

PROPOSAL OF
ST. JOSEPH'S CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1844
RIVERBEND TOWNSHIP
TO THE GASTON COUNTY HISTORIC PROPERTIES REGISTER
FEBRUARY, 1989



GASTON COUNTY HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

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SAINT JOSEPH'S
CATHOLIC CHURCH

DEDICATED IN 1843 BY BISHOP
I.A. REYNOLDS, D.D. OF THE DIOCESE
OF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

ST. JOSEPH'S IS THE OLDEST
STANDING CATHOLIC CHURCH IN
THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA.



CONTENTS

1. Name and location of the property - St. Joseph's Catholic Church, SW corner of the junction of NC 273 and SR 1918, River Bend Township, Gaston County, North Carolina.
2. Name and address of current owner of the property -
~~Michael J. Begley~~ *John F. Donoghue* *attn: Rev. Msgr. John J. Masweaney, V.G.*
Bishop of the Charlotte Diocese
~~% Belmont Abbey~~ *P.O. Box 3776 36776*
~~Belmont, N.C. 28012~~ *Charlotte, N.C. 28203*
MS4/377-6891 28236
3. Representative photographs of the property -
4. Map depicting location of the property -
5. Current deed references of the property -
6. Historical sketch of the property - This report contains a brief historical description of the property prepared by Mrs. Nancy Shannon of the Properties Commission using the historical description of the National Register Nomination.
7. Architectural description of the property - This report contains a brief architectural description taken directly from the National Register Nomination prepared by Mr. Jerry L. Cross of the N.C. Division of Archives and History.
8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property is of historical significance to the county. St. Joseph's, one of the oldest surviving Catholic churches in the entire state, is associated with the development of gold mining in the western Piedmont. Through the efforts of Father J.J. O'Connell of St. Joseph's, St. Peters of Charlotte, Belmont Abbey, and Belmont Abbey College were begun. This church is regarded as an important landmark in the development of Catholicism in western North Carolina and is therefore significant to the history of Gaston County.

ST. JOSEPH'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

STANLEY

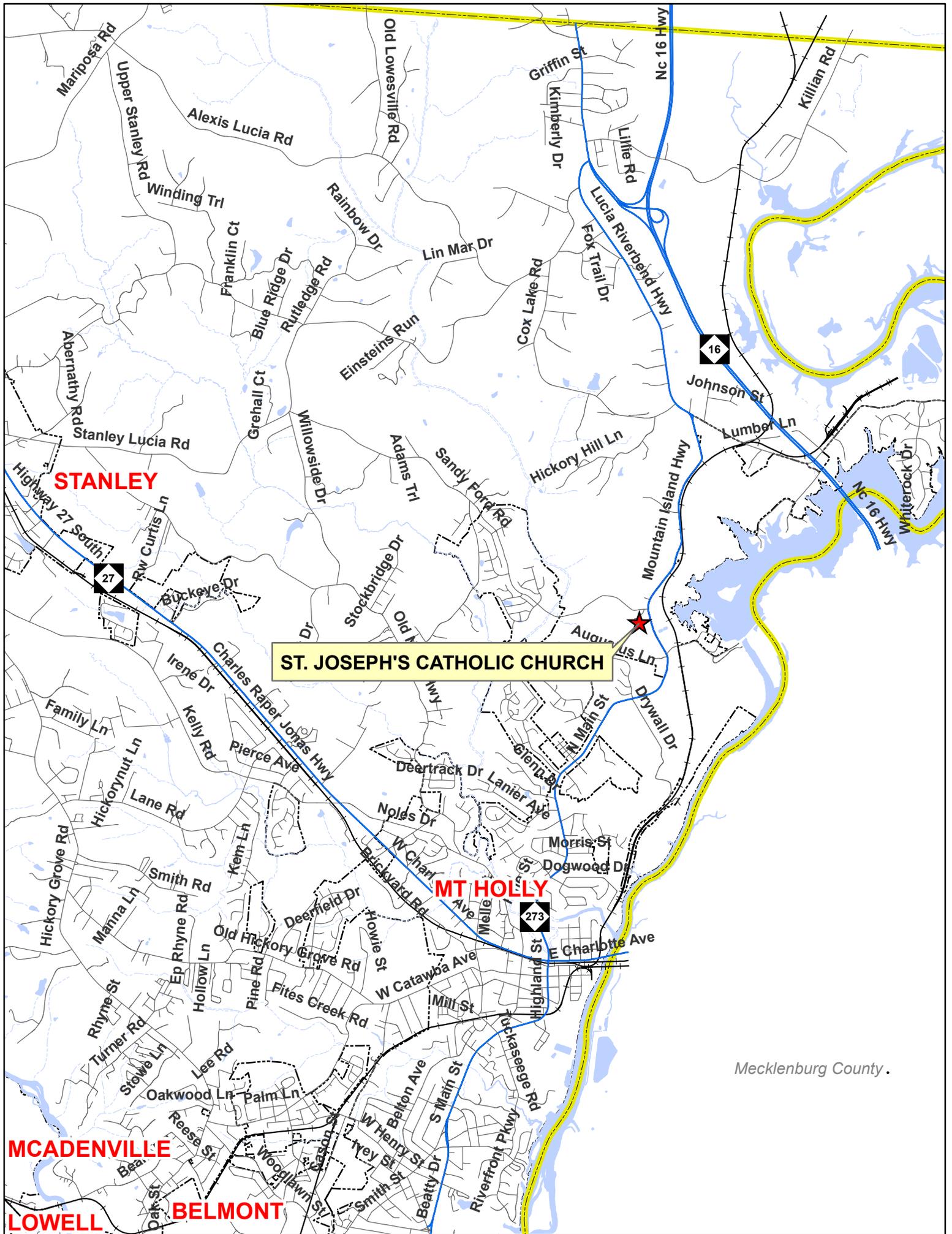
MT HOLLY

MCADENVILLE

LOWELL

BELMONT

Mecklenburg County.



CHAIN OF TITLE

1. On October 23, 1843, William Lonegan of Lincoln County conveyed to the "Roman Catholic Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina" a tract of land in Lincoln County containing 6 acres. (Father John Gifford represented the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Charleston, S.C. in this transaction.) This deed is located in the Gaston County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 1, page 101.
2. Pope Pious IX created a separate vicariate and Bishop James Gibbons was appointed as the first Vicar Apostolic of North Carolina on March 3, 1868. (Lincoln County was split into Lincoln and Gaston in 1846.)
 - a. Bishop James Gibbons had responsibility for Saint Joseph's from 1868 to 1887.
 - b. Bishop Leo Haid, his successor, had responsibility for Saint Joseph's from 1888 to 1910.No civil transfer can be found.
3. In 1910, the Diocese of Belmont Abbey was formed. Bishop Leo Haid had responsibility for Saint Joseph's for the Belmont Abbey Diocese from 1910 until his death in 1924. Reference letter of Jan. 16, 1987, from Father Paschal Baumstein, OSB, to Mrs. John Cashett.
4. Bishop Leo Haid died July 24, 1924, and in his will he conveyed the property he owned for Belmont Abbey Diocese to his successor. His will is recorded in the office of Clerk of Superior Court of Gaston County, file 3252.
5. In 1925, the Diocese of Raleigh was established and William J. Haffey was made the Bishop. On June 22, 1931, Bishop Haffey conveyed Saint Joseph's to the Southern Benedictine Society of North Carolina. This deed is recorded in the Gaston County Register of Deeds in Deed Book 440 at page 46. However, this deed was a mistake or an effort to clarify Haid's estate, according to Father Paschal Baumstein, O.S.B., Archivist for Belmont Abbey. Raleigh Diocese never owned Saint Joseph's from 1924-1931, since it lay within the territory of the Belmont Abbey Diocese.

CHAIN OF TITLE CONTINUED

6. On November 14, 1960, the Southern Benedictine Society of North Carolina conveyed this property to Vincent S. Waters, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, N.C.. This Deed is recorded in the Gaston County Register of Deeds in Deed Book 780 at Page 376 and 377.

7. In 1972, the Diocese of Charlotte was formed. On January 12, 1972, Bishop Waters of the Raleigh Diocese conveyed Saint Joseph's to Michael J. Begley, Bishop of the Charlotte Diocese. This Deed is recorded in Deed Book 1074 at page 316 and 317 in the Gaston County Register of Deeds.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

St. Joseph's is a very quaint, frame church built in vernacular temple form surrounded by holly, cedar, crepe myrtles, boxwood and a stone wall. The gravestones date back to the 1870's. Upon entering the churchyard, one truly steps back in time. Once inside the little church, a feeling of serenity envelopes the spirit, and one automatically sits in a pew and experiences the presence of those who once worshipped there, the Lonergans, the Millers, the Hawkins, all of the early Catholic settlers who came to work the gold mines, the first priests who came up from Charleston to say Mass and hear Confessions and baptize infants and those who wished to convert to the faith.

North Carolina was settled, predominately, by Protestants. Although there were only a small number of Catholics in North Carolina in 1789, the state was assigned to the Catholic Diocese of Baltimore. Very little is known of Catholic activities in the state until 1820 when North Carolina became a charter member of the Diocese of Charleston.¹ There were a few hundred Catholics in North Carolina at this time but no churches had been erected. By 1844 St. Joseph's was to become the fourth Catholic Church to be built in North Carolina and is one of two of that period left standing today.²

In the late 1820's gold deposits were discovered along the banks of the Catawba River. An Italian Catholic by the name of Chevalier Riva de Finola acquired mines and became very wealthy. His beautiful home became a gathering place for Catholics who had come to the Tuckaseegee Ford area to work in the mines.³ By 1830 an Irish Catholic

settlement had been established in the eastern part of Lincoln County (now Gaston) near Mountain Island. The names of some Catholic families were Lonergan, Cahill, Coxe, Duffy, Miller and Hawkins.⁴

In 1835 de Finola was forced to close his mines due to legal complication. He left the area and Catholic families lost their place of worship.⁵ In 1838 the Diocese of Charleston sent father T.J. Cronin, at intervals, to serve the needs of the Catholic settlement. Father Cronin acquires several acres of land from William Lonergan and collected contributions to start a building fund.⁶ Judge William Gaston, Supreme Court Justice and former Congressman, was a major contributor.⁷ Father Cronin died in 1842 following a bout with yellow fever. He was buried at the site selected for the church.⁸

Father John Gifford succeeded Father Cronin as the priest in charge of western North Carolina, and on October 23, 1843 William Lonergan transferred six acres of land to Father John Gifford as representative of the Bishop of Charleston.⁹ In 1844 the church was built and dedicated by Bishop I.A. Reynolds. It was initially named Sts. Mary and Joseph Catholic Church.¹⁰ Unfortunately, early church records were destroyed by the Charleston fire of 1861 when the Catholic Archives were destroyed.¹¹ It is not, therefore, known when the church's name was changed to St. Joseph's.

Around 1846 there had been much growth and change in the area. The southern part of Lincoln County became Gaston County in honor of Judge William Gaston.¹² One year later Father Cronin was transferred to Chicago and Father John Barry assumed his position. Father Barry conducted services at St. Joseph's every six weeks for fourteen years.¹³

St. Joseph's was the only Catholic Church in the state west of Raleigh. Catholics came to St. Joseph's to worship until 1850 when St. Peters was built in Charlotte.¹⁴ Due to the development of St. Peters Parish and the loss of lives in the Civil War, St. Joseph's had one family remaining in its parish by 1885. Pierce Cahill and his family were left.¹⁵

Textile workers began to move to the area to work in the cotton factory at Mountain Island. A few families kept St. Joseph's alive. Father Barry left in 1861, but other priests followed. Some of these were Fathers L.P. O'Connell, A.J. McNeil, and J.J. O'Connell.¹⁶

Father J.J. O'Connell was ordained into the priesthood May 24, 1844. In 1871 after working in Georgia and South Carolina, he was assigned to western North Carolina in hopes that the climate would help his frequent bouts of fever.¹⁷ Father O'Connell purchased 536 acres of land near Tuckaseegee Ford from the S.L. Caldwell estate for \$4,182.98.¹⁸ The date was December 20, 1871.¹⁹ A few years later Father O'Connell gave the land to Bishop James Gibbons to establish a monastery. Father O'Connell requested living quarters in the monastery in exchange for the donation of land.

Bishop Gibbons was responsible for St. Joseph's from 1868 to 1887 under a separate vicariate created by Pope Pius IX.²⁰ Bisop Gibbons contacted the Benedictine Order of St. Vincent in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, and they accepted his proposal to establish a religious institution.²¹ In 1877 the Church of St. Mary's Help of Christians and Maryhelp Abbey were built. In 1878 St. Mary's

College began. The names were later changed to Belmont Abbey and Belmont Abbey College.²²

Father O'Connell left a small room at the rear of St. Joseph's that he had occupied for six years and moved to the Abbey.²³ Eventually, the entire congregation shifted to Belmont Abbey and St. Joseph's was abandoned.

In 1910 the Diocese of Belmont Abbey was formed. Bishop Leo Haid, as Bishop Gibbons successor, had responsibility for St. Joseph's from 1888 to 1924, the date of his death. He was responsible for Belmont Abbey Diocese from its origin in 1910 until his death in 1924.

In 1925 the Diocese of Raleigh was established with Bishop William J. Haffey as bishop. On June 22, 1931, Bishop Haffey conveyed St. Joseph's to the Southern Benedictine Society of North Carolina. Actually, St. Joseph's and Belmont Abbey were part of the Diocese of Belmont Abbey. The deed transferring the Abbey from the Raleigh Diocese to the Benedictines was an effort to clarify Bishop Haid's estate.²⁴

On November 14, 1960 the Southern Benedictine Society of North Carolina conveyed the property to Bishop Vincent S. Waters of the Raleigh Diocese.

By the mid 1900's the church had badly deteriorated.²⁵ In 1965 Father James Keenan of the Queen of Apostles Church in Belmont became responsible for the church and started a fund for restoration. He repaired the roof and painted the exterior.²⁶ After these repairs were made, the church experienced a decade of neglect. In 1972 the Charlotte Diocese was established and Belmont Abbey was transferred

to Bishop Michael J. Begley of Charlotte.

In 1974 Francis B. Galligan started the St. Joseph's Preservation Project. He collected contributions and volunteers from the Knights of Columbus, Belmont Abbey College, Sacred Heart College, and Boy Scout Troops. Many individuals also contributed. For only \$15,000 St. Joseph's was completely restored.²⁷

On November 2, 1975 St. Joseph's was rededicated by the Reverend Michael Begley, Bishop of Charlotte, and the Reverend Abbot Jude Cleary of Belmont Abbey. Ten priests assisted and 250 people attended the special Mass.²⁸

Today St. Joseph's stands as a shrine to the small number of Irish and Italian Catholics who brought their faith with them to Gaston County.²⁹

1979 NR

FOOTNOTES

1 New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 15 vols., 1967), X, 508; and Minnie Stowe Puett, History of Gaston County (Charlotte: Observer, 1939), 189, herein after cited as Puett, History of Gaston County.

2 National Register nomination for St. Paul's Catholic Church, New Bern; see also Rev. Dr. J.J. O'Connell, O. S. B., Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia: Leaves of its History (Westminster, Maryland, 1964, a facsimile reprint of the Sadlier edition 1879), 474, hereinafter cited as O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas; and Puett, History of Gaston County, 189.

3 St. Joseph's Church, Scrapbook (submitted to the Division of Archives and History 1977), 2, hereinafter cited as St. Joseph's Scrapbook; Puett, History of Gaston County 189-190; O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 470; and Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman, The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina Region (Charlotte and Gaston Historical Society, 1961), 66, herein cited as Cope and Wellman, Gaston County.

4 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, §71. See also names on the tombstones in the church cemetery.

5 Wording on a plaque hanging in the church. St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 13; and "Gaston County and the Catholic Church". A brief history submitted by The Very Reverend Peter N. Stragand to the Research Branch, Archeology and Historic Preservation Section, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, 1976, hereinafter cited as "Gaston County and the Catholic Church".

6 St. Joseph's Scrapbook; 2; and O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 475

7 Puett, History of Gaston County, 191; Cope and Wellman, Gaston County; "Gaston County and the Catholic Church"; and Joseph Herman Schauinger, "William Gaston: Southern Statesman", The North Carolina Historical Review, XVIII (April, 1941), 110-113, 123-129.

8 Many people have long believed that Father Cronin was buried in Salisbury where he died. His obituary clearly shows that his body was transferred to a site in Lincoln (Gaston) County for burial. See The U.S. Catholic Miscellany, XXII (November 5, 1842 No. 18).

9 Gaston County Deed Books, Office of the Register of Deeds, Gaston County Courthouse, Gastonia, Deed Book 1, p. 101, hereinafter cited as Gaston County Deed Book.

10 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 475.

11 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, x.

12 David Leroy Corbitt, The Formation of the North Carolina Counties 1663-1943 (Raleigh: N.C. Division of Archives and History, 1950), 103.

- 13 St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 3.
- 14 St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 3.
- 15 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 471.
- 16 Cope and Wellman, Gaston County, 72; and St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 3.
- 17 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 138, 290.
- 18 Gaston County Deed Books, Grantee Index.
- 19 Gaston County Deed Book 5, p. 113.
- 20 Letter from father Paschal Baumstein, Archivist, Belmont Abbey College to Mary Cashette, Gaston Historic Properties Commission.
- 21 See letter from James Gibbons, Bisop of Richmond, to the Right Reverend Abbot Wimmer, St. Vincent's Abbey, 1875, in St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 14, hereinafter cited as Gibbons' Letter; and O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 480.
- 22 William S. Powell, Higher Education in North Carolina(Raleigh: N.C. Division of Archives and History, 1964), 14; and O'Connell, Catholicity 480.
- 23 Gibbons Letter; and O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, XV.
- 24 Letter from Father Paschal Baumstein, Archivist, Belmont Abbey College to Mary Cashette, Gaston Historic Properties Commission.
- 25 Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975.
- 26 St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 2-3.
- 27 Letter from Francis B. Galligan, Chairman of the St. Joseph's Preservation Project, to William Craig, Chairman of Gaston County Bicentennial Committee, April 8, 1975, copy in Research Branch, Archeology and Historic preservation Section, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975; and St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 4-5.
- 28 St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 5; and Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975.
- 29 National Register nomination for St. Joseph's.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION
ST. JOSEPH'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

