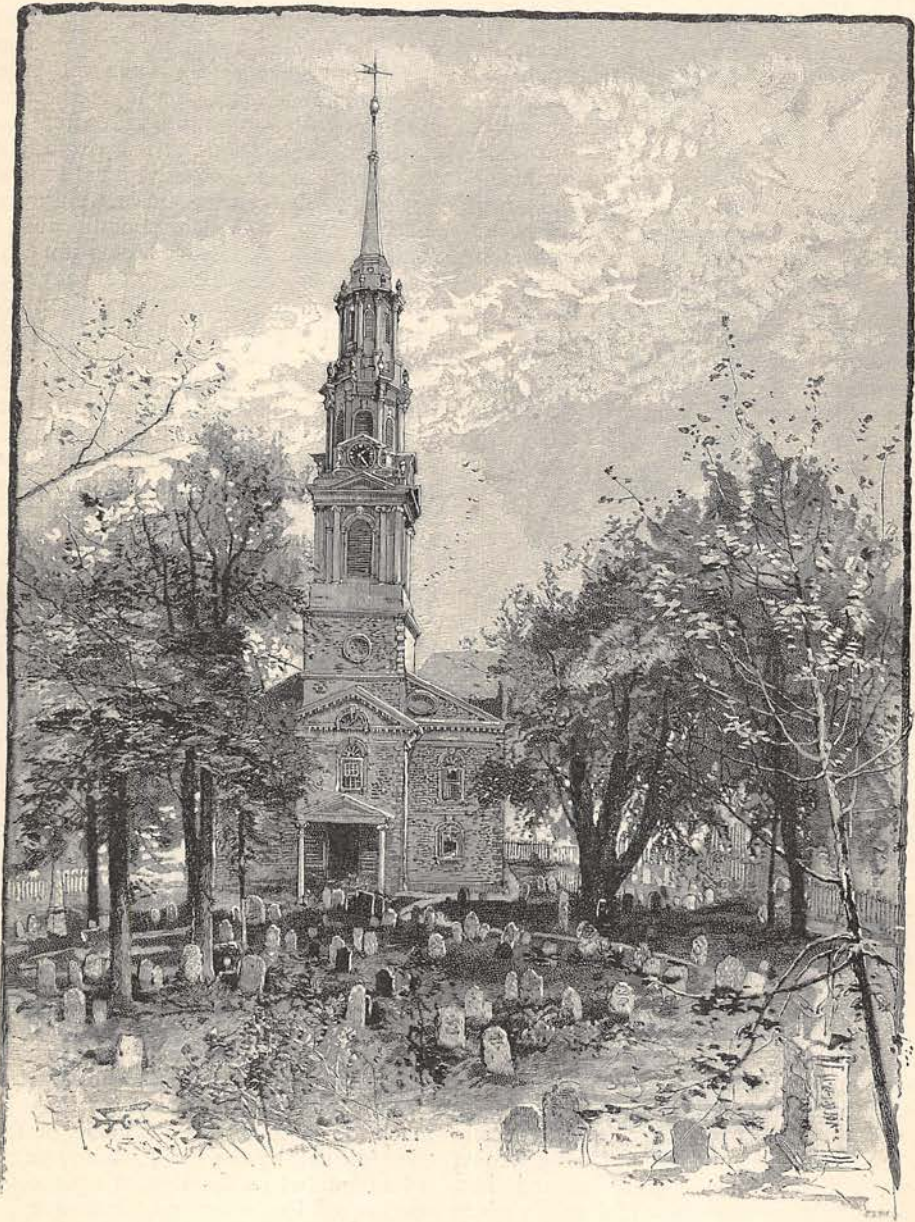


OLD PUBLIC BUILDINGS IN AMERICA.



ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, NEW YORK, FROM CHURCH STREET.

As "Old New York and its Houses" \* proved to be a subject hardly less interesting to the readers of the article so entitled than it was to the writer, he is led, not unnaturally, to the consideration of a kindred theme, the

public buildings of colonial and immediately post-colonial times—led thereto, as before, by the sight of tempting sketches of such subjects. There may be some pleasure in this direction, and certainly there will be some profit, if we consider the style of the

\* See THE CENTURY for October, 1883.



buildings in which the grandfathers and the great-grandfathers of those living Americans, whose Americanism did not begin within the last half century, worshiped and legislated. The existing representatives of these structures are unhappily very few; for in most cases they have been ruthlessly destroyed, with blindness to their beauty and indifference to their associations; yet often, it must be admitted, because there seemed no practicable way of preserving them. Enough, however, remain to tell us what manner of men they were who did our public building in this period—so little thought of and so little known.

The rows of unhomelike and even unhouse-like dwelling-places which are generally spoken of as "brown-stone fronts"—phrase unlovely, and therefore most fitting—may properly be regarded as manifestations and embodiments of the spirit of our domestic architecture in the second and third quarters of the present century. In them the fatuous frivolity and obtrusive vulgarity of that period found complete expression. As geologists designate the various stages of the earth's formation as the Eozoic and the Paleozoic, and the Eocene and Pliocene periods, and the like, so we may well designate the stage of house-building through which we have lately passed—and from which we are slowly emerging, but with struggles and lingering throes of adhesion—as the brown-stone period of American architecture. How firmly imbedded we have been in this stratum of old red sandstone, thin laminae of which seem to have cropped up out of our soil, through our very souls, as veneering to our "stylish" domiciles, may be inferred from a two-part story, as dual as a pair of trousers, which reached me through two architects.

