



FREELY GIVEN

The story of a Sparkill landmark and its famous architect

Christ Episcopal Church • Sparkill, NY 10976 • First Edition





“

be content to

labour in GOD's
service

without care for your personal
fame...”

- AUGUSTUS WELBY NORTHMORE PUGIN (1812-1852)

Ring the bell in St. Mary's Chapel prior to Sunday Eucharist, date unknown.

On the cover: the sanctuary at Christmas in an undated photograph, circa 1930.

Introduction

"In the future," Andy Warhol once said, "everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." That future is arguably here. We live in an age of Facebook and Twitter; of Survivor and American Idol. Supermarket tabloids thrive on a steady stream of subjects who are "famous for being famous." And for a large number of ordinary people, achieving wide recognition for no particular set of accomplishments has risen to the status of a life goal.

The need for recognition, it may be argued, is universal - something all human beings crave from birth. But the fact is, this wasn't always true. At least not here.

What follows is the story of a small local church that came into being through the sheer persistence and determination of a small band of people for whom honor or recognition - at least an earthly one - was not the ultimate end. Not only does this church wind up surviving the odds: its very birth was against the odds.

The selfless mindset of the people you will meet on these pages seems almost alien to-day. Indeed, this story's biggest hero was self-effacing to a fault. His biggest gift - the church building itself - was apparently never noted in a public manner. There was no announcement in the newspaper, no plaque on the wall. His gift was quite anonymous, having been mentioned just once, in an uncirculated handwritten history that dates to 1884. That history was soon filed away.

Only in 2010, when this history was rediscovered within the archives of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, did this story finally see the light, and one man's singular generosity become known.

It emerges, by the way, that this quietly generous gentleman was hardly a private person. Quite the contrary - he was very much a public figure. The man who gave the "gift" of Christ Church went on to become one of the founders of what we know today as the profession of architecture. He was one of the most creative and accomplished people of his time, and we think you will learn to treasure his talent as much as we do.

To appreciate his story, however, it's first necessary to set the stage.

The first years

Christ Church Piermont was organized on March 1, 1848, and officially incorporated six weeks later, on April 10. It was the original Episcopal congregation in Rockland County.

The parish's first home was in a Piermont warehouse known as the Lime Kiln building, the precise location of which remains a mystery. A local attorney, Thomas E. Blanch, volunteered to purchase the structure from Eleazer Lord (1788-1871), the founding president of the Erie Railroad and perhaps Piermont's pre-eminent figure of the time. (The Diocese of New York favored Piermont for the establishment of a parish because of its prospects, as the Erie's eastern terminus, for becoming a prosperous, fast growing community.)

"After the opening of the Erie railroad, some Episcopalians were attracted to Piermont from New York to spend the warm season," reports The Church Journal of August 17, 1864. Hence the need for a worship space.

The first priest associated with Christ Church was the Reverend William F. Walker, who settled on Piermont Hill (now Clausland Mountain), near an unnamed boarding house. "When Rev. Walker came it was claimed that an Episcopal church should be organized," a church history states.

Blanch acquired the title to Lime Kiln for just \$250, or roughly \$6000 today. He partitioned the structure, reserving the middle floor for Christ Church, and devoting the remainder to apartments.

Fr. Walker found a second-hand organ that could be purchased for just \$100 (about \$2500 in 2010 dollars). While Blanch fronted the cost for the instrument, the fledgling parishioners passed the hat and absorbed the cost of the organ's transportation, installation, and tuning.

Shortly thereafter, church records state, "Mrs. Anne G. Quackenbus then thought a Communion Service to be needed, and after speaking to a few of the ladies on the subject, purchased the Cup and Paten now in use."

Fr. Walker did not stay long. He left the parish shortly after this flurry of activity, probably because the small congregation could not support him. He decamped for Humphreysville (now Seymour), Connecticut. His replacement, the Rev. John Caulfield Sterling, also stayed only a year. But before departing, Fr. Sterling recommended the Rev. Solomon G. Hitchcock, a native of Amenia, N.Y., as his successor.

The terms of Fr. Hitchcock's call were what was then called a pulpit sharing arrangement. He would officiate at Christ Church, but also "ride the circuit" among a number of nascent Episcopal parishes on behalf of the Diocese of New York's Missionary Society, which appointed him Missionary to Rockland County. Fr. Hitchcock began his duties in the Autumn of 1849, in Advent.

