

ref md 80000619

FORM B - BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
Office of the Secretary, State House, Boston

In Area no.

Form no.
131-K

2. Photo (3x3" or 3x5")
Staple to left side of form
Photo number _____

4. Map. Draw sketch of building location
in relation to nearest cross streets and
other buildings. Indicate north.

1. Town Worcester
Address 40 Temple Street
Name St. John's Roman Catholic Church
Present use church
Present owner Roman Catholic Bishop of Worcester
40 Elm Street
3. Description:
Date 1845, addition 1884
Source cornerstone
Style Greek Revival
Architect P.W. Ford (1884 addition
Exterior wall fabric brick
Outbuildings (describe) rectory (44 Temple Street)
Other features central pavilion with pediment, brick pilasters, low tower with spire, arched windows set between piers on side walls
Altered spire Date ca. 1940
Moved no Date _____
5. Lot size: Assessors' Book 4, p.17
11,000 sq.ft. of total
One acre or less 84,934 sq.ft. Over one acre _____
Approximate frontage 140'
Approximate distance of building from street
15'
6. Recorded by S. Lee & B.R. Pfeiffer
Organization Worc. Heritage Pres. Soc
Date January 1978

UTM
19/269300/4682180

(over)

7. Original owner (if known) St. John's Roman Catholic Church

Original use church

Subsequent uses (if any) and dates same

8. Themes (check as many as applicable)

Aboriginal	☐	Conservation	☐	Recreation	☐
Agricultural	☐	Education	☐	Religion	☒
Architectural	☒	Exploration/ settlement	☐	Science/ invention	☐
The Arts	☐	Industry	☐	Social/ humanitarian	☒
Commerce	☐	Military	☐	Transportation	☐
Communication	☐	Political	☐		
Community development	☒				

9. Historical significance (include explanation of themes checked above)

The oldest church building in Worcester, St. John's Roman Catholic Church is the city's only example of Greek Revival church architecture. Built of brick, the church rises from a granite plinth to a low-pitched roof. The building's facade is symmetrical, containing a projecting central pavilion framed by paired pilasters which support a pediment. Above the pavilion is a square-plan tower which rises to a wooden belfry and spire. While the belfry may be original, the present spire dates from the 1940s. Flanking the central pavilion are single entries surmounted by arched windows. At the ends of the facade are paired pilasters supporting a wide entablature cornice. Access to the facade's three entries is gained by three separate flights of granite stairs. Side walls of the church are divided into bays of equal size by paired brick piers; each bay contains a single arched window.

Worcester's oldest Catholic parish, St. John's traces its origins to 1834 when the Reverend James Fitton was appointed by the Roman Catholic Bishop (Fenwick) to visit Worcester once each month to conduct religious services for the town's 80 Catholics, most of whom were Irish. In the same year Fitton tried to buy a lot at the corner of Salem and Park Streets on which he intended to build a church. According to local tradition, the lot's sellers learned of its intended use and as a result destroyed the deed, refusing to carry out the sale. In July, 1834, part of the present Temple Street property was purchased by several Worcester natives who then transferred title to Fitton. Foundations for a wooden church were laid and the building completed in 1835. Local histories report

(cont.)

10. Bibliography and/or references (such as local histories, deeds, assessor's records, early maps, etc.)

Worcester Spy, May 28, 1845, p.3 (laying of cornerstone)

Nutt, C. History of Worcester, vol. I, pp. 271-272 (Irish immigration)

vol. II, pp. 860-867 (Catholic church in Worcester and St. John's)

Stevens, C.E. Worcester Churches, pp. 110-112.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
Office of the Secretary, Boston

Community: Worcester	Form No: 131-X
Property Name: St. John's Roman Catholic Church	

Indicate each item on inventory form which is being continued below.

9. that this first building was constructed by Irish laborers, most of whom had come to Worcester to work for the railroad. During the 1840s increasing Irish immigration brought several thousand immigrants to Worcester, causing St. John's to outgrow its first church. In 1845 the old church was moved and the present church was built on the newly cleared site. By June, 1846, the present church with a planned capacity of 1,450 people was completed, appearing much as it does today. In 1884 additions were made to the building's rear (north), based on plans by P.W. Ford of Boston; these alterations seem to have increased the building's seating capacity and to have altered the sanctuary, leaving the facade unaltered.

An important force in establishing Catholicism in central Massachusetts, St. John's is one of the oldest Catholic churches in the state and is regarded as the "mother church of the Springfield diocese". As early as 1837 Reverend Fitton had established two local schools, one of which (Mount St. James's Seminary) later became Holy Cross College. With the growth of the parish, the church developed a variety of social services, of which the most important were its separate parochial schools for boys and girls (opened 1872 - now demolished). By 1910 the church membership had grown to 15,000 despite the establishment of many other Catholic parishes in Worcester. Finally, in 1911, the congregation was divided by the creation of a new parish, Ascension Church.

