

5. Statement of Significance—Church of Saint Mary, 438-440 Grand Street.

(Block and Lot includes Church Rectory, cited as 28 Attorney Street, but now on a de-mapped block)

Executive Summary

Long an architectural and cultural beacon within Grand Street’s evolving streetscape, the Church of Saint Mary—now framed by affordable housing towers it initiated—embodies fundamental aspects of New York City history. Celebrating its bicentennial in 2026, the congregation is housed in an 1833 structure



Church of Saint Mary, 438-440 Grand Street. Fieldstone walls from 1833; brick and brownstone facade from 1864. (Photo: D.Wye)

that is the oldest Catholic church in New York; its facade from 1864 was designed by Patrick C. Keely, the Irish-born Catholic architect who dominated church design for decades.

St. Mary’s represents a seminal moment in the history of Catholicism in New York, as the religion began to take hold after a period in which priests were forbidden to even hold Mass. Eventually there would be more Catholics in New York than adherents of any other religion.

St. Mary’s is also linked to the early years of immigration on the Lower East Side, a phenomenon that would eventually swell the population of the neighborhood to historic heights and continue to re-define its ethnic make-up in successive generations.

The congregation of St. Mary’s was founded in 1826 to meet the needs of Irish immigrants. Earlier arrivals from Ireland had most often been Protestant, but it was poorer Irish Catholics who began flocking to the Lower East Side to be near jobs on the docks of the East River, and in its shipbuilding industry. Nativist backlash against Catholic immigrants was intense and led to St. Mary’s first building—a former Protestant church on Sheriff Street—to be burned down. While fire was a daily threat at that time, the burning of St. Mary’s was premeditated. Today the Church is a multi-ethnic parish dominated by a Latino population. Very well-attended Masses are conducted in Spanish and English.

Cultural and Historical Background

The Catholic Church began to expand in New York after the 1784 repeal of an anti-priest law; St Mary's would play a significant role in its early years. The first Catholic congregation was St. Peter's, its church building on Barclay Street dedicated in 1786. (The present St. Peter's on the site dates from 1840.) By 1808, the Catholic population had grown to such an extent that a Diocese was established to encompass not only New York City but all of New York State and also northern New Jersey. St Patrick's on Mott Street opened in 1815 as the Cathedral of the Diocese.

It was at this time, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and its American campaign in the War of 1812, that Irish immigrants began to arrive in large numbers, escaping unemployment and poverty in their homeland. They came at a period of dynamic expansion in America and particularly in New York, where

laborers were in great demand. Ship building and maritime industries bordering the East River on the Lower East Side made this area one of the destinations for new arrivals. The need for a Catholic church in the neighborhood soon became evident. The new parish church was St. Mary's. Founded in 1826, its first location was in a former Presbyterian Church on Sheriff Street.

There was growing hostility toward this influx of Irish Catholics. Tensions arose even with Irish Protestants, known as Orangemen. In 1824 a riot broke out between the two groups in Greenwich Village—an event that was a harbinger of more to come. Nativists, generally, were deeply suspicious of the Catholic Church and its dependence on the Pope. Violence would escalate in the 1830s and 1840s in New York and other cities. In 1936, the Ancient Order of the Hibernians was established here, in part to help protect Catholic churches.

The devastating fire at St. Mary's on Sheriff Street, on November 9, 1831, was an early example of the growing hostilities against Catholics. While no investigation was conducted, reporting at the time established that the fire was premeditated. It was set in three different locations in the building and the church bell was secured so it was impossible to alert fire companies. Several nearby frame buildings were destroyed, and others were badly damaged. The fire even reached the Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Bialastoker



After a fire in its first church, a new St. Mary's in the Greek Revival style was built on Grand Street and dedicated in 1833. This image shows the church in 1845. (Photo: MCNY)

Synagogue) on Willet Street, but it was not severely damaged.

The congregation was anxious to rebuild, and the Church bought a site on Grand Street that had been owned by a former Mayor of New York, Stephen Allen (Mayor from 1821-1824). The new St. Mary's was constructed from fieldstone, with a Greek Revival-style facade. The stone may have been gathered from the remains of nearby Mount Pitt, which was leveled at around this time. The building was dedicated in 1833 and its fieldstone walls, with their tall arched windows, remain today. The façade was updated some thirty years later in 1864. But with a substantial portion of the church intact, St Mary's qualifies as the oldest church in New York (not counting Old St. Patrick's, which was built as a Cathedral). The church has remained basically unchanged in the 160 years since the replacement of its façade, although its surroundings have continually evolved.



The east side of St. Mary's as seen from Ridge Street (now de-mapped), looking toward Grand Street. 1924. (Photo: NYHS-Eugene L Armbruster)

In its early years, St. Mary's was fully integrated into the streetscape, and it has borne witness to all the changes that have occurred in the built environment of the Lower East Side. Upon its dedication in 1833, the church was bounded on its east side by Ridge Street, with a corner location that gave it prominence within the neighborhood; a row of tenements was located to its west.

Throughout the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, immigration patterns changed and this area saw an ethnic succession within the population. What began as an area populated by Irish immigrants evolved with the arrival of Germans, French, Poles, then Italians and, most predominantly, Jews. By the 1950s there was a major influx of Puerto Ricans, who had earlier become United States citizens with the

Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. An increase in air travel after World War II was a further impetus to migration from Puerto Rico.

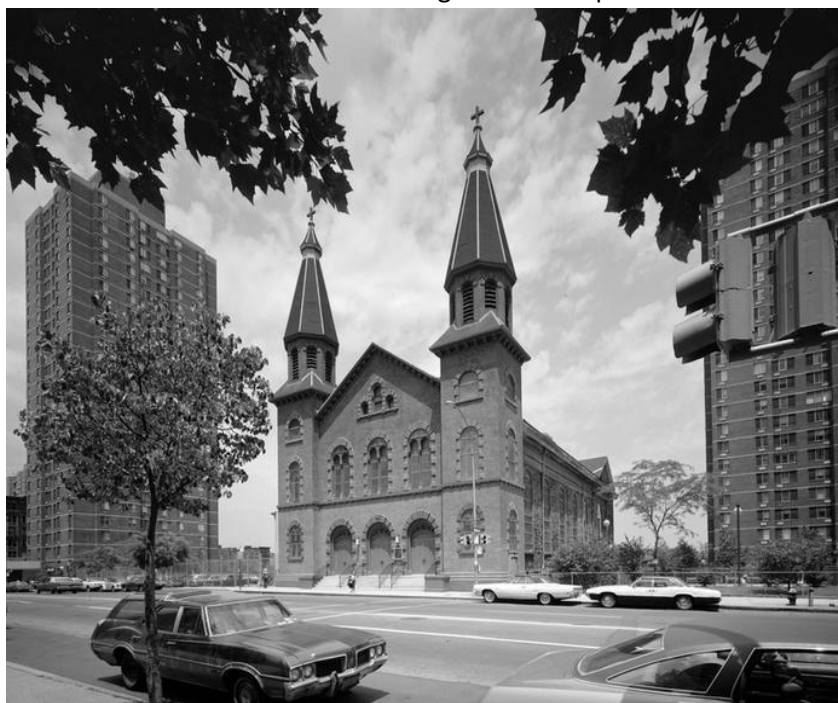


*St. Mary's looking east along Grand Street, n.d.
(Photo: St. Mary's website)*

The most dramatic changes to the built environment of the Lower East Side came in the era of urban renewal. In the 1960s, St. Mary's formed a partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to build affordable housing for people of "all faiths and no faith," in the area surrounding the church.

The organization formed by the Church and HUD was called Grand Street Guild, and in the 1970s it would be responsible for constructing three residential towers of affordable housing around St. Mary's. This led to the de-mapping of the block of Ridge Street along the Church's east side, and the addition of a small park/playground in that area. The stretch of Attorney Street on the block to the west of the Church was also de-mapped, giving the church a singular site in the neighborhood. Currently, a fourth Grand Street Guild building is near completion a block north on Broome Street to the immediate

west of the Church, and a fifth one—on Broome Street to the immediate east—is in the planning stages. These on-going projects are the result of the Guild Street Guild partnership between the city/federal government and Catholic Homes/Catholic Charities. Eventually, St. Mary's Church will be fully surrounded by affordable housing towers.



St. Mary's, c. 1978, showing two Grand Street Guild towers and the de-mapping of blocks on Ridge and Attorney Streets (Photo: MCNY-Edmund Vincent Gillon)



Today, parishioners of St. Mary's form a multi-ethnic group, with the dominance of Latinos. Masses are held in both Spanish and English

Residents of Grand Street Guild buildings sitting on the steps of St. Mary's rectory, 1970s. (Photo: Grand Street Guild website)

Architectural Description



When St. Mary's built its new church in the early 1830s, after the fire in the building on Sheriff Street, the Greek Revival style was selected for its façade—a style that would be at the height of its popularity in the 1830s and 1840s. While Catholic churches would later come to favor the Neo-Gothic style, other Greek Revival churches in New York from this period are St. Joseph's from 1834, St. James from 1836, and St. Peter's from 1840.

In some instances, architects are attributed to Greek Revival buildings, but builders such as carpenters and masons also designed and constructed them following pattern books. That may have been the case for St. Mary's, where there is no attribution to an architect.

It should be noted that before St. Mary's was completed, services were held in the basement area surrounded by its walls of fieldstone—that space is intact and still used today for special events.

An 1833 [MDCCCXXXIII] dedication plaque from original facade of St. Mary's in the vestibule entrance to the sanctuary. (Photo: D. Wye)



St. Mary's, 438-440 Grand Street (Photo: Wikipedia)



windows are in a double-arched, mullioned style that was most frequently used in the Gothic style, but traces back to the Romanesque period.

(Photos: D.Wye)

Some thirty years after the Grand Street church opened, its façade was updated by architect Patrick C. Keely, who dominated Catholic Church architecture for nearly 50 years. Its Greek Revival columns and pediment were replaced by a front that might be called eclectic in style. It has also been referred to as Romanesque Revival, perhaps for its proliferation of arches. However, the tripartite design, with central gable and two square corner towers topped by octagonal steeples, does not resemble the typical Romanesque. The heaviness and monumentality often found in that style is absent. Rather, St. Mary's suggests a welcoming community meeting place constructed from warm red brick and brownstone trim.

The trim includes a dentillated belt course separating the first and second floors, and Gibbs Surrounds on doors and windows. Keystones come to a slight point suggesting the ecclesiastical Neo-Gothic, but that is almost imperceptible. The central gable cornice and those topping each square tower include modillions, and nearly all the



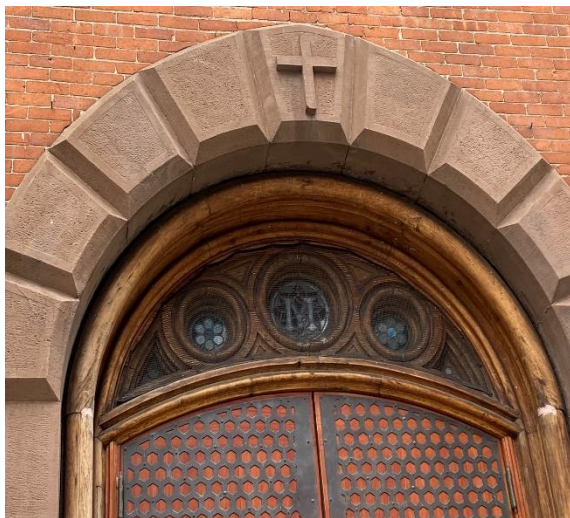


St. Mary's, view of east side. (Photo: D. Wye)



Interior view of stained glass. (Photo: D.Wye)

The original fieldstone walls on the east and west sides of the building each contain a row of stained glass windows with a double-arched mullioned design, framed by a simplified brick version of the Gibbs Surround. Although the photograph of the 1833 church, included earlier, shows the east side windows with what could be stained glass, that seems unlikely. That would represent a very early example in the history of stained glass in New York buildings, which came into wider use in the 1840s and 1850s and carried on into the late 19th century and beyond. The present stained glass windows of St. Mary's have been dated to 1888 and attributed to a major German stained glass studio—Mayer of Munich.



(Photos: D.Wye)



Stained glass details also appear in other areas of the building, including above the three entrance doors to the church—over the central doorway is an “M” for St. Mary.

By the 1870s, Masses became so crowded at St. Mary's that an expansion of the church was required. An extension at the rear was designed by architect Lawrence J. O'Connor and completed in 1871. It again made use of fieldstone for the wall extensions, but with brick on the back side above a fieldstone base. This extension required the demolition of the church rectory, which stood on Ridge Street immediately at the back of the church.



Rectory on St. Mary's campus. Former 1850 row house at 28 Attorney Street, purchased by St. Mary's for a rectory in 1865. (Photo: D. Wye)

In the meantime, in 1865, the church had acquired an 1850 rowhouse at 28 Attorney Street, on the west side of the church. That building would be converted into a new rectory. Brownstone trim was added. Belt courses at the second and third floor levels give the suggestion of dentils, perhaps to link the building to the church. On the first floor, the trim is most elaborate and indicates the ecclesiastical, with pointed arches on the lintels and atop the door surround, and a cross over the doorway clearly identifying the building's connection to the church. There are also belt courses connecting the window lintels on the first and second floors. They contain what appears to be ceramic inlays with an encircled rosette and cross pattern on the first floor and a more simplified design on the second floor.

In 1885, architect O'Connor was again called upon when an extension was required for this rectory. He designed that in the Romanesque Revival style. It is attached at the northeast back

corner and provides a link to other out buildings, forming an indoor passage to the church.



St. Mary's Rectory- detail of ornament on first floor belt course. (Photo: D.Wye)



*Extension to St. Mary's Rectory. 1885. Architect-Lawrence J. O'Connor.
(Photo: Google Maps)*

Architects

Architect of 1833 Church:

The designer of the Greek Revival style church, with fieldstone surrounding walls, was likely a builder using pattern books.

Architect of 1864 Facade:

Patrick C. Keely

Patrick Charles Keely (1816-1896), who designed the present façade of St. Mary's in 1864, is considered the most prolific architect of American Catholic churches, with an estimated 500-700 individual buildings credited to him. An Irish Catholic immigrant, Keely was trained as a carpenter and builder by his father in Ireland, before emigrating to America in 1842 and settling in Brooklyn. He worked there initially as a carpenter. His first church commission came in 1846 for St. Peter and Paul's in Williamsburg, a building that was later replaced.

His arrival in America was at a time when there were few trained architects. Carpenters and masons were often called upon to design new buildings. It was also a time of an expanding Catholic Church, with a constant demand for new parishes. Keely would ultimately design churches throughout the eastern United States—from Boston to Philadelphia, and especially in New York—but also ventured as far as Montreal, Chicago, Charleston, and Little Rock. Keely churches were most often in a Neo-Gothic mode, although he occasionally designed churches in other styles. He also worked on a few Protestant churches.

Keely was known as a humble and scrupulously honest man, but the church recognized his enormous contributions in 1884 with their second, annual Laetare Medal—the most prestigious award given by the Catholic Church. It stated that Keely had “ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church and enriched the heritage of humanity.”

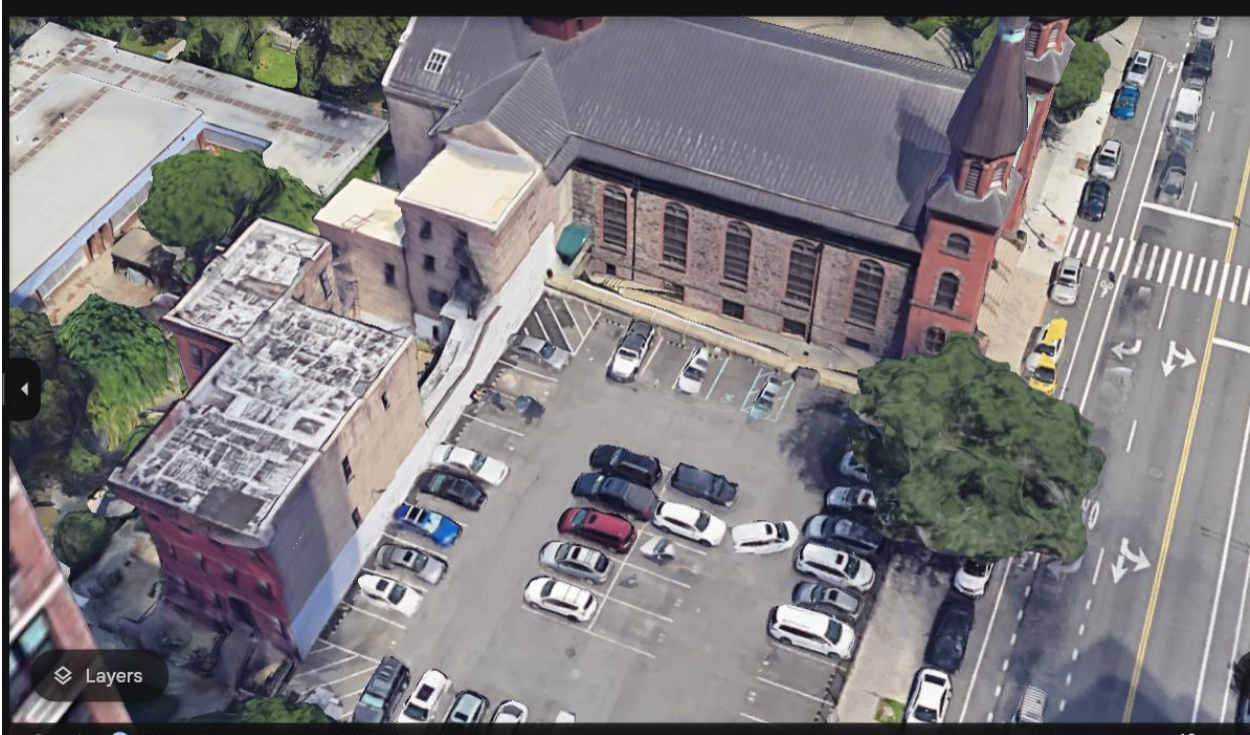
On the Lower East Side, Keely designed St. Bridget's Church on Avenue B across from Tompkins Square Park in 1848. His only church protected by landmarking is St. Anthony of Padua from 1875, which is in the Greenpoint Historic District.

It is difficult to overstate Keely's contribution to the Catholic Church and its architecture. The eulogy at his funeral called him, “a man who for fifty years honored and served God as fervently as a priest or bishop at the altar.”

Architect of Church extension and Rectory extension:

Lawrence J. O'Connor

Little is written about American architect Lawrence J. O'Connor (d. 1900), who designed the extension to the back of St. Mary's in 1871, and who was also the architect for the extension to its rectory building at 28 Attorney Street, in 1885. O'Connor was most active from the 1870s to the 1890s and among his most well-known churches are several impressive buildings in the Romanesque Revival style—Our Lady of Mount Carmel (1887) at 449 East 115th Street in Manhattan, and Immaculate Conception Church (1892) in Yonkers. Like Patrick C. Keely, but not to the same extent, the Catholic Church seemed to depend on O'Connor. He was named a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1892.



Overview of St Mary's campus-Church at upper right, Rectory at lower left with extension at northeast back corner, and two connecting buildings. (Photo: Google Earth)

Conclusion

The role of the Catholic Church and the role of immigration, are fundamental to an understanding of the history of New York City. The Church of Saint Mary occupies a highly significant place in both these aspects of our past. Its congregation has endured for nearly 200 years—since 1826; the present church building, with its fieldstone side walls and rows of tall, elongated windows, represents the oldest Catholic Church in New York. From its beginnings, St. Mary's has witnessed the growing influence of Catholicism, from a period when the religion was reviled by Nativists, to its ascendance in representing the religion practiced by more New Yorkers than any other.

Saint Mary's first served as a place of community and refuge for those immigrants who had recently arrived from Ireland, seeking a better life. They came to this neighborhood to be near the East River waterfront and its jobs in the maritime industries. The Irish as an ethnic group faced rampant discrimination during their early years in the city, but they would grow in numbers and in influence, not only in the Catholic Church hierarchy but also in the political and civil service realms.

St. Mary's remains an immigrant church today, in a Lower East Side neighborhood where demographics have evolved, and ethnic groups have succeeded each other. Today a Latino population predominates in what is a multi-ethnic congregation. Masses, with consistently high attendance even on weekday mornings, are held in Spanish and English.

Architecturally, St. Mary's communicates the sense of a welcoming parish church. And the Church continues to serve as a fulcrum within the neighborhood, particularly with its commitment to the Grand

Street Guild and affordable housing in the area. The Church's presence and its accomplishments also provide deeply rooted links to the past. And while the building has borne witness to radical changes in the built environment around it, it remains basically unchanged from how it looked some 160 years ago.

The congregants of St. Mary's revere their church and its community. They have gathered an estimated 4000 signatures from their neighbors in support of "Saint Mary's Grand" becoming a New York City Individual Landmark.

It is clear that the Church of Saint Mary merits landmark protection for its essential place in the history of New York—for its enduring function within the immigrant community, and for its foremost role in the architectural and cultural heritage of the Catholic Church.

Timeline

1784: Repeal of anti-priest law in New York led to first Catholic parish in the city.

1786: St Peter's, first Catholic church building in New York, dedicated on Barclay Street; replaced by current church in 1840.

1808: Diocese of New York established, covering all of New York State and northern New Jersey

1815: End of Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 led to influx of the Irish to America. Original St. Patrick's Cathedral opened on Mott Street.

1815-42: The number of Catholics in New York City increased from about 15,000 to 200,000, mostly Irish, but also many Germans and a few French.

1824: Riot in Greenwich Village marked the beginning of open conflict between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics in New York City.

1826: Father John Power, pastor of St. Peter's and administrator of the Diocese during a gap between Bishops, gave the city its third Catholic Church, St. Mary's on Sheriff Street, housed in the former 7th Presbyterian Church.

1831: On November 9, a suspicious fire broke out in St. Mary's Church on Sheriff Street; began in three different locations; bell immobilized so it could not alert fire companies; Nativists suspected the culprits

1833: New St. Mary's Church on Grand Street dedicated.

1830s-1840s: An era marked by an increase in violent opposition to Roman Catholicism. In 1834, a protective brick wall was built around St. Patrick's Cathedral and cemetery on Mott Street

1836: Ancient Order of the Hibernians founded at St. James Church on James Street partially in response to burning of St. Mary's.

1845-1852: Irish Potato Famine led to huge influx of the Irish to America.

1863: St. Teresa's on Rutgers Street established in former Rutgers Presbyterian Church since another parish was needed between St. James Church on James Street and St. Mary's Church on Grand Street.

1864: Façade of St Mary's 1833 building replaced; architect was Irish-born Patrick C. Keely.

1865: Catholics became largest denomination in the city.

1865: St Mary's purchased an 1850 rowhouse at 28 Attorney Street; became rectory in 1871.

1871: First St. Mary's rectory, behind the Church on Ridge Street, demolished when Church built extension designed by architect Lawrence J. O'Connor



St. Mary's, n.d. It has been noted that there seems to be a white wash painted over the brick façade in this image. (Photo: St. Mary's website)

1885: Extension added to Attorney Street rectory at northeast back corner; architect was Lawrence J. O'Connor

1888: Stained glass windows by the firm of Meyer of Munich, Germany, installed at St. Mary's

1917: Jones-Shafroth Act gave U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans

1940-1970: Puerto Rican population of the city grew from 61,000 to 817,700; Catholic population grew through influx of Latin Americans, first from Puerto Rico, then from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and other countries.

1960s: Monsignor Keogh of St. Mary's Church established the Grand Street Guild to create affordable housing for people of "all faiths and no faith"

1970-2000: Latino population grew from 1,200,000 in 1970 to 2,216,000 in 2000.

1973: Through partnership between St. Mary's (eventually Catholic Homes/Catholic Charities) and HUD (Housing and Urban Development), three Grand Street Guild residential buildings opened at 410 Grand Street,

460 Grand Street, and 131 Broome Street

2008: Diocese of New York reached its Bicentennial year; Sunday Mass celebrated in more than 30 languages in NYC; at St. Mary's, Masses held in Spanish and English.

2024: 4th Grand Street Guild residential building to open at 165 Broome Street near St. Mary's Rectory; 5th building planned for 151 Broome Street, also behind St. Mary's

2026: St. Mary's Bicentennial to be celebrated on May 26.

Selected References

Bergman, Edward F. in association with the New York Landmarks Conservancy. *The Spiritual Traveler: New York City, The Guide to Sacred Spaces and Peaceful Places*. Mahwah, N. J.: Hidden Spring, 2001.

Church of Saint Mary's website. <https://www.saintmarygrand.org/>

"Conflagration," in *The Truth Teller* (New York, NY). Vol. VII, No. 46. Saturday, November 12, 1831. <https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:225649#?xywh=-6945%2C-1%2C18401%2C6424&cv=2>

"Destructive Fire," in *New-York Evening Post* (New York, NY). Thursday, November 10, 1831, p.2. <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=nep18311110-01.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

Grand Street Guild website. <https://grandstreetguild.org/>

"History of Stained Glass," The Stained Glass Association of America website. Stainedglass.org

Jackson, Kenneth T., ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. New York: Yale University Press, 2010. "Catholics," pp. 215-218; "Irish," pp. 656-659; "Latinos/Hispanics," pp. 721-723; "Puerto Ricans," pp. 1058-1060.

Kervick, Francis W. *Patrick Charles Keely, Architect: A Record of his Life and Work*. South Bend, Indiana: Privately published, 1953. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015064344750&seq=7>

New York City, Municipal Archives. Folder for Block 341, Lot 26.

"O'Connor, Lawrence J." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_J._O%27Connor

"Patrick Keely." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Keely

Shelley, Thomas J. *The Bicentennial History of the Archdiocese of New York, 1808-2008*. Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, 2007.

"St. Mary's R.C. Church—No. 438 Grand Street," *Daytonian in Manhattan*, July 14, 2015. <https://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/search?q=438+Grand+Street>

"St. Mary, Church of," in David W. Dunlap, *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship*. New York: Columbia University, 2004, p. 227.

Smith, John Talbot. *The Catholic Church in New York*. 2 vols. New York: Hall and Locke, 1908. <https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/85963-the-catholic-church-in-new-york-a-history-of-the-new-york-diocese-from-its-establishment-in-1808-to-the-present-time-v-01>

Conversations with two community members; one a parishioner of St. Mary's and one a resident of Grand Street Guild housing.