St. Joseph's Catholic Church, a vernacular temple form frame structure dedicated in 1844, stands in its landscaped churchyard planted with holly and cedar trees, crepe myrtles and boxbushes and surrounded by a stone wall. Grave stones dating from the second quarter of the nineteenth century to the present stand individually and in groups in the yard to the south and east of the church. The enclosure, built of both quarried and field stone, has suffered from both neglect and vandalism and been subsequently repaired and repointed in various sections during the course of its existence. Openings occur in both the north and east wall. The main entrance on the east wall is flanked by square piers supporting a metal arch over the opening inscribed with the church's name and date of construction; the hand forged gate is composed of simple flat vertical members with diamond-shaped cresting on the palings. The less important north opening contains a modern factory made metal gate.

The main block of the church is a rectangular three-bay by three-bay building with a tetrastyle portico on the south (front) elevation and a shallower, shorter block across its north gable end. Resting on stone blocks (later infilled with a brick foundation on the south, east and north sides) the church is covered with weatherboards and has a gable roof. The simply molded woodwork is transitional Federal-Greek Revival in character.

The portico with its weatherboarded tympanum protects the three bays--a central entrance and flanking windows--of the front elevation which is covered with flush sheathing. In a recent rehabilitation of the church the deteriorated floor of the portico was removed and a pair of brick steps preceded by a small paved brick platform, installed to provide access to the door. At the same time the deteriorated lower portions of the columnar supports--irregularly hewn tapering octagonal posts were removed and the columns set on low square brick piers. The central entrance, set in a two part molded Federal surround, features a pair of doors with a horizontal six panel division. The windows, like those on the three-bay east and west side elevations, are enframed by the same surrounds and contain sixteen over sixteen sash. Several of the original pegged blinds remain intact with their original hardware while others have been sympathetically repaired. These feature a symmetrical two panel division with raised panels on the interior and applied moldings on the exterior.

A shallow rectangular block with an engaged porch across its flush sheathed east side forms the north gable end of the church; its gable roof is lower in profile than that of the main block of the building. The wood porch floor was removed here also and replaced with a quartet of brick steps leading to a door in the southwest corner of the porch while the square porch posts rest on square brick piers. A pair of four over four sash windows with their original louvered blinds is set to the right of the five panel door. On the opposite, west side of this smaller block is a pendant board and batten door; a single four over four sash window with a solid panel blind is located to the north of the door. The north gable end of the church is without fenestration but once an exterior end brick chimney provided a fireplace in the larger of the two chambers at the rear of the church.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION
ST. JOSEPH'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

The interior of the church follows a center aisle plan and is, like the exterior, simply finished with hand planed flush sheathing and vernacular molded woodwork. The simple wood pews have long been fixtures in the church while the lighting fixtures and other furnishings date from various periods of the building's use. Framed panels, surmounted by a carved cross, illustrating the fourteen stations of the cross are symmetrically disposed around the east, south and west elevations.

A balcony, supported by square posts on either side of the aisle, carries across the southern end of the nave and is reached by a stair set in the southeast corner of the church and enclosed by a board and batten partition. At the opposite end of the church the chancel is raised above the floor of the nave and separated by a low communion rail which carries in a slight arc from the east to west side of the church. The reredos, preceded by a Gothic revival tabernacle and communion table is set on a recent, higher platform and is flanked by doors on either side. The door on the right gives into the small sacristy while that on the left leads to the larger private chamber where Father J. J. O'Connell lived for some six years. These rooms, like the sanctuary, are finished with flush horizontal sheathing. The sacristy was once used as an office by Father O'Connell whose desk remains in place against the west wall. On the north wall a four panel door opens onto the enclosed stair which rises to the west across the north end of the room. A similar four panel door at the southern end of the west wall leads into the priest's room where a cupboard is built into the northwest corner. The mantel set in the center of the north wall has a wide frieze below the projecting molded shelf with three symmetrically positioned panels formed by applied moldings. A plain oval tablet is set in the center panel while circles ornament the outer panels.