

“From a single tree to a forest city:”
Mattoon’s Church Architecture, 1890-1910

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Incrementally and unconsciously, church designs reveal what church people are thinking”¹

In 1908, Rollin Lynde Hartt remarked on America’s defining aesthetic for public buildings, “we are outgrowing the impulse to make little things seem big.” He delicately explained that little villages should not shy away from being rural and simple, and appearing quiet and picturesque. His ideal church architecture for smaller towns was that religious buildings should be monuments to the morals of Christianity, that of honesty and modesty. The romantic notion of simple agricultural life took shape in “lovely little chapels” lacking ostentatious ornament, and with clinging ivy. A church’s grandeur or importance, complete with tall towers and cheap brick construction, just parodied religious faith. Apparently, Mr. Hartt believed, these smaller towns and villages were attempting to create an illusion of momentousness within their communities with this extravagant show. These church members, concerned with social status, only designed a “sanctified exposition building” instead of a sincere church of faith.²

Mattoon, Illinois, in the later ninetieth and early twentieth centuries, was a great railroad community that saw an increase in public architecture. Beyond just the impressive

¹ Tim Stafford, “God is in the blueprints,” *Christianity Today* 42, no 10 (September 1998): 77.

² Rolline Lynde Hartt, “A Proper Village Church,” in *The World’s Work: A History of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1908), 10365, 10367.

numbers, the architecture and style of these buildings, especially the churches, indicated that the town was now emerging as an affluent and planned city of both commercial and cultural significance. The church-going citizenry of Mattoon built elaborate structures which symbolized their religious faith. The intricate stained glass, grand cathedral-like interiors, and conscious design expressed the many tropes of worship of the Christian faith. These grand buildings stood as celebration of belief, with design that professed the light of God.³ Though in many other ways, the churches built in downtown Mattoon near the train rails broadcast more than earnest religious reverence.

Rollin Lynde Hartt, and his peers in architectural scholars, presented new notions in prescriptive literature of church building for this late nineteenth to early twentieth century time period:

Churches in our suburbs and rural centres . . . though not always devoid of attractiveness, usually express a desire to make a small thing great by depriving it of its inherent character, which is smallness. Needless height, to admit galleries in which no one sits; tall spires, aiming at sensationalism more often than at grace; a skyline thrust high for mere sake of show urging ostentation at cost of genuineness; they would rather have a shingled steeple two hundred feet high than a masonry tower fifty feet high; they prefer a giddy, checker-board roof, lofty and showy, to the low and reasonable skyline; they plead for a profusion of fantastic ornament.⁴

Those who analyzed the true nature of church building pleaded for simplicity in décor. Hartt, for the outward face of churches, called for function over opulent form in these buildings, and asked builders to allocate funds for permanence, found in the use of stone and good masonry. The worst a church could offer was that of a high spire built of wood which signaled the village

³ Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, "A Realm of Light," *UNESCO Courier* (November, 1990): 40.

⁴ Hartt, 10364, 10369.

congregation opted for showmanship instead of soundness for their sanctuary. Another scholar of proper church design, Michael B. Biscoe, commented on the pretense of extravagant ornament, such as tall towers, declaring them undignified for a religious building due to their ostentatiousness, “there must be nothing trivial, mean, or merely pretty . . . [p]urposeless towers and turrets, odd projecting gables with out meaning, spreading buttresses with no load to carry but their own, are to be shunned, as are decorations without religious feeling All must be simple, symmetrical, straightforwards, and church-like.”⁵ Herbert Wheaton Cogdan, in the 1910 *Architectural Record*, again advocated simplicity over pretension, “a really good church design must have more than beauty of mass.”⁶ William B. Bigelow said of the late nineteenth century country churches, that it must be of brick and should be not fully fronted on the street, but “its simplicity is protected by the intervening garden which, again, is given seclusion by a heavy retaining wall.”⁷

A suitable church befitting a small town’s congregation according to these men of practiced authority of church architecture, would be more than picturesque. A building that was suited for worship, would resonate simplicity with piety. Also permanence, through the use of functional design and ornamentation, would be found in stone, or less preferable brick, construction. “The message of the Church is to all the world,” Cogdan proclaimed to the members of congregations in the smaller towns and villages.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Mattoon became the home of the crossing of the Illinois Central Railroad and the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad, (known as the Big Four). The town’s 12,000 citizens made their livelihood from this railroad center, and defined their town by the crosscutting rails, anchored their center of commerce by the railway, and positioned the finest, and the tallest, of their architecture along the tracks. Church architecture provided

⁵ Maurice B. Biscoe, “Some Essentials in Church Architecture,” *Outlook* (1 April, 1905): 822.

⁶ Herbert Weston Cogdan, “Building a Church for a Small Congregation,” *Architectural Record* 27 (February, 1910): 172.

⁷ William B. Bigelow, “The County Church in America,” *Scribners Magazine* 22 (1887): 615.

tangible evidence of the town's affluence; the prominent members presented their own contribution by their support of large, extravagant buildings with steeples that pierced the skyline, drawing attention to the cityscape. For those passengers seated comfortably in their cars and watching the passing view on their way from Peoria to Cairo, Mattoon appeared a rather urban center of sorts, surrounded by acres of rails and flat land of broomcorn.

From the 1880s to the 1910s, public and domestic building flourished in Mattoon, stemming from the prosperity of the town's position as of a railway juncture. The number of buildings increased, as did the cost for their construction. The citizenry of Mattoon expected an aura of affluence to be seen in their public architecture, and quite willingly paid the highest taxes in the county for this grandeur and civic pride.⁸ Moving beyond the view of the city hall and new library to Mattoon's religious architecture, those members of the more well-established religions contributed extensively to build large cathedral-style churches in the popular Romanesque style, paying vast amounts for pipe organs as well as huge steeples and towers that emerged over the busy downtown skyline.⁹ These churches, whose members consisted of the prominent commercial elite of the city, were most likely located near the business district and thus also the railroad. This city center provided immediate access to public improvements such as good streets, electric lights, trolley lines, and the concrete sidewalks built along the main thoroughfares shaded by newly planted trees. The number of these religious buildings increased drastically in the 1890s. The most consequential aspect of their construction was the funds spent on these structures. The money spent in the 1890s tripled the norm of the earlier decade. By century's end, Mattoon began to fully articulate its prominent

⁸ Charles Edward Wilson, "History of Coles County, Illinois," in *Cyclopedia of Illinois* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company, 1905), 734.

⁹ Average price paid in Mattoon in the time period of 1890-1910 for a pipe organ was \$4,000. They were found in most of the churches built in the period. According to Cogdon, in his essay on proper church adornment, this is an adequate price. Some churches in the city with these large organs however were built for under \$12,000.

position in East Central Illinois and foresaw prosperity into the twentieth century with advances in technology as well as social mobility.

After the Civil War, Mattoon became a railway center of linking lines, though new residencies and business were not drawn to this town until the 1870s. From the year 1870, Mattoon, with a population of four thousand, grew from a small village in Coles County, ten miles from the county seat in Charleston, to a commercial town of over 10,000 in the 1890s. All activity concentrated around the crossing of the two railways, which became the official center of Mattoon. Built here was the city's ticket office, named the Essex House located on the main thoroughfare. This avenue, Broadway, was a thirty-four block avenue that ran down the middle of town from the east and west boundaries. It followed the tracks of the Big Four Railroad, which was the site of all of Mattoon's four banks, five furniture stores, six jewelers, six pool halls, seven clothes stores, nine candy stores, and seventeen lawyers, among others.¹⁰

There emerged a clear distinction of fiscal prosperity in the town, made quite visible by the crossing train lines; Mattoon was divided into four sections, reserving the northeast corner for other industry that did not serve the railroad directly. This became the first area of settlement, named "True Town," though it quickly lost popularity due to its distance from the railroad line. Church members, like the many early land speculators of the town, followed the path of the future railroad success, which is apparent in the clear trail of church building from the early settlement in the east section of Mattoon to the more gentrified Noyes settlement, north west of the tracks.

With the emergence of a strong municipal government under Mayor Frank Kern in early 1891, the town added improvements such as electric lights and telephone services, and forbid livestock from running loose in the streets. With modern features of landscaped trees planted along the new concrete sidewalks, electric streetlamps, and revitalized water treatment, Mattoon became more than just livable; it began to thrive as a city. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* referred to the municipality in 1891 as "the Prosperous Prairie City of Coles County." In the

¹⁰*Mattoon City Directory*, 1908.

year 1897, Mattoon held its first street fair, the first in the state, which attracted large crowds and the city celebrated its new prosperity. This progress of civic improvements, as well as civic pride, continued in the construction of a new library, a block south of the commerce center in 1903. In 1905, Illinois history writer Charles Edward Wilson, in describing Mattoon, focused on its urban improvement extolling the town's attempts of creating out of a flat land a picturesque scene of controlled nature and careful city planning:

Although Mattoon was located upon the prairie, with only a single tree in what now constitutes its corporate limits (the historic lone elm at Thirty-second Street and Western Avenue), it is now truly a forest city, the streets being lined and the parks filled with magnificent trees planted by citizens, their sunrified shade stretching over beautifully kept lawns, whose velvet surface furnishes a rich setting for pretty homes. This "city beautiful" was made possible when the "town cow" nuisance was abolished in 1892, and the fences removed from the fronts of lots.¹¹

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Mattoon was in all attempts turning its small town image of "town cow" into a city of social planning and commerce. The citizens of this emerging metropolis of thriving downtown business and new development sought, through public and domestic building along the rails, progress, which became elaborated through technological improvement, civic pride, and through public architecture, especially its churches. The churches themselves were at times modest, though a few congregations abounded in members, as well as funds, to build magnificent structures in the Gothic and Romanesque styles. Even the less prominent churches of the town, with their smaller congregations and contributions strove to be prominent in Mattoon's cityscape along the rail line.

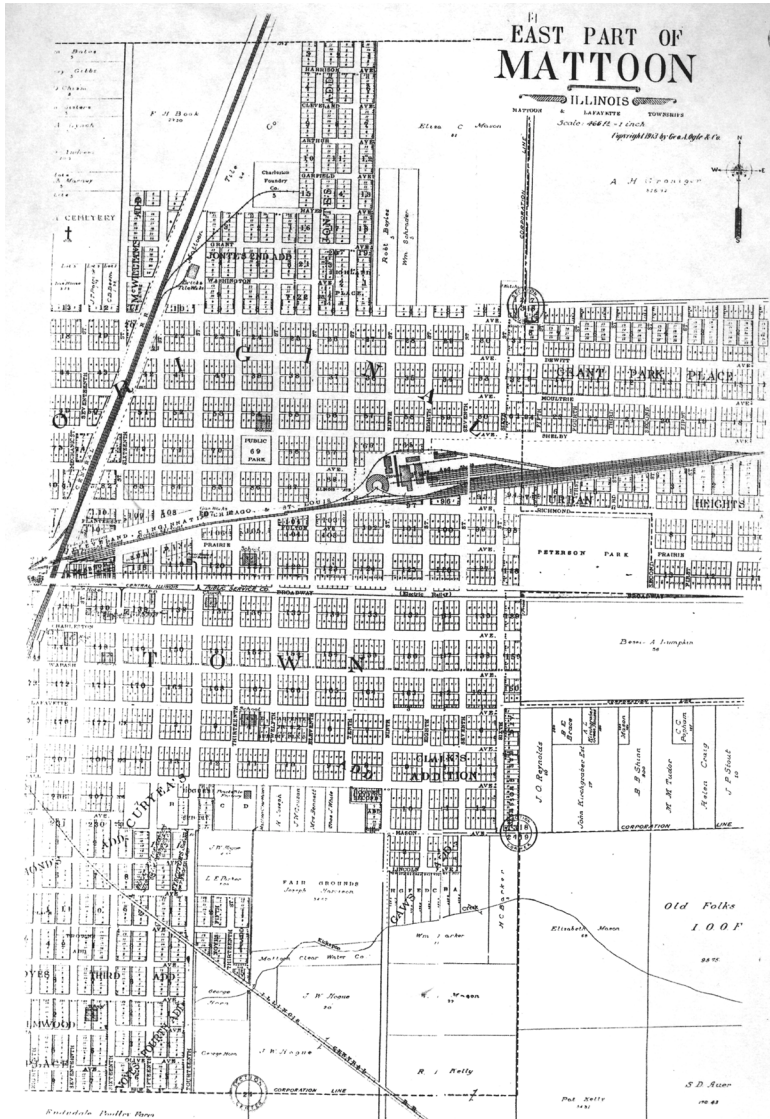
Of the three larger churches of Mattoon, the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church proved to be the most expensive to

¹¹Wilson, 725.

build. Rebuilt after a mysterious fire in 1890, the complete sum for construction totaled \$50,000. Located on the eastern end of the Noyes Addition, it stood on the corner of Richmond and 20th Street, a block from the rail line. Richmond Avenue, as well as the other main east-west thoroughfares, was broken by 21st Street then slipped down half a block to continue. These discontinuous roadways that were quite obvious in the downtown, are attributed to Ebenezer Noyes himself, member of the Catholic Church and early founder of the city, who, as tradition retells, refused to allow the streets in his own part of Mattoon to connect straight with those of the east side.¹² This layout ensured the importance of the Noyes section of the city. When walking down Richmond Avenue, the Church of the Immaculate Conception quite surprised visitors with a one hundred and sixty-foot-tall tower caddy-corner to the rest of the streetway. With more than twelve hundred members, this Gothic structure of stone was an impressive T-shaped building that in many ways proclaimed an association with those who provided financial success to Mattoon.

Ten years after the completion of Mattoon's Catholic Church, the First Methodist Episcopal Church built a larger building for their growing congregation. They constructed a Romanesque style stone building, estimated to cost \$40,000 on the corner of 16th Street and one block from Richmond on Charleston Avenue. Though similar in appearance to Mattoon's other smaller churches, this church's appearance of distinction and massiveness can be seen in the one-story stone extension built on the back, which stretched almost an entire block. Of the more than seven hundred members of the congregation, the one leading force was that of Dr. M. McFall, trustee of the church and one of Mattoon's most prominent physicians. This doctor was one of the leading trustees behind the building of the Memorial Hospital in 1906. The Methodist Church had much support throughout the county, due to the easy access to the

¹²Wilson, 725.



Figures 1 & 2: From Standard Atlas, Coles County, Illinois 1913 (Chicago: George A. Ogle & Company, Chicago, 1913).

railroad. Mattoon became this religion's head district in Illinois.¹³

The third of the larger churches constructed during this prosperous fifteen-year period was the First Presbyterian Church, consisting of two Presbyterian congregations joining in the 1870s to a total membership of around four hundred. Finished in 1903, it was located on the corner of 21st and Western Avenue, the second road south of Richmond, and one block from Charleston Avenue. With a final price of \$45,000, this red brick structure's tower rose over 180 feet, far above the trees planted along the street by the city to create a picturesque walk through downtown. Within this massive steeple was placed a clock and a bell costing an extra \$2,000 provided by a single donor. The congregation itself was comparably smaller than the other affluent churches of the town. But within that membership was John Voight, an attorney, Harlan McNair, the head cashier of the Mattoon National Bank, Frank Coppage, co-owner of a drug store, Frank Cox, a real estate developer, L. R. Nobel of Spitler, Noble & Co., and W. W. Williams, druggist and owner of a well-known Queen Anne style house on Western Avenue. These men, serving as Elders and trustees, all can be seen as fond supporters of their church, as well as possessing civic pride of their growing city and their contributing parts of its success. The most affluent of all the members of the Presbyterian Church was John Stubbins, a co-owner of the Dole House, one of the first and finest hotels in the town located on the main street of Broadway. In 1900, he sold his half of the business and retired, but stayed on as a trustee of the church until the end of the 1910s. Of the other members of the congregation, about one-fourth of the working-age men were connected directly with the railroad and shops as machinists, ticket agents, conductors, and engineers. Most likely though, a member of this church would be a shop owner, such as a grocer or jeweler, or a tradesmen,

¹³ Martha Cates Ladd and Constance Schneider Kimball, *History of Coles County, 1873-1976* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, Inc, 1976), 396.

such as a carpenter or contractor, real estate, law, or insurance.¹⁴ From these more affluent affiliates of the church, came donations totaling \$18,000 in collections, on opening day services, November 1, 1903.

The earlier church of Mattoon's Presbyterian congregation certainly lacked the grandeur of the newly built structure. The first Presbyterian church constructed was located only a block north of the second church, and pre-dates it by forty years. Built with wood in the Federal style, with a steeple and bell, it still stood as an impressive monument to the religious faith and style of architecture. But its successor appeared as an imposing brick structure. With a hipped roof and cross gables, along with an octagon shaped wing protruding from the front left, it presented an irregular outline. With a massive white painted wooden steeple, which can be seen as almost jutting out of the middle, this building's designers were not dutifully minding simplification; the First Presbyterian was hardly a quiet sanctuary. A church should be a monument, Maurice B. Biscoe expounded, but "there must be no striving after effect."¹⁵ This public building certainly possessed visible power, with a steeple that is said by tradition to be the tallest structure ever constructed in Mattoon.

Mattoon's church congregations also built three smaller churches, the Cumberland (Broadway) Presbyterian, built in 1895 for \$12,00 with a membership of 250; the Christian Church, built in 1896 for \$12,000 with a membership of 400; and the Congregational Church, built in 1897 for \$14,000, with a membership of 200. All were constructed a few blocks from each other, along the downtown's central thoroughfares, with close proximity to the railroad. They also acted as indicators of importance of the train industry and urbanization to Mattoon. The extensive number of church buildings constructed during the 1890s and 1900s are significant indicators of this new wealth from the central source of the railroad.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Matton City Directory, 1898* (Chicago: Samson Directory Company, 1898); *Matton City Directory, 1908* (Chicago: Samson Directory Company, 1908); *First Presbyterian Membership Directory, 1910*. Photocopy

¹⁵ Biscoe, "Some Essentials," 823.

¹⁶ *Mattoon City Directory, 1898, 1908*.

A historian of religious architecture, Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, once wrote of the early European cathedrals of the 12th and 13th centuries as representing powerful messages, quite visible, of a Christian identity.

Spires, massive stonework and other external features were also a response to the cathedral's relationship with the city. A cathedral had to be visible from a distance, and no other building was allowed to compete with it. At a time when there were few stone buildings and houses were no more than one or two storeys high, the cathedral towered over its surroundings and gave an identity to a community¹⁷

For Mattoon in the 1890s and early 1900s, the building of churches, these substantial cathedrals of glorification, appeared to announce more than reverence for Christianity. Prosperous members of these churches contributed their wealth to create monuments that exemplified the members' importance to the town. The vibrant and visible railroad brought great wealth to the town of Mattoon and enabled the congregations to build churches that reflected this new prosperity. And through other civic improvements this town-wide self-consciousness could be interpreted as solidifying the appearance of the new modern Mattoon, a clean, prosperous city. Public structures, emulating the wealth of the commercial downtown, attempted the portrayal of successful urban city planning.

Mattoon's religious architecture consciously strove to pretense, in many ways a vexation to those scholars of proper church building such as Hartt and Biscoe. The prosperous business man, who either gained his fortune directly from the railroad, in sale of land or services, or the shop owner who depended on the influx of consumers from the train line, manifested their success and held just pride of this town in the prairie. A town did not need a courthouse or normal school to control some of the county's wealth. Mattoon, at the beginning of the twentieth century, possessed all the advances in

¹⁷ Erlande-Brandenburg, 44.

technology available now in the land south of Chicago. These massive sanctuaries, along the rail road track, with high steeples that could be seen walking down the commercial strip of Broadway, glorified personal wealth in a new world of economic power apart from agriculture. Simplicity reserved itself for the quiet village; the picturesque and disguised, possessed images of the rural, and for Mattoon, the demure rehashed the picture of the roaming cow through rutted streets.