

# *Gold Dome Churches Tour*



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**Preservation Association of the Southern Tier**

# GOLD DOME CHURCHES

*F*rom 1880 to about 1930, almost two dozen magnificent Eastern Christianity or Orthodox churches appeared on the Broome County landscape. From Northern Binghamton to Western Endicott these heavenly structures with crowns and crosses of gold were built by thousands of Southern Tier immigrants. To many County residents onion-dome churches are common. Yet in these places we find the spirit exalted beyond our times. Beginning in the late 19th century, generations of Eastern Europeans from the Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Greece, Armenia and Slovakia travelled an Atlantic to toil in Triple Cities cigar and shoe factories. In their new-found communities they recreated their culture in fraternal orders, youth groups, music ensembles, schools... and churches. Today, these heavenly structures with brilliant crowns of gold remain as their story, told through decades of art and architecture.

## THE BUILDERS

*T*he builders of the churches had common bonds of extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunity in their homelands and persecution because of religious or cultural affiliation. Moving to America meant they could enjoy religious freedom and preserve their ethnic identity while improving their standard of living.

Beginning with a major wave of immigration from Slovakia in 1880, multi-Ethnic groups of eastern Europeans began to settle in the small coal mining towns of eastern Pennsylvania. By 1900, they numbered an estimated 81,000. Diligent, hard-working, they offered employers an inviting alternative to the native Anglo-Saxons who were committed to the union movement and were prone to frequent strikes. Within a few years, the number of Slavic immigrants in the coal fields increased to well over 200,000.

To the north, the Parlor City's shoe and cigar factories offered safer, more attractive employment for unskilled laborers. Voyaging from Europe or leaving the anthracite fields, eastern immigrants who settled in "The Valley of Opportunity" could think of owning a home or farm with greater opportunities for their children as the industrial economy of the region expanded. In Binghamton, many settled in the First Ward where they could find inexpensive dwellings in boarding houses along Clinton Street near the factories. They attended Sunday services at St. Patrick's church on Leroy Street, or in private homes or stores. They formed ethnic ghettos, which determined the future sites where churches would be built. As a group they integrated slowly into the mainstream Anglo-American society, speaking dissimilar languages and maintaining separate identities and communities. Because of linguistic, liturgical and traditional differences, not even the Catholic or Lutheran immigrants could be readily absorbed into existing parishes.

## FIRST CHURCHES

**B**y the 1920s, most of the Eastern Europeans had formed ethnic mutual benefit societies. It was through the fund-raising efforts of these organizations that many of the gold dome churches were built. The story of each church has many common elements. Individual ethnic groups would meet in homes or social halls while they financed the construction of the church. They bought farmland or converted existing churches or structures such as barns or social halls and built humble structures. These served until the congregation grew and monies permitted the building of a more worthy edifice. Parishes split as ethnic groups gained numbers and finances and founded their own churches.

The first Slovak church was built in 1905 at 128 Clinton Street and was dedicated to the 9th century missionaries to Moravia, Saints Cyril and Methodius. The congregation included many non-Slovak Catholics. In 1910, several Polish families purchased land on Snowden Street, between Glenwood and Pulaski Street. Over the next four years, the Polish Holy Trinity Society cleared the lot and built a simple wooden platform; dances were held to provide monies for a church. In 1914, the Syracuse diocese granted permission to build a church. Within a few days ceremonies were being held at the site; four walls and a roof had been applied to the dance stage to build the first St. Stanislaus Kostka Church.

Between 1920 and 1924, Slovaks living on the western edge of Binghamton grew tired of the mile and half unpaved walk along Clinton Street to St. Cyril's. They petitioned the Syracuse diocese to build a new Slovak church. Permission finally granted, the Slovaks purchased the McNamara farm. With the addition of a belfry topped with a simple cross, the McNamara barn was transformed into the first St. Ann's church which remained until the basement of the existing church was built in 1935.

## THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

**A** local misnomer, "gold domed church" refers to a broad segment of diverse Orthodox and Catholic ethnic churches, from St. Ann's on Prospect Street in Binghamton to Sacred Heart in Johnson City (which has no gold dome!). To understand Orthodox church architecture we must digress to the history of the Orthodox Church.

