

James Renwick, Jr.

Architect (1818 – 1895)



Renwick was born into a wealthy and well-educated family. His mother, Margaret Brevoort, was from a socially prominent New York family, and his father, JAMES RENWICK, was an engineer, architect, and professor of natural philosophy at Columbia College, now Columbia University. Renwick studied engineering at Columbia, entering at age 12 and graduating in 1836. He received an M.A. three years later.

In 1843, at the age of 25, Renwick received his first major commission, to design Grace Church, in New York City, and a year later he won the competition for the design of the Smithsonian Institution Building. The many-turreted building, designed in the Romanesque style, is generally referred to as 'the Castle.' It was a major influence in the Gothic revival in the U.S.

In 1849, Renwick designed the Free Academy Building (City College of New York) at Lexington Avenue and 23rd Street, one of the first Gothic Revival college buildings on the East Coast. Renwick went on to design what is considered his finest achievement, and his best-known building, St. Patrick's Cathedral. He was chosen as architect for the cathedral in 1853, construction began in 1858, and it opened in May 1879. The cathedral, the most ambitious essay in Gothic that the revival of the style produced, is a mixture of German, French, and English Gothic influences.

Among the other buildings that Renwick designed was the Corcoran Gallery of Art (now home to the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery), in Washington D.C.; Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York; the New York Stock Exchange; and All Saints' Roman Catholic Church in Harlem. Several of Renwick's protégés became influential architects, including BERTRAM GOODHUE, who was a partner of RALPH ADAMS CRAM, and William Hamilton Russell, a grand nephew of Renwick.