A certain very costly mansion in one of the principal avenues of New York was designed by its architect to be built of a light-colored, grayish stone; but the client, although he accepted the design, rebelled against the proposed material, and insisted on having his house in brown stone, "like other people." Then another projector of a "palatial mansion," a dweller in California, but a native of New York, astonished his architect by declaring that his house must also be built of brown stone, although the country around him abounds in stone more beautiful and in every way better for building,—assigning as his reason that he "wanted to have a brown-stone house like Mr. —'s, on — Avenue, in New York,"—the elaborate structure before mentioned; wherefore, poor building material for a house in San Francisco was transported from New York. This disposition to copy New York has been deplorably in-

jurious to the architectural as well as to the moral aspect of the whole country. No sooner is the "Interocean City" of some farthest Western frontier of civilization out of the log-cabin period, than it has at once a Broadway, a Fifth Avenue, and an Academy of Music; and in the two former parallel passages through its desolation, where "saloons" and "dry" goods stores—the wet dispensaries outnumbering the dry in the proportion of three to one—alternate with stump-dotted clearings, its ambitious citizens begin to erect shapeless, roofless houses, with heavy sham cornices of the regulation New York model, which, brown stone being unattainable, they paint as nearly as possible brown-stone color; the object in view being not convenience, nor comfort, nor beauty, nor fitness, but "style," in cheap imitation of the style of New York—rich New York, big New York, ever richer and ever bigger New York; and when at last a house is built with its front of veritable brown stone, it is looked upon with a feeling as nearly approaching veneration as the Interoceanites are capable of, and is hailed as a blessed harbinger of coming metropolitan splendor.

The place which the brown-stone-front house fills in the history of our domestic architecture, is filled in that of our public architecture by a sort of building of which the Post Office and the new City Hall of New York are perfected types and oppressive examples. The very presence of the Post Office on its present site is an insult to good taste and a defiance of common sense. It may safely be said that in no other country, hardly in any other city in the civilized world, would such a fine open place as the old City Hall Park, being the property of the city and almost coeval with it, have been destroyed. Some modification of its former condition was made necessary by the increase of population and of traffic. But the indications pointed very plainly to a change the very reverse of that which has been made. That triangular piece of ground which has become the center of the business part of the city was of no account as a "park." It was much too small for such a name, or for any use indicated by the name. Many years ago it had fulfilled its function as a place of recreation, of lounging, or of intramural verdure. But as an open *plaza* it would have been respectable, and could have been made admirable. In size it would have equaled many such ornaments and breathing-places in the capitals of Europe. Its position at the junction of the two great thoroughfares of the city, and the fact that it contained the building which was at once the City Hall and the



handsomest not the only the city, unitions to plead of its original and unencumbered railings, its trees also, The Register's

public structure, if handsome one, in ed with old associa- for the preservation expanse, unreduced bered, although its grass, and perhaps should be removed. Office, and an un- stone structure be-

the old Park was filled with wooden barracks ; and when at last the time happily came for these to be pulled down, the spirits of greed and corruption had taken possession of New York, and of all the imitation New Yorks in the country ; and 'nothing, public or private, under our skies was looked upon but as a means of getting money by fair means or by foul. Therefore it was that, a new post office being required, the site of it, by selfish, roguish intrigues, the history of which remains unwritten, was cut ruthlessly out of this fair little expanse of earth and air, in which every citizen of New York had an interest, and which might have been made for the future, as it had been in the past, a sightly, healthful, honored ornament and landmark of the city. Bright open space and pleasing urban vistas gave place to gloomy restriction ; the old Park was destroyed forever ; and traffic was increased and concentrated upon a point which should have been relieved. And this was done simply and solely that some men might get money, and that others might save money. That like motives directed the planning and building of the New City Hall, it is needless to say. It stands a fitting monument of the political and social condition of which a Tweed is the natural, if not the inevitable, product ; a sign and a token to all peoples and all generations that, in the course of less than half a century, New York attained a pitch of combined vulgarity and corruption unequaled in the records of municipal history.

