**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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

### NAME
- **HISTORIC**: St. Joseph's Catholic Church
- **AND/OR COMMON**

### LOCATION
- **STREET & NUMBER**: SW corner of the junction of NC 273 with SR 1918
- **CITY, TOWN**: Mountain Island vicinity
- **STATE**: North Carolina
- **CODE**: 37
- **CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT**: 10th

### CLASSIFICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>OWNERSHIP</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
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<td>GOVERNMENT</td>
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### OWNER OF PROPERTY
- **NAME**: The Diocese of Charlotte, c/o Bishop Michael J. Bagley
- **STREET & NUMBER**: P. O. Box 3776
- **CITY, TOWN**: Charlotte
- **STATE**: North Carolina
- **VICINITY OF**: 28203

### LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
- **COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.**: Gaston County Courthouse
- **STREET & NUMBER**
- **CITY, TOWN**: Gastonia
- **STATE**: North Carolina

### REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
- **TITLE**
- **DATE**
- **FEDERAL**
- **STATE**
- **COUNTY**
- **LOCAL**
- **DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS**
- **CITY, TOWN**
- **STATE**
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 center 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.
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.
PERIOD AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW

PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY PREHISTORIC COMMUNITY PLANNING LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE RELIGION

1400-1499 ARCHAEOLOGY HISTORIC CONSERVATION LAW SCIENCE

1500-1599 AGRICULTURE ECONOMICS LITERATURE SCULPTURE

1600-1699 ART EDUCATION MILITARY SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN

1700-1799 ENGINEERING THEATER

1800-1899 COMMERCE PHILOSOPHY TRANSPORTATION

1900- COMMUNICATIONS INVENTION

1844

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St. Joseph's Catholic Church, dedicated in 1844, occupies a significant role in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in North Carolina because of its relatively early date of establishment and its associations with educational and social endeavors. The church was dedicated the same year as St. Paul's, New Bern (built 1839-1841), making St. Joseph's one of the two oldest Catholic churches surviving in the state. The denomination has been historically small in number in a predominantly Protestant state. The establishment of St. Joseph's is associated with the development of gold mines in the western Piedmont and the presence of Italian and Irish people in the mining communities. Through the efforts of Father J. J. O'Connell of St. Joseph's important social and education institutions began in the region—St. Peter's, Charlotte, and Belmont Abbey and Belmont Abbey College. The small frame church is a notable example of a modest, vernacular adaptation of the temple form popular for religious and public buildings in the mid-nineteenth century. The church is regarded in the region as an important landmark in the development of Catholicism in western North Carolina.

Criteria Assessment:

A. St. Joseph's Church sponsored Maryhelp Abbey and St. Mary's College (1878) which later became Belmont Abbey and Belmont Abbey College: both institutions have made important social and educational contributions to the state and especially western North Carolina.

C. St. Joseph's Church is a modest vernacular version of the temple form whose popularity for use in the design of religious structures was established in the eighteenth century and enormously popular for grand, academic churches of the Greek Revival. While simple in design and execution St. Joseph's remains little changed from its original appearance.

While churches are not ordinarily considered eligible for listing in the National Register, St. Joseph's Catholic Church is an exception as one of the two oldest Catholic churches in the state, and the sponsoring organ of Belmont Abbey and Belmont Abbey College in addition to its architectural significance as a little altered and well-maintained example of vernacular temple form building.
Catholicism in North Carolina received official recognition in 1789 when the state was made a part of the Diocese of Baltimore. Very little is known of Catholic activity, however, before the time North Carolina became a charter member of the Diocese of Charleston in 1820. By then there were a few hundred Catholics scattered throughout the state but not a single house of worship had been consecrated. New Bern began the erection of the first Catholic Church about 1839, completing it in 1841; others of the period were in Fayetteville and Raleigh. St. Joseph's in Gaston County, was the fourth and is still standing, with St. Paul's in New Bern, the only remaining of the four original buildings. Both were dedicated in 1844 by Bishop Reynolds.

