the first worship of Anglicans in New Castle took place here. Work on a church began in 1703 but in a very real sense has never ceased. Each generation has altered the building to serve its own needs and tastes.

In 1708 the Rev. George Ross wrote that the church was finished. The pulpit was located along the north wall and the altar at the east end of the church. The church of 1708 had no porch, gallery or pews. By 1715 the parish felt all of these were needed. Within a decade of the completion of the original structure the north and south walls were bowing out from the weight of the roof. By 1727 a porch was added on the south wall entrance and a second porch which served most likely as a sacristy was added on the north wall. These served to stabilize the walls. Also by this date a gallery in the west end of the church had been added. The exterior of the church in 1727 was much the same as that rendered in the Benjamin Latrobe survey of New Castle done in 1804. Box pews were gradually introduced into the church with the last pew constructed in 1735.

William Strickland, one of the most noted architects of his day, greatly altered Immanuel in the period from 1820 to 1822. He added the tower and transepts, although the latter were only half their present length. The wall along the west side of the transepts continued between the chancel area and the tower to form one continuous line without the recessed area subsequent generations have been familiar with. In the middle of this wall stood a large pulpit that dominated the interior of the building. The chancel was set off by a curved rail identical to the one in place today. There was no permanent altar. Most likely a portable table served on those few occasions communion was celebrated. The box pews of the earlier era gave way to slip pews with doors the same as those now in use. The 1820-1822 design turned the seating in the church around one hundred and eighty degrees. The tower with its town clock and the spire above it dominated the outward appearance of Immanuel.

In the late 1840s and 1850s Immanuel church again underwent change. John Notman, James Dixon and John Gibson contributed to the change. The chancel area was recessed seven feet into the tower and a permanent altar installed. The darkened interior forced the viewer's attention on John Gibson's stained glass window. That window let in light behind the altar and caused both priest and altar to be silhouetted when viewed from the pews. Eventually a hanging was placed in front of the bottom half of the window to remedy this problem. The pews lost their doors and high above the chancel in gilt lettering was inscribed "The Lord is in His Holy Temple." In 1857 the apse replaced

Strickland's simple and graceful window in the back of the church and in 1860 Stephen D. Button doubled the length of the transepts.

Laussat R. Rogers, a local architect and a member of the parish, gradually altered the Victorian Immanuel beginning in 1900 by introducing elements of colonial revival architecture. He designed a new pulpit, altar, and lectern. In 1918 he replaced the Gibson stained glass window with one half its length that let in diffused light. *The Every Evening* wrote at the time of the dedication of the new window:

During the last few months this one of New Castle's many fine old structures, has been undergoing repairs again, and the improvements are rightly named, and not the kind that will make the heads of future generations hang in shame, because their forebearers had bad taste instead of good. . . . New Castle is such a gem of an old town, . . . the despoiling hand of that awful period of architecture and furniture from the Civil War to 1900 was not allowed to bring about the awful changes that it did in almost every other locality in this country. . . . There had been over the altar quite a monstrosity, put there by some misguided soul who thought it beautiful. Its most noticeable detail was a fat bird, that always reminded the faithful that capon is the favorite . . . for the Sunday dinner, and made mouths water for it.²

A tremendous change in taste had occurred since the end of the Victorian era.

The changes rendered by Rogers did not complete the transformation of Immanuel from Victorian gloom to colonial revival. After the Second World War a series of changes occurred under the guidance of three different sets of architects. Collectively, they completed the colonial revival design of the church by 1966. In 1951 the architectural firm of Pope and Kruse made limited alterations to the chancel. In 1965 Samuel and Victorine Homsey introduced a sounding board for the pulpit and in 1966 Theodore Fletcher and Douglass Buck put doors on the pews that were modeled after the ones at Old St. Anne's in Middletown. The Immanuel of the years 1966 to 1980 was not a church restored to some early architectural appearance. It reflected an idealized mid-twentieth century notion of what a colonial church should look like according to colonial revival taste but not the way Immanuel had ever actually appeared.

Immanuel Church was rededicated in December 1982. The architectural firm of John Milner Associates, after careful historical and archaeological research, designed an interior that is unique to today and today's needs. It is rooted, however, in the building's architectural heritage and comes closer to the Immanuel designed by William Strickland one hundred and sixty years earlier than it has at any time since the mid-nineteenth century. The Immanuel of 1982 has a unity of design based on Strickland's concepts. The church of today is regarded by many architects as the most beautiful building in Delaware.