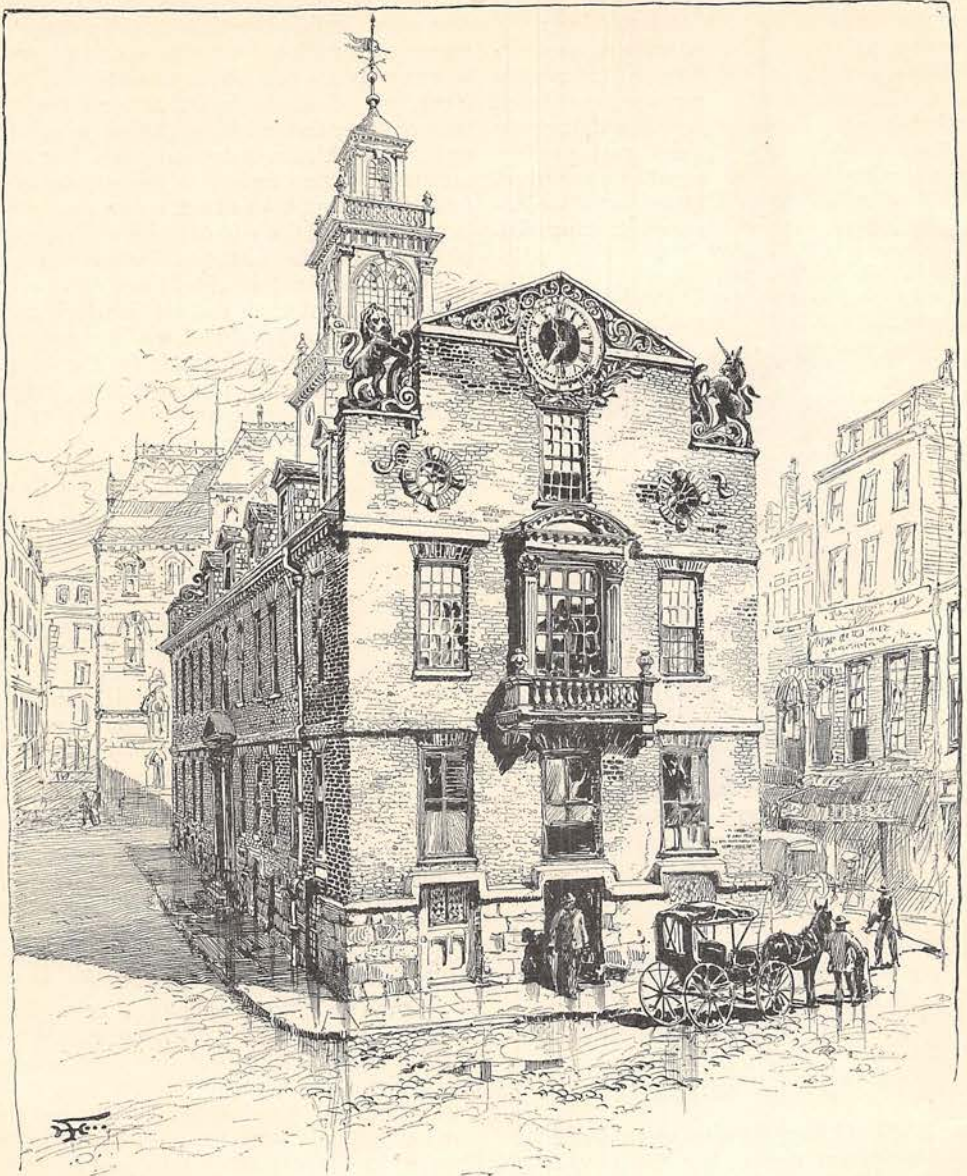
The old City Hall in New York, handsome as it is with a handsomeness of the kind that we call elegant, does not quite do justice to the design of its architect. That design sought to give the building a becoming dignity. This was attained in part by its elevation upon a paved plateau. I suspect that few people, except those who frequent this building, know that it does not stand upon the level of the surrounding land, and that to reach the plane from which its entrance stairs ascend there is a rise of two steps to a large semicircular plateau paved with square stones, which have not been disturbed for three quarters of a century. In justice to the architect, Mr. John McComb, it should be said that the city corporation obliged him to modify his original plan by reducing its ground-plan proportions in certain directions. The lines and proportions of the detail were preserved. The design is of a character which lends itself to such modification with a facility hardly possible in other styles ; yet the loss was material, although not destructive, for it probably made just the difference between respectable elegance and imposing dignity, in which

hind it, should have been taken away, and the accommodation needed for the city court-rooms and bureaus provided by the extension of the City Hall at right angles about an inclosed court. The result, if the style of the old building had been conformed to and harmoniously developed in a structure of larger proportions, might have been a public building of admirable beauty and of ample size for all requirements, so situated as to be at once convenient to business and an imposing object when viewed from any quarter. Such a building could hardly be better placed. And this was the modification of the old Park and the Hall which a few public-spirited citizens, of cultivated tastes, projected some twenty years and more ago. But then came the Civil War, and



ST. JOHN'S, NEW YORK.





OLD STATE HOUSE, BOSTON.

elegance would not have been lacking. The reason of this change was, of course, economy of material and of work,—simply of cost. The same motive caused the north side, or rear, of the building to be built of sandstone, although the front and sides are of white marble. When the Hall was built, in 1803, so small and so comparatively unimportant was that part of the city on the north of "the Park" (as it was called) that sandstone was supposed to be good enough for what would be little seen. Briefly, then, when New York

ing parts together did not extend much above Chambers street, its citizens erected the handsomest public building that to this day is to be found within its new immensity, and one of the finest to be found in the country.\*

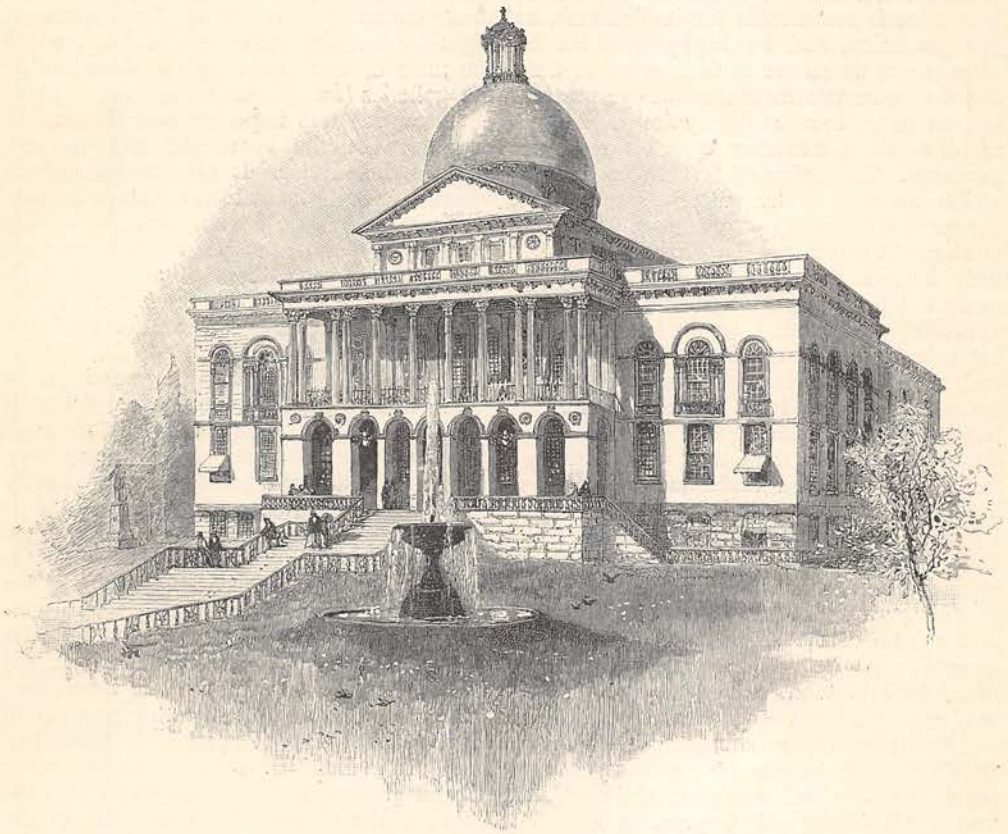
The cheap sandstone of the north side provoked more animadversion thirty years

\* The plans of the Hall, and a commonplace book or diary written by the architect during its erection, still exist; and we hope at an early day to present to our readers selections, with comments by a member of his family.—EDITOR.



ago than now, because then it was more observed than it is now by city people and by sight-seeing strangers. When New York had marched solidly up beyond Bleecker street, and was stretching on to Union Square, the pride of the prosperous up-town Gothamites found one of its vents in sneers at the blindness of the fathers of the city, who thought that sandstone was good enough for "up-town." This well-known feeling led to a

ored social evolution, entered one Saturday afternoon two serious gentlemen, white of face and unexceptionable in appearance, who announced themselves as emissaries of the Common Council, which had resolved that New York should no longer be disgraced by a City Hall white on three sides and brown on the fourth, and that therefore the fourth side should be whitewashed. Would he undertake this important job, in earnest of



THE BOSTON STATE HOUSE.

laughable practical joke on the part of two wags. At that time whitewashing was as much practiced in houses as it has been since in politics; and the trade was almost exclusively in the hands of the colored inhabitants of the city, who were of much simpler minds, although hardly of less exuberant manners, than their brethren, or rather their children, of the present day. At that time the negrominstrel was not a black-faced singer of sentimental songs and propounder of satirical conundrums, but a man (Dan Rice) who sang and jumped Jim Crow, alternating this *chanson de geste* with "Clar de Kitchen" and other genuine plantation songs. To a boss negro whitewasher, in this stage of col-

which a deposit of five or ten dollars was tendered? Indeed he could and would, and he not only jumped at the prospective profit, but rose some hundred feet or more in his own estimation. Sunday was passed in preparation for the great undertaking; and early on Monday morning an array of sable laborers, armed with pails and brushes and ladders, appeared, and the great work (typical of an inward moral necessity soon to be developed) was begun. It did not continue long, although long enough to attract an admiring and jeering crowd; and it was with some difficulty that the eager and simple-minded sable artist was convinced that his services were not required by the city, and



that the money which he had already received (probably quite enough to secure him against loss) was all that he was likely to get by his contract.

Close by the City Hall stands another building of the same period, but somewhat older, and of equal architectural merit,—St. Paul's, one of the finest Wren churches now existing, if not the very finest. In all my walks about London and through other cities in England, I saw not one at all equal to it. The spire is remarkable for its lightness, its fine gradation, and its happy combination of elements which are in themselves so little suited to spire treatment that the eye protests against them, even while it admires the triumph of the constructor over his reluctant materials. The spire of St. John's Church, which stands on the eastern side of the square now covered and oppressed by "Commodore" Vanderbilt's big freight depot, is little inferior to it; but St. Paul's springs more lightly from its tower, and rises to its vanishing point with a gradual grace which St. John's does not attain. The Broadway end of St. Paul's is hardly less admirable. Its pediment and lofty Ionic columns are beautifully proportioned, and are worthy of far more attention than they receive, except from well educated architects, who show little reserve in their admiration of this building and of its neighbor, the old City Hall. It is true also that in construction these churches, and other buildings in this country of that period, are much superior to those in England of the same date. This I say upon the advice of competent professional men; for I pretend to approach architecture only as a dilettante and on its æsthetic side.

The interior of the churches, of which St. Paul's and St. John's are the best existing types, were not without a certain kind and degree of beauty. They were, indeed, not truly ecclesiastical in spirit. They lacked entirely the sublimity and the mystery which the architecture strangely called Gothic expresses with such natural facility. For them no soaring nave and dimly lighted clear-story. But they were better than most of the little sham Gothic tabernacles which succeeded them. They were genuine; good of their kind; well suited to their purpose. In them respectability and decorum were so happily expressed that they were raised with an embodied grace. If people must assemble in large bodies to worship in pews, and take part in a ceremonial of which the most important part is the listening to a sermon, it is difficult to see how it could be more conveniently, comfortably, and appropriately done than in one of these old Wren parish

churches. The chancel ends of these churches, in which both the pulpit and the reading-desk were usually placed, were in some cases dignified by rich drapery, the fitness of which to a Protestant house of worship is, I am inclined to think, greater than that of the chromatic mural decorations by which it has been succeeded in the imitation Gothic city churches of to-day. Some of them were lighted by rows of chandeliers entirely of cut glass, splendid with pendent prisms; and when these churches were lit up for service at night the combined effect of the interior and the mass of worshippers on the floor and in the galleries (for churches were then apt to be thronged) was imposing and thoroughly expressive of the Protestant and modern spirit of the service. It may be questioned whether in going back to the mediæval style we have not made a vain attempt to defy congruity. Good examples of such interiors are those of King's Chapel, Boston, to which I shall again refer, and Christ Church in the same city—the latter however being, I believe, much more modern.