The history of St. Joseph's Church began in the late 1820s when gold deposits were discovered along the banks of the Catawba River. Among those who came to work the mines was an Italian called Chevalier Riva de Finola, who apparently enjoyed great success. De Finola was a devout Catholic and his home near Tuckaseegee Ford in then Lincoln County became a religious gathering place for a number of Irish Catholics who had come to work the mines owned by de Finola and others. By 1830 an Irish settlement had emerged in the eastern corner of Lincoln (now Gaston) County near Mountain Island. Family names included Lonergan, Cahill, Coxe, Duffy, Miller, Hawkins, and others.

Legal entanglements and dwindling gold deposits clogged the de Finola mines in 1835 and the Italian prospector left the Catawba region. With his departure, the Irish Catholics were left with no place of worship. In 1838, Father T. J. Cronin, assigned to the Diocese of Charleston, began regular missions into western North Carolina to serve the needs of the Catholic community on the Catawba. On one of his visits, Father Cronin secured a promise from William Lonergan for the gift of several acres on which to build a church. A building fund was established and a number of contributions collected. Among the contributors was Judge William Gaston, North Carolina Supreme Court Justice and former congressman. There is no evidence that Gaston ever visited the community on the Catawba, but he was a devout Catholic and had long fought for an end to religious discrimination in the state. Father Cronin, his health weakened through a bout with yellow fever, died on October 26, 1842, at the age of thirty-eight. His body was taken to the site selected for the church and there interred.

Father John Gifford succeeded Father Cronin as the priest in charge of the mission in western North Carolina. On October 23, 1843, William Lonergan officially transferred the promised church land (six acres) to Father Gifford who represented the Bishop of Charleston. A small white frame church was erected near the grave of Father Cronin. It was dedicated in 1844 by Bishop I. A. Reynolds and named Sts. Mary and Joseph Catholic Church. The early church records were destroyed when fire destroyed the Catholic Archives in Charleston in 1861, consequently, it is not known when the name was shortened to St. Joseph's, or if any official change was ever made at all. For the first few years, Father Gifford conducted mass periodically at the church.
In 1846 the southern portion of Lincoln County was cut off and named Gaston, in honor of Judge William Gaston. A year later Father Gifford was transferred to the Diocese of Chicago. He was replaced by Father John Barry who conducted services (about every six weeks) at the church for the next fourteen years.

During the infant years, St. Joseph's, being the only Catholic church west of Raleigh, attracted worshippers from Charlotte and other parts of Mecklenburg County. In 1850, however, St. Peters was constructed in Charlotte reducing the congregation of the little church near Mountain Island. That same year, St. Joseph's and St. Peters were assigned to the Columbia, South Carolina Diocese. The Civil War took its toll also, and by 1865 only Pierce Cahill and his family were left from the Irish community which had struggled to build St. Joseph's.

The little church survived despite loss of membership to St. Peters and the disrupting effects of the war. New members came from the work force employed by the cotton factory at Mountain Island. A series of priests followed Father Barry who left the mission in 1861: Fathers L. P. O'Connell, A. J. McNeil, and J. J. O'Connell. The latter changed the course of history for St. Joseph's Church and Catholicism in North Carolina.

Jeremiah J. O'Connell was born November 21, 1821, in County Cork, Ireland. He entered the seminary in Charleston in 1840 and was ordained as a priest on May 24, 1844. The early years of his ministry were spent at missions in Georgia and South Carolina. In 1871 he was transferred to the mission in western North Carolina in hopes of restoring his health which had been broken by bouts with fever. Father O'Connell purchased several farms in Gaston County, among which was one belonging to the estate of S. L. Caldwell. From Samuel P. Caldwell, executor for S. L. Caldwell, Father O'Connell bought 536 acres near Tuckaseegee Ford for $4,182.98. The date was December 20, 1871. Several years later he offered the property to Bishop James Gibbons (later Cardinal Gibbons) for ecclesiastical use. Bishop Gibbons contacted the Benedictine Order of St. Vincent in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, and proposed the establishment of a religious institution. The idea and the offer of land were both accepted.

