

Alexander Esty

A Romanesque Church Design: Image and Meaning

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On a Sunday morning in March of 1853, the First Congregational Church of Winchester, Massachusetts, was engulfed by fire. Despite efforts by the citizens of the town and engine companies from neighboring Woburn, Stoneham, and Medford, the destruction of the church, including the “new and valuable church organ, procured by subscription during the winter of 1852-53,” was complete.¹ Ironically, the sermon

planned for that Sabbath was intended to preach the value of supporting the expansion of the Congregational Church into the western United States and to begin a collection in support of church-building in the western territories. Instead, as church Clerk Stephen A. Holt notes in a contemporary volume, the Reverend Reuben Totman Robinson suggested to his congregation that they begin at home with the rebuilding of their own church:

... he exhorted the people in accordance with the spirit of his discourse and the manifest will of Providence to begin at home and rebuild here the House of God and concluded with the earnest wish that the glory of the latter house might exceed the former, not only in material beauty and fitness, but also spiritually, “even by the coming of our Lord’s Savior, who shall fill it with his presence and glory.”²

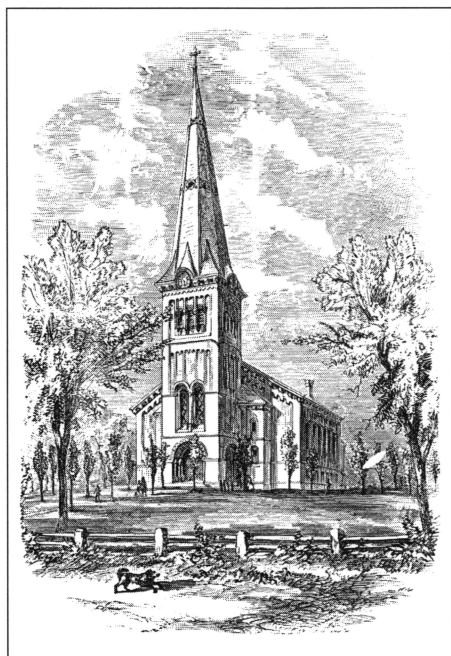
His words were apparently taken to heart by the congregation. A few days later, a *Woburn Journal* correspondent reported, “At an informal meeting of the Congregational Parish, held on Monday evening, a harmonious and determined spirit seemed to prevail, and it was voted, unanimously, to take immediate measures for the erection of a new church.”³

Built between 1853 and 1854, the new First Congregational Church was designed in the Romanesque Revival style. It is an early work of prominent nineteenth-century architect Alexander Rice Esty, whose role in the building’s design has not been recognized in publications on Winchester history and architecture. In a 1993 lecture, architectural historian Stephen Jerome pre-

sented documentation in support of the attribution.⁴ The Winchester church appears to be a variation on the design of Esty’s first Romanesque Revival church: Prospect Street Congregational in Cambridge, dating from 1851.

The First Congregational Church may be studied from two other perspectives. First, it represents an early Massachusetts example of an important nineteenth-century picturesque style. Second, the rebuilding of First Congregational was marked by controversy despite the account, quoted in the *Woburn Journal*, of the convivial parish meeting. From the selection of the building committee to the choice of church design, First Congregational became the focus of friction within Winchester relating to its evolution from a rural town into an affluent suburb of Boston.

Alexander Rice Esty (1826-81) was a life-long Framingham, Massachusetts, native and the son of a carpenter-builder. A prominent citizen of the town, he was at one time chairman of the board of selectmen. Like many architects of the mid-nineteenth century, Esty began his career with an apprenticeship to a practicing architect: Richard Bond, who designed Gore Hall at Harvard College (1836-38, destroyed 1914). After his apprenticeship, Esty worked for Gridley J. F. Bryant and then opened his own office in 1849. According to city directories, Esty’s architectural office was located in Boston at 2 Change Avenue from 1850 through 1874 and subsequently at 35 Congress Street until his death at fifty-four in 1881.⁵



(Winchester, Mass., Archival Center)

FIGURE 1. The First Congregational Church of Winchester, 1853-54, designed by Alexander Esty. A line drawing of the church reveals its original appearance.

During a thirty-odd-year career, Esty was a successful and prolific architect of public, residential, and ecclesiastical buildings. He designed a number of colleges and schools, including the State Normal School at Framingham (1853), Anderson Hall at the University of Rochester (1859-61), and several buildings at Colby College in Waterville, Maine (1867-72).⁶ Esty also designed several commercial buildings after Boston's great fire of 1872: the Monk's buildings at 35 Congress Street (1873, destroyed) and at E Street and West Broadway in South Boston (1873), and the Boston and Albany Railroad Depot on Kneeland Street (1881, destroyed).⁷ At the time of his death, Esty was poised for success on a national scale. His obituary notes that he was one of three architects appointed to a special commission to "make designs of the proposed Congressional Library Building" and suggests that his designs for the interior had been "unanimously approved."⁸

Several obituaries indicate that Esty's church architecture was well regarded. Of his known works, churches are the most numerous.⁹ Although a devout Episcopalian, Esty designed churches for Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists.¹⁰ Noteworthy extant examples include Prospect Street Congregational (now Christ the King Presbyterian) in Cambridge (1851), the Church of Our Saviour in Brookline (1867-68), and Union Congregational (now Union United Methodist) in Boston's South End (1872). In keeping with the common practice of the time, Esty's Episcopal churches are always Gothic in design, while those built for other denominations are typically Romanesque and occasionally Gothic.

Esty's first church design may have been the 1848 remodeling of the Hollis Evangelical Meeting House, Framingham, in the Gothic style.¹¹ Architectural historian Lance Kasparian proposes, however, that during 1848, while working for Gridley Bryant, Esty may have designed the Gothic-style First Baptist Church in Haverhill. Dedicated in November of 1849, First Baptist closely resembles Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church in New York City (1844-46). A *Haverhill (Mass.) Gazette* article from 1849 states that Bryant was the "architect under whose supervision designs

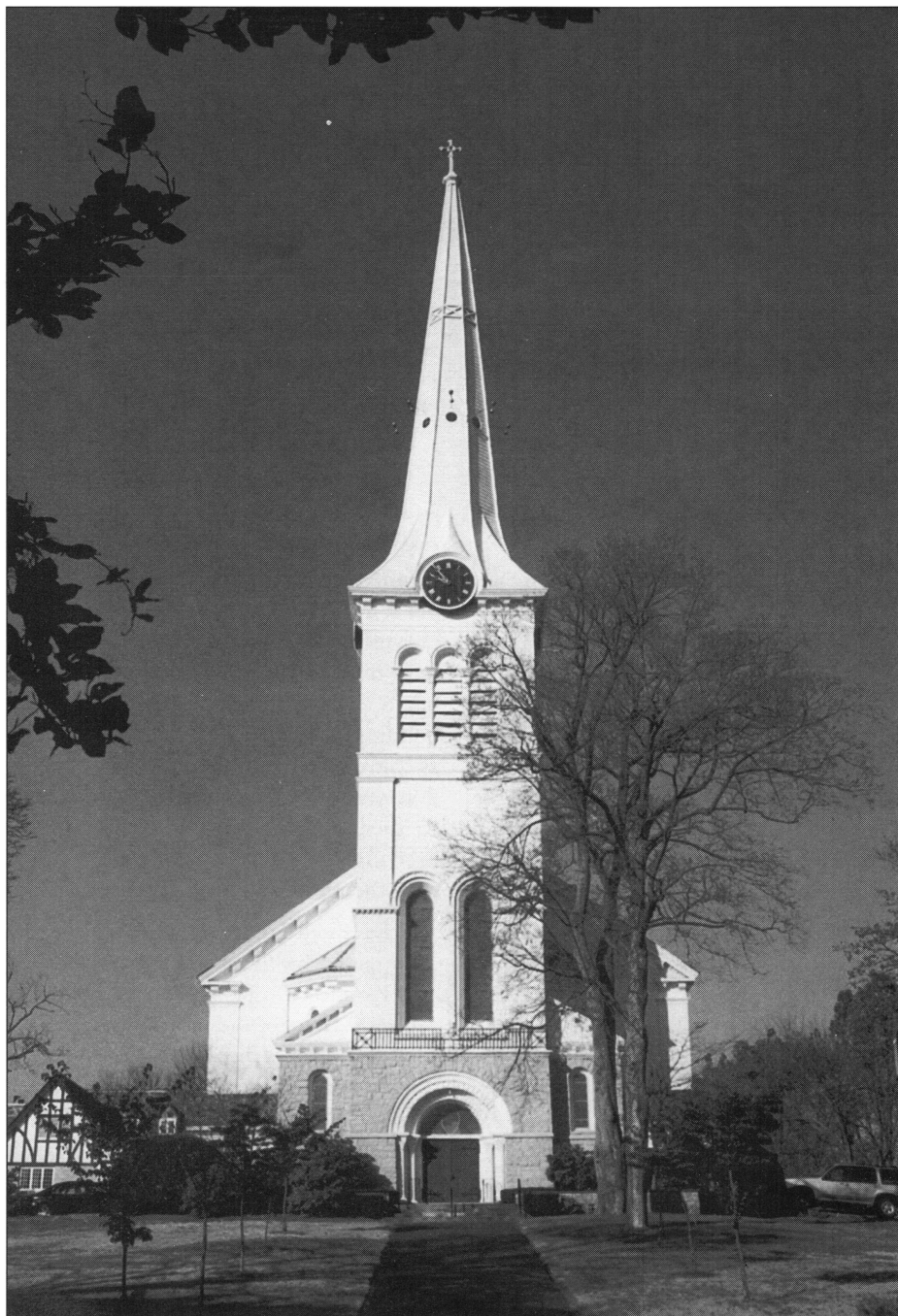
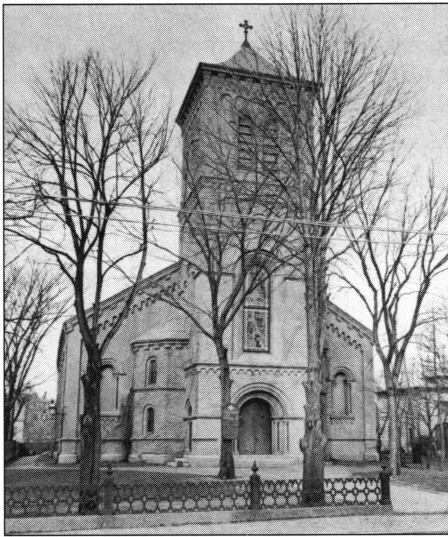


