

# CHURCHES for the SOUTHWEST

The Ecclesiastical Architecture of  
JOHN GAW MEEM



STANFORD LEHMBERG



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OF  
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W. W. Norton & Company  
New York • London

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89	THREE: THE LAST DECADE, 1952–1960
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119	Notes
124	Credits
125	Index

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Ryan - 1/34 I

Cristo Rey Church

W. Clark

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**ST. JOHN'S  
CATHEDRAL.** Chapel.



## PREFACE

JOHN GAW MEEM'S reputation as the most famous architect of New Mexico and leading exponent of the Santa Fe style is well established. Several earlier works have treated his career. The classic account by Bainbridge Bunting considers his life and works, while more recent studies discuss his role in historic preservation and the houses he designed. So far, however, there has been no book devoted primarily to the churches that were such an important part of his legacy. This book attempts to fill that gap.

I am greatly indebted to Meem's daughter, Nancy Meem Wirth, for encouraging me to undertake this project and for her continuing assistance. In particular, I am grateful to her for permission to quote from the John Gaw Meem papers housed at the Center for Southwestern Studies in the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico (appropriately enough, a building designed by Meem himself) and to reproduce photographs and drawings from this archive. The members of the Center staff, especially Nancy Brown and Stella De Sa Rego, were unfailingly helpful in giving me access to the Meem job files and drawings as well as the collection of photographs of his work. Thanks to the efforts of Meem's long-time office manager, Ruth Heflin, as well as the present curators, the files are unusually full and well arranged. Others who have offered assistance include the Monsignor Jerome Martinez y Alire of St. Francis Cathedral, the Rev. Sheila Gustafson of the First Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Dale Coleman of the Church of the Holy Faith, Alfonso Trujillo of Cristo Rey, the Rev. Douglas K. Escue of Immanuel Lutheran Church, and the Rev. Lee Herring of the First Baptist Church, all of Santa Fe; Peggie Findlay, Steve Bush, Bruce Barber, and the Rev. Al Tarbell of St.

John's Cathedral in Albuquerque; Eleanor Mitchell, Roy Morgan, and Richard Schalk of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque; Cameron Mactavish, Dorothy Brandenburg, Barbara Brenner, and the Rev. Wayne A. Mell of the First Presbyterian Church in Taos; the Rev. Davis Given, formerly of the school and chapel at Fort Defiance, and the Rev. Jim Leehan, present rector there; the Very Rev. Lawrence J. O'Keefe, rector of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Gallup; the Rev. Canon Thomas W. Gray, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Carlsbad; the Rev. John T. Rollinson, rector of St. James's Episcopal Church in Clovis; Brian Vallo of Acoma Pueblo; and Susan Lander of La Foret Conference and Retreat Center. To all I express my appreciation.

A note on the illustrations may be appropriate. These are of three sorts. First there are early black-and-white photographs taken by Tyler Dingee. Born in Brooklyn in 1906, Dingee moved to New Mexico and began working with Meem in 1945. He was also employed by the University of New Mexico and the laboratories at Los Alamos. He was killed by lightning on July 26, 1961, while on a fishing trip to Estes Park with his brother-in-law, the artist Will Shuster. Dingee's photographs are deposited with the Center for Southwest Research, and I am grateful for permission to reproduce them. A number of new color photographs were taken especially for this volume by my son Derek Lehmberg, who has combined a passion for photography with a career as a management consultant in the United States and Japan. Finally, I have been able to reproduce a number of drawings by Meem and members of his office, especially Edward Holien. Again, these are housed at the Center for Southwest Research. The frontispiece, an early print of Cristo Rey Church by the Santa Fe artist Willard Clark, is reproduced by kind permission of his grandson, Kevin Ryan.