Orthodoxy descended from a schism in Christianity that occurred about 1054 A.D. when Pope Leo IX excommunicated Michael Caerularius, Patriarch of Constantinople with his entire church. The excommunication formalized a rift that had begun in 323 A.D.. Then, Constantine the Great made the fateful decision to move the seat of the Roman Empire to the eastern

Balkan town of Byzantium, which henceforth came to be known as Constantinople. In making this move the Emperor realized the growing strategic and economic importance of the eastern provinces. He could hardly foresee the effect on the Empire. The Western Empire would fall prey to bands of marauding Visigoths, Vandals, Ostrogoths and Lombards. By the end of the sixth century, centralized Roman government had disappeared, the Empire was split. Although a succession of Eastern Emperors would lay claim to the Western provinces, the later was managed by a series of ineffective rulers. Byzantium was to prosper under the reign of Constantine's successor, Justinian (527 to 565 A.D.), and would remain unassailed until the 15th century. With the rise of Islam, Africa and Near Eastern parts of the Empire were overrun by Arab armies. Turks occupied a large part of Asia Minor, while the last Byzantine possessions in the West fell to the Normans. The Empire with its possessions reduced to the Balkans and Greece held on until 1453 when the Turks finally conquered Constantinople.

The division of the Empire led to a religious split as well. During Constantine's reign, the bishop of Rome deriving his authority from St. Peter was the acknowledged head, or pope of the Christian Church. His claim to preeminence came to be contested by the Patriarch of Constantinople and further doctrinal divisions ensued.

When the old Roman Empire split and the Eastern half became separate in government from the west, the term "Greek" or "Eastern" Church gradually acquired a fixed meaning. The ecclesiastical division of the church was based on the civil. Constantine established further divisions of the empire called dioceses. The church adopted the same divisions. The bishop of the chief city in each diocese rose to preeminence and was commonly called "exarch" - a title borrowed from the civil system. In time the title "patriarch" was reserved for the most eminent of the exarchs, and councils elected one worthy of the title. The council of Nicaea recognized three patriarchs - the bishops of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. To these were added the bishops of Constantinople and Jerusalem. When the empire divided there was one bishop in the West, the Bishop of Rome, while in the East there were two, then four, and then five. Within his diocese, the patriarch like the modern Roman pope, was supreme.

Like the Roman Church, the Greek Church soon spread beyond its imperial dioceses - Greek Christianity became the religion of the Slavs and Latin Christianity became the religion of the Germanic peoples. Orthodox Christendom divided into the Western or Catholic church and the Eastern or Orthodox Church. The disputes ran deep. Roman Catholicism maintained its independence from imperial or any state authority and became the international church institution or Universal Church. The Eastern church was based on a union of secular and spiritual in the person of the Emperor, who appointed the patriarch. It thus remained dependent on the power of the state, exacting an allegiance from the faithful yet sharing the vicissitudes of political power. The pattern had deep roots in history with the divine kingships of Egypt and the Near East. If the Byzantine emperors, unlike their pagan predecessors could no longer claim the status of gods, they could put themselves in the exalted role of head of Church and State. The tsars of Russia claimed the mantle of Byzantine emperors by creating the "third Rome" in Moscow and the Russian Orthodox church was closely tied to the state.

## ORTHODOXY AND BYZANTINE ART

**T**he division of the Roman Empire and the religious separation of the church may have ultimately led to an artistic division as well. There is no sharp dividing line between Early Christian art and Byzantine art. But in Western Europe, Celtic and Germanic peoples fell heir to the culture of late antiquity and transformed it into the Medieval. In the East, antiquity lived on and Greek and Oriental elements came to the fore at the expense of Roman heritage.

Constantine's decision to make Christianity the state religion had a profound effect on Christian art and led to the construction of many large imperially sponsored churches. Until that time, congregations had been unable to meet for public worship: services were held in homes. The Constantinian church was a new type called the basilica. The original basilica was a combination of an assembly hall, temple and private home. The pagan church had been exemplified by a long nave flanked by aisles and clerestory windows. The Constantinian church combined the earlier elements with a spacious interior demanded by the Christian ritual with imperial associations that proclaimed the privileged status of the state religion. The church had to be more than an assembly hall; in addition to enclosing the community of the faithful, it was the sacred house of God and the Christian successor to temples of old. In order to express this function, the design of the basilica was given a new focus, the altar, which was placed in the front apse at the eastern end of the nave. The entrance was shifted to the western end. Thus the Christian basilica was oriented along a single long axis.

Byzantine art had its roots in the Age of Justinian, Emperor from 527-565 A.D.. Justinian was an art patron on a scale of Constantine. During his reign the East emerged as a center of art and culture while the west continued to decline. A new type of church structure came in vogue: round or polygonal church buildings crowned with a dome. These central-plan churches departed from the basilica style that had been backed by Constantine. The buildings were outgrowths of the Roman baths and did not lend themselves as well to the Christian ceremony. But a new economy in vaulting led to the creation of tall windows on each level which flooded the interior with light. The aisle was given a second story (for seating women). The only remnant of the basilica was a cross-vaulted section for the altar backed by an apse and a narthex on the other side. The origins of this style of church are unclear, but domed, central plan churches were to become the standard church of Orthodoxy as the basilica style came to dominate the medieval West.

In Byzantine art, the ideal of human beauty seen in paintings and mosaics changed from comparatively squat Early Christian figures with large heads, to tall, slender figures with tiny feet, small, almond shaped faces and huge, staring eyes that we often see in icons). Bodies seemed capable of slow ceremonial movements. Every hint of movement or change is carefully excluded - the dimensions of time and earthly space have given way to an eternal present amid the golden translucency of Heaven.

Byzantine architecture entered a second golden age from the late ninth to the eleventh century. Churches of this period were designed with the plan of a Greek cross (with arms of equal length). The central feature was (again) a dome with a high, cylindrical base punctuated with tall windows. The base was set higher than the rest of the building. The largest and most lavishly decorated church of the Second Age was St. Mark's in Venice, begun in 1063. The Venetians had long been under Byzantine influence before they became a world power of their own. The domes of St. Mark's are not raised on drums, instead they have been encased in bulb-type wooden helmets covered by copper sheeting and topped with ornate lanterns. The effect is quite impressive for the seafarer. Byzantine architecture also spread to Russia. The most famous example being St. Basil's adjoining the Kremlin in Moscow. Built during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, St. Basil's domes are fantastic, magic kingdom-like sprouting from the roof in limitless profusion.

## **FACTORS AFFECTING EASTERN CHURCH DESIGN IN THE SOUTHERN TIER**

**S**ociological factors have had a major effect on the design and interior decoration of the eastern churches in our area. Apart from Greek-Revival or Christopher Wren-inspired structures, most churches built in our area up to the 1960s were inspired by Medieval architecture (Romanesque or Gothic). The great cathedrals of northern Europe have always been models of the highest spiritual expression. St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York is a copy of the Cologne Cathedral. Many university campuses have chapels incorporating elements of King's College Chapel in Cambridge England. So it was not an accident that local eastern churches picked up "medieval" elements.

Several other factors affected the design of local eastern churches: restricted funds, climatic conditions, inability of contractors or architects to deal with onion domes. Several area churches belie their converted roots as homes, halls or warehouses such as Holy Trinity on Court Street and St. Nicholas' on Page Avenue. Jan Hus and St. Joseph's Lithuanian churches were built with exceptionally limited funds and have functional shapes.

Architect Walter Bowen was employed for the construction and brickwork of several churches. Bowen, who designed three churches in the First Ward and two rectories in Endicott was the first architect in Binghamton (or possibly America) to use laminated wood arches. His inventiveness with this technology in the late 1940s made possible the spectacular structure of Sacred Heart in 1977.

Gold domes have had to be modified for the Binghamton climate. With the exception of Sacred Heart, none of the gold domes are open on the inside due to the enormous heating

expense for Americans (who demand this luxury in their churches!) Most of the domes have been altered several times due to leaking. Almost all have been replaced with anodized gold aluminum and originally open drum bases have been enclosed. Two of the most affected are Sts. Peter and Paul on Hill Avenue and St. Mary's on Jenkins Street in Endicott. Sts. Peter and Paul was remodeled in the 1960s; the present blue domes are made of fiberglass (as are those of St. Nicholas). St. Mary's once beautiful blue onion domes and white drum bases were replaced with anodized gold open ribbed cages.

