

PH0501093

DATA SHEET

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY  
RECEIVED JUL 14 1977  
DATE ENTERED JAN 31 1978

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC \*\*

St. John's Church

AND/OR COMMON

St. John's Church

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

105 Chapel Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Portsmouth

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

First

STATE

New Hampshire

VICINITY OF

CODE

33

COUNTY

Rockingham

CODE

015

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 type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

St. John's Church

STREET & NUMBER

105 Chapel Street

CITY, TOWN

Portsmouth

STATE

New Hampshire 03801

VICINITY OF

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Rockingham County Court House

STREET & NUMBER

Exeter Road

CITY, TOWN

Exeter

STATE

New Hampshire 03853

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

New Hampshire's Historic Preservation Plan

DATE

1970

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

State of New Hampshire, Department of Resources & Economic Development

CITY, TOWN

Box 856, Concord

STATE

New Hampshire 03301

## 7 DESCRIPTION - Present

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

St. John's Church is a brick structure measuring about 61 by 88 feet and covered by a gable roof. The brickwork of the body of the church is laid in Flemish bond except on the rear (east), where a running bond is used. The facade (west) of the church is articulated by a projecting central pavilion, which has a central doorway on the first floor, a Palladian window on the second, and a semicircular lunette in the tympanum. The central pavilion is flanked by doorways which are identical to the central entrance, and by arched windows on the second floor. The doorways are embellished with rusticated trim of limestone or soft marble; the second floor windows have sills, impost blocks and keystones of the same material. The horizontal cornice is formed of bricks moulded to an ogee profile, with common bricks set below this moulding in the manner of modillions. This cornice extends around the sides of the building. The raking cornice of the frontal pediment is executed in painted wood, but is identical in profile and detail to the horizontal brick cornice.

Each side of the church has, on the first floor, five rectangular windows, now of stained glass. On the second floor are four arched windows of clear glass. The fifth window, in the forward bay, is a circular bull's-eye. The forward bays are ornamented by blind arches which project a few inches from the main wall surface and enframe the bull's-eye windows. This combination of motifs is believed to derive from Plate 133 of William Pain's The Practical House Carpenter (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1797), a book that is known to have been used by the architect of the church, Alexander Parris.<sup>1</sup>

The brick tower of St. John's Church is composed of a square brick belfry that is pierced on each side by an arched and louvered opening. Surmounting the belfry is an octagonal wooden lantern with four arched windows facing the cardinal points of the compass. The lantern has an entablature supported by four pairs of engaged Ionic columns, and covered by a faceted dome from which rises a short spire with a banneret weathervane.

The interior of St. John's Church is essentially a single large auditorium with galleries on the side and west walls; the altar is set within an apsidal niche in the east wall. The side galleries are supported by four wooden Tuscan columns with full Ionic entablature. The upper colonnade supports the ceiling, which is horizontal in the area above the galleries but rises to a low plaster vault in the center.

Most of the pews on the first floor of the auditorium are "slip seats" which were installed in 1867, but some of the original box pews remain in the galleries. The altarpiece, derived from a plate in Pain's The Practical House Carpenter,<sup>2</sup> remains unchanged, but the original pulpit, apparently also derived from Pain's book, has been replaced. In 1848, Daniel M. Shepard of Salem, Massachusetts, decorated the interior of the church with trompe l'oeil painting in the form of simulated bas-reliefs and ceiling coffers. This work was carefully restored in 1951.

Around the walls of the auditorium and vestibule are a series of memorial tablets of varying styles and dates; many of them reflect designs published in English architectural sourcebooks during the eighteenth century. The stained glass windows also reflect several styles of glazing and coloring, and were installed over the period from 1885 to 1956.

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7. DESCRIPTION--original appearance:

The original design of the facade of St. John's Church differed considerably from the present appearance. Instead of the present pediment, which follows the slope of the building's gable roof, there was a series of flat-topped parapet walls which were ornamented with applied volutes and ball finials. The parapet of the central pavilion rose to the level of the ridge, hiding the slope of the roof; the flanking parapets were lower and were ornamented with baroque volutes at their intersection with the higher central wall.