FIGURE 2. The First Congregational Church today. The building retains its original massing, although many of the church's Romanesque Revival decorative elements are gone.

were prepared and the building executed," but that the "drawings were made by Mr. Alexander Esty." Esty's name and office address of 2 Change Street appear on the church drawings, which suggests that he, not Bryant, actually designed the building.¹²

The surviving records for the First Congregational Church of Winchester in-

dicate that the parish first contacted architect Richard Bond to design the new building. The parish book for 1840-55 notes on 11 April 1853 that "Mr. Bond the Architect has some Plans of Churches which he would like to have the Parish look at."¹³ Yet in a 4 October 1854 entry outlining the total cost of the church, "Mr. Esty" is listed as being owed \$100, presumably for



(Cambridge Historical Society Collection, Cambridge Historical Commission)

FIGURE 3. Prospect Street Congregational Church, Cambridge, 1851, designed by Esty. The Cambridge church (now Christ the King Presbyterian Church) was built of brick.

a church design.¹⁴ An October 1861 issue of the *Congregational Quarterly* confirms the attribution of the church to Esty. It includes an illustration captioned “Congregational Church, Winchester, Ms. Alexander R. Esty, Esq., of Boston, Architect. E.F. Watson, of Lowell, Builder.”¹⁵ The appearance of both Bond and Esty in records relating to the church’s design is intriguing due to the earlier relationship between the two men as master and apprentice. But without additional documentation, one can only speculate about how this relationship might have resulted in Esty’s becoming the architect of First Congregational.

