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## Understanding the Gothic Revivalist Richard Upjohn

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The Gothic Revival was an important architectural movement of the nineteenth century. It was a result of the nineteenth century Romantic fascination with the Middle Ages. People looked to that era for inspiration in all arts, including architecture.

The United States had no authentic Gothic background, so the architect Richard Upjohn became a key player in the Gothic Revival movement there. He transplanted the style of architecture from his native England to the young nation. Among his many commissions were the Trinity Church and the Church of the Holy Communion, both located in New York City. Both buildings were revolutionary, but were very different in style.

Richard Upjohn (1802-1878) was born in England, immigrated to Boston in 1829, and established an architectural firm in 1834. He relied heavily on his own architectural heritage, including contemporary neo-Gothic. He was influenced by the contemporary British architect A.W.N. Pugin, and owned a copy of his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841). Upjohn was instrumental in implementing Pugin's ideas in the United States. He was also influenced by Ecclesiological societies, which celebrated the Gothic church as a means of teaching doctrine. Upjohn said of church architecture, "The object is not to surprise with novelties in church architecture, but to make what is to be made truly ecclesiastical- a temple of solemnities- such as will fix the attention of persons, and make them respond in heart and spirit to the opening service."<sup>1</sup> He eventually became the preeminent architect of the Episcopal Church, and the first president of the American Institute of Architects.

Upjohn's Trinity Church was constructed between 1841 and 1846 in lower Manhattan. It was built in the Perpendicular Gothic style, considered by many to be the highest form of Gothic. It was directly influenced by Pugin's design of St George's church in Southwark, London, which appeared in *True Principles*. At the time of its consecration, it was considered to be the grandest example of Gothic Revival architecture in the United States. It became a model for countless churches in the country.

The building is rectangular, arranged behind a single tower. This basic pattern was already standard in American Gothic Revival churches, but the Trinity Church is much larger and more ornamented than its predecessors. The building also features a deep chancel, an element Upjohn insisted upon during construction. The magnificent tower (fig. 1) is a landmark in itself on Wall Street in New York City. It is twice as tall as the rest of the building. The spire is ornamented along the ridges and is topped with a cross (not seen in photo). All these elements lend themselves to the Perpendicular Gothic.

During the 1830s and 1840s, lower Manhattan was home to one of the richest Episcopalian parishes in the United States. The parish had the means to construct a grand building like the Trinity Church, but most parishes did not. Churches like the Trinity were rare; most were much more modest in design.

One of these is the Church of the Holy Communion, on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. After the positive reception of the Trinity Church, Upjohn received commissions from all over the East Coast. The Holy Communion, constructed 1844-1845, is only a few miles away from Trinity, but is much smaller and less grandiose.

Upjohn had a substantially smaller budget for this project. He departed from Perpendicular Gothic and built in the Decorated style. Upjohn's design of the building came primarily from traditional English parish churches. The building is characterized by brownstone masonry; the colors in the bricks provide the only significant ornamentation in the building. The floor plan is asymmetrical, a dramatic departure from mainstream church design. The tower is located at the corner of the Latin cross-shaped building instead of at the center of the façade. In fact, it is almost difficult to determine the orientation of the building, as there is little significant embellishment to distinguish the front entrance from the side entrances.

The tower (fig. 2) is a striking example of the difference between the Trinity Church and the Church of the Holy Communion. It has no spire, and is topped with a castellated conclusion. It remains simple and unadorned, unlike the delicate ornamentation found on the Trinity Church. The stone masonry varies dramatically in terms of color and consistency between the two churches. The height of the tower at Holy Communion is much less dramatic. It is less than a storey taller than the rest of the building.

Both churches feature buttressing and pointed windows in their towers, elements inherent in the Gothic tradition. But the disparity of wealth between their respective parishes prevented more stylistic similarities. Richard Upjohn was able to do remarkable things with the funds available to him. Therefore, while dramatically different from each other, the churches were both remarkable within the context of American Gothic Revival architecture.



Fig. 1. The spire at the Trinity Church  
Photos by Ashley Allen.



Fig. 2. The tower at the Church of the Holy Communion

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Andrews, *American Gothic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 63.