

Submission to February 2023 St. Peter's Cathedral newsletter by Patty Dean

Ninety-three years ago, St. Peter's Church—as it was then known—launched a campaign to erect a new church on a sloped site near Hill Park. Much had changed in church life and Helena since the first St. Peter's had opened its doors in 1879 on the southwest corner of Grand Street and Warren, approximately three blocks north of "Catholic Hill". (The church's site is now a parking lot south of the Labor Temple which was the Methodist-Episcopal church.)

Over time, the activities and worship in the Gothic style stone building constructed by mason Peter J. Perine and carpenter Thomas Tweedy were hampered by inadequate lighting and ventilation, a poorly equipped kitchen, a lack of facilities for the "social needs of the young people" and Boy Scouts, no baptistry, and an inaccessible chapel. Additionally, in the decades since the church was completed, the development of the West Side neighborhood meant St. Peter's location on the east side of Main Street (as Last Chance Gulch was initially named) was less convenient to a sizeable number of Helenans. In January 1930, Rector Henry H. Daniels wrote to parishioners: "...we have recently purchased a beautiful piece of property on Park Avenue situated between the YWCA building and Hill Park. The generosity of a few friends enabled us to pay cash for this. It would cost a great deal to restore our present property, and the general feeling is that it has outlived its usefulness...This new site is centrally located and admirably suited for our purpose..."

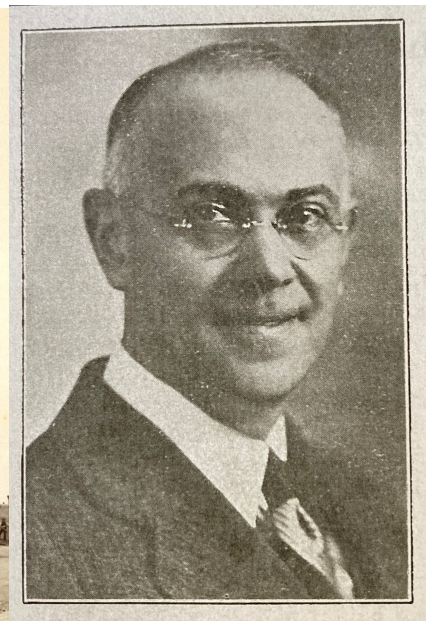
At the suggestion of Coadjutor Bishop Herbert H. H. Fox, Daniels wrote Spokane architect Harold C. Whitehouse, describing his desire for a 300 seat "simple parish church...of simple Gothic design..." and a chapel for weekday services. Whitehouse quickly drew up plans and, by May 1930, proposed a new building designed in the "early English style of Gothic architecture." The new church was to embody the late 19th century Arts and Crafts movement's values of honesty in design and materials, hand-made elements and furnishings, use of local building materials, and a veneration of medieval ideals. The Cornell-educated architect exclaimed in a 1930 letter to Daniels: "...there are very few churches built in this northwest country that can boast of a more honest type of design that emulates more closely the art and sturdiness of the old Mediaeval [sic] work than this church will..." Whitehouse had gained firsthand knowledge of medieval and Renaissance European and English architecture, gardens and art on a year-long post-graduation study abroad.

Why was the Gothic style and "honest" medieval design desirable and where did these ideas come from? The answer lies in the work and values of A.W.N. Pugin, an English designer, architect, writer, medievalist, and convert to Roman Catholicism, as well as those of fellow Englishman William Morris who was a designer,

writer, “medievalist turned Marxist,” prolific lecturer, and the leading figure in Britain’s late 19th century Arts and Crafts Movement. Architects and designers throughout the United States were familiar with Pugin and Morris’ writings which favored Gothic design with its ecclesiastical origins over the godless classical aesthetic derived from pagan Greece and Rome.

Ralph Adams Cram was among the American architects who admired Pugin and Morris. His 1901 book, *Church Building: A Study of the Principles of Architecture in Their Relation to the Church*, became a standard reference for church design in the US, containing dozens of illustrations entitled “An Example of Vicious Design”, “An Example of Good English Work”, etc. as well as plans, lengthy essays and photographs of country churches and cathedrals throughout Europe, Great Britain, and the US. Cram was the penultimate American Gothic Revivalist. Both Diocesan Bishop William F. Faber and Reverend Daniels consulted Cram’s writings at least once in the design process for St. Peter’s and Whitehouse referenced Cram’s activities in his correspondence to the latter.

Whitehouse’s attitude, as he expressed in a letter to Rev. Daniels, was that of a doctor to a patient, i.e. St. Peter’s Church being the patient, and together they would solve the “problem” of what church to design and build. In February 1931, St. Peter’s Church contracted with Whitehouse and Price to design the church, its decoration, and furnishings, to create what would likely be one of the last architectural gems of the Arts and Crafts movement in America.



Additional notes exploring St. Peter's nationally significant design, furnishings and decoration will be published in upcoming newsletters.

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PHOTO CREDITS/CAPTIONS:

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 1879-1883, courtesy of Helena As She Was website, Jacoby Lowney Collection
Harold C. Whitehouse, circa 1931