

St. Martin de Tours Church

5848 S. Princeton Avenue, Chicago



St. Martin de Tours Church, 1895, Henry J. Schlacks, 5848 S. Princeton Avenue. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

A striking Gothic structure with a soaring steeple, St. Martin Church has been a visual landmark on the South Side of Chicago for nearly 130 years. It was designed by renowned ecclesial architect Henry J. Schlacks and Louis A. Becker for a fledgling German Catholic parish in Englewood.

The church first served German immigrants and ultimately became a thriving African-American parish before being closed by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago in 1989. Following its closure, the church was used for a short time by the Archdiocese as a storage

**St. Martin de Tours/St. Martin de Porres/
Chicago Embassy Church**

Address: 5848 S. Princeton Avenue, Chicago

Architect: Henry J. Schlacks with Louis Becker

Date: 1895

Style: High Gothic

Neighborhood: Englewood



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facility and warehouse. Its subsequent purchase and reopening as a Protestant house of worship, known as The Chicago Embassy Church in 1998, was a hopeful outcome for the historic building and the Englewood community. However, with the unfortunate closure of Chicago Embassy Church in recent years, the former glory of this amazing church structure has further diminished from deferred maintenance which led to its current state of vacancy, deterioration and neglect.

There is an urgent and immediate need to find a preservation solution to save St. Martin's. Restoration of this magnificent edifice to its former prominence would add to the spiritual and social life of the community, and creative reuse could spark renewal of this corner of Englewood.

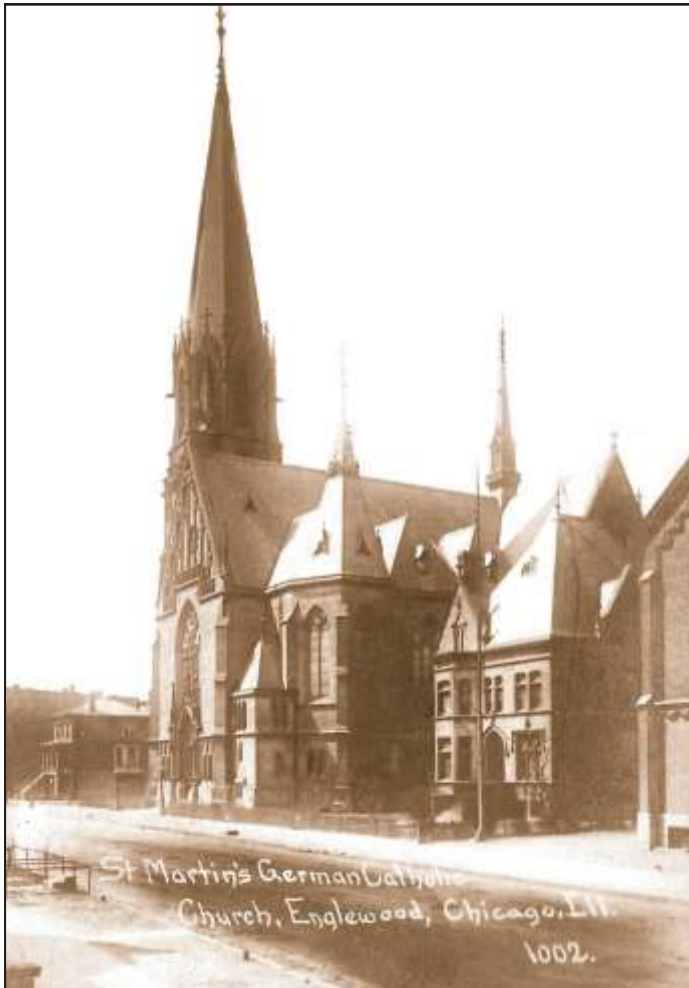
HISTORY

The cornerstone of St. Martin's was laid in September 1894 and the church was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day 1895 by Archbishop Patrick Feehan. At the time of the dedication, it was noted that 400 families were part of St. Martin's Parish, with 350 students enrolled in the school.

The magnificence of the edifice was readily apparent and it was deemed "one of the finest examples of German Gothic architecture in the country." Its 228-foot steeple had 4 bronze bells weighing from 2,500 to 5,000 pounds each. The immense weight of the tower due to its height resulted in a novel, separate foundation for the tower consisting of 120 oak piles. The church features extraordinary quality cut stonework on its exterior Indiana limestone elevations, with its Gothic spires, turrets, blind arches, arcades, crockets, gargoyles and fine tracery.

Schlacks' interior was equally impressive with a hand-carved oak altar rail, confessionals, and altars decorated with "a small forest of spires." There were numerous statues and wooden carved Stations of the Cross by German

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Historic photo of St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church circa 1909. St. Martin de Tours Church, 1895, Henry J. Schlacks with Louis A. Becker, 5848 S. Princeton Avenue. Image Credit: Chuckman's Postcard Collection



Saint Martin's Church, Chicago, IL, 1894. Louis A. Becker, Schlacks & Ottenheimer. Printed in Inland Architect, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1897. Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #IA2901_2226

craftsmen. Although many of these interior features have been lost over the decades, the high-quality art glass windows manufactured by Franz Meyer of Munich, Germany and TGA (Tyroler Glasmalerei Anstalt) of Innsbruck, Austria, are still intact. The apse windows depict scenes from the life of Christ, with the transept windows depicting the lives of St. Martin and St. Boniface, while other saints are depicted in the nave. A massive, 72-register, 3,000-pipe organ built by Johnson & Son which had been in use at the Central Music Hall, designed by architect Dankmar Adler & Company and previously located at State and Randolph Streets (on the site of the Marshall Field & Company store), was donated to St. Martin's by Mrs. Marshall Field, Jr.

An original exterior wooden statuary group of "St. Martin and the Beggar" carved by Sebastian Buscher was replaced by a metal statue designed by German-American architect, Hermann J. Gaul. It depicted St. Martin de Tours on horseback and was mounted atop the peak of the high stone gable fronting Princeton Avenue. The statue was later covered in gold leaf, making it even more visible and gleaming to all who passed the church. This golden statue was reportedly used as a landmark by pilots on their approach to Midway Airport and Meigs Field. The gold leaf was restored in 1960, and with the opening of the neighboring Dan Ryan Expressway-Interstate 90-94 in segments in 1961-1962, the statue became a marker for tens of thousands of daily commuters and visitors. In 2006, the statue was damaged by high winds and removed for repairs. Following its removal, it was stored in a nearby garage and awaiting possible repair before being stolen. The current location of the massive gilded sculpture is unknown, but may have been potentially scrapped.

The St. Martin de Tours sculpture atop the church's high gable was especially meaningful for generations of parishioners. St. Martin de Tours, for whom the church was originally named, was a 4th century Roman soldier who



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cut his cloak in half to share with a beggar on a cold night. The parish was renamed in the decade before its closing for St. Martin de Porres, a Black Dominican from Lima, Peru, who comforted the sick and provided for the poor.

Care of the poor and dispossessed has been a constant throughout St. Martin's history. In its early decades, as the German immigrant population grew, the parish continued expansion of its campus and services. The parish hall located to the north of the church was destroyed by fire in June 1908, and was replaced with a brick building that had been enlarged in 1902. Additionally, a three-story school building designed by Hermann J. Gaul, another noted ecclesial architect, was built at 5830-5838 S. Princeton in 1909 and operated by the "School Sisters of St. Francis." A two-year coeducational high school was added in 1910, with school enrollment and parishioners increasing.

By the 1920s, the parish was free of debt, the church was redecorated with new altars installed, and the organ was rebuilt and enlarged. Additional property was purchased for the construction of a convent, continuing during the Depression years of the 1930s. Improvements proceeded with the beautiful art glass windows repaired as necessary, along with the slate of the tall steeple and all honoring the parish's golden jubilee in 1936.

By 1941, the parish was no longer a "thoroughly German" parish; English replaced German in sermons, announcements, and publications. By the post-war years, the parish had become multi-ethnic with Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Mexican, and Black families joining the Germans. After a temporary decline in school enrollment, non-Catholic students began to enroll in the school in 1951.

Throughout the 1950s, the percentage of African-American students significantly increased, with enrollment reaching nearly the same level as the earlier peak in the 1920s. By the 75th anniversary of the parish, St. Martin's had become a majority African-American school and parish. Some parishioners were displaced by the construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway and financial difficulties continued through the later decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet parish operations expanded, with kindergarten and day care services added. The parish remained active, operating a food pantry, lunch program for seniors, and a scouting program, among other things. In 1978, four bells in the church tower were repaired, blessed and rung daily, after many decades of silence.



Saint Martin's Church, Chicago, IL, 1894. Louis A. Becker, Schlacks & Ottenheimer. Printed in Inland Architect, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1897. Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #IA2901_2229

THREAT

After years of deferred maintenance and closure, St. Martin has suffered significant deterioration. Sections of the roof appear to be compromised with large holes visible resulting in interior exposure to the elements. The roof of the adjacent mansion-like rectory also appears to have deteriorated. Some of the windows appear to have been damaged and occasional graffiti to the church's limestone facade has been noted. The condition of the interior of the building is presently unknown, but was in good repair prior to the recent closing of the Chicago Embassy Church. Without intervention, this church will continue on a steady path of deterioration due to weather, deferred maintenance, and unheated conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

St. Martin's entire existence has combined the highest level of structural craftsmanship with service and attention to its community's many needs. The awareness that beauty is a need and a benefit to the poor as much as to the wealthy has lifted the spiritual and emotional well-being of its parishioners of every background.

Like most disinvested communities, the present day needs of the community are many, including education and job training, economic investment, accessible mental health, and a clean and healthy environment, among many others. As pressing as these needs are, there is also the need for intangible goods, like a sense of security, safety, and peace of mind.



St. Martin de Tours Church, 1895, Henry J. Schlacks, 5848 S. Princeton Avenue. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

The restoration of St. Martin's Church as a beautiful, luminous space can provide a spiritual and emotional benefit even if it is not used for religious services. The church and complex could be repurposed for smaller-scale musical performances, occasional art exhibits, possibly of the immersive experience type. This reuse could be coupled with arts, music and other classes in the renovated rectory-parish hall building north of the church. Perhaps this could be accomplished in collaboration with faculty of the nearby Kennedy-King College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. Various spaces could also house a small gallery featuring goods produced by local craftspeople and artists. The existing paved parking lot on the site of the demolished St. Martin's School building could be turned into green space with beekeeping and a native-plant garden, as well as community plots for growing fresh produce. In this way, the entire St. Martin campus could become something of a creative incubator space.

If restored and repurposed, the irreplaceable and landmark-quality structure of St. Martin's could anchor an oasis of creativity, while embracing nature, offering music performance, arts training, and a restful and welcoming place for present-day and future generations of Englewood residents.

In commenting on the damaged equestrian statue, once located atop the high gable of St. Martin in 2006 one of the clergy of the Chicago Embassy Church commented that: "The statue can tell the story of the Englewood community and where it was, and where it is. And [...]where it is going. We believe that Englewood is one of the hidden treasures in our city." A renovated St. Martin Church can be a beacon of pride and hope for the entire community, making this corner of Englewood a monumental destination for those residents nearby, as well as visitors that pass this beautiful structure. It's estimated that over 330,000 cars use I-90/94, the Dan Ryan Expressway, each day, and such preservation and reuse options could benefit many.

We at Preservation Chicago are also requesting that the City of Chicago encourage a reuse of St. Martin's Church, as part of the INVEST South/West initiatives and programs, while also designating the building a Chicago Landmark. Noting the building's current conditions, perhaps other municipal and county agencies could assist in potential reuse visions for this magnificent building.

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St. Martin de Tours Church, 1895, Henry J. Schlacks, 5848 S. Princeton Avenue. Photo Credit: Deborah Mercer



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