Staple to Inventory form at bottom

Property Worcester Multiple Resource Area (Partial Inventory)

State MA (Worcester) Working Number 8.30.79.2060

TECHNICAL

CONTROL

Photos 383 + 13
Maps 2, 63

HISTORIAN

Call/Accept
Lightner
10.30.79

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN

ARCHEOLOGIST

OTHER

ACCEP
MURPHY
2/28/80

HAER

Inventory _____

Review _____

REVIEW UNIT CHIEF

BRANCH CHIEF 3/3/80

KEEPER

Soldner
3/5/80

National Register Write-up _____

Send-back _____

Entered _____

MAR 5 1980

Federal Register Entry _____

2.3.81

Re-submit _____



30 AUG 1979

131-K

St. John's Roman Catholic Church

40 Temple St.
Worcester, MA

West + South
elevations

Please refer to the map in the
Multiple Property Cover Sheet
for this property

Multiple Property Cover Sheet Reference Number: 64000304

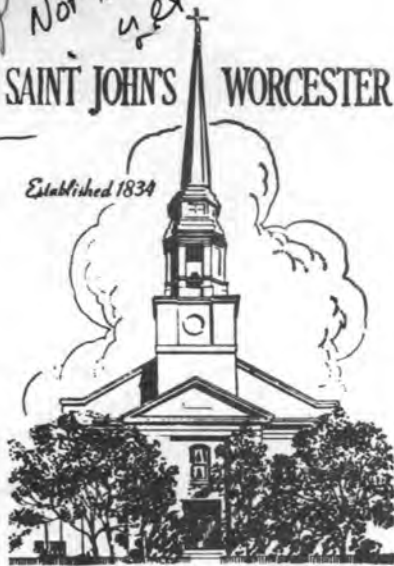
Worcester Multiple Resource
Center

5-11-79

MA

Worcester Co.

October 26, 1979



Mr. Charles A. Herrington
United States Department
of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and
Recreation Service
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: Worcester Multiple Resource Area
40 Temple Street

Dear Mr. Herrington:

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Worcester, Bernard J. Flanagan, has referred to our parish your letter of September 27. Our parish is delighted that our church - referred to in your letter as the "Worcester Multiple Resource Area" - has been nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. We feel this listing is a privilege and an honor, and we will do whatever we can to help you in your review of the application submitted on our behalf. Please let me know if I can assist you in any way.

Enclosed for your review is a brief sketch history of our church. Unfortunately, this history leaves out much of the rich and varied background of our church: a background we would be delighted to review with you at your convenience. It highlights well, however, the integral involvement of our church in the history of Worcester in general, and in the history of the Irish immigrant population of central New England in particular.

Very truly yours.

Brian A. O'Connell

Brian A. O'Connell
President; Parish Counsel

BAO/rma
Enclosure

THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
DATE RECD OCT 30 1979
FILE NO. 68-111-1000-1000
REMARKS (ATTACHED)
AGENCY (ATTACHED)
LOCALITY (ATTACHED)
LOCALITY TAKEN _____
INITIALS _____

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W. C. Frost

The Mother Church of Two Dioceses



NOTHING so perfectly typifies the "old" of the Church in Worcester County as St. John's, Worcester — the mother parish of two dioceses, Springfield and Worcester.

St. John's traces its history back to when Worcester had a population of seven thousand, of whom only "four families, eighteen unmarried men and a single lady" were Catholics. There was no Temple Street then, only a wagon track or cattle walk running east from Green Street toward the Blackstone Canal.

It was the Blackstone Canal that had brought the first permanent Catholic settlers to Worcester — Irish immigrants strong of body and dedicated to the Faith of their fathers. It was this dedication that led to the purchase in 1834 of meadowland, divided by what we now call Temple street, as the site for the first Catholic church in Central or Western Massachusetts. On this land was raised up Christ's Church, later St. John's.

Worcester was an unfriendly community for these pioneer Catholics, and history records that it is not without difficulty that the meadowland was bought. Rebuffed in prior attempts to secure land on which to erect a church, it was only with the assistance of three non-Catholic citizens of the town that the land finally was obtained. The three non-Catholics were William Lincoln, whose brother was afterwards governor of the State, Francis P. Blake and Harvey Pierce. The last two were subsequently baptized into the Faith.

Christ's Church, a frame structure built and paid for in two years, was placed under the pastoral care of Father James Fitton, the celebrated "Apostle of New England," who had devoted the years since his ordination in 1827 to bringing Christ and the Sacraments to the remotest corners of Massachusetts and its neighbor States.

The tremendous apostolic effectiveness and priestly popularity of Father Fitton are attested to in scores of town histories and parish registers. In fact, the sturdy foundations of the Church in Worcester County today are due in principal part to his zeal. This is so on the educational as well as parish level, for it was Father Fitton who founded what was to become one of the nation's outstanding institutions of higher learning, Holy Cross College.

Father Fitton remained seven years as pastor of St. John's. Each Summer of those years he was visited by large numbers of Penobscot Indians, whose affection he had won while a missionary in Maine. The Penobscots would pitch their tents near the old rolling mill facing Franklin and Grafton streets and worship at Christ's Church. After Mass the Indians had a custom of kneeling on the dusty roadway outside the church door and there await Father Fitton's individual blessing.

About this same time Army militiamen on their way to Florida and the Seminole War would visit the church for services from their encampment on nearby Brown Street.

The present red-brick St. John's Church was constructed in 1845 and it exists today with only slight architectural modifications. It stands strong and proud against the passing of decade upon decade, its permanent place in history long ago solidified by such giants as Father Fitton, Father John Boyce (Paul Peppergrass of literary fame), Father Patrick T. O'Reilly (who became first Bishop of Springfield), Monsignor Thomas Griffin (who brought the Sisters of Providence to Worcester to found St. Vincent Hospital, and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Xaverian Brothers to staff the parish schools), and a host of others, cleric and lay.

To the right of the church stands the parish rectory. Looming in the distance behind it is the tower of the old railroad station, the symbol of something less permanent than St. John's, Worcester.

