

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**



80

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic

and/or common St. John the Baptist Catholic Church

2. Location

MI WI Q

street & number _____ not for publication

city, town Johnsburg _____ vicinity of _____ congressional district 6th

state Wisconsin code 55 county Fond du Lac code 039

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name St. John the Baptist Congregation, The Reverend Robert Bier, Pastor

street & number Route 4, Box 220

city, town Fond du Lac _____ vicinity of _____ state Wisconsin 54935

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Fond du Lac County Courthouse

street & number 190 South Main Street

city, town Fond du Lac _____ state Wisconsin 54935

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? _____ yes no

date 1980 _____ federal state _____ county _____ local

depository for survey records State Historical Society of Wisconsin

city, town Madison _____ state Wisconsin 53706

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The spire of the church of St. John the Baptist dominates the skies of the surrounding farmlands in Fond du Lac County for several miles. The historical focal point of the community, the church is still the village's outstanding edifice. The visual dominance of the structure is intensified by its elevation on a raised site of the winding main road through town. The sloped site includes a cemetery to the south, the two-story cube rectory and two-story brick school to the north.

St. John the Baptist Church is a small-scale, symmetrical Romanesque Revival-style structure dominated by a tall, three-stage steeple and spire. Stones for construction of the coursed, rough-cut limestone walls were gathered from nearby fields.¹ The simple gable-roofed rectangular nave is fronted by an enclosed narthex whose north and south ends form apsidioles against the center steeple; at the west end to the rear, a large, polygonal apse marks the location of the altar and sacristy. Part of the church's cathedral-like presence results from the generous proportions of its exterior decoration: shallow, full-scale arcading frames the round-arched windows along the north and south walls of the nave; full-size blind arches fill the upper stages of the steeple. Slender buttresses frame the front portal and second stage of the steeple. Entrance to the church is gained through double doors recessed within a central round arch, or via single-door entrances in the apsidioles to the sides. Short runs of front and side stairs graduate to fill the full front facade. The large blind round arch filling the second stage of the steeple is topped by an inscribed cross and stone corbelling; above, double round-arched louvres mark each of the four faces of the tower. Shingled and crowned by a decorated cross, the tall polygonal spire rests on a cross-single base set with blind oculi.

The simple, single space of the nave inside is dominated by the pinnacled altar at the west end. Side altars are placed to the sides. The wide vaults of the ceiling spring from flat-columned pilasters along the north and south walls between large round-arched windows. Tracery in the deeply-set windows is simple, formed of two lancets with oculus in the spandrel. A center aisle and side aisles break the oak pews into four rows. Against the north wall, attached to the end of the low, arcaded altar rail, an oak pulpit is raised on a carved pedestal. At the east end, a closed arcaded balustrade frames the choir loft above the narthex. The present floor is patterned linoleum.

¹ St. John the Baptist Congregation, Copyright 1957 by Reverend B. J. Blied, Johnsburg, Wisconsin, 1957.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1857¹ **Builder/Architect** Unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The primary significance of St. John the Baptist Church of Johnsbury, Fond du Lac County, lies in its expression of the strong and vibrant German-Catholic heritage of the settlement. St. John's was the first Catholic church built between Green Bay and Milwaukee and it was to this outpost of the newly-formed Milwaukee Diocese that the early German-Catholic immigrants of northeastern Fond du Lac County flocked until their own parish churches were built.² The church was a focal point for the German-Catholics who were politically, economically, and culturally isolated from the dominant Yankee society. The structure also has local architectural significance as Johnsbury's preeminent landmark and a superior example of "country church" Romanesque Revival design fashioned by anonymous craftsmen.

Settlement

St. John's was, and continues to be, a symbol of the vitality of the German-Catholic culture of the area. The parish was founded in 1841 with the arrival of six families from Trier, Germany.³ Until the crude log church was built in the spring of 1843, the pioneer parishioners worshipped in the cabin of John Brost. The present structure was consecrated on June 24, 1857 and was constructed of locally-quarried hard limestone.⁴ The building of the church, however, lacked much of the unity and religious fervor of the hardy, God-fearing pioneers who entrusted their salvation to the pastor. In 1850 the parishioners split over a desirable location for the new church. The missionary/pastor, Father Caspar Rehrl, had intentions of establishing a religious community but the majority of the parishioners were opposed to this plan. Rehrl resigned and was succeeded by a number of itinerant priests. Finally, in August of 1854, Father Michael

¹St. John the Baptist Church, parish records.

²Harry H. Heming, The Catholic Church in Wisconsin (Milwaukee: Catholic History Publishing Co., 1896), p. 434.

³Ruth Shaw Worthing, History of Fond du Lac County as Told by Its Place Names (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin: Worthing, 1976), p. 52.

⁴Peter Leo Johnson, Crosier on the Frontier: A Life of John Martin Henni (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1959), p. 125.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See attached sheets.

10. Geographical Data

ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

Acreeage of nominated property 0.36

Quadrangle name Brothertown, Wis.

UTM NOT VERIFIED

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

1	6	3	9	6	3	2	0	4	8	5	8	7	8	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

Zone		Easting				Northing							

C

Zone		Easting				Northing							

D

Zone		Easting				Northing							

E

Zone		Easting				Northing							

F

Zone		Easting				Northing							

G

Zone		Easting				Northing							

H

Zone		Easting				Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

West 132' of that part of NW 1/4, NE 1/4 of section 12, Town 6 North, Range 18 East, lying north of Loher St. and east of Lot 1 of Loher's subdivision of Johnsburg, Wisconsin.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Michael Matucheski, Researcher, and Diane H. Filipowicz, Architectural Historian, Historic Preservation Division

organization State Historical Society of Wisconsin date March 12, 1980

street & number 816 State Street telephone (608) 262-2970

city or town Madison state Wisconsin 53706

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Richard Murray

title Director, State Historical Society of Wisconsin date 8/18/80

For HCRS use only	
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register	
<u>W. Roy Luce</u>	date <u>70/29/80</u>
Keeper of the National Register	
Attest: <u>Glenda Hunt McCalland</u>	date <u>10.27.80</u>
Chief of Registration	

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Deisenrieder arrived and proceeded with the collection of building materials. The cornerstone was laid in the spring of 1855 by Bishop John Martin Henni, who was the driving force behind the German-Catholic migration to Wisconsin. Construction was slowed considerably as a number of discontented parishioners withdrew support and began to erect a rival church on the old site; this came to naught.⁵ After two years of interrupted work, the present structure was completed. At the consecration, Henni pleaded for peace and reconciliation in the parish, and, as a result, a few families settled around the church.

The parishioners of St. John's were immigrants from Trier, Rhenish Bavaria, and Rhenish Prussia who were inclined toward religious indifference and lay domination of ecclesiastical affairs. The origins of this tendency are to be found in the exaggerated nationalism and the clerical remissness prevalent in the first half of the nineteenth century, characteristics that were especially strong in the as yet ununited Germany.⁶ Having acquired the freedom to manage one's civil affairs in America, many immigrants wanted to transfer this independence to religious matters. Such was the case with the majority of the parishioners of St. John's. They exhibited the belief of the "Forty-eighters," the more radically-minded Germans who fled to America following the abortive revolutions of 1848, that tyranny was not to be tolerated, neither the tyranny of the king nor the bishop.

Another manifestation of an attempt at lay independence was the refusal of the parish in 1899 to allow its incorporation under Wisconsin statutes. The parish was reluctant to hand over its land titles to the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for fear of losing its national identity. The issue was not resolved until November 12, 1909 when the parish finally submitted to the pressure of Archbishop Messmer.⁷

A most visible expression of the settlement's ethnic heritage was the use of German in parish services until the fall of 1948. Despite the rise of anti-German feeling that grew around World War I and mushroomed with the aggression of Nazi Germany, St. John's continued to proclaim its ethnic pride through the 'native tongue.' It is

⁵ Harry H. Heming, The Catholic Church in Wisconsin, p. 435.

⁶ Rev. Benjamin J. Blied, A History of St. John the Baptist Congregation (Johnsburg, Wisconsin: Blied, 1957, revised 1980), p. 47.

⁷ Ibid.

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most significant that the male parishioners voted 40-34 in 1944 to continue the use of German. The predominance of German for such a long period stemmed from the isolation of the parish, the determination of the parishioners, and the fact that the priests assigned to St. John's were, with few exceptions, natives of German-speaking countries.⁸

St. John the Baptist Church, therefore, is a reminder of the development of German Catholicism in Wisconsin on the level of the rural parish. It is a symbol of the perseverance of the German immigrants who were instrumental in the settlement of the outlying areas of Fond du Lac County. Although plagued with internal disputes throughout its early history, the parish held together, bound by the common heritage of its members. America promised civil and religious independence but, in the case of Johnsburg, not at the price of a loss of national identity.

Architecture

The architect of St. John the Baptist Church is unknown. More than likely, like more common Gothic-style structures of that period, the little Romanesque Revival-style church was the product of country masons and carpenters "...whose knowledge of [Romanesque] architecture was limited, but who invariably were excellent craftsmen with a fine appreciation for a material they were handling."⁹ Cathedral-like in its proportions, the structure is closer to miniature in size, with a thinness and delicacy that suggests the Gothic despite its Romanesque features. The quality of the design, quite sophisticated for the work of local artisans, combines with the quality of construction and the handsomeness of the stone to make St. John the Baptist a distinguished example of nineteenth-century country church design.

⁸Rev. Leo Rummel, History of the Catholic Church in Wisconsin (Madison: Knights of Columbus Council, 1976), p. 80.

⁹Richard W. Perrin, The Architecture of Wisconsin, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1967, p. 82.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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