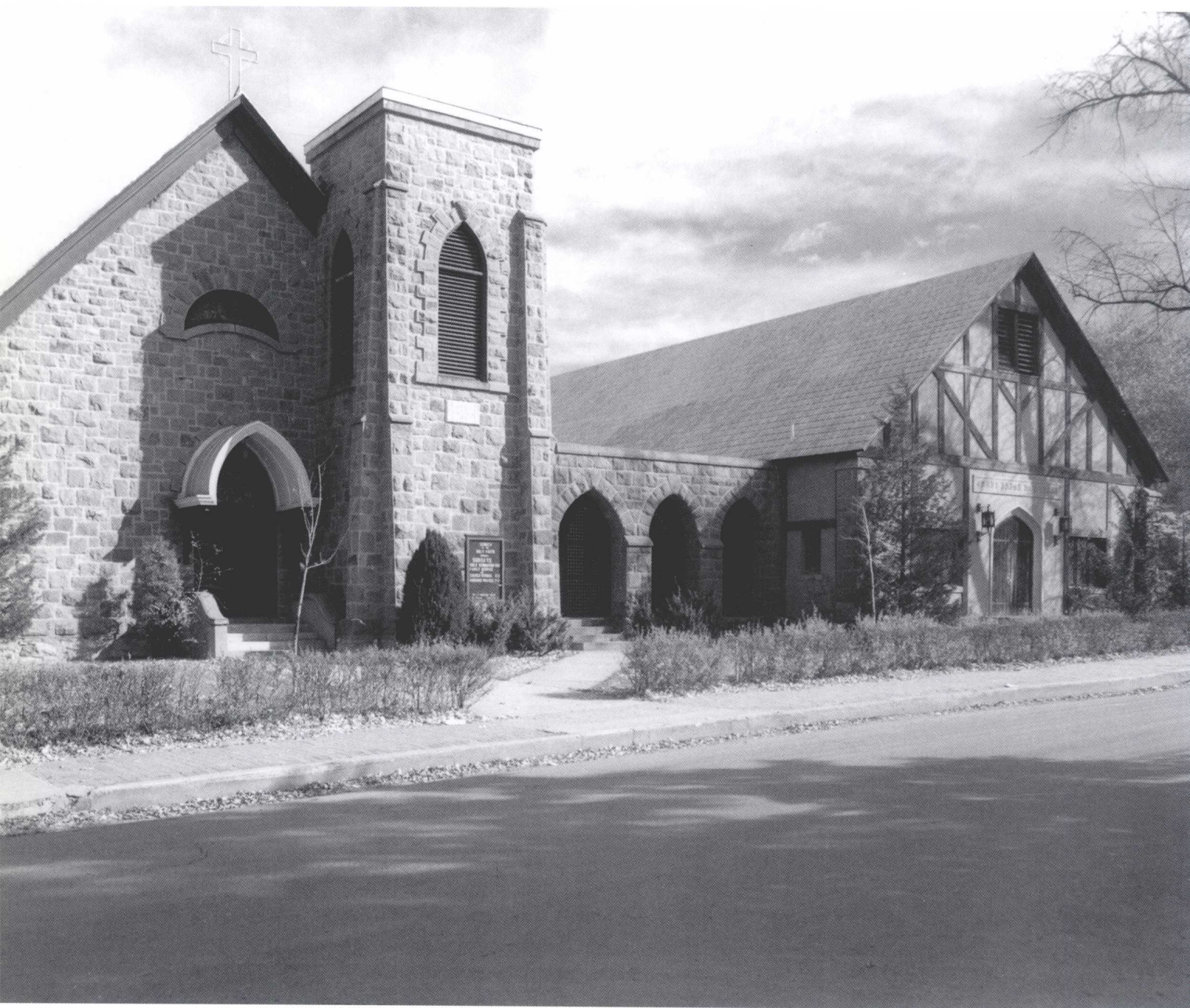
**READERS WHO ARE NOT FAMILIAR** with the terminology for parts of a church or cathedral may find some definitions helpful. The front of the building, containing the entrance, is known as the *façade*. Inside there may be a *narthex* or gathering area. This leads into the *nave* or principal seating area for the congregation. The term is derived from the Latin word *navis*, which means ship—the nave was regarded as a ship which would carry the souls of the faithful to heaven. The altar was located in the *chancel*, regarded as the holiest part of the building. It was usually railed off and during the Middle Ages was not accessible to lay persons. Between the nave and the chancel was the *choir* (in England known as the *quire*), an area that accommodated singers and sometimes small congregations at services. A *reredos* or screen might be placed behind the altar and could be decorated with statues or painted figures of saints (in the Southwest called *santos*). Two-dimensional *santos* are called *retablos*, while three-dimen-



sional figures are known as *bultos*. The artist who creates a santo is known as a *santero*—saint-maker—or *santera*, if female. The top of the altar traditionally was a stone slab known as a mensa. Cathedrals sometimes had an enclosed cloister—an outdoor green or garden—adjoining the building.