Like many churches of the period, First Congregational has been altered since its completion. The illustration that appeared in the *Congregational Quarterly* provides an opportunity to examine First Congregational as it was built in 1854 (figure 1). The current exterior massing of the church—with the exception of the addition of the parish house at the rear of the building—is similar to that of the original (figure 2). The front entrance has been changed by the addition of narthex wings and porches in 1904. But much of the church is essentially the same as it was when it was completed, including its main

building block, four-story axial tower, single central entrance, and broach spire. Six bays, each fenestrated with a large, round-headed window at the nave level and a smaller round-headed window at the basement level, appear in the 1861 illustration and can still be seen today. The 1861 description notes that the height of the tower and spire is 172 feet.¹⁶

Significant changes in the exterior details have been made, however, including the alteration or removal of most of the Romanesque Revival decorative elements. With the exception of the steeple, the original building was resurfaced with stone and stucco in 1959. All of the decorative arched molding—which resembled a flattened corbel table—was removed. In the 1861 illustration, this molding may be seen immediately beneath the cornice and in three places on the tower—beneath the cornice and over the windows in both the second and fourth stories. The window profiles in the tower have been simplified. The original second-story tower windows were separated by a columnar mullion, and the third and fourth-story stages were enhanced by panelwork. The original roof was probably slate. Prior to the addition of the narthex wings, the hexagonal stair turrets, with their Romanesque style round-arched windows, were more visible. A number of new decorative elements have transformed the exterior into something more akin to a Classical Revival church. The pilasters at the corners of the main facade and between the windows on the sides of the building are the most noteworthy. The 1861 article does not suggest the color of the church’s exterior, but nineteenth-century photographs show that it was not white.¹⁷ Happily, the doorway, with its pair of rounded arches carried on half columns, displays archivolts with a chevron pattern, which gives the viewer an important clue to the church’s original exterior.

First Congregational’s exterior closely resembles an earlier church designed by Esty, Prospect Street Congregational (1851) in Cambridge (figure 3). While not identical—Prospect Street Congregational is built of brick that originally was painted to resemble stone—the main facades have the same axial four-story tower flanked by hexagonal stair turrets, central round-

arched doorway with chevron-patterned archivolts supported by paired columns, and decorative moldings. A third Esty church, Park Street Baptist (1854) in Framingham (figure 4) originally displayed a similar facade.¹⁸

Like the exterior, the interior of First Congregational—a large auditorium space consisting of a nave with side aisles and without balconies—has been somewhat altered (figure 5). The organ, which has been moved, was located in the tower. The pews were arranged in a semi-circular shape focused on the pulpit; an example of this configuration can still be seen at Prospect Street Congregational. In 1925, a deep chancel was added.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the church interior, its elaborate decorative plasterwork, has not been altered. Elaborate decorative elements appear throughout the interior. The tall nave arcade is carried on octagonal piers, each with eight attached half-columns and lush foliate capitals. The ceiling has been constructed to resemble ribbed stone vaulting; the 1861 article describes “groined arches” in both the nave and side aisles. A decorative string-course divides the nave arcade from a clerestory above. The ceiling arches spring from attached columns above the piers, which also feature foliate capitals. Finally, each juncture of the ribbed “vaulting” is punctuated by an elaborate plaster boss of intertwined vines and leaves. The current white color of the interior represents a significant change from the original decorative treatment, which was much darker: the walls were originally “blocked in imitation of freestone” and the wood furnishings were constructed of English oak and rosewood.¹⁹

While no contemporary accounts of an official Congregational Church response to the design of the Winchester building have been found to date, the 1861 description in the *Congregational Quarterly* notes, “It is universally conceded that the proportions and the fitting up of the [First Congregational] interior are unique and tasteful, beautifully in keeping with the design of the house.”²⁰ Influential members of the Congregational Church had recently endorsed Romanesque Revival as a particularly appropriate style for Congregational churches. This development is analyzed in Gwen W. Steege’s article en-

titled “The *Book of Plans* and the Early Romanesque Revival in the United States: A Study in Architectural Patronage.” Steege suggests that the *Book of Plans*, published in 1853 by the Congregational Church, was an “important catalyst in the general spread of medieval styles and the Romanesque in particular throughout American church architecture.” She links the choice of style to a “purification movement” within the Congregational Church.²¹ A *Book of Plans* was intended to provide correct designs for new Congregational church buildings, especially those in the rapidly expanding western states:

... in the judgement of this Convention, it is expedient that the Central Committee, constituted for the aid of Churches at the West, in erecting Houses of Worship, procure plans of suitable edifices, with specifications and estimates...with a view to promoting convenience, economy and good taste, in the design and execution of the work.²²

Two of the *Book of Plans* authors were founding members of the Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, New York, an important center for Congregationalist theological revival during this period. Steege suggests that the Church of the Pilgrims, designed by Richard Upjohn in 1844 and dedicated in 1846, was “the seminal church in the Romanesque Revival movement in this country.”²³

As First Congregational’s rebuilding occurred soon after the publication of this important work, it is tempting to conclude that the book directly influenced Winchester’s choice of the Romanesque style. The book presents several designs for Romanesque-style churches, including one with a prominent axial tower entrance on its west facade. However, as previously discussed, First Congregational is probably based on an earlier Esty design, Prospect Street Congregational in Cambridge. The *Book of Plans* may have served instead to provide the building committee with the authority to approve the Romanesque-style design.

The original First Congregational Church building in Winchester was built in 1840 by members of the Woburn Congregational Church who lived in South Woburn. They had determined for a variety of reasons to incorporate and build



FIGURE 4. Park Street Baptist Church, Framingham, 1854, designed by Esty. From *One Century of Service: South Framingham Park Street Baptist Church, 1854-1954*.

their own church. The building they erected is described by historian Henry Smith Chapman as “a simple, white painted New England meetinghouse” and is attributed by him to Gardner Symmes. When it was completed, the church had forty-two pew holders.²⁴

South Woburn was incorporated as a separate town in 1850 and was renamed Winchester; it had been experiencing significant change since 1835. During the early nineteenth century, the area was still “a community of scattered farms, rural in character in spite of a few promising industries.”²⁵ By 1835, however, the Boston and Lowell Railroad had been built through South Woburn. Chapman notes that several men moved their businesses from Woburn to South Woburn to take advantage of the proximity of the railroad.²⁶ By 1845, Chapman writes, South Woburn “must have numbered at least a thousand persons. In addition to those attracted by its industries, it was beginning to be sought

out by residents of Boston who recognized the beauty of its surroundings and found the railroad a ready and speedy means of reaching it.”²⁷

Substantial growth occurred during the early 1850s. Between 1850 and 1852, the tax rolls doubled and town expenses tripled: in 1850 taxes due totaled \$3,001 and town expenses were \$4,116; by 1852 taxes due totaled over \$6,000 and expenses were nearly \$12,000.²⁸ The increase in town population was such that the townspeople decided that the existing small cemetery behind First Congregational would no longer serve. A new and larger cemetery, Wildwood, was completed by the summer of 1852.²⁹

The expansion of the town and its changing character created friction between inhabitants, and the destruction of First Congregational by fire in early 1853 occurred at a time when relations were not at their best. The rebuilding of the church was accompanied by controversy and ill-feeling between residents whose families had resided in Winchester for years and the newer residents who regarded Winchester as an attractive commuting suburb of Boston.

An account published soon after the church was destroyed suggests that the choice of the building committee was a source of controversy:

A building committee of nine members was elected and instructed to proceed at once with plans to rebuild the church. The committee, once chosen, made the startling proposal that they be not restricted in the least in their actions; i.e., that they be allowed to build such as house as they saw fit, without limitation as to the amount of money they should spend, or advice as to the kind of church they should build. This, of course, provoked discussion, for in the opinion of some, it placed too much power in their hands. In the end, however, the committee prevailed, although by a small majority.³⁰

An August 1853 article in the *Woburn Journal* indicates that only five months after the fire, the building committee had accomplished a great deal: “The new church, now in progress of building at Winchester, in place of the one lately burnt, will be a very handsome building, costing about \$16,000. The site for the church has been much improved. The materials for the building appear to be on the ground

and the workers are plenty and busy.”³¹ The same article also notes, with apparent pride, the changes then occurring in the town: “There are many fine buildings being erected in Winchester. The town is rapidly growing.”³²

In April of the following year, the *Middlesex Journal* records that at the annual meeting of the Congregational Parish, the building committee estimated the total cost of the church is “little rising \$22,000 [sic].”³³ The correspondent appears to have been either a member of the committee or at the least sympathetic with it, for he writes:

This certainly is a very reasonable sum for so spacious and handsome an edifice as the society have in process of erection. And here we would say, we approve most heartily of the enlarged and liberal view which the society have entertained throughout this enterprise. There is no reason why this house should be the poorest house in the village. Rather should it be the best as superior to all others as the purpose for which it is intended is higher, holier.³⁴

The correspondent reports also that the meeting had been “very harmonious and pleasant” and that “...the affairs of the society were never in a more satisfactory and prosperous condition.”³⁵

Yet correspondence published in the paper during May and June of 1854 clearly contradicts the assertion that all was “harmonious and pleasant.” The April 22nd article comments favorably on a cross on the top of the spire: “Certainly if there is any appropriate symbol for a Christian church it is the cross. Nor is there any reason why this should be suffered to remain in the possession of any one denomination...”³⁶ However, a response in the May 6th edition asserts that the cross is a “Catholic emblem on a Protestant church.”³⁷

On June 17th, a correspondent who signs himself “A Citizen” explicitly states the feeling of the established residents of the town toward the newer residents, the commuters:

It is necessary that readers should know that in our goodly town nearly everything of a public nature is done by, or through, or for “the people who go to Boston.” And the same will apply to our Parish. When our



(Winchester, Mass., Archival Center)

FIGURE 5. First Congregational Church, Winchester, interior, as photographed in 1882. The photograph shows how the church interior originally appeared when the walls were painted to resemble blocks of freestone.

house was burnt there was a feeling of regret on the part of every one for the place (if not the place where our fathers worshiped) at least where we had worshiped. And there was but one feeling expressed at the society meeting that was informally called [here the writer refers to the meeting in March of 1853, just after the fire]. And on the part of some, the feeling was expressed that the house which we proposed to build should be exceedingly magnificent. But on this point all could not agree. But all were agreed so far that it should be a commodious and a good house. Yet here another point came in. It should be done to please the people who go to Boston. And accordingly at a regularly called Parish meeting a rather fresh importation of that class came forward and joined the Parish, and the same evening some from these were chosen on the committee; and one was chosen ... who was not a member of the Parish. In order to carry out the design it was necessary that they should not be restricted the least in their actions. Hence a motion was made and carried by a small majority that they would build such a house as they saw fit, without being limited as to the amount of money they should expend or consulting the Parish as to the kind of house they should build. Some thought it was giving them too much power. But the committee wanted such power and we believe have acted strictly in accordance with them, by consulting no-

body but themselves, and making a very large expenditure. Hence the cross your correspondent spoke of in terms of such eulogy.³⁸

The passage suggests that not only was the expenditure of the committee an issue for other members of the parish, but that the design of the church itself was a point of contention. The final cost of the church was in excess of \$26,000—a not inconsiderable sum for a wooden edifice at that time—and \$10,000 more than originally estimated. In addition, the completed church could seat approximately 750 people, almost three times the size of the actual congregation. Was the committee interested in creating a large and beautiful building in order to attract more parishioners in a rapidly growing town? Or were the size and style of the church the result of building committee members who wanted to ornament “their” town with an impressive monument—a case of the building reflecting the patrons’ ambitions? The lavishness of the interior and expenditure might support this second hypothesis.

Despite the controversy in Winchester, the completed building received favorable notice from the Church hierarchy. In the closing paragraph of its 1861 article, the *Congregational Quarterly* notes, “Thus this Church, though it has not yet attained to its majority, has...come to take rank in

numbers and efficiency among the first churches in the State,” and adds, “It is to be hoped that the cause of religion will continue to flourish in this highly favored community...”³⁹ The author, no doubt, would observe with satisfaction that today, after nearly 150 years, Esty’s church still presides over Winchester’s town center and is maintained by an active parish.

NOTES

I am indebted to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., for providing generous access to his files on Alexander Esty and to Maureen Meister for additional materials on First Congregational. This article developed from my research on Esty for a paper written for James F. O’Gorman, Grace Slack McNeil Professor of the History of American Art, Wellesley College, in 1997.

1. Quoted in Leonora M. Rich, *Stepping Stones in Preserving Our Heritage. A History of the Church. Sesquicentennial Anniversary Edition, 1840-1990*, Winchester, Mass., ca. 1990, 30-31. See also “First Congregational Church, Winchester, Ms.,” *The Congregational Quarterly*, Oct. 1861, 337-40. The original church burned on 20 March 1853.

2. Rich, 30-32.

3. “Congregational Church Burnt in Winchester,” *Woburn Journal*, 26 March 1853. This article is quoted in Abijah Thompson, “Church History. The First Congregational Church of Winchester, Mass.,” *Winchester Press*, 5 July 1901. A copy of Thompson’s article may be found at the First Congregational Church.

4. See Maureen Meister’s article on Jerome’s 1993 lecture, “Neat, Convenient and Tastefully Designed: The First Congregational Church of Winchester and Its Architect, Alexander R. Esty,” *Winchester Star*, 15 April 1993.

5. Little published biographical information on Esty is available. This summary relies in part on Minnie J. Fannin and Leslie Larson, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination for St. John’s Episcopal Church, Framingham,” 12 May 1988. See also Adolf K. Placzek, ed., *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, New York, 1982, s.v. “Alexander R. Estey [sic],” by Frederic C. Detwiller.

6. The University of Rochester awarded him an honorary degree in 1866. See Esty’s obituary in the *Boston Daily Transcript*, 5 July 1881.

7. I wish to thank Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., who provided a list of Esty’s known works and their dates.

8. Constantine Canaris Esty, “Alexander Rice Esty, 1826-1881,” *Framingham Gazette*, 8 July 1881. Esty’s perspective view of his design for the Library of Congress, ca. 1875, is illustrated in Bates Lowry, *Building a National Image*, Washington, D.C., 1985, plate 63.

9. Shettleworth list.

10. In a 5 April 1868 letter to A. A. Lawrence, Esty discusses at length justification for the use of a credence table in the Episcopal service. Esty closes with, “I am no follower of ‘Ritualistic abominations’—my endeavours in arranging churches [sic] is to adopt that course which will give the services of our beloved church full and free, far be it from me to do otherwise ...”

11. Shettleworth list.

12. *Haverhill (Mass.) Gazette*, 10 November 1849. Lance Kasparian provided me with this information derived from his research on the topic.

13. Maureen Meister, assisted by Ann Russell of the First Congregational Church, supplied this reference. “Parish Book of Woburn South Congregational Parish,” 12 May 1840-31 Dec. 1855, 119, First Congregational Church archives.

14. “Parish Book,” 120. Meister and Russell also located a church pew plan, owned by the First Congregational Church and dated 1854, which is labeled “Alexander R. Esty, Arch’t.”

15. Stephen Jerome located this article and noted this attribution, which led to the examination of church records in Winchester. I am indebted to him for this important source.

16. “First Congregational,” *Congregational Quarterly*, 339.

17. Gwen W. Steege suggests that many Romanesque Revival buildings were originally painted gray or light tan, but “most have by now been covered with white to satisfy the subsequent classical revival taste.” See Gwen W. Steege, “The Book of Plans and the Early Romanesque Revival in the United States: A Study in Architectural Patronage,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Sept. 1987, 224-25. Photographs of the First Congregational Church taken during the nineteenth century reveal that it was painted a deep shade. For example, see *Winchester, Massachusetts: The Architectural Heritage of a Victorian Town*, Winchester, Mass., 90.

18. The Framingham church was completely redesigned in the Classical Revival style during the 1930s.

19. “First Congregational,” *Congregational Quarterly*, 339.

20. Ibid.

21. Steege, 215.

22. *A Book of Plans for Churches and Parsonages*.

Published under the direction of the Central Committee appointed by the General Congregational Convention. October 1852, New York, 1853, 3.

23. Steege, 217.

24. Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester, Massachusetts*, Cambridge, Mass., 1936; reprint Winchester, Mass., 1975, Vol. I, 152.

25. Chapman, 134.

26. Chapman, 138-39.

27. Chapman, 154.

28. Chapman, 170-71.

29. Chapman, 173.

30. Quoted in Rich, 32.

31. *Woburn Journal*, 6 Aug. 1853.

32. Ibid.

33. “Congregational Parish,” *Middlesex Journal*, 22 April 1854.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. *Middlesex Journal*, 6 May 1854.

38. Unsigned letter to the editor, *Middlesex Journal*, 17 June 1854.

39. “First Congregational,” *Congregational Quarterly*, 340.

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