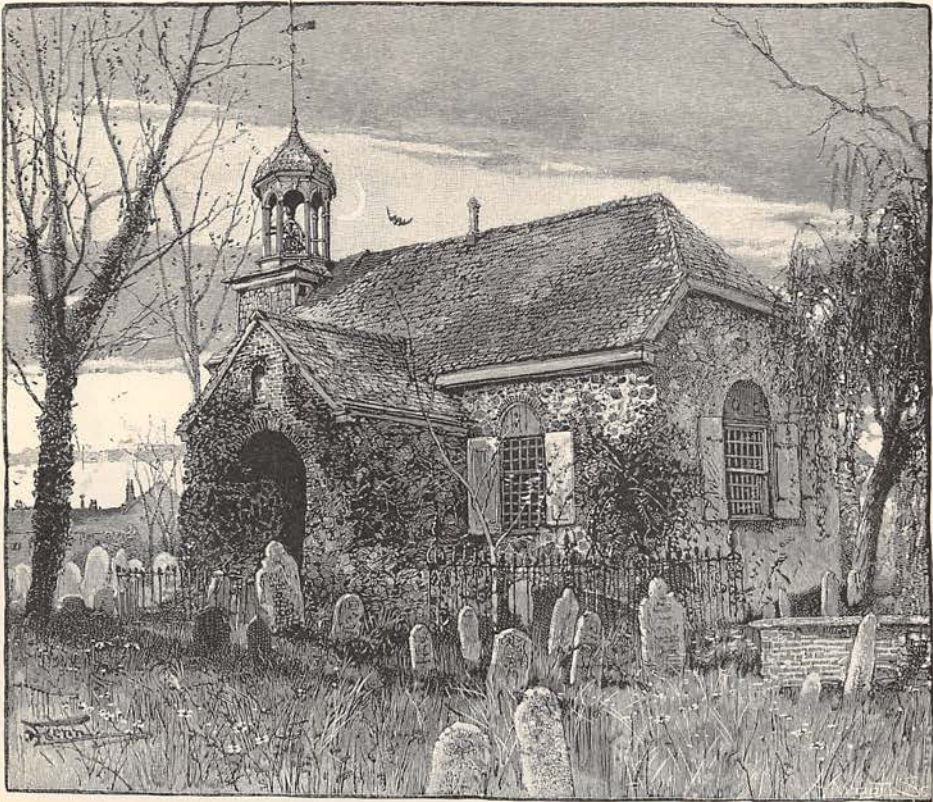
The style of architecture, however, in which Wren attained his eminence, although it is not without a happy fitness to small Protestant town-churches (for in the country its mien of artificial urbanity seems strangely foreign and impertinently obtrusive), falls very short of the higher needs of ecclesiastical architecture upon a larger scale. What is admirable in the small is not admirable in the large: a magnifier discovers defects and emphasizes deformities; we tolerate in a statuette what would be intolerable in a statue; and that which is well suited to a parish church like St. Paul's in New York only attracts attention to its own deformity in a cathedral church like St. Paul's in London. The Wren style, not a natural growth, not a development like the Grecian, the Gothic, the Byzantine, or the Moorish styles, but a composite fabrication, an outcome of the school of Palladio, is wholly lacking in religious expression. It has not a single element of ecclesiasticism. Moreover, it is without any individuality of its own, and expresses nothing but the spirit of conventional respectability and a kind of solid, decent convenience. Such a style in a great cathedral church, in which utility and convenience are not the needs to be supplied, but the function of which is to unite the influences of awe and mystery and beauty, is wholly out of keeping. Wren's style has no elevation, no charm, and only an inferior middle-class sort of dignity.

The London "Builder," in commenting upon "England Without and Within" in terms which certainly should satisfy the crav-



ing vanity of any author, finds yet one grievous fault in that heartily written book—its expression of a very positive non-admiration of St. Paul's (London) and of the modern part of Hampton Court Palace. "Where,"

but would point its irreverent finger at a more celebrated building, which the eminent architect of St. Paul's, in designing it, had in mind, and upon which, in some respects, he improved. It would even venture to say of



CHURCH AT WILMINGTON, DELAWARE.