The ceilings of most of Meem's churches are made of wood, not stone or brick. They are supported by *vigas*, great beams which are left round like the tree trunks from which they are made.

Traditional cathedrals were built in the shape of a cross. Its side arms were known as transepts because they ran across the main axis of the building. For centuries it was usual for cathedrals to be oriented east and west, with the façade at the west end and the altar at the east, so that the congregation would face the direction of the Holy Land during services. The transepts then ran north and south. Meem's churches, however, are often not bound by this orientation: He was willing to work with the layout of areas where he was building and to accommodate existing street patterns. Nevertheless, one may still refer to the altar area as being at the liturgical east end.



CHURCH OF THE HOLY FAITH, SANTA FE. Exterior.

## ONE

# EARLY WORK, 1926–1939

THE UNUSUAL EVENTS of Meem's early life help us understand his special interest in the church and church architecture. He was born in 1894 in Brazil, where his father, John Gaw Meem III, was a missionary priest for the Episcopal church. Like Meems I and II he was descended from a family of Polish and German extraction that had settled in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in the 1830s. Most of the Meem men attended the Virginia Military Institute and studied civil engineering. John Gaw Meem II helped build a rail line in Brazil before accepting a position as architect with the U.S. Treasury Department. Meem III was also trained as an engineer but was drawn into the Episcopal ministry and in 1891 moved to Brazil, where he established a mission church in the port city of Pelotas. Here he married a Brazilian woman of German and Portuguese ancestry, Elsa Upton Krischke. John IV was their first child; three daughters and another son followed.<sup>1</sup>

As a teenager Meem IV returned to the United States where he too attended Virginia Military Institute. After graduation in 1914 he worked briefly for a firm that was constructing the New York subway system. With the advent of World War I he joined the army and was soon commanding a battalion and training recruits at Plattsburg, Iowa. As the war ended he was struck by the widespread influenza epidemic, but he recovered and returned to Brazil, where he worked as a credit manager for a bank in Rio de Janeiro. Weakened by his earlier illness, he soon developed tuberculosis,



and the bank sent him back to New York for treatment. His doctor suggested recuperation in a sanatorium, possibly in the Southwest. When he saw an office of the Santa Fe railway proclaiming the merits of the climate in New Mexico, he purchased a ticket. Arriving in Santa Fe in 1920, he was admitted to the Sunmount Sanatorium, operated by Dr. Frank Mera. Rest, good food and good company, and nights spent on an open-air sleeping porch gradually improved his health. At Sunmount Meem made a number of friends, including Mary Vilura Conkey, who had been educated at St. Lawrence University and had taught Latin and Greek in the East. A fellow tuberculosis sufferer, she had come to Santa Fe for a cure and never left. As we will see, she encouraged Meem's interest in historic preservation and in the Episcopal church, and he built one of his finest houses for her early in his career.

Meem's interest in architecture was sparked by several new buildings designed by the local firm of Rapp and Rapp in what came to be known as the Santa Fe style.<sup>2</sup> When he was sufficiently recovered, Meem left Santa Fe for Denver, where he studied architecture as an apprentice with the firm Fisher and Fisher and, as a student at the Atelier Denver, with the teacher Burnham Hoyt. Hoyt was trained in Beaux-Arts architecture, not the Southwestern style that Meem was later to adopt himself, but he taught the young Meem a great deal about design.

Partly because overwork in Denver caused his health to decline, Meem returned to Santa Fe early in 1924. Again he lived at Sunmount Sanatorium. Dr. Mera made space available to him for use as an architectural studio, and he shortly opened a practice in partnership with a fellow Sunmount patient and architect, Cassius McCormick.

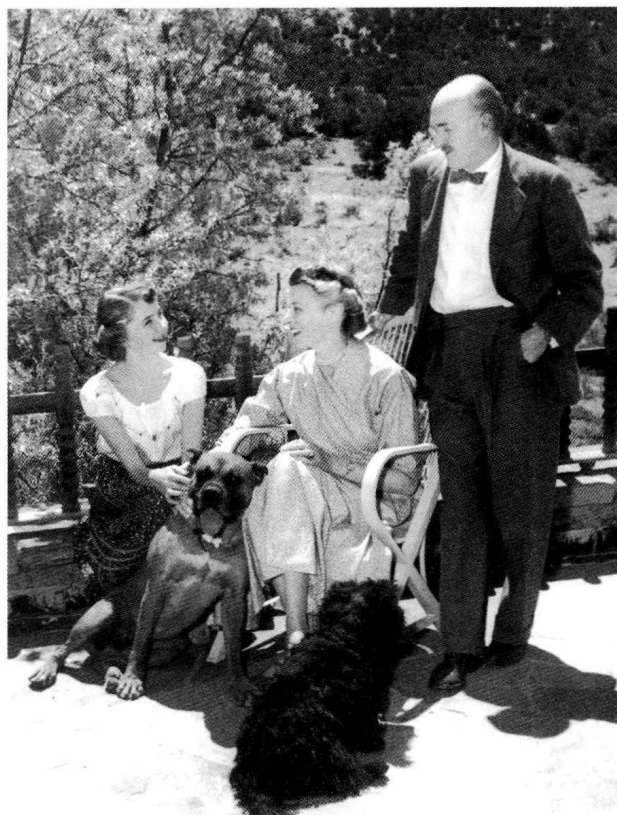
Some of Meem's friends were members of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Faith in Santa Fe, and they turned to him for help with the construction of a parish house. The first Episcopal priest to visit Santa Fe had come as early as 1863. Early meetings, many of them led by L. Bradford Prince as lay reader, had been conducted in the Palace of the Governors; a building in the early Gothic style was erected in 1881. It still serves as the nave of the present church. It did not, however, include space for parish meetings, classes, or offices. The leading advocate of the new building project was Mrs. Rufus J. Palen, the daughter of an Episcopal bishop and wife of one of Santa Fe's leading bankers. The Palens's daughter Caryl had recently died, tragically soon after her marriage, and the parish house was to become a memorial to her, known as Palen Hall. The exterior of Meem's design, obviously intended to harmonize with the existing stone church, displays stucco walls with half-timbered details on the façade, reminiscent of medieval English buildings. Most of the interior was simply a large meeting room that could accommodate assemblies, dinners, or classes. There was also a stage, which came to be used by the dra-



matic groups that flourished at the church, as well as offices, a choir room, and a kitchen. The cornerstone of Palen Hall was laid by the bishop, Frederick Howden, in 1925, and work was completed in 1926.<sup>3</sup>

Meem was still a young man, not yet married, when he designed Palen Hall. Shortly thereafter he was chosen as architect for a new Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs. The principal patron of this project, Alice Bemis Taylor, introduced Meem to her niece Faith Bemis, who had studied at Vassar and had an advanced degree from the Cambridge School of Domestic and Landscape Architecture. Bemis's father was the head of the family manufacturing firm in Boston but would have preferred to build homes; her mother was the daughter of a Congregationalist minister from Colorado Springs. Because Bemis had lost her job in New York City due to the Depression, Aunt Alice suggested that she assist Meem in drafting plans for the Art Center. Bemis soon moved to Santa Fe, where she stayed with Lura Conkey until she and Meem were married (in Boston) in 1933. The Meems became enthusiastic about the church in 1940 when four English evacuees, fleeing the threat of German invasion, arrived to live with John, Faith, and their daughter Nancy. The young women were good Anglicans and wished to attend services at Holy Faith, and the Meems began to accompany them regularly.

Meem's association with Alice Taylor was also responsible for his design of the Taylor Memorial Chapel on the family estate and summer home at La Foret, in the Black Forest north of Colorado Springs. This chapel was erected by Mrs. Taylor as a memorial to her late husband. Meem completed plans and specifications after several trips to Colorado in 1929.<sup>4</sup> The chapel is Meem's earliest work in the Spanish mission style; it was inspired by the church at Acoma Pueblo, which (as we shall see shortly) he helped to restore. The entry is recessed between two large buttresses, which also enclose a balcony. A central pediment provides room for a single bell. The ends of large beams protrude from the side walls at two levels. The interior is dominated by an impressive reredos that was painted by Eugenie Shonnard, a friend who had first introduced Meem to Mrs. Taylor. Born in New York in 1886, Shonnard had studied with Rodin in Paris and at the New York Art Students League before settling in Santa Fe in 1926. Meem said that he regarded her as "one of the greatest sculptors in this country," and he continued to work



**JOHN GAW MEEM.**

His wife Faith Bemis, their daughter Nancy, and their dogs.