In 1877 the Church of St. Mary's, Help of Christians, was completed on the old Caldwell property. A monastery was established which came to be known as Maryhelp Abbey, and St. Mary's College began in 1878. Later they were changed to Belmont Abbey and Belmont Abbey College. Father O'Connell had requested living quarters in the monastery in exchange for the gift of land. Upon its completion he moved to Belmont, leaving the small room in the rear of St. Joseph's where he had lived for six years.
The diocese continued to send priests to conduct services at St. Joseph's but eventually the congregation shifted to Belmont Abbey. Celebration of mass became more and more infrequent until the little church was virtually abandoned. Though small in size, it was mother to two large and important offspring, St. Peters and Belmont Abbey.

By the mid-twentieth century the years of neglect were evident. A badly deteriorated roof offered little protection from the elements; only two shutters remained; windowpanes had fallen victim to time and vandals. Nature reclaimed the once immaculate cemetery, and the stone wall crumbled in places. Rust ate through the iron gate hinges, loosening it from its mooring. In 1965 St. Joseph's became the responsibility of the newly established Queen of Apostles Church in Belmont whose priest was Father James Keenan. Father Keenan led a fund drive to repair the church. Catholics in Gaston and Mecklenburg counties responded to the call and St. Joseph's received roof repairs and a fresh coat of paint. The reprieve proved to be temporary, however, and neglect during the following decade negated the work initiated by Father Keenan.

Renewed interest in St. Joseph's began in 1974 under the guidance of Francis B. Galligan, chairman of the St. Joseph's Preservation Project. Funds were raised and renovation began. Some professional work was required but most of the labor came from volunteers, including St. Gregory's Council of the Knights of Columbus, the Phi Kappa Theta Fraternity of Belmont College, girls from Sacred Heart College, three different Boy Scout troops, and a host of individuals. At a cost of approximately $5,000, the little church was returned to excellend condition.

On November 2, 1975, St. Joseph's was rededicated by The Most Reverend Michael Begley, Bishop of Charlotte, assisted by The Most Reverend Abbot Jude Cleary of Belmont Abbey and ten priests. About 250 persons attended the special mass, the first in the church in more than a decade. Today it stands as a shrine to the handful of Irish who brought Catholicism to western North Carolina.
Footnotes


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: Gaston County Historical Society, 1961), 66, hereinafter cited as Cope and Wellman, Gaston County.

4 O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 471. 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, Archaeology 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).

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

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


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 See letter from James Gibbons, Bishop 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.

21 William S. Powell, Higher Education in North Carolina (Raleigh: N. C. Division of Archives and History, 1964), 14; and O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, 480.

22 Gibbons Letter; and O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas, xv.

23 Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975.


25 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, Archaeology and Historic Preservation Section, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975; and St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 4-5.

26 St. Joseph's Scrapbook, 5; and Gastonia Gazette, November 2, 1975.


St. Joseph's Church. Scrapbook. Raleigh: Archeology and Historic Preservation Section, N. C. Division of Archives and History.


U. S. Catholic Miscellany. XXII. November 5, 1842. No. 18.
MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA
ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 10 acres

QUADRANGLE NAME Mt. Holly

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

ZONE EASTING NORTING ZONE EASTING NORTING
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C | 1,7 | 4,9,9 | 9,5,0 | D | 1,7 | 4,9,9 | 9,6,0
E | | | | F | | | |
G | | | | H | | | |

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

FORM PREPARED BY
NAME/TITLE Description prepared by Davyd Poard Hood, Survey Specialist; Significance prepared by Jerry L. Cross, Research Branch

ORGANIZATION N. C. Division of Archives and History

STREET & NUMBER 109 East Jones Street

TELEPHONE (919) 733-4763

CITY OR TOWN Raleigh

STATE North Carolina

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 National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

DATE January 11, 1979

FOR NPS USE ONLY
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST: KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION