

A Little Architectural History of St. Philip's Church



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Preface

The church has been a very important element in New England villages since the Puritans arrived in the early 17th century. Churches were the tallest structures in the community; their steeples could be seen across the countryside, an ever-present reminder of the Holy Spirit for people going about their daily lives. The St. Philip's Episcopal Church steeple is still visible from the harbor and all roads leading into the heart of town. This church stands in a venerated Wiscasset neighborhood listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Our congregation and leaders are doing their best to take care of this beloved historic building. In 1973, the church community committed to major structural repairs, completed the following year. In 1994, we raised enough money to pay for the restoration of the tower and steeple. In 2016, thanks in large part to a Maine Steeples Fund grant, the belfry was waterproofed and the steeple painted.

The craftsmanship, faith, purpose, love, and hard-earned money invested in St. Philip's Church have made it an essential part of Wiscasset's past, present, and future. It continues to be a home for worshippers and has grown a dynamic community ministry including the Help Yourself Shelf food pantry, the Bargain Basement thrift store, the Feed Our Scholars program supporting local elementary school children in need, and shelter for people without housing.

All are welcome to join us in worship and/or participate in our outreach programs.

The People of St. Philip's Church

A Little Architectural History of St. Philip's Church Wiscasset, Maine

How St. Philip's came to be:

St. Philip's Episcopal Church sprang to life in 1856 in an abandoned Calvinist Baptist meetinghouse on a height of land in Wiscasset village. The Baptists had laid the building's cornerstone on June 2, 1822, but after 24 years, they closed its doors. A group of Episcopalians seeking a home for their budding congregation bought the meetinghouse and a 50-square-rod lot of land with money they'd raised from the sale of future pews and



Postcard of St. Philip's rectory, c. 1900.



Fassett's St. Philip's Church and Rectory,
Hodge Street, Wiscasset, photographed c. 1890

contributions from the Ladies Sewing Society. So, St. Philip's began.

In 1866, full of confidence from 10 years' growth, the St. Philip's vestry approached New England architect Francis H. Fassett, inviting him to design an interior and exterior make-over of the austere meetinghouse. Having bought the lot just north of the

church, where Wiscasset's town hall had stood before it burned, the vestry also asked Fassett to design a rectory for the site. On Hodge Street's crest, these buildings still stand.

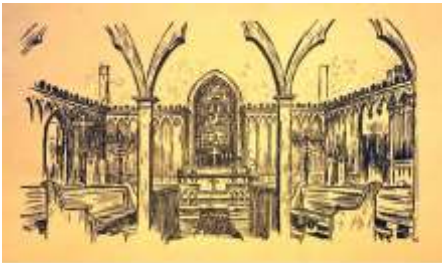
Who was Francis Fassett?

Francis H. Fassett (1823-1908) was a native son of Bath, Maine. At 18 years old, he found work as a carpenter and draftsman for Bath architect and builder Isaac Cole. He went on to study architecture on his own in Boston and New York and, in 1868, spent four months in Europe seeing cathedrals, churches, and other great historical buildings, which inspired his own



Photograph (September 1891) of the St. Philip's presbytery decorated for a harvest festival.

work for the rest of his life. Fassett became "the state's most prolific 19th-century architect," wrote architectural historian Rosalind K. Magnuson. He designed "400 homes and buildings throughout the state, with particular



Drawing (c. 1940) of the St. Philip's interior with the rood screen and choir in front of the altar

influence in Portland."* While he followed national and international architectural trends, "his ecclesiastical designs were distinctly his own, and his clients included all

of the major denominations in Maine,” Magnuson noted. Fassett, who had offices first in Bath and later in Portland and Boston, designed important buildings in the Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, and Romanesque styles across New England. While many are gone, many still exist. His work helped shape Maine’s visual identity. He designed some of Portland’s most iconic Gilded Age edifices, including the Baxter Library (1888), the John B.



Fassett’s residence (1866), Pine Street, Portland.

Brown Memorial Building (1881), Fassett’s own Pine Street residence (1876), the Mellen E. Bolster house (now The Francis hotel and spa) (1881), and the Williston-Immanuel Church (1877), one of his five Portland churches. Several of his facades grace Bath’s Front Street and his stately Sagadahoc County Courthouse keeps watch over the city. Fassett’s town hall for Brunswick, with its soaring clock tower, was torn down in the 1960s.

Fassett’s vision for St. Philip’s

He chose to remake St. Philip’s Church in the Gothic Revival style that shaped other important contemporaneous churches including Richard Upjohn’s St. Paul’s Church and First Parish Church in Brunswick. At 43 years old, Fassett was relatively young; this was one of his earliest significant projects.



Fassett's Maine General Hospital (built between 1871-1892), which evolved into the Maine Medical Center, Portland

Both church and rectory were to be made of wood, allowing Fassett to embellish them with ornamentation that was extraordinary for a small Maine village of that era but also affordable. He added a 200-square-foot narthex (foyer) to the east side of the old building, creating a formal entrance. This also serves as the base supporting the tower, topped by an octagonal *tempietto* housing the belfry and, above it, a graceful steeple holding a hand-carved, gilded cross 90-feet above Hodge Street. Twin doors with Gothic windows above them and ornate trim around them, at the top of a flight of wide steps, accentuated the importance of the entry and drew one's attention up toward the heavens.



Fassett's Portland Public Library. (1887-1888)

High points inside

Fassett chose to create an intimate sacred space inside using dark-stained pine wood paneling, notable for the

hand-carved *fleur-de-lis* decorating the top of the presbytery panels and the rood screen. He designed leaded, diamond-paned lancet windows (typical of the Gothic style) filled with handmade French glass panes in shades of rosy-gray. The pews were hand-painted *faux bois* to look like oak grain. The rectory complemented the church architecture and is an exceptional example of residential Gothic Revival board-and-batten architecture.

Above the altar, there is a modest but beautiful stained-glass window showing the Nativity, given to the church in the early 1920s. Church records of the time attribute the window to the world-renowned Louis C.

Tiffany Company in New York City. (Tiffany windows of the same period adorn several other Maine churches, including Fassett's South Parish Congregational Church in Augusta; and ecclesiastical, civic, commercial, and residential buildings across the United States. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York exhibits several Tiffany windows.)



Detail of Portland Public Library entrance. (1888-1889)

In 1918, an organ built by the E. M. Skinner Company of Boston, the great organ-maker of the day, was given to St. Philip's. This organ, Skinner Opus #282, is listed in the National Register of Historic Instruments. Other Skinner organs stand in St. Luke's Cathedral in Portland, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, Yale University, and elsewhere. St. Philip's spent \$63,000 to undertake a complete restoration of the organ in 2001, so its rich voice continues to fill the nave.



*To learn more about Francis Fassett's influence, see "Francis Fassett on the Portland Peninsula" (2018) by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Maine State Historian.



St. Philip's Episcopal Church, circa 2020