Curley’s Corrections

By Rev. Augustine J. Curley, O.S.B.

A number of years ago, Martin I. J. Griffin ran a column in his American Catholic Historical Researches called “Errors Corrected, or, Griffin’s Pillory.” In it he pointed out the errors in recently published historical works. Since historical errors are still with us, this column will seek to correct historical errors, misunderstandings, and fuzzy history in recent historical works.

Let me start by correcting one of my own errors. In my article “Newark Abbey” in the Encyclopedia of New Jersey, I state that the architect of St. Mary’s Church was Patrick Keeley. This is also what is stated on the plaque placed on the facade of the Church when it was added to the National Register of Historic Sites. Brian Regan repeats the error in his wonderful book about Sacred Heart Cathedral, Gothic Pride. It was only when, in the entry on St. Mary’s on his New Jersey Churchescape website, Frank Greenagel questioned the attribution to Patrick Keeley that I went back and examined the sources. I asked a couple of my confreres why we claimed that Patrick Keeley had designed the church. “That’s what I have always been told,” was the response. In examining various histories published over the years, it was obvious that the attribution to Patrick Keeley was relatively recent. The earlier histories said nothing about an architect, and sometimes even implied that there was no architect, that the workmen-parishioners simply built a church based on some illustrations of European churches.

As I sorted through material that had come to the archives from the old business office, I came upon the specifications for the building of the church. These were “according to the accompanying plans, elevations & sections, made by the architects, Edson & Engelbert, N.Y.” Henry Engelbert was born about 1826 in Gottenberg, Germany. He was part of the Rundbogenstil, or German Romanesque revival, which sought to emulate the early Church. St. Mary’s, one of his early designs, is a basilica-style church which, as much as possible, used local materials, in accordance with the precepts of the movement.

The entry on John Tatham in the Encyclopedia of New Jersey identifies him as an Anglican. This is an understandable mistake, since he is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Burlington. But when he was buried there, it was not yet the cemetery for St. Mary’s, but simply a cemetery that he and several others had established as a burial ground for themselves and their families. In fact, Tatham was a Roman Catholic, and at one time an English Benedictine monk. Although he once sued someone for accusing him of being a Papist, he seems to have remained a Catholic, although a closeted one, for his entire life. He is one of the many Catholics who had to practice their faith in a clandestine manner because of the laws restricting the practice of Catholicism in New Jersey.

Anyone who has knowledge of other published historical errors that should be corrected, or has a question about some statement that does not seem right, can e-mail the author at acurley@sbp.org and he will try to determine the truth of the matter.