

5. Statement of Significance: Former St. James School; now Transfiguration School

Executive Summary:



Former St. James School, with St. James Church at the left. Photo: Bruce Monroe

The former St. James School, an architectural gem at 37 St. James Place (and 25-29 James St.), is linked intrinsically to the history of education, immigration, and the Catholic Church in New York City. Its building, from 1868, is among the oldest purpose-built Catholic schools in the city, and likely the oldest. The former St. Ann's School on East 11th Street and the former School of Our Lady of Sorrows on Stanton Street, opened in the 1870s, while the Old St. Patrick's School building was remodeled from an orphanage only in 1886.

As immigration surged in New York in the early and mid-19th century, particularly in the Lower East Side, it was clear that the city would have to educate a vast number of students. The organization of schooling continually evolved in this period. The public offering, through the Public School Society, was imbued with Protestant teachings and Catholic leadership strongly objected to this curriculum. Eventually the Church established its own parallel school system that, at its peak a century later, would accommodate some 40% of Catholic children.

The St. James School was first established in St. James Church on James Street, not long after the church opened in 1836. The present school building, at 37 St. James Place (then called New Bowery), across the street from the Church, opened in 1868. It is situated on a prominent triangular corner lot with one façade on James Street. Fundraising for construction was led by parishioners, most often women, who organized fairs and other special events. The completed school was highly praised for its architecture from the time it opened.

St. James's parish was in the predominantly Irish immigrant 4th Ward, at a time when the Catholic Church population, and its hierarchy, were dominated by the Irish. One distinguished parishioner and school alumni, Irish on his mother's side, was Alfred E. Smith, four-term New York Governor and Democratic nominee for President in 1928. This was the Smith family parish. In addition to Smith, his five children went to St. James school, while his mother had attended at an earlier location. St. James Church and its school played a central role in the life all Catholic

families in the surrounding neighborhood, providing them with a true sense of belonging. When St. James School closed in 2010, the building began to house Transfiguration School, and it still provides a Catholic education to youngsters in grades 6-8.

Cultural History—Catholic Education in New York

In the early 19th century, when Catholicism had only been newly accepted in New York, Catholic schooling began at St. Peter's, the first church here. As other churches opened, they too began instruction for children, usually in their basements. With the onset of mass immigration, first with the Irish and Germans, a transformation in Catholic school education began. The Irish arrivals were Roman Catholic, as were a substantial number of Germans. The demand for churches increased, along with the need to educate more children. In New York, at that time, families who could afford it hired private tutors for their children; those who could not, took advantage of schools overseen by the Public School Society, a private charity organization.



Archbishop John Hughes (1797-1864). Photo: Catholic Heritage Curricula

The Public School Society was the nemesis of John Hughes (1797-1864), an Irish immigrant priest who arrived in New York in 1838. He rose to Bishop in 1842 and Archbishop in 1850 and has been called “the single most important figure in the history of the Catholic Church in New York.” Hughes strongly objected to the Public School Society's Protestant underpinnings, which encouraged Bible readings, hymns, and textbooks that he deemed offensive to Catholics. He believed Catholic children were in danger of losing their faith with this kind of education, in a society already hostile to the religion.

Hughes's first educational effort was to try to force the city and state to provide funding for separate Catholic schools. He began to organize meetings to gain support for his cause in the basement of St. James Church.

Hughes lost that battle but successfully instigated the end of the Public School Society, as the city established a system run by elected Ward school boards. Although the religious aspect had been eliminated from public schools, Hughes was not satisfied. He wanted to firmly instill Catholic beliefs in the many children of the faith. He began the process of setting up a parallel Catholic school system and, given its tremendous success, he is considered the father of that system.

Cultural History—St. James Church and School

Opening in 1836, the Greek Revival St. James Church on James Street is among the city's oldest extant Catholic churches. It was an early New York City landmark but is currently closed and in



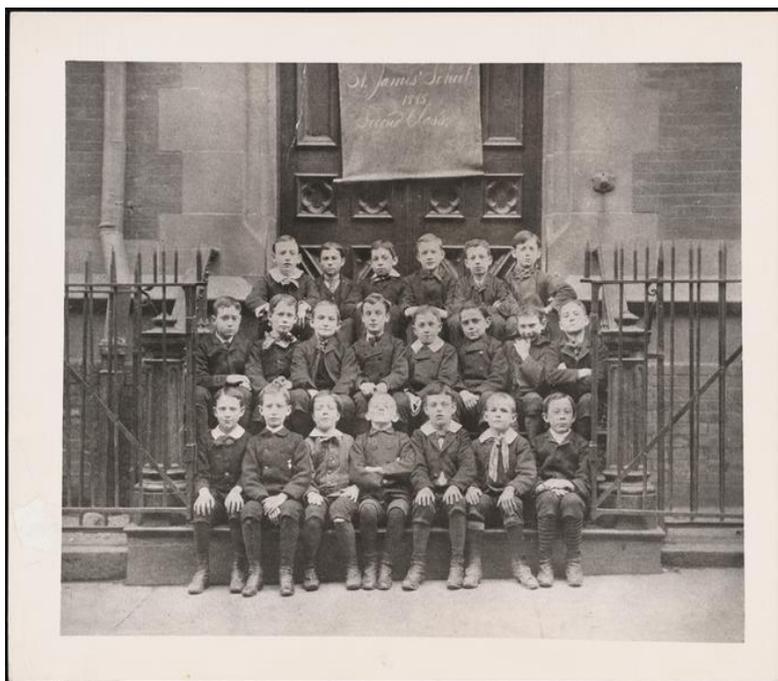
*St. James Roman Catholic Church. 1836. James St.
Photo: Bruce Monroe*

deteriorating condition. It once served as the center of community life in the predominantly Irish 4th Ward. It provided not only religious services, but also a range of clubs and programs for parishioners of all ages. It also was the site of the founding of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, soon after the Church opened. This Order was foremost among the fraternal societies that began to appear as a defense against the rampant anti-Catholic sentiment in New York at that time.

St. James Church is also known for one of its most celebrated members— four-term Governor of New York and Democratic nominee for President, Alfred E. Smith (1873-1944). Smith was born and raised in

the 4th Ward and lived there in adulthood with his family. The Church was integral to his upbringing. His father had been baptized there, and it was where his parents met and married. In Smith's youth, the Church and its priests provided both guidance and a variety of activities. He was a proud altar boy, but most enjoyed the St. James Players and became a minor celebrity in the neighborhood for his acting—he even considered becoming a professional.

For education, the Smith family depended on St. James School. His mother attended when the



Al Smith (first row, second from left) at St. James School. His winning medal for elocution is on his jacket. 1884. Photo: MCNY

school was in a building on Roosevelt Street, but Smith and his five children all went to the purpose-built school at 37 St. James Place. When Smith was 9 he won a city-wide elocution contest, representing the school. He was proud of the medal he won, later saying it remained a treasured possession. Smith would quit school just months before his 8th grade graduation to go to work and help with family finances. His father had died two years earlier. That would be the end of Smith's formal education.

The Architecture of St. James School



St. James School, where St. James Place and James St. meet. Photo: Bruce Monroe

A striking architectural composition, the former St. James School, by an unknown architect, makes an immediate impact on the streetscape. It is located on a triangular corner lot that was created when St. James Place (then known as New Bowery) was cut through at a diagonal in 1856 to connect the Bowery to Pearl Street. It was renamed St. James Place in 1947. The resulting “flat-iron” shape of St. James School adds to its distinction, as does its polychrome scheme of red brick with sandstone trim. It was designed in a mix of styles. Pointed arches on the windows are Gothic Revival, while the classicizing cornice suggests the Italianate, and the Mansard roof—popular in New York in the late 1860s-1870s—is French 2nd Empire. (It is possible the roof was an addition.) The unusual combination of styles, and the building’s placement, contribute to its striking presence in the neighborhood.

An entrance to what was the school hall is at the confluence of James Street and St. James Place and is the focal point of the building’s chamfered corner. It contains two plaques recognizing Alfred E. Smith as an alumnus. While there were once separate girls and boys entrances, typical for early school buildings, the girls entrance on James Street has been truncated and now serves as a window. The boys entrance on St. James Place, remains. It was on these steps that the photograph of Al Smith and his class was taken. The iron gate in the early photo is still there today.



Left: Corner entrance; Right: Boys entrance facing St. James Place. Photos: Bruce Monroe; Richard Moses



Roof, cornice, and window detail. Photo: Bruce Monroe

Conclusion

The former St. James School and its history contribute to our understanding of the development of the Lower East Side and also add a significant chapter to an even broader New York story—the development of the Catholic Church and the Catholic school system. In addition to its cultural heritage, the building is an architectural treasure that was recognized as such soon after it opened. The Church leadership called it, “a noble building of the most modern style, which throws in the shade some of the Public School buildings that cost the city millions. It is perfect in all its arrangements.”

This unique building needs the protection offered by New York City landmark status. Its loss would be immeasurable to the community around it and to anyone who might visit this neighborhood. Its prominent location and unusual style give rise to its indelible impact on passersby. Although it remains a Catholic school today, there is no guarantee that will continue and the building will survive.

The students of St. James School moved out in 2010 to join students at nearby St. Joseph’s School, during a period of consolidation that continues today. Whereas St. James School had a student population of approximately 1,450 in 1878, by 2010 there were only 213 students. Then, in 2013, St. Joseph’s School also closed due to declining enrollment and financial hardship. Transfiguration Middle School currently occupies the building.

As likely the oldest extant, purpose-built Catholic school in New York, with a rich history—including its connection to the esteemed Alfred E. Smith—and significant architectural distinction, the former St. James School merits designation as a New York City Individual Landmark.

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Timeline

1785: St Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, first in New York, is founded.

1800: First Catholic school opens in St. Peter’s Church.

1805: Free School Society is founded by influential city men to educate poor and working-class youth.

1826: Free School Society renamed Public School Society, though it remained primarily a privately-run organization.

1836: St. James Church opens on James Street.

1838: John Hughes, Irish immigrant priest, arrives in New York. At this time there were eight Roman Catholic Churches, each maintaining a free school. Hughes becomes Bishop in 1842 and Archbishop in 1850.

1840: Debate begins, spearheaded by John Hughes, contesting the Public School Society's control of public education, in what is considered by education expert Diane Ravitch to be one of the bitterest debates in the history of American education. The Church petitions for a share of educational funding for its schools. Hughes loses this battle in 1842 and becomes committed to establishing a separate Catholic parochial school system.

1842: A new public educational system is established with elected Ward commissioners and a citywide Board of Education. For the first time, New York had an educational system financed solely by public funds. The Public School Society will be subsumed by elected Board of Education.

1864: John McCloskey succeeds John Hughes as Archbishop of New York and continues the school building campaign.

1868: St. James School opens.

1884: Each pastor in America is required to build a parochial school in his parish.

1940-1965: The number of parochial schools grows, with 1965 the peak year for Catholic parochial school attendance in the U.S.

2010: St. James School closes; students transfer to nearby St. Joseph's School. Transfiguration School moves into St. James School building. St. Joseph's School closes in 2013.

2026: Transfiguration Middle School still occupies former St. James School.

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