The interior was also somewhat different originally. Until 1885, all the windows were glazed with clear glass. The pews were originally of the box type, altered in 1848 and largely replaced in 1867. According to indications in an early sketch, the original pulpit, surmounted by a sounding board, stood directly in the center of the east end of the church.<sup>4</sup> The walls were not frescoed until 1848.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James L. Garvin, "St. John's Church in Portsmouth: An Architectual Study,"  
Historical New Hampshire, XXVIII, 3 (Fall, 1973), pp. 165, 168-169.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., p. 166.

<sup>3</sup>ibid., pp. 158-167.

<sup>4</sup>Charles T. Webb, / St. John's Church, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, A Visitor's  
Guidebook (Portsmouth: St. John's Church, 1967), p. 6.

## 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 checked="" 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" 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 1807

BUILDER/ARCHITECT James Nutter, Builder  
Alexander Parris, Architect

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE ARCHITECTURAL:

St. John's Church was the first brick church built in New Hampshire. It was considered at its completion to be one of the state's finest religious edifices, notable for "...the elegance of its structure, the beauty and simplicity of its decorations, together with its happy accommodation to the purpose, to which it is intended..."<sup>1</sup> Apart from its aesthetic distinction, both in its original condition and in its present form, St. John's Church is important for its connection with Alexander Parris (1780-1852), an important American architect of the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The church represents Parris' earliest surviving major design, executed when the architect was twenty-six years old. Parris was later noted for his architectural work in Boston, including the design of such granite buildings as St. Paul's Church on Tremont Street and the Faneuil Hall (Quincy) Market. He became prominent as an engineer, designing and superintending the construction of docks and seawalls at the Boston and Portsmouth Navy Yards. Parris' stature as an architect is rapidly being recognized, and St. John's Church stands as a key monument in his early work. The church reveals not only Parris' skill as a designer, but also his use of architectural sourcebooks like Pain's The Practical House Carpenter, a volume which figured prominently in the design of the church.

In its original state, St. John's Church was one of a group of religious structures having frontal parapet walls and a generally baroque composition to their facades; others of the same type included Charles Bulfinch's New North Church (c. 1802) and Holy Cross Church (1800-1803), and Asher Benjamin's West Church (1806) and Charles Street Church (1807), all in Boston.<sup>3</sup> Thus, St. John's, though altered, is significant both as an early design of an important early nineteenth century architect, and as an example of a type of church design that had been introduced into New England at the turn of the century.

St. John's Church is also important because it represents the work of Portsmouth's most skilled early nineteenth-century building tradesmen. The leading joiner was James Nutter (1775-1855), described as "the head of his craft" in Portsmouth. The carved elements of the church were executed by William Dearing, who was the most skilled carver in the region. Other leading local artisans supplied iron and brass work, stonework, ornamental stucco, and a variety of other elements. Thus, the church embodies the skill of Portsmouth's leading craftsmen at a time when the material culture of the region was at a level comparable to that of other Federal-period urban centers.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Morss.

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

James L. Garvin, "St. John's Church in Portsmouth; An Architectural Study," Historical New Hampshire, XXVIII, 3(Fall, 1973), pp. 165, 168-169.

Charles T. Webb, St. John's Church, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, A Visitor's Guidebook (Portsmouth: St. John's Church, 1967, p 6

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 10<sup>2</sup> (Branham 1.12.78)

UTM REFERENCES

A	1 9	3 5 7 0 8 0	4 7 7 0 8 0 5	B					
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		
C				D					

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

All land with buildings thereon bounded by Bow, Chapel and Daniel streets EXCEPT: house and land owned by Marguerite J. Griffin 166 Daniel Street and the Warner House, a National Registered Historical Landmark

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	NA	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	NA	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Gerald D. Foss, Chairman Historical Committee

ORGANIZATION

St. John's Church, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

DATE

1975

STREET & NUMBER

328 Washington Road

TELEPHONE

(603) 436-0956

CITY OR TOWN

Rye, New Hampshire 03870

STATE

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE XX

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 National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

*[Signature]*

1975

TITLE Commissioner NH Dept. Resources & Economic Development DATE JUN 7 1975  
NH State Historic Preservation Officer

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE 1.31.78  
KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE 1.25.78

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
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CONTINUATION SHEET 2

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE TWO

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8 SIGNIFICANCE: ARCHITECTURAL: (Continued)

<sup>2</sup>James L. Garvin, "St. John's Church in Portsmouth: An Architectural Study,"  
Historical New Hampshire, XXVIII, 3(Fall, 1973), pp. 162-169.

<sup>3</sup>ibid., pp. 166-167.