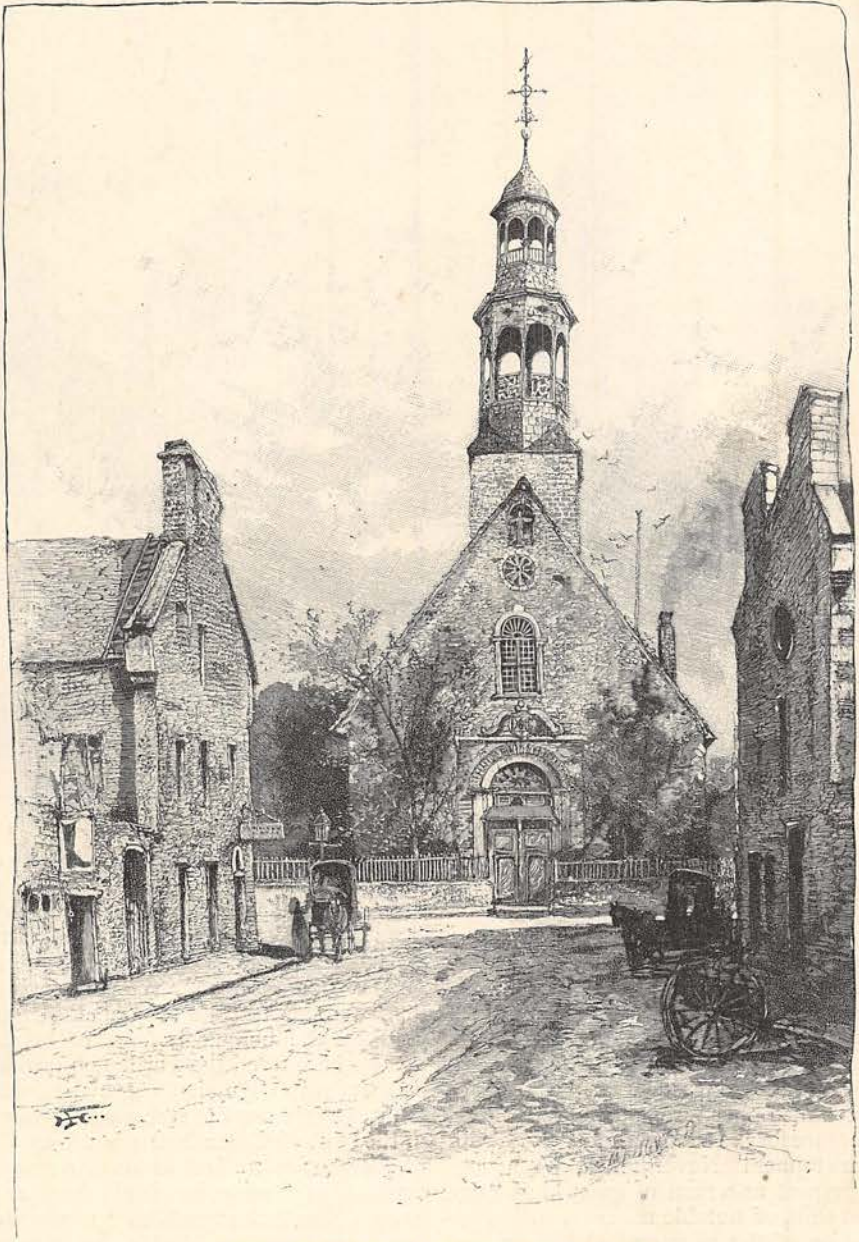
it asks, "is Mr. Grant White's reverence?" And subsequently a contributor to the same publication points out that this irreverent writer, in finding fault with Wren's work, is condemning some of the most important buildings in his own country. Well; and what of that? Criticism which asks not what a thing is, but where it is or whose it is, and which fails to emulate charity in beginning at home, is little to be trusted. And as to reverence for Christopher Wren; as reasonably ask for reverence for the wren without Sir and without Christopher! Nevertheless, Wren commands respect as a man of great knowledge, of great skill, of notable mastery, within certain limits, of the resources of his art, and, chiefly, as a great constructor. But he was an architect without a spark of creative genius, without a touch of poetic feeling, without a sense of the higher beauty. He was the greatest of architectural manufacturers. Moreover, this criticism does not stop at St. Paul's,

St. Peter's at Rome that, magnificent in many respects as it is, as a cathedral church it is a magnificent mistake. The impressiveness of St. Peter's is in its vastness and its splendor; but the gorgeous hemisphere of its mighty dome is wholly void of religious feeling. Buonarotti stole the dome of Bramante, and by the herculean force of his brawny genius he heaved the Parthenon into the air, and its vast Olympian curve dominates not only the city but the surrounding country, as if the soul of Cæsar had passed on through the centuries to find at once a monument and an expression in visible form and substance. But that expression is purely material, mundane, heathen. Within, too, this is even more manifest than without. He who gazes upward into that colossal concave feels no elevation of soul, no humility of heart, no hushed awe, no mystery, no aspiration; only the wonder which always accompanies the consciousness of a vast inclosed space, with



a vague admiration of the forms and the decoration which themselves lose by their remoteness. For in this respect Wren improved upon his model. His double dome, by which he gained inner beauty without

bodies and the details of both these great basilicas have little which commands intelligent admiration—any admiration except that cheap sort which is easily provoked by bigness, bombast, and blazonry.

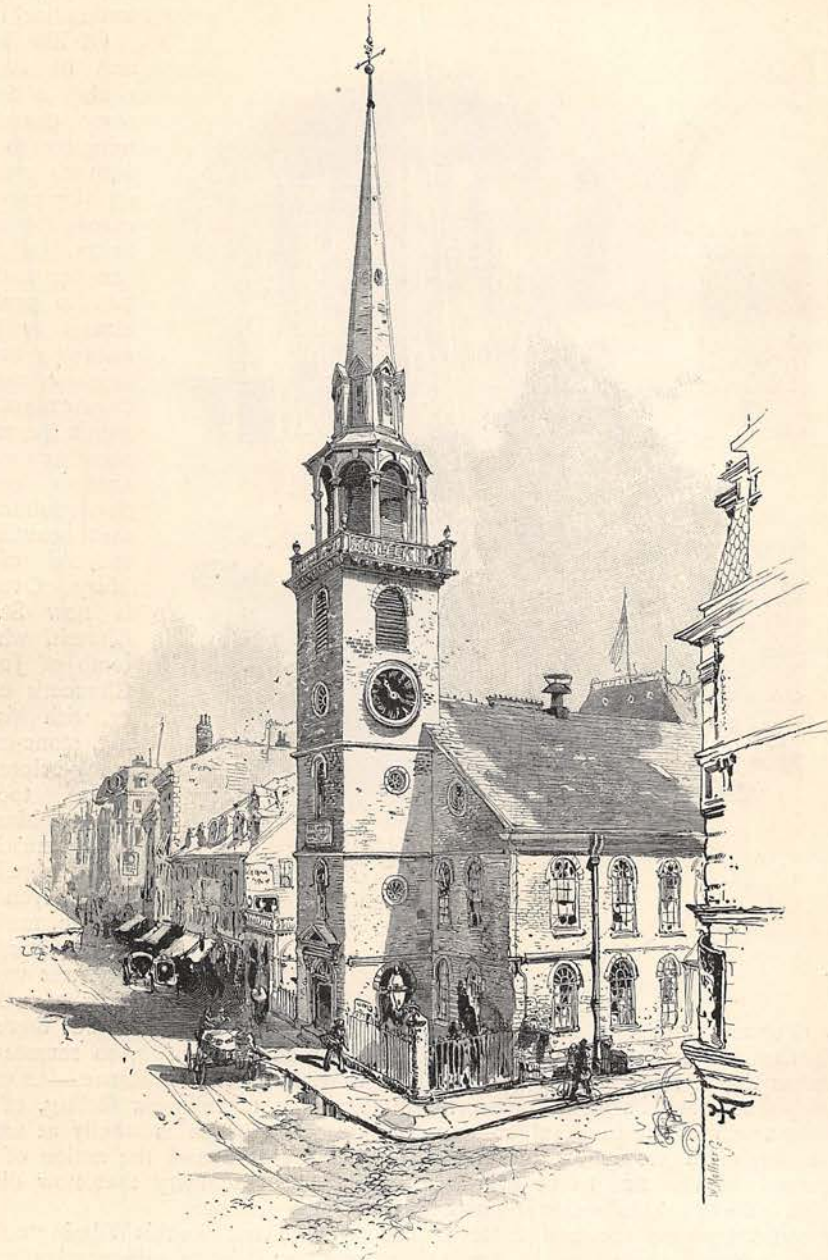


ÉGLISE DE NOTRE DAME DE BONSECOURS, MONTREAL.

losing external grandeur, was a triumph of his great constructive talent. But both St. Peter's and St. Paul's are chiefly domes, and in St. Peter's, except the dome, not much of what we see is Michael Angelo's: the

There are no such domes as these in the United States. The nearest approach to them is that huge mechanical hollow which fitly crowns the Capitol at Washington. But the State House at Boston furnishes, on a much



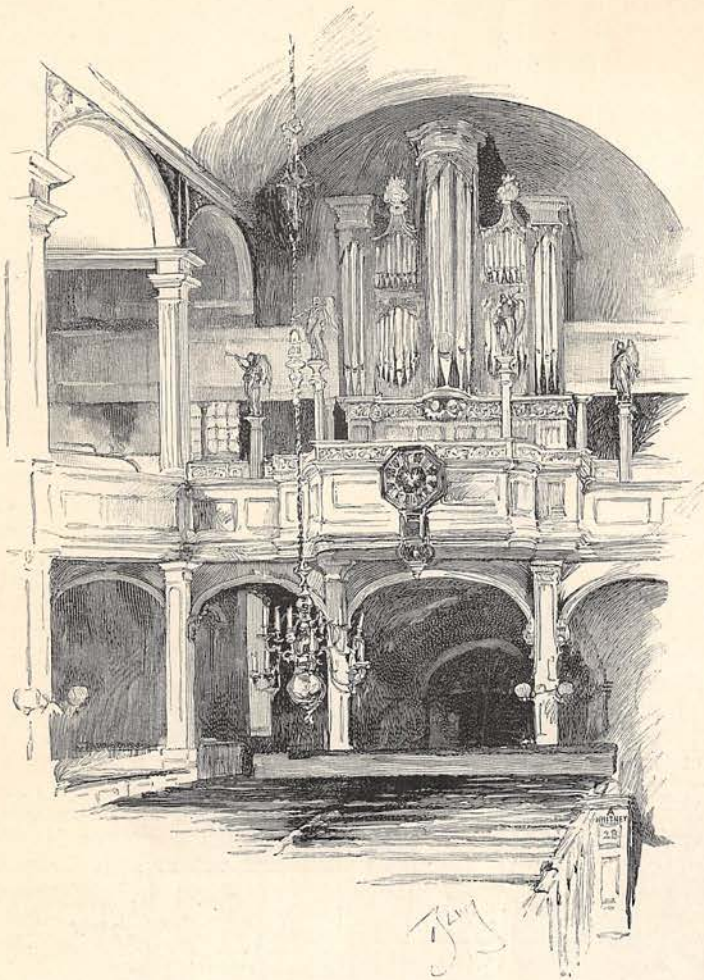


OLD SOUTH CHURCH, BOSTON.

smaller scale, a far better example of the sphered dignity with which this pompous architectural form can rule a region of surrounding country. The dome of the Boston State House is the revered sign and token, seen from afar, of the only true capital city—that is, a seat and center of government, of society, of literature, of art, of commerce—in all “America.” It is indeed a mere protrusion

heavenward of the hub of the universe; the globed and gilded tip of that axis around which all that is best in our Western world revolves, ever has revolved, and it seems ever will revolve, *sæcula sæculorum*. Here this style of architecture has its fit and becoming place. The Boston State House is not a wonderful nor a very beautiful building; but it is worthy of admiration for its expression of dig-





CHRIST CHURCH, BOSTON.

nity, decorum, and eminent respectability. Far be the time when it shall be displaced; but I confess that I myself could spare it more willingly than I could its old predecessor. Compare the two, and see in the elder—smaller, less costly, more provincial, if you will—a character which is not to be found in its grander, gilt-domed, hill-crowning successor. You could imagine the new State House designed according to a formula at any time, by almost any clever, thoroughly educated architect; the old one seems to be the natural product of a period. We need not be told that Holmes's "Last Leaf" must have fluttered gayly about it in the spring of his life, and probably drooped near it in the autumn, to be borne past it, withered and lifeless; to mingle with earth from which it had sprung. If I should live long in the neighborhood of that old State House, I should come to love it dearly. I cannot imagine the new one as

the object even of a Platonic attachment.

Of like loveliness, and of even greater charm, is the little old stone church at Wilmington, in Delaware, with its great welcoming side porch, its truncated gable, and its open belfry, in which a dainty decency and fitness attain to prettiness and almost to beauty. A railway deforms its neighborhood, and the engine roars and shrieks within the sound of the preacher's voice, just as another does in London (Southwark), past that beautiful relic of the old priory of St. Mary Overy, which is now St. Saviour's Church, where is the tomb of John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary, with his effigy lying, stone-canopied, in many-colored state, and where, too, Fletcher and Massinger and Shakspeare's brother Edmund were laid to final rest. Even this parish church, made out of a mere transept of the priory, was venerably old long before the Wilming-

ton church was built; but there is a spirit common to the two, so remote from each other in time and distance,—an expression of stability, of religious feeling, of sober, still decorum, which is wholly at variance with the presence and the action of the "rapid transit" machinery that now disturbs their solemn vicinage.

Somewhat like this Wilmington church, but quaint, daintier, primmer, is the little *Église de Notre Dame de Bonsecours*, which, with bare, sharp gable, surmounted, but not mitigated, by its double open belfry, cleaves the air at the end of Bonsecours street in Montreal—a genuine bit of unpretending work. Its modest door-way is really beautiful; and seen through its vista of sound, respectable home-looking houses, it has the air of a demure, sweet-natured old rustic spinster, conscious of worth, but also not very cheerfully conscious of a lack of grace and elegance.



Eminent among the very few of our old sacred edifices which have not been (like the whooping aborigines—the real “Americans” — who once roamed over their sites) improved off the face of the earth, are the King’s Chapel and the famous “Old South Church,” in Boston. The former—a stone structure rich in the soft and somber harmonies of hue which are found only upon the palette of Old Time, that prince of colorists—is elegant, and,

in peril? It would seem that its days are numbered. But there should be mourning in Boston when the “Old South” is taken away; and I verily believe that some genuine tears will be secretly shed on that sad occasion. It is the perfect model of a New England “meeting-house,” of the highest style in the olden time. Bare of the beauty of architectural detail, it delights the eye by its fine symmetrical proportion; and its oc-



KING'S CHAPEL, BOSTON.

although small even for a city parish church, has true dignity. Standing in its well populated church-yard, an historical link between the orthodoxy of the last century and the free thought which the close of that century first awoke in the general mind, it is perhaps the most interesting, as it is certainly one of the most pleasing, of our few ecclesiastical monuments. It should never be removed, and it probably never will be; for it is in Boston, where there is still some capacity of love, some remnant of reverence, for what may be lovable and reverend, except money and the signs of money.\*

And yet is not the life of the “Old South”

\* King's Chapel was built for Church of England (Protestant Episcopal) service; but its congregation gradually drifted into Socinianism, and modified their Common Prayer Book into what is known as the King's Chapel Liturgy. This pretty church is the cradle of Unitarianism in the United States.

tagonal spire, springing from an airy, eight-arched loggia, is one of the finest of its kind, not only in this country, but in the world. Nothing more light and elegant and graceful can be found, unless in the finest Gothic work. Not a “Wren” spire (indeed an architect would scout the notion), it yet suggests Wren to the unprofessional eye; but I have never seen a spire of Sir Christopher's which equaled it in grace and lightness. A peculiar interest attaches to it because it is of home growth. It is not a copy nor an imitation of anything else. It is the conception of a Yankee architect—the outgrowth and development of the steeple-belfry of the rural New England meeting-house. New England may well be proud of it. Needless to tell here of the connection of this church with Boston's part in the struggle, at first for freedom and at last for independence, more than a century ago. No one building in the country so



unites religious and patriotic associations. Its removal would not be a sin (for it may become a necessity), but it would be a grievous misfortune that would be felt by every son of the scattered New England stock between the world's two great oceans.

The interiors of these old meeting-houses, the very best of them, it must be admitted, are devoid of all semblance of beauty. In them the hard, utilitarian, unsentimental spirit of the old New England life and the old New England Puritanism was fully expressed; but intuitively, and without purpose. There no charm of color, there no grace of form, there no monuments of departed notability were allowed to divert the eye and mind from religious business. They were bare, galleried halls, in which mass meetings were held for worship. In our day many of them have been modified, softened, and enriched, and most of them, indeed, have given place to structures the comfort of which would have offended the ascetic souls of the "Fathers," not less than their pleasing forms and colors would, or the profane "box o' whistles" which has taken the place of the bleating pitch-pipe of the old chorister. Better, indeed, that they should be taken down with solemn and reverent hands, and become mere memories, like old St. George's in Beekman street, New York, than that they should have the fate of two famous churches in the same city, Orville Dewey's Unitarian chapel and the Murray street church, known to our grandfathers as "Dr.

Mason's," in which that celebrated divine, whose fame reached Europe, thundered the denunciations of Calvinistic theology when New York was a "Sabbath"-keeping town, in which chains were stretched across the streets on each side of every considerable church, in order that no passing vehicle might disturb either the devotions or the slumbers of the worshipers. Both these somewhat famous churches have become theaters of the "variety show" sort. The Dewey Theater stands (with a new brick façade hiding its massive stone masonry) on its old site in Broadway, opposite Waverley Place. Dr. Mason's church was taken down carefully and carried up-town, where it was rebuilt so carefully, stone by stone, in Eighth street, opposite Lafayette Place, that it seemed to have been transported upon Aladdin's carpet. Abandoned by its congregation, it passed into the hands of the Roman Catholics. Abandoned in turn by them, it became the property of Mr. A. T. Stewart, who used it as a factory of upholstery. Now it is a theater, in which all the young rapsallions of the upper Bowery region who can compass fifteen cents see male jugglers and female jugglers, and listen to dramatized penny dreadfuls and dime novels. Its history is characteristic of the city of which it was once one of the respected landmarks—a center whence radiated truth and purity, and of which it is now one of the pestilent nurseries of vulgarity.

*Richard Grant White.*

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SONG.

THE sunset light is on the sail,  
The water all aglow,  
And on the billows up and down  
The boat rocks to and fro.  
The birds float upward to the sky,—  
Oh, how I long for wings to fly!

The boat has wings,—the birds have wings,  
But none remain for me;  
But wings of kind and loving thought  
And wings of memory.  
On these I come, and still repeat,  
I love, I love, I love you, sweet.

*Mary L. Ritter.*

