

# Presentation Convent and School Registered Heritage Structure

St. John's, NL

Landmark Registered Heritage Structure

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## DESCRIPTION

Presentation Convent and School are 2-storey stone buildings

with basement levels, influenced by the Classical Revival style of architecture. The buildings are located in Cathedral Square, within the complex of the Roman Catholic Basilica-Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, and in the heart of the ecclesiastical district of St. John's, NL. The designation is confined to the footprint of the buildings.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### **Formal Recognition Type**

Registered Heritage Structure

### **Heritage Value**

Presentation Convent and School was designated a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1999 due to their historic and aesthetic value.

Presentation Convent and School were built for the use of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a religious order founded in Cork, Ireland in 1775. In 1833, Bishop Fleming, seeking to build the Catholic education system in St. John's, visited Ireland to recruit suitable teachers. After Fleming's meeting with the Presentation Sisters in Galway, Ireland, four Sisters volunteered to cross the Atlantic and take on the education of girls in Newfoundland. During their first years, the Presentation Sisters moved several times in order to accommodate the growing number of students. A convent and school were eventually built on Long's Hill in 1844. Both were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1846, possibly by embers carried in on the belongings of people seeking shelter from the flames.

In 1850, Bishop John Thomas Mullock laid the cornerstone for a new convent. The Presentation Motherhouse was officially opened in 1853 and remains the central convent of the congregation in

Newfoundland and Labrador. In the following decades, the Presentation Sisters (along with the Sisters of Mercy) were instrumental in the operation of girls' Catholic schools on the Avalon and across the island. The visual prominence of the Presentation Convent and School speaks to the Presentation

Sisters' contributions to Newfoundland education, and to the defining role that Catholicism played in the social, educational and religious lives of many Newfoundlanders during this period.

Presentation Convent is constructed of both local and Irish granite. Its styling is typical of a Classical Revival building, with its symmetrical façade and large tetrastyle portico framed by ionic columns. Similar Classical elements including a pediment, quoining and rounded arch windows can be found on the adjoining Presentation School. The convent and school were constructed by locally-renowned architect James Purcell and his partner, builder Patrick Kough. Purcell and Kough worked together on several significant buildings in St. John's, including the nearby St. Bonaventure's College and the Colonial Building. The ceiling of the chapel and drawing room were painted in the early 1880s by Polish convict Alexander Pindikowsky, who also painted the decorative work on the ceilings of Government House and the Colonial Building.

As the Presentation Convent continued to gain new members, an additional wing with more living quarters and a larger chapel was added to the convent in 1916; otherwise the building has remained largely unchanged since its construction. The convent and school were historically connected by footpaths and interior passages to the other buildings that make up the ecclesiastical complex of the Basilica Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Their central location within the ecclesiastical district of St. John's reflects the growing

importance and influence of Catholicism in Irish St. John's during the mid-1800s.

Source: Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador property file "St. John's – Presentation Convent and School – FPT 1707"

## **Character Defining Elements**

All elements that define the buildings' Classical Revival design, including:

- number of stories;
- mid pitch gable roