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Hannah More Chapel

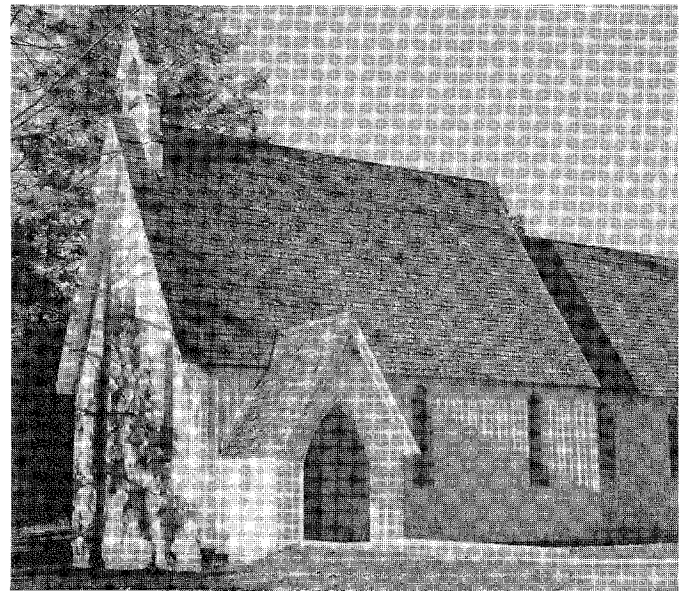
by John McGrain

Hannah More Academy was originally known as Locust Grove Seminary and was founded in 1829 under that name by Mrs. Anne Neilson, owner of the Locust Grove house on the west side of Reisterstown Road. Mrs. Neilson was the daughter of Isaac Van Bibber, Baltimore City merchant and shipowner and Baltimore County landowner and farmer.

When she made her will on March 15, 1832, Mrs. Neilson selected the name "Hannah More" for the school in honor of an English school mistress of that name, a native of Stapleton, Norfolk, England, who had been acquainted with Dr. Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and David Garrick. Mrs. Neilson died early in 1834 at age 45, leaving \$10,000 and three acres of land on the east side of the Reisterstown Turnpike Road.¹ Her trustees formed a board to carry out the bequest. The six trustees, three clergymen and three laymen, met in the vestry of Christ Church, Baltimore, and appointed a superintendent, Mrs. Gertrude Hoyt, who began her service on September 20, 1834. The school was moved out of Locust Grove into an old house on the opposite side of the road on the land left for the school. The same year a two-story brick house costing \$6,000 was constructed "by Mr. Blakely, a well known contractor and builder of this city." The Neilson will prescribed "a plain substantial brick building." That main building survived until November 25, 1857, when it burned, together with the wardrobes of the "inmates" and several collections of books.² It was necessary to house the students at the Cherry Hill Farm while the firm of Lind and Murdoch carried out the rebuilding.

The school had received a corporate charter under the Acts of 1838 of the Maryland General Assembly.³ In 1848, the trustees had acquired additional property from George L. Van Bibber; that tract and the two lots willed by Mrs. Neilson trace back to the Councilman's Tanyard shown on the 1788 plat for laying out Reisterstown Turnpike Road. The same plat shows that the present Hannah More Road is a surviving link of the old, meandering Conewago Road or Wagon Road of 1737.⁴

The land in the angle between the turnpike and the

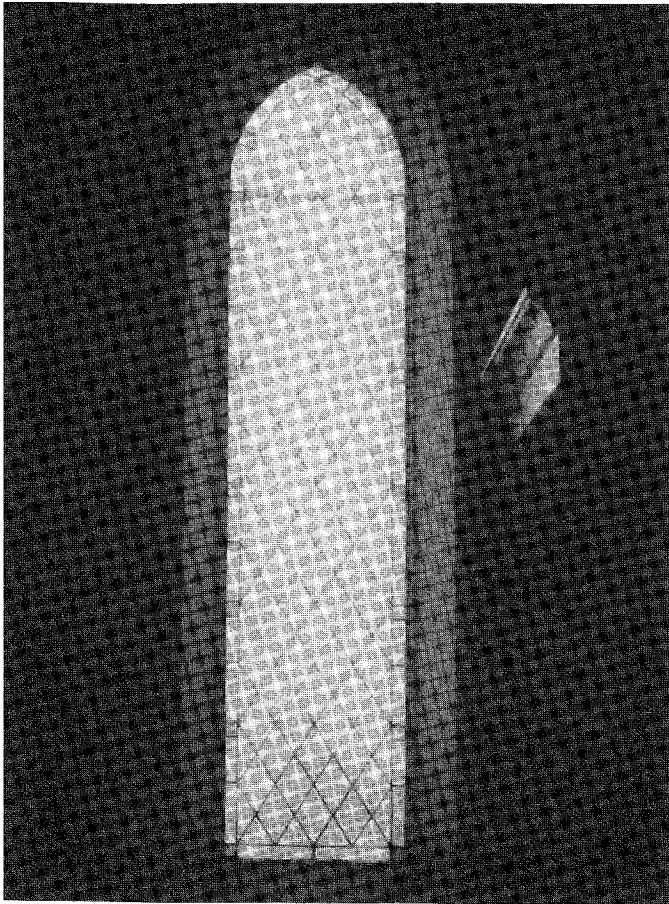


The Hannah More Chapel was an example of the "ecclesiology" movement during the Gothic Revival of the mid-19th Century. Poor parishes tried to build Gothic buildings in wood.

Hannah More Road was used as a lot for the school chapel which was practically centered on the tanyard site. The Reverend Arthur John Rich, who had been a physician before entering the ministry, was responsible for founding the chapel. The academy trustees met on May 27, 1853, and voted permission for him to erect a church on the grounds. However, it was also necessary for him to get permission from the Diocese of Maryland to construct a new place of worship within the territory of St. Thomas Parish.⁵

A motion to build was introduced at the convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church held at Baltimore in May 1853 and it was at first tabled but eventually passed on May 27 after some brief opposition:

In 1853, Mr. Rich, then chaplain of the school, notified the vestry of St. Thomas' of his purpose to apply to the convention for permission to build a Chapel at Hannah More. In the cus-



Lancet window in west end shows no figures, only diamond shaped panes called quarrels, just as described in the 1854 article.

tomary manner of vestries, this one "instructed its delegates to resist."⁶

The undertaking was reported in the newspapers under "Affairs in Baltimore County":

New Chapel—The cornerstone of the Protestant Episcopal Chapel about to be built at the Hannah More Academy near Reisterstown, was laid on Thursday last.⁷

The date of the ceremony was September 29, 1853, and in the absence of the bishop the stone was put in place by the Rev. Ethan Allen, rector of St. John's in Worthington Valley. Bishop Whittingham recorded in his journal that he received a deed of donation for the church and performed its consecration on July 13, 1854:

An overflowing congregation more than filled the church. . . . Offering \$60 and some cents—for the Bell and Organ.⁸

The instrument of donation in the Diocesan archives describes St. Michael's (the official name) as a "house of public worship . . . built of timber in the Gothic style with a nave and Chancel and Vestry Room . . ."⁹

The Gothic Revival style was not only a popular fashion but also an expression of a philosophical and theological point of view called "ecclesiology" which held sway over many Episcopalians of that time. Ecclesiology held that Gothic structures similar to English country churches of the Middle Ages provided the best atmosphere for public worship. The Romantic Rebellion in art and the Oxford Movement in religious thinking were also linked to ecclesiology to the point where enthusiasts decreed that Medieval pointed arches and stained glass windows were a prerequisite for the conduct of Episcopal worship, "the only proper style."

The description of the chapel in a nationally distributed American church publication reports on the Hannah More Chapel in such arcane and specialized architectural jargon that it is almost a satire on the ecclesiology movement:

The Chapel consists of Nave of three bays, Chancel, northern Sacristy, and southern Porch, the porch being on the westernmost bay of the Nave. Orientation is observed. The west end presents two lancets and a vesica window, and is surmounted by a simple bell-gable, which, however, is rather of a stone than a timber outline. The side walls of the Nave are pierced by lancets and couplets, alternated: the chancel has two South lancets, an East window of three lights with plain intersecting tracery. The side walls of Nave and Chancel are 13 feet high; Porch and Sacristy 7 feet; the Sacristy roof is a lean-to, [coming] just under the Chancel eaves; the nave, chancel [and porch] gables are at an angle of 60°, and are each surmounted [by a] cross of wood of varying patterns. The bell gable is [unintelligible] carrying up two posts, 12 inches square, in the framing [of the] West end, which are shown inside with cross ties and chamfered and appear above the roof outside having a cross-tie at the apex of Nave, and others above, so arranged that the opening for the bell is an arch, and the top of the bell gable is of the same pitch as the Nave, and roofed in a similar manner, with cypress shingles having octagon ends. The outside of the building is covered with upright plank, with battened joints, having wide battens at the corners, and neat cornices: the roofs project at the gables and have simple vergeboards.

The Porch is entered by an arched doorway of good width, and is lighted by a small window on each side: the Nave opens into the Porch by an arched doorway with folding doors. The present length of the Nave is 34 feet by 21 feet in width, allowing a wide central alley, with comfortable sittings for 100 persons: about 20 more can be accommodated by movable stools in the alley without obstruct-

ing the passage, except in case of a funeral, the Font will be placed in the centre of the alley opposite the South door. The Nave roof, inside, shows a principal at each post, which posts project beyond the plastering of the side walls, and with the plates neatly planed and chamfered: a simple molded base is broken around the posts and carried all around the building. Between the principals are smaller intermediate rafters with straight collars; the principals have collars also and are secured at their feet by curved knees bolted to them and to the posts. The ceiling between the rafters is of pine, oiled. The pulpit is low and is placed in the northeast corner of the Nave. The Lectern stands just outside the Chancel.

The Chancel arch is 12 feet wide. The chancel is 17 feet deep by 15 feet wide, properly divided by step and rail into Choir and Sanctuary: The Choir has two stalls on each side and a door into the Sacristy just West of the rail. The Sanctuary has the altar, northern credence and two sedilia on the South side. The roof is in two bays, having principals with cross collars, and arched braces, and intermediate rafters with cross collars only.

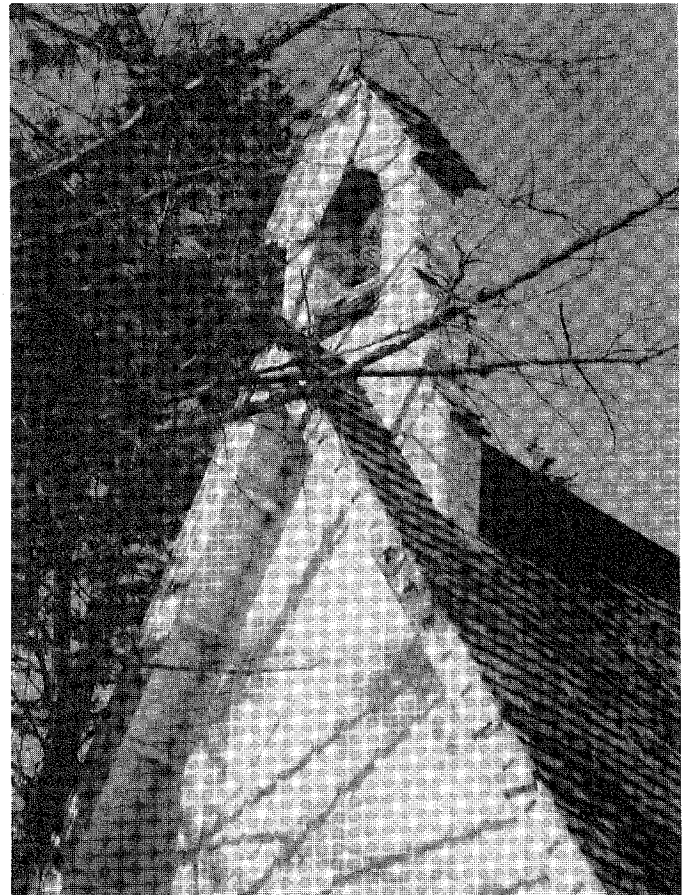
The Chancel rafters, etc., are chamfered; the ceiling is paneled in diamonds and triangles. The Sacristy is about 8 feet by 12 feet inside, and has a good wardrobe. All the furniture of the Church is of oak, simple in design but substantial. The Altar is a heavy oak slab supported by upright ends, pierced and molded, connected by stretchers beveled and pierced with quatrefoils. The Credence is a shelf on two brackets. The Nave seats are open with plain gabled ends.

The windows are filled with stained and enameled glass. The lancets have plain enameled quarrels of a pleasant tint, with a colored border and head of foliage. The side lancets of the chancel have the quarrels enriched with a diaper. The vesica window at the west end of the nave contains a rich and beautiful I.H.S. in gold, on a dark purple foliated ground; this window being high in the gable is made to swing as a ventilator. The East window being of three lights, with intersecting tracery, has three spaces in the head filled with the Alpha and Omega. The three lights have a border of wheat ears and grapes, expanded richly in the heads, and are filled with a foliated ground of neutral tint, broken by three medallions in each light. The upper and lower medallions are cusped ovals; the central ones are quatrefoils. The center light has in the medallions the dove, cross and double triangle: the side lights have the passion flower and the pomegranate; the lamb and the pelican; the wheat and the grape worked up as symbols, and gracefully managed. The general effect of the

window is very good. All the glass was executed by H. P. Bloor & Co., of Brooklyn, under the direction of the Architect, J. W. Priest, 634 Broadway, New York.¹⁰

Oddly enough, a church in the ecclesiology tradition had already been built in nearby Pikesville six years before for the Roman Catholic parish of St. Charles Borromeo. Although Maryland Catholics had not become enthusiasts for Medievalism, the architect at Pikesville, Robert Cary Long, Jr., had been experimenting with Gothic Revival for some city churches. The first St. Charles Borromeo Church is no longer standing, having been built of porous brick that lasted only until 1897.¹¹

Bishop Whittingham found that the small frame Gothic churches were just the thing for Episcopal churches on the Eastern Shore and other areas without resources to build in brick or stone. He reported in 1855 at the annual convention that Hannah More Chapel was "one of the most beautiful and church-like structures to be seen in Maryland or elsewhere . . . with sittings free forever, under the management of a legally and canonically constituted vestry."¹² Some of the local chapels were built from a plan book by New York architect Richard Upjohn,



The bell gable, as it was called in 1854, is supported by timber posts that run up the west inside wall of the nave.

and for many years Hannah More was thought to be one of the Upjohn plans.

From the beginning, the chapel was designed to serve the general public as well as the school. Dr. Rich had reported to the 1853 convention that at his services held in the schoolrooms, "many persons from the neighborhood and most of them not members of the Church, attend on Sundays."¹³ The first year after opening the chapel, Dr. Rich reported baptisms of African Americans and in 1857 he recorded:

Quite a number of colored persons are in the habit of attending the church, particularly on Sunday afternoons; and twice during the year, I have had a special service for them. On one of those occasions, a collection was made for the Africa Mission, and their offering amounted to \$2.83.¹⁴

A Sunday school for black persons was started in 1860. This had always been a "free church"—one without pew rents—and the original contributions were collected with that understanding. The congregation was received into union with the convention on May 31, 1855.

Various physical improvements were made to the interior and in 1858 the Record reported:

Since the last convention a handsome "Corona Lucis," made in England, and presented to St. Michael's by one of the Vestry, has been put up in the Chancel; and a large chaste stone font, with oaken cover, from designs by Mr. Priest, has been presented by the children.¹⁵

In 1865, Dr. Rich, uncertain of how far he should carry the decorative schemes of ecclesiology, wrote to the Bishop:

Mr. Somerville Norris desires to do something towards beautifying the Church of St. Michaels. . . . He offered to have a Super-Altar made and to bring from England with him an Altar-desk, a cross and a pair of candle-sticks, if I would accept and use them. Someone suggested that perhaps you might object to the candle-sticks and Mr. Norris requested me to write and ask you about it.¹⁶

Four years later, Dr. Rich reported to the convention:

A bell of fine tone, weighing 395 lbs., from the foundry of Messrs. Joshua Regester & Son, Baltimore, has been purchased by the congregation.¹⁷

What may be the earliest illustration of the chapel is in an 1861 school catalog which shows the west end of the building practically as it is today.¹⁸

The headmistress at the time of building the chapel was Mrs. Agnes C. Lyon, actually referred to as the superintendent. The first three administrators, as stipulated in the Neilson will were women: Mrs. Hoyt, Mrs. Lyon, and Mrs. C. E. Dunbar. The school was forced to close at the beginning of the Civil War and it reopened in 1863



Original lancet windows in the nave have been replaced by stained glass windows with religious figures.

under a headmaster in the person of the Rev. Dr. Rich. An advertisement placed in a newspaper of 1864 begins:

The Hannah More Academy has been placed under the control and management of the Rev. Arthur J. Rich.¹⁹

Dr. Rich was in charge for 30 years. In 1873, the school was designated as the Diocesan School for girls in the Diocese of Maryland. Successive administrators included Mrs. Rich and her son Alexander, next the Rev. Joseph Fletcher, who was also rector of All Saints Church (1895-1908); Miss Anna Lawrence (1908-1918); Miss Mary S. Bliss (1918-1926); Miss Laura Fowler (1926-1943); Miss Janet Ward (1943-1948); Miss Elizabeth Norris Harvey (1948-1951); Mr. Victor Cain (1951); and Miss Catherine Offley Coleman (1956-1967).

The public use of the small chapel caused problems early in its history, and in 1875 Dr. Rich reported to the convention:

The seats in the Church are all free . . . The Communicants fill the church. The aisles are crowded with chairs every fair Sunday, and occasionally, some who come to the Church cannot get in at all. It is becoming absolutely necessary to build a Church in Reisterstown or to allow those who desire and seek the ministrations of the Church to wander off.²⁰

The next year Dr. Rich reported of his "Reisterstown Parish" that:

As there was not room in St. Michael's Church for the congregation in regular attendance, I secured the control of a suitable room, fitted it up for our purposes and began services in Reisterstown in September last.²¹

It was not until 1891 that Reisterstown had an Episcopal church of adequate size, All Saints, of which Dr. Rich was first rector.

St. Michael's was closed at some point, and a letter from Bishop William Paret in 1908 reported to one of the school trustees that the girls were finding it difficult in foul winter weather to get to All Saints, "and it has been suggested that regular services might be held at the chapel, as well as the church."²²

The gothic chapel was falling into disrepair but in 1928 it underwent repairs and the chancel (i.e., the segment containing the altar) was lengthened. A brick aisle was laid, kneelers added, sanctuary and chancel carpeting installed, and leaded stained glass windows put in, including one in honor of a former house-mother, Mrs. Scarff. A reed organ was presented by an alumna, Mrs. Cranford. The building was reconsecrated on May 31, 1929. Miss Fowler reported to the convention:

The interior of the Chapel you will find quite lovely, simple, dignified and churchly, and I feel sure that in its beautified form it will continue to mean a great deal in the lives of our girls.²³

An etching of the lengthened chapel was made by Don Swann.

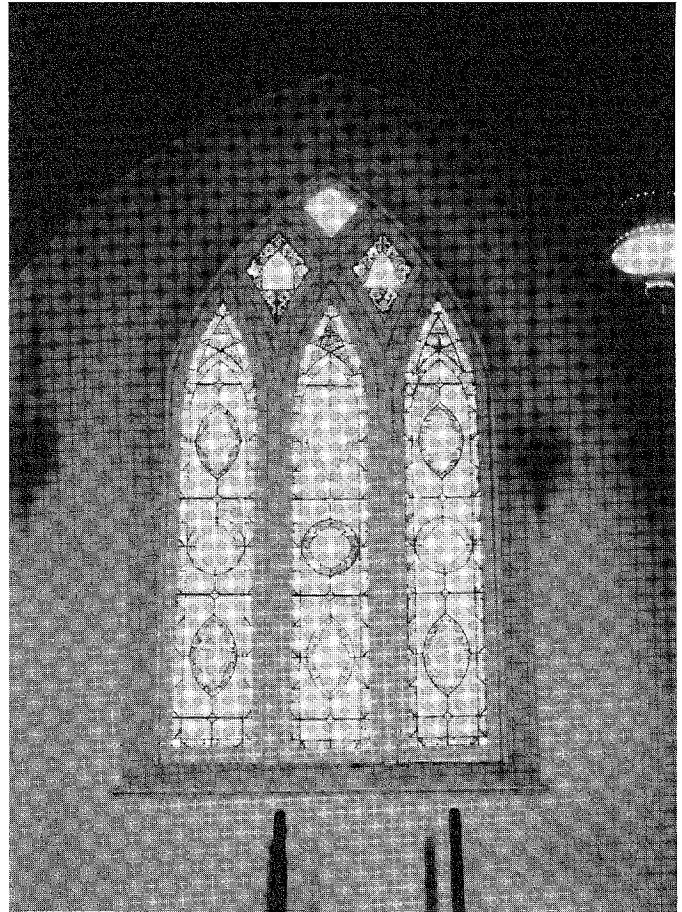
Reisterstown's local paper reported the 1929 rededication:

Last Saturday afternoon a number of former graduates of Hannah More Academy, as well as friends of the school, assembled to participate in the rededication of St. Michael's Chapel.

This chapel was built in 1853-1854 and the Alumnae of the school have restored and enlarged the original edifice to meet the needs of the present enrollment. On this occasion the new building, which was recently erected in memory of Miss Anna L. Lawrence, a former teacher and principal of the school, was also dedicated.²⁴

The campus plant was considerably expanded in the 1960s but shortly thereafter the school began to suffer the strain of a large debt. The academy was losing about \$50,000 per year when the trustees decided to close the school and transfer its charter and enrollment to St. Timothy's School for Girls on Green Spring Avenue.²⁵

A group was formed called the Committee for the Continuation of Hannah More Academy and it vigorously protested the solution of selling the school grounds, insisting that the deficit could be managed. However, the Diocese of Maryland put the property up for sale in the Spring

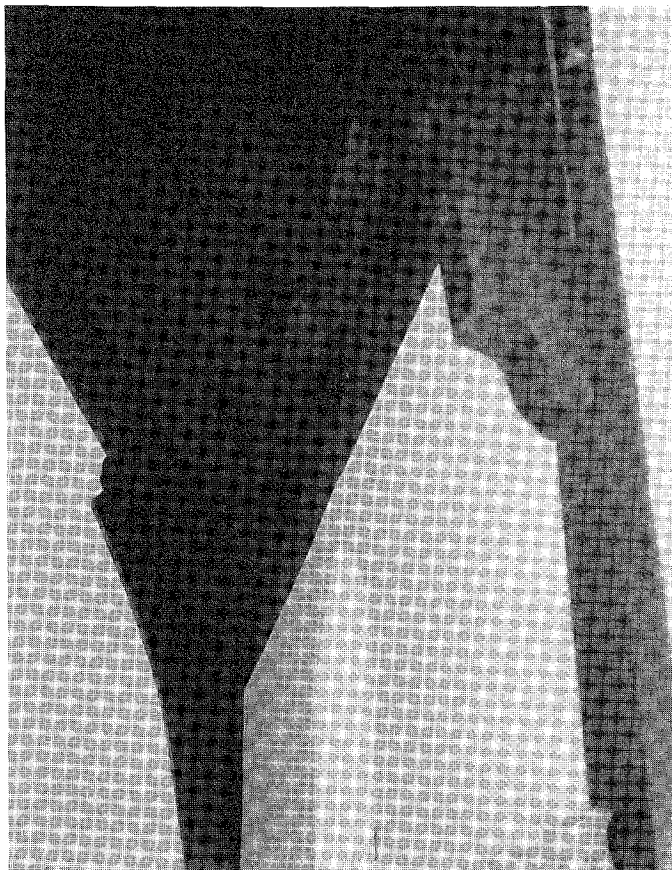


The three-part Gothic window in the east end of the chancel.

of 1974. Thus ended "The Oldest Episcopal Boarding School for Girls in the United States."

Local residents feared that the large campus would become an apartment complex or shopping center, but support began to build for acquisition of the tract by Baltimore County government for some public purpose such as a community college or special school. County Executive Theodore G. Venetoulis announced in April 1977 that he would place a request in the next capital budget for \$1 million to buy the property, and the County Council agreed on that budget item in a meeting held May 24, 1977. The actual purchase contract was accepted by the council on February 28, 1978. The final price was \$1.1 million and the deed executed March 23.²⁶

A 23-member task force appointed by the county executive under the chairmanship of Mr. Lance Berkowitz began its work on May 16, 1978, charged with the evaluation of various proposals that had already been submitted for putting the campus to practical use. At that time, some of the buildings were already undergoing repairs for use as residential space for emotionally disturbed youths. The youth center was an idea advocated for several years by Mrs. Tucky Heller.²⁷



The curved principal rafters spring from the side walls, anchored by curved knees as described in the 1854 report.

The old chapel was deconsecrated on May 12, 1978, as prescribed in Episcopal regulations, to make the building suitable for any secular use.

The chapel was accepted on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and was listed as a Baltimore County Final Landmarks List site by the County Council in 1980.

After the disastrous fire wiped out the original academy building in 1857, a new, all purpose building was designed by Edmund G. Lind of Baltimore and is the structure depicted in the school catalog of 1861 and reproduced in *Maryland Historical Prints*. In 1895, a third main building was constructed in the Georgian Revival style following a design by T. Henry Randall who also designed the Lyric Opera House.

The third academy building survives with a modern wing tacked on during the county's ownership.

A frame house on a separate but adjoining tract was the home of the headmaster, Dr. Rich, and was called Richleigh; that house was later acquired by the school and survives today.²⁸

NOTES:

1. Baltimore City Wills, DMP 14:435.

2. *Baltimore Sun*, November 26, 1857, p.1.
3. Catherine Offley Coleman, *A Short History of Hannah More Academy* (Reisterstown, 1960), pp. 1-2. Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the Hannah More Academy, December 30, 1857, MS., Diocese of Maryland Archives, 4 East University Parkway, Baltimore.
4. Baltimore City Deeds, AWB 399:360. Also, "Plat of An Accurate Survey of the Old and New Roads from Reisterstown to Baltimore," 1788, Pocket Plat No. 159, Maryland Archives, Annapolis.
5. Proceedings of the Board, May 27, 1853.
6. *The Hannah More Academy, 1832-1932* (Reisterstown, 1932), p. 1.
7. *Sun*, October 1, 1853, p. 1.
8. William Whittingham, *Journal*, p. 155, Diocese Archives.
9. "Instrument of Donation, July 1854," Diocese Archives.
10. *The Church Journal*, New York, 2, August 3, 1854: 211-212 (Supplied by Dr. Phoebe B. Stanton, professor emerita of Johns Hopkins University and author of *The Gothic Revival & American Church Architecture* Baltimore, 1968).
11. Beryl Frank, *A Pictorial History of Pikesville* (Towson, 1982), pp. 47-48. Baltimore County's first Gothic church was Sherwood P. E. at Cockeysville. A special train to visit "the Gothic church" was advertised in the *Baltimore American*, June 21, 1833.
12. *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1855), p. 16.
13. *Journal . . . of Convention* (Baltimore, 1853), pp. 92-93.
14. *Journal*, 1857, p. 46.
15. *Journal*, 1858, p. 39.
16. Letter, Dr. A. J. Rich to Bishop William Whittingham, November 16, 1865, Diocese Archives.
17. *Journal*, 1869, p. 60.
18. Lois B. McCauley, *Maryland Historical Prints* (Baltimore, 1975), p. 92.
19. *Baltimore Daily Gazette*, May 2, 1864.
20. *Journal*, 1875, p. 123.
21. *Journal*, 1876, p. 121.
22. Letter, Bishop William Paret to William E. Wyatt of Glyndon, Md., March 28, 1908, Diocese Archives.
23. *Journal*, 1929, p. 111.
24. *Community News*, Reisterstown, April 19, 1929.
25. "Old Hannah More School Up for Sale, Its Charter, Students Transferred," *Sun*, October 7, 1974, p. C-1.
26. Antero Pietila, "County Is Negotiating to Buy More Property," *Sun*, April 24, 1977. Antero Pietila, "\$66.6 Million County Capital Budget Includes 911 Line," *Sun*, April 25, 1977, p. D-1. Monte I. Tramer, "County Council Approves Hannah More Purchase," *Sun*, March 1, 1978.
27. Antero Pietila, "County Youth Center Is Planned," *Sun*, June 2, 1977. "Hannah More Study Set." *Sun*, May 17, 1978.
28. Baltimore County Deeds, WJR 3558: 630.