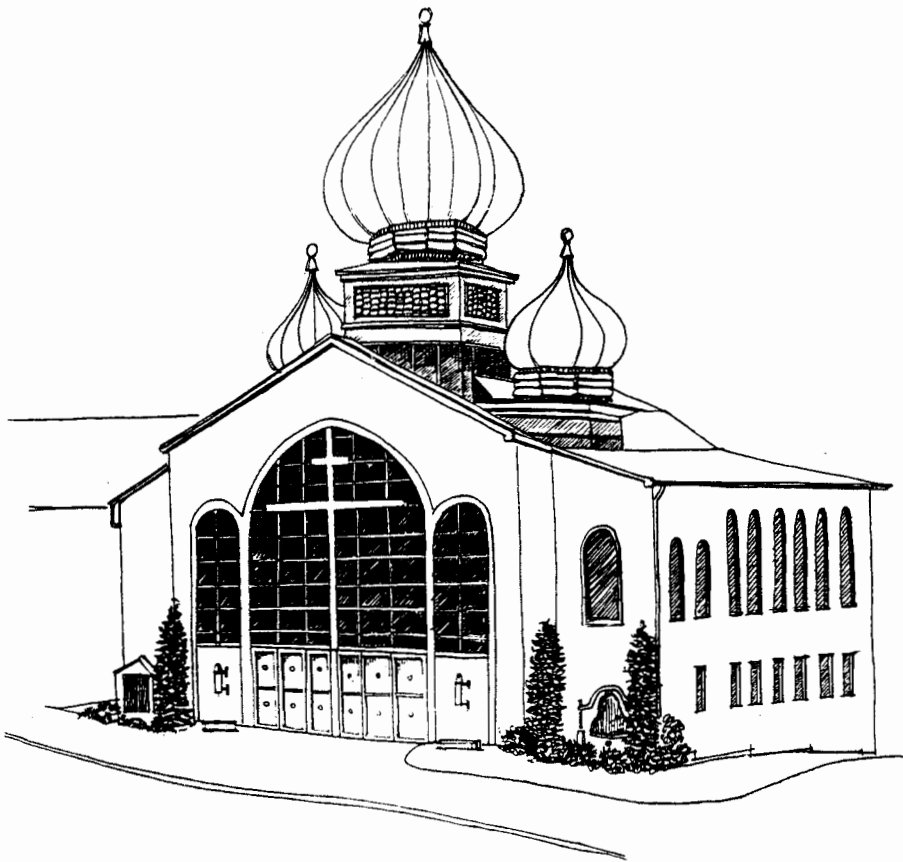
Visitors to the Tour's eastern churches will be puzzled by what is "traditional." Eastern European and Greek ecclesiastical paintings, frescoes and icons were composed of sacred or narrative images rooted in the medieval or Byzantine style. Byzantine style created in sixth century Constantinople came to be the accepted art of Slavic peoples in the ninth century and by the Russians of Kiev when they converted to Orthodoxy in 988. A second less homogeneous tradition began in the sixteenth century with the Italian Renaissance and continued into the Baroque and Rococo periods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The more naturalistic forms of Renaissance and Baroque art were diffused through eastern Europe. In the eighteenth century, Peter the Great's "westernization" of Russian art changed its medieval style of painting. Architecture was affected likewise, so that it is not uncommon to find Russian churches in a "traditional" medieval style or a "traditional" eclectic mixture of western and Byzantine styles. The result of this in our community was the immigrant church builders in our area recognized art forms they found traditional in their homelands - Byzantine or western - and the Southern Tier churches they built reflect this diversity.

Stained glass is a major figurative and narrative element of Western medieval churches. In Orthodox churches, stained glass is not used as it would interfere with the appreciation of murals or frescoes. In our area, this does not seem to apply, only Sacred Heart and St. Nicholas have managed to avoid stained glass. St. Mary's on Baxter Street has tinted glass, all the others have stained glass. The reason for this appears to be the altered design of our eastern churches. St. Mary's Carpatho-Russian Church has its painting confined to cove ceilings. But the larger issue seems to have been one of competition. Stained glass windows are expensive and were commonly found in the area's Protestant and Catholic churches. As the Orthodox congregations became financially successful, it was possible to afford more expensive windows. The representational windows became a source of pride in the ethnic communities: a sign of "arrival" of their congregations. Stained glass windows would have been rejected on traditional grounds by the earliest Orthodox foundations. Stained glass windows appeared in 1956 and later when many churches were remodeled, they added sparkle to their already radiant designs.



# NOTES FROM "ETHNIC CHURCH TOUR"

*By Penelope C. Mayo, Broome County Historical Society*



## **DORMITION OF THE VIRGIN MARY**

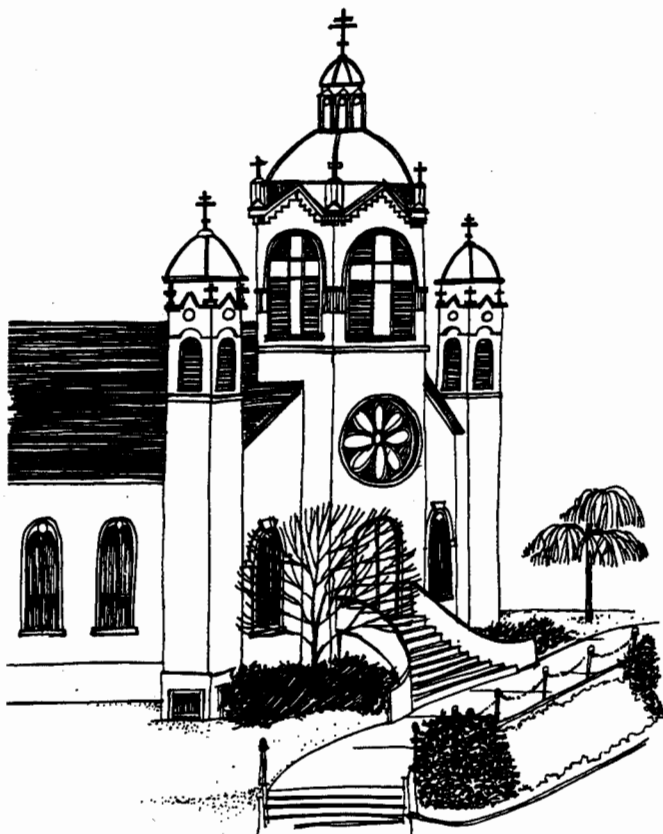
*53 Baxter Street, Binghamton  
Architects: Mather & Carlton  
1916+*

(The exterior of the church and its domes have been altered four times. Originally it had five domes and was a wooden structure. The present exterior is the result of a remodeling to expand the church initiated in 1955 and a fourth dome project of 1968.)

Relatively small, compact and nearly square structure faced with pale red brick. The facade is a simple gable with triple-arched windows above the doors which dominate the north face. Three multi-gored onion domes are set behind the facade and are of anodized gold aluminum and topped with triple - barred crosses. The simple arched windows with limestone moldings are typically Byzantine in style; the domes are characteristically medieval Russian.

The core of the church, reached by steps from the vestibule, has a broad central nave flanked by two side aisles divided by slender columns and has a flattened cove ceiling. Despite the absence of an open dome, the interior seems centralized (Byzantine) and the background of all the walls is painted a uniform pale blue. Paintings of individual male and female saints are placed between the windows as intricate and rich wall icons; other paintings on the walls and ceiling form an intricate and rich iconographic program symbolic of the historic and external church. Of special interest are the large crystal chandelier imported from Czechoslovakia, liturgical furnishing and the three-tiered icon screen of dark wood embellished with gilded copper. All paintings are in the western style.





## SAINTS PETER & PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

210 Hill Avenue, Endicott

Architect: Nikula Construction

1960

Compact red-brick structure with stone window and door trim. Central facade tower surmounted by octagonal blue onion dome with applied stars on high drum; larger dome over crossing. Domes topped with triple-bar crosses with scimitars and hanging chains. Mosaic of the Virgin and Child over the door. Modern version of cubic Byzantine forms.

