



A Brief History of Religious Architecture in New Jersey 1703-1900

Frank L. Greenagel

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A Brief History is an extensively-illustrated survey of the traditions and changes in the churches, meetinghouses and synagogues erected in New Jersey between 1703 and 1900. This chronologically-organized account is light on technical architectural terms and long on an interpretation of the social and cultural forces operating—why the buildings look the way they do. While eighteenth century religious architecture was largely derivative of old world construction practices and architectural traditions, in the nineteenth century, the vigorous religious pluralism that had evolved out of Independence resulted in hundreds of new churches and synagogues. Steam-driven manufacturing had made elaborate architectural elements affordable for even the smallest congregations, and architects vied with each other to express their interpretations of Greek, Gothic, Romanesque and late Victorian styles for the emergent professional and merchant classes. From the sophisticated Gothic Revival designs erected in stone by leading architects to the simple wooden-frame and brick meetinghouses, often built by members of the congregation, the book offers an engaging account, illustrated by stunning photographs of the visual and material presence of the state's religious buildings. Many are on the National Register of Historic Places. But this is not church history in its standard form, focusing only on the grandest churches; one can follow the growing affluence and taste of rural and small town congregations as their churches grew in size and refinement over the 200 years examined here. Economic, social and cultural factors occupy a central role in the description and explanation of why the churches look the way they do. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, when more than a third of the surviving houses of worship were erected, it is clear that piety was no longer the driving force.

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