Hitchcock very much wanted to give Christ Church a proper, permanent home. Under his leadership, in 1851, there was a serious attempt to raise funds for construction of a church building. It proved unsuccessful. Piermont at the time was still very much a community of railroad laborers and transients.

"The population of the place is so changeful and unabiding that they feel little inclined to tax themselves for the erection of a church," Christ Church's 1855 Parochical Report ruefully noted.

So, Christ Church would spend the final decade before the Civil War still worshipping in an old warehouse. It was about this time, however, that the principal figure in our story was preparing to enter the picture.

About Charles Babcock



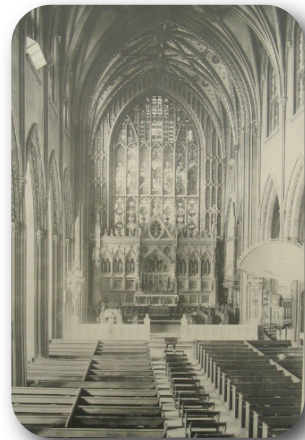
Charles Babcock (1829-1913), son of an Episcopal priest, was born in Ballston Spa, N.Y., and graduated from Union College, a private liberal arts college in nearby Schenectady. He gained experience in architecture as an apprentice in the renowned firm of Richard Upjohn, perhaps the leading religious architecture firm of its era. Upjohn & Company designed Manhattan's Trinity Church and some thirty other churches and cathedrals in the mid 19th century.

Babcock married Upjohn's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, and in 1853, at the age of 24, became a full partner in the Upjohn firm at the very height of its prominence.

Religion was an integral part of Upjohn's practice, and the young Babcock was deeply influenced by Upjohn's interest in Gothic Revivalism. Both Upjohn and Babcock were followers of the Ecclesiological Movement in church architecture, which held that good liturgy and good architecture were two sides of the same coin, and that the Gothic style represented church architecture's highest ideals.

One of the progenitors of the Ecclesiological Movement was Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), the British architect who helped design the Houses of Parliament. Pugin promoted architecture as a noble calling. "Above all," he wrote, "if you intend to build churches, dismiss every mercenary or selfish thought, be content to labour as in GOD'S service without care for your personal fame."

Answering this call to "labour in God's service," Babcock was a very busy man who became something of a 19th century road warrior. He was the Upjohn firm's johnny-on-the-spot, supervising many of its projects on-site as Upjohn himself



struggled under a heavy workload and health problems in the 1850s.



There were, of course, many dozens of congregations that could not afford stone and stained glass churches - let alone the Upjohn firm's design fees. Cognizant of this need, Babcock drew most of the illustrations for Upjohn's book, *Rural Architecture*, published in 1852. *Rural Architecture* includes the plans for a straightforward, relatively inexpensive, board and batten church (see illustration from the book at left). Churches of this simple "Carpenter

Gothic" design still dot the landscape today, from

Maine south to Virginia and west to Kansas.

It was not long before Babcock - still only in his 20's - began developing a reputation of his own. Clients began addressing him directly, and repeatedly, for assistance. He began designing private homes for the wealthy as well as churches, and it seemed that the more work he did, the more demand there was for his talent.

The year 1858, however, was something of a watershed in Babcock's life. Perhaps it was the strain of managing multiple projects across such a wide area; or perhaps his constant work with the angles (and angels) of Gothic architecture nurtured a deep spiritual yearning within the young man. For whatever reason, at the age of 29, Babcock abruptly left the thriving and prosperous Upjohn practice - and began studying for the priesthood.

As it happens, the late 1850s - the time of Babcock's life change - was right around the time that things were beginning to stir again at Christ Church.

Stymied efforts to build

Christ Church's second attempt to build a church coincided with the 1859 opening of the Northern Railroad, an early passenger line which connected Piermont with Hoboken and Jersey City. This fundraising attempt, too, concluded without success.



Interestingly, both the 1851 and 1859 building campaigns appear to have involved direct pleas for aid to Trinity Church (left), the original Anglican church in New York City and one of the city's wealthiest parishes to this day. It is said that Trinity declined, both times, on the grounds of "pecuniary embarrassments" (a 19th century euphemism for "sorry, no money"). This may not be as miserly as it sounds: in the late 1840s, the current Trinity Church building had just been constructed (it was designed by Upjohn), and early records refer to a "flood of applications" for help from small congregations. One contemporaneous source says Trinity had to deal with a "succession of knockings for aid at its thronged and beleaguered doors."

Something had to give, though. Piermont was finally becoming a destination - albeit not the one the Diocese of New York had envisioned. Instead of a railroad hub, Piermont suddenly began to attract attention from the well-to-do as a potential summer retreat.

This was welcome news, since for much of the prior decade, Piermont's future had been very much in doubt. Almost immediately after the Erie Railroad established the historic land route between the Hudson River (at Piermont) and Lake Erie (at Dunkirk), the issue was raised: why not move the eastern terminus south, to Jersey City, where it will be directly across the Hudson River from Manhattan? Speculation about whether this move would take place injected what today might be called an "air of uncertainty" into the local real estate marketplace.

The 1859 opening of the Northern Railroad changed that equation. Finally, according to the 1864 Church Journal, “Episcopalians from New York were inspired with confidence to come up and buy, or build country residences.”

The audience needed to get the local Episcopal parish out of a warehouse setting was finally beginning to settle in Piermont. And initially, that audience seemed motivated. “They could not live in their own ceiled houses, while the ark of God abode in curtains,” the Journal reported.

But the time was still not ripe. The following year, 1860, Christ Church tried for a third time to raise funds for a new church building. This attempt also failed.

A turning point

In that same year of 1860, Charles Babcock, now studying for the Episcopal priesthood, became a deacon and established a ministry at St. John the Evangelist in Barrytown, N.Y., a hamlet in Dutchess County near Red Hook. Christ Church was still worshipping at Lime Kiln. Fr. Hitchcock, now in his twelfth year as rector of a warehouse, continued to “ride the circuit” to other parishes in need of a priest.

Interestingly, one of those other parishes was also in dire need of a building. St. John’s Church was located in a bustling iron mining hamlet in Orange County known as Greenwood (near present-day Arden, not far from the Harriman exit on the New York State Thruway).



St. John’s was spearheaded by Robert and Peter P. Parrott, who invented the Parrott Gun and Parrott Rifle (at left) used extensively in the Civil War. They owned the nearby Greenwood Iron Works, which produced the iron for the weapons’ manufacture.

By the time Fr. Hitchcock organized a mission at Greenwood in 1852, Robert Parrott’s wife, Mary, had already established a Sunday school, with 50 students in attendance. Hitchcock began offering Sunday services in the foundry for ironworkers and their families.

So now, Fr. Hitchcock was now presiding at two congregations that needed a church building. He was also a man with very little free time. Greenwood, about 30 miles northwest, was at least a 90-minute fast carriage ride from Piermont. He had also committed to doing services, on weekdays and occasionally Sundays, in places like Spring Valley, Sloatsburg, Monroe (NY) and Ringwood (NJ).

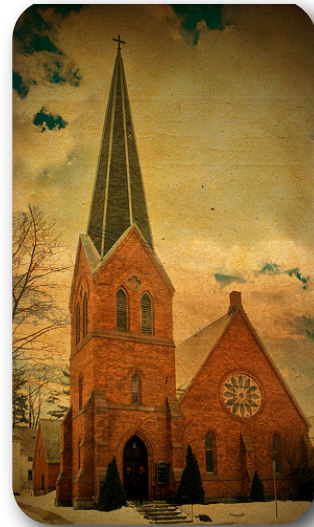
Chances are Hitchcock was in the market for help - in the form of a deacon.



As it happens, Charles Babcock was not just a deacon. He was still designing churches. Upon arriving at Barrytown, he taught math in nearby Annandale-on-Hudson, at St. Stephen's College (which today is known as Bard College) - and drew the plans for St. Stephen's Chapel on the Annandale campus (left).

Around this time, Babcock also designed his first Christ Church – this one in his hometown of Ballston Spa (pictured at right), completed in 1861 at a cost of \$10,000.

It's unclear exactly how Fr. Hitchcock learned of Charles Babcock. But Babcock's papers show that he left Barrytown and arrived in Greenwood as Missioner in 1862. Perhaps he had heard that St. John's needed a building. Perhaps he had an eye toward some kind of permanent assignment in Greenwood when he finally became a priest.



Whatever the case, Hitchcock and Babcock clearly hit it off upon the latter's arrival. The following year, 1863, Babcock designed a beguiling fieldstone Gothic church for St. John's, which still stands in Arden (at left). He was now only months from his ordination as a priest.

"Beautiful plans," Fr. Hitchcock surely told him.

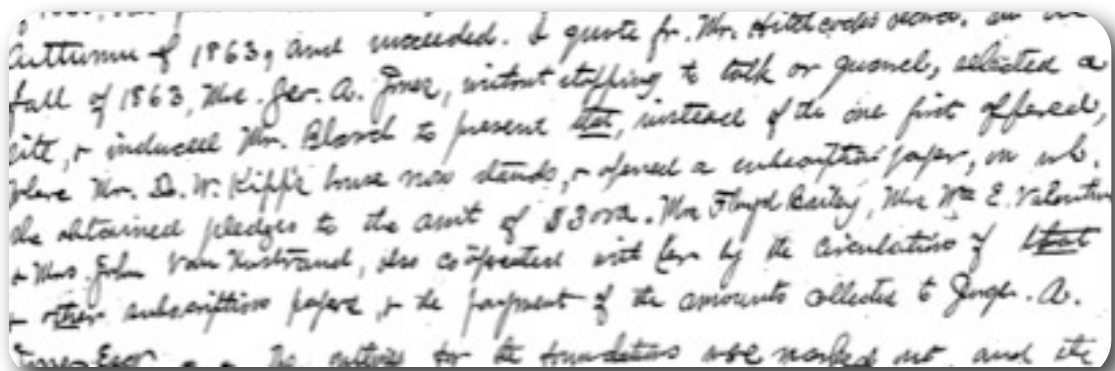
"Well, Hitchcock," we can imagine Babcock replying... "now that this little project is well on its way... doesn't your church need a building too?"

"Without talk or quarrel"

There is no record of the conversations between Fr. Hitchcock and Charles Babcock about Christ Church. All we know is that in 1863 - the year of the Battle of Gettysburg, the year the tide turned in the war, and the year that Deacon Babcock drew plans for St. John's in Greenwood - there was finally real movement, and even a sense of urgency, to the Christ Church building campaign.

"In the fall of 1863," Fr. Hitchcock writes, "Mrs. George A. Jones, without stopping to talk or quarrel, selected a site" on the Piermont-Sparkill border, with the rear of the property on a crest overlooking Sparkill Creek, known in those days simply as the Sparkill (a Dutch term meaning "spruce creek" or "fir creek"). The record indicates the property was owned by attorney Thomas E. Blanch, who had first purchased the Lime Kiln warehouse from Eleazer Lord.

Mrs. Jones, a Christ Church parishioner, was the wife of another local attorney. We know little about her today, but we may surmise that she was a woman of considerable persuasive power.



Autumn of 1863, and succeeded. I quote fr. Mr. Hitchcock's record, on the fall of 1863, Mrs. G. A. Jones, without stopping to talk or quarrel, selected a site, & induced Mr. Blanch to present that, instead of the one first offered, where Mr. D. W. Kipp's house now stands, & secured a subscription paper, on which she obtained pledges to the amt of \$3000. Mrs. Floyd Bailey, Mrs. E. Valentine & Mrs. John Van Hookland, also contributed with her by the circulation of that & other subscription papers & the payment of the amounts collected to Joseph A. Babcock. The entries for the fundations are marked out and etc.

According to the section of the handwritten history reproduced above, Blanch had apparently wanted to donate another piece of property, "where Mr. D.W. Kipp's house now stands." But Mrs. Jones somehow "induced" Blanch to "present" the current property, instead of the (parcel) "first offered."

D.W. Kipp was a local bookseller. He is also listed as Treasurer of the Building Fund for the Sparkill A.M.E. Zion Church, which around this time was collecting money to erect a new church building of its own. His house may have been at the present day intersection of Route 340 and Highland Avenue, near the Arbor Hill Nursery, which is still referred to by longtime locals as “Kipp’s Crossing.” It is interesting to contemplate how Christ Church’s future might have been different if this other parcel had been chosen.

Mrs. Jones immediately offered a subscription paper, on which she obtained pledges to the amount of \$3000. Mrs. Floyd Bailey, Mrs. William E. Valentine, and Mrs. John Van Nostrand cooperated with her, by the circulation of that and other subscription papers. The notes collected were held in escrow by her attorney husband, George A. Jones.

Christ Church Sparkill (the new name probably evolved from its perch overlooking the creek, not its location on the edge of the hamlet) was thus almost certainly Charles Babcock’s last design project before becoming a priest.

In July 2010, a request to the Archives of the Diocese of New York turned up a long-forgotten handwritten history of Christ Church, which was used along with other sources to construct this narrative. It was penned in 1884 by then-Rector Rev. Theodore M. Peck. In a day before copying machines (and way before email), Fr. Peck’s history included what he called a “true copy” of an earlier history written by Hitchcock. In part it reads:

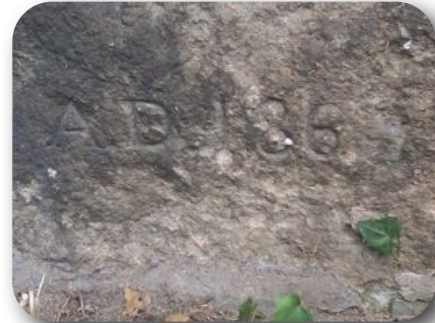
“The architectural designs + drawings were gratuitously furnished by Rev. Charles Babcock of Greenwood, who was kind enough to say that he gave the use of them to the Church in Piermont, in consideration of the missionary services which its Rector had performed for Greenwood + its vicinity.”

In context, therefore, the reason for Charles Babcock’s singular generosity is clear. After his ordination, he would assume the rectorship of St. John’s himself. He clearly felt indebted to Fr. Hitchcock for having been something of a mentor to him, and for nurturing his new parish through all those years of services at the Greenwood Iron Works.

That sentiment, taken perhaps with Pugin’s admonition to “dismiss every mercenary or selfish thought,” appears to have led Charles Babcock to donate the architectural plans to Fr. Hitchcock’s parish - Christ Church.

The new church

The outlines for the foundations were marked out, and the ground broken for Christ Church on April 6th 1864. On July 20 - just a week after the Union Army drove Confederate forces away from Washington, D.C. - the cornerstone (at right, with the now faint inscription reading A.D. 1864), was placed in an aperture left in the wall for its reception.



Charles Babcock was very much hands-on with his craft - “he designed furniture, pulpits, and memorials in the buildings for which he was an architect,” according to one account of his life - and it would have been completely in character for him to pay frequent visits to Christ Church while it was being built in the spring and summer of 1864.

On August 28, Christ Church was opened for the first time, for the celebration of Divine Services, with Fr. Hitchcock presiding. St. John’s in Greenwood was completed a few months after Christ Church, and opened for Services on Christmas, 1864, with Fr. Babcock presiding.



At left is a painting (© 2007 Sue Storey) of how Christ Church Sparkill appears today. The center section is original to 1864. The transept (around 1892) and lych gate (around 1900) were most likely added from plans that Babcock developed himself (see “The Sage Chapel and Christ Church,” below). As for the original building, the entire cost was \$8029.71. Fr. Hitchcock himself gave \$650.00.

Thanks to Fr. Babcock’s generosity in donating the plans, the initial project could be paid off quickly - and, by the summer of 1866, it was. That same summer, a new organ was

bought, and a gallery built for it, at a total expense of \$1302.21. Christ Church was consecrated by the Rt. Rev. Horatio Potter, Bishop of New York, on Sept. 7, 1866.

A flood of gifts accompanied the new church's dedication. A prayer desk, lectern, altar, chancel and ante chancel chairs, library bookcase, and a marble baptismal font were all donated by various individuals and families.

The chancel window, of which no pictures exist and which unfortunately was lost in a later renovation, has a particularly interesting backstory. It was presented on September 11, 1867, by Robert Seaman of New York (1822-1904), who a century after his death merits his own Wikipedia page. Seaman was a millionaire industrialist who is best remembered for his late-life marriage to the pioneering muckraker journalist and proto-feminist Nellie Bly.

The similarities between Christ Church and St. John's in Greenwood (Arden) are striking - from the Medieval Gothic lines to the rough-hewn fieldstone construction. It may be that Babcock used both churches - but especially Christ Church - as templates from which to draw plans for other churches of this period.

Fr. Solomon Hitchcock, who accomplished so much for Christ Church, died on September 14, 1877, after a short illness. Charles Babcock, meantime, had already entered the newest and arguably the most exciting phase of his life. The work he was already doing would forever change the profession of architecture in the United States.

Babcock and the field of architecture

It is unclear how often Babcock visited Christ Church after the new building opened. That can be excused, however. For Fr. Babcock was well on his way to becoming a highly influential figure in American architecture.

On February 23, 1857, Babcock was one of 13 architects who met in Richard Upjohn's office to form what would become the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The group sought to create an architecture organization that would "promote the scientific and practical perfection of its members" and "elevate the standing of the profession." The first steps of this small group would change the profession of architecture in the United States profoundly.

With the notable exceptions of Upjohn, Babcock and their like-minded contemporaries, architecture in America had fallen into something of disarray - the consequence of a young nation, responding to the call of Manifest Destiny, expanding headlong into the hinterlands. "With the severance of ties binding us to the old world... some of the finer things were forgotten," wrote architecture professor Clarence A. Martin. "A gradual decline in the appreciation of the fine arts culminated in the most debased period of American Architecture about the middle of the 19th century."



Until the AIA's founding, "anyone who wished to call him-or herself an architect could do so," the organization's Web site states. "This included masons, carpenters, bricklayers, and other members of the building trades. No schools of architecture or architectural licensing laws existed to shape the calling."

Today, the AIA boasts more than 80-thousand members. It is considered the guardian of the public's trust in the quality of commercial and residential buildings. AIA members adhere to a code of ethics and professional conduct, designed to reflect an architect's dedication to the highest standards in professional practice.

In 1871, Babcock left his post as Rector of St. John's, Greenwood, to found yet another keystone of the new profession: Cornell University's Department of Architecture. Cor-

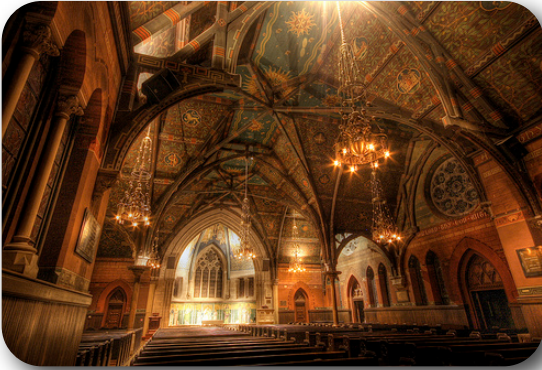
nell is critical to architectural history: it was not only one of the first two schools of architecture in the U.S. (the school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology being the other), but it was the first anywhere to develop a four-year course of study in the profession.

“His task was a tremendous one,” noted Cornell’s Architecture chairman Clarence A. Martin at a 1912 testimonial address in Professor Babcock’s honor. He went on to describe the course in architecture that Babcock had to create from scratch, including a prodigious output of models and drawings, many of which were still in use at the time of his address some some 40 years later:

“Imagine, if you can, one man in a school of architecture of 30 students, teaching history, drawing, design, decoration, heating and ventilating, acoustics, etc., with no material equipment other than a library... Nowadays when we want an illustration we can almost surely find it somewhere, in book, periodical or photograph... I, perhaps, better than any other except Professor Babcock know something of the magnitude of his labors and it seems to me like the building of the pyramids. I marvel that one man could do it.”

Babcock was the Department of Architecture’s only professor until 1880. But he did not forsake his commitment to the Church. He organized a parish on the Cornell campus, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, which held services in the side chapel of Sage Chapel, and served as its rector.

The Sage Chapel and Christ Church



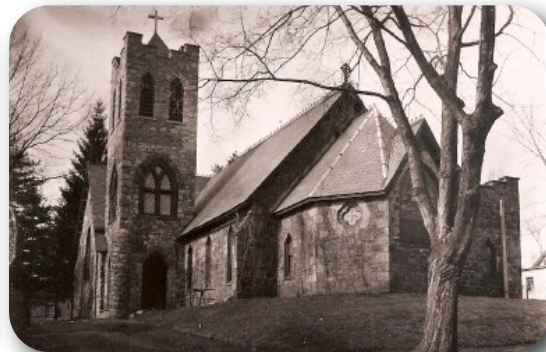
While at Cornell, Babcock designed many of the Ithaca campus's signature buildings.

These include the exquisitely conceived Sage Chapel (1874, at left), which is widely regarded as his masterpiece. "Babcock's details and ornaments are beautifully articulated but the rich surfaces are not overpowering," writes Sara Ethel Goodstein in *Charles*

Babcock: Architect, Churchman and Educator. Kermit C. Parsons, Cornell's Dean of Architecture, quotes the critic Montgomery Schuyler as thinking Sage Chapel and its companion, Sage Hall, were equal to any English Victorian gothic work.

Babcock also refined Sage Chapel over the years; it became a work in progress for the rest of his life. "His designs... were acts of devotion," writes Parsons. "His services were called upon at every stage of this building's evolution until he died."

Babcock's willingness to add to his completed designs, as at Sage Chapel, appears to have allowed Christ Church to expand as seamlessly as it did. It appears likely, for instance, that Babcock was directly involved in the designs of a transept, bell cote and heightening of the bell tower at Christ Church in the late 19th century (see before and after photographs below), and of an ambulatory and lych gate in 1900.



Most interesting is Christ Church's rose window (below left), which bears a dead-on resemblance to both Babcock's pen-and-ink rendering of the window at Sage Chapel (center), as well as the completed chapel on the Cornell campus (right).



At the time of Christ Church's construction, the rose window was located in another building, the Wayside Chapel, still standing on River Road in Grandview. While the search is still on for Babcock's original Christ Church blueprints, it is probable that they included plans for a rose window, which finally became available when the Wayside Chapel was converted to a private residence (right). The Wayside Chapel's architect is unknown.



Sage Chapel's history also offers insight into Babcock's inner character. While "devout, kindly, versatile and erudite," he was by no means a pushover who could be arm-twisted into designing religious structures for free. The anecdote below illuminates the uniqueness of Babcock's decision to donate the plans for Christ Church.

"He was brave in everyday battle standing up to Henry W. Sage (the donor of Sage Chapel)," said Kermit Parsons, at the 1972 bust in Babcock's honor. "Sage believed that Professor Babcock should design Cornell's buildings as a part of his duties as Professor of Architecture.

"Babcock would not (do this), and offered to resign his chair if Sage's demand was not withdrawn. It was."

In addition to Sage Chapel, Babcock designed Sage Hall, Lincoln Hall, Franklin Hall, Olive Tjaden Hall, and the Cornell Armory. He completed two textbooks, *Elementary Architecture* (1876) and *Vaults* (1884). He retired from active service in 1897 with the title Professor Emeritus.

"His quiet, sincere life"

Charles Babcock spent the last 16 years of his life on Cornell's Ithaca, N.Y., campus, remaining active in the affairs of the University. In 1912, a portrait of Babcock was unveiled at a testimonial in his honor. The proceedings read, in part:

"Our first professor has been to us something more than a man of culture, an architect of high attainments and correct ideals, and a competent and sympathetic teacher. The one thing that stands out preeminent, growing stronger in our memories as the years pass and other memories grow dim, is the sturdy, unflinching goodness, the loving, kindly spirit of the man under the cloak of the teacher. Never moralizing, never criticizing, never even seeming to notice the good or evil in the rest of us, his quiet, sincere life and kindly spirit have been and are still influences for good that no man can measure; and to my way of thinking this is the best, most lasting, and most fruitful of all his works, though doubtless the things of which he himself has been the least conscious."



Charles Babcock died on August 27, 1913, at his home on the campus. He was 84 years old. In one of many tributes, he was hailed as "a true friend and genial companion, the finest type of Christian gentleman and scholar - a type which is fast disappearing."

A memorial card concludes thusly:

"His life was like a beautiful discourse which has uplifted the souls of men; his death like the quiet benediction at its close."

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