Compact and airy nave with centralized emphasis. White paint used throughout. Stained glass windows of individual saints replace usual wall icons. Of special interest: icon screen (two-tier), tabernacle shrines, liturgical furnishings. Icon screen is white wood frame with gold-leaf decoration. Byzantine style in mosaic

executed in Italy. Form of screen utilizes elements from three churches in Russia: Moscow, Odessa and Yaroslavl. Old western-style icons preserved on sanctuary side of screen. Mosaic Anastasis on back sanctuary wall.

## ST. MARY'S CARPATHO-RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH:

1907 Jenkins Street, Endicott

Architect: Jones & Jewell

1937+

Imposing yellow brick structure with white trim; tripartite facade reflects 11th century Kiev architecture and originally planned as huge central arch capped by blue dome on high octagonal base and flanked by lower domes. Facade now capped by tall open-ribbed gold



domes topped by triple-barred crosses. 3-arch scheme repeated in bell-arches in front of church and 3-arched entrance. Overlooks Endicott.

Spacious single nave with deep sanctuary and flattened cove ceiling. Stained glass window with Christological cycle. Of special interest: complex iconographic program of paintings covers entire ceiling; eastern Baroque-style five-tiered icon screen of marbellized wood with vine-scroll patterns and unique use of inserted stained glass for Last Supper over Holy Doors; sanctuary baldachin and fittings.

Church is highly ornate in interior vs. austerity of exterior - a common Eastern Orthodox juxtaposition. Western-style paintings.

## **SACRED HEART UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

*230 Ukrainian Hill Road, Johnson City*  
*Architect: Apollinare Osadca*  
*1977*

Wooden log-frame structure with square plan, with decorative front porch and three octagonal, shingled onion dome-on-domes on longitudinal axis. Direct copy of still preserved wooden churches (17th-18th century based on older traditions) in the Carpathian mountains. Decorative wood patterns.



Central plan with open central dome and choir gallery using laminated arches for support. The entire church is of special interest. Huge carved wood chandelier with symbolic designs, painted wall icons of Byzantine and Russian saints, pierced wood icon screen and painted (imitation mosaics).

# **HOLY SPIRIT BYZANTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

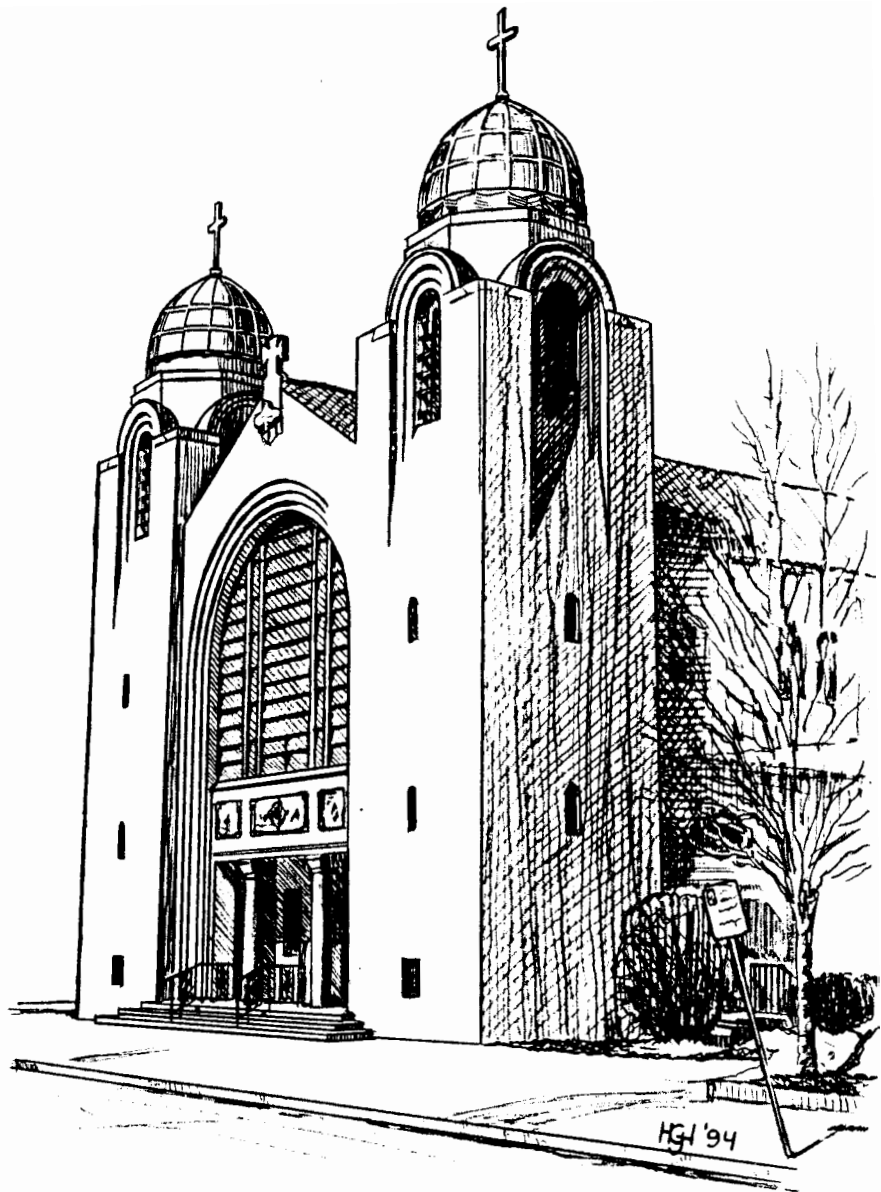
*360 Clinton Street*

*Architect: Walter Bowen*

*1952*

Large structure faced entirely with Indiana limestone. Adoption of cubic Byzantine style (11th century models in Kiev, Novgorod) with two-towered facade window and double columned porch supporting lintel with inlaid mosaic decoration.

Spacious central nave with low side aisles and barrel vaulted ceiling. Stained glass of individual saints and Christological cycle (western style). Marble and inlaid mosaic liturgical furnishings; superb crystal chandeliers. Of special interest: Byzantine-style Pokrov mosaic in apse and mosaics in apse-arch based on 11th century models in Kiev; mosaic medallions of angels on upper nave walls (work of iconographer Christine Dochwat).



**ST. MICHAEL'S  
GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH**

*280 Clinton Street, Binghamton*

*Architect: unknown*

*1916*

Impressive red-brick structure with limestone trim. Combined Romanesque-Gothic style with central large and lower flanking towers capped by gold domes terminating in tapering cones and 3-barred crosses. Mosaic of Archangel Michael over door.

Spacious single nave church with cove ceiling and elegant Rococo-style pilasters articulating the walls. Paintings of biblical subject ca. 1919, set into Rococo-style frames on ceiling. Stained glass windows of the life of Christ.

Of Special interest: exquisite full 5-tiered icon screen in white and gold leaf designed as a Tree of Life. Icon paintings in Renaissance/Baroque western style and include copies of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Guido Reni. Shrine of the Virgin has Byzantine-style icon based on 12th century original in Hosios Lukas, Greece. Sanctuary appointments and baldachin.



## ST. JOHN'S UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

*1 St. John's Parkway, Johnson City*

*Architect: None*

St. John's dispensed with the services of an architect for financial reasons and its design was provided by parishioner, John Tylko. Tylko took his inspiration from Walter Bowen's design of Holy Spirit.

Large buff-bricked structure with gabled facade and twin towers sheathed in Indiana limestone. Facade dominated by huge mosaic of the Baptism (based on 14th century Byzantine model) above double columned porch supporting lintel with inlaid mosaic decoration. Front towers support 8-sided gold-leaf onion domes; flattened helmet dome over central crossing. Cubic masses modeled on 11th century Kiev churches.

Airy, single nave with transept; stained-glass windows with individual saints replace standard icons. Of special interest: Icon screen retained from earlier church and adjusted. Five-tier with gold-leaf eucharistic grape and vine leaf pattern. Paintings and stained glass in western-style.



**SAINTS PETER & PAUL RUSSIAN  
ORTHODOX CHURCH**

*210 Hill Avenue, Endicott*

*Architect: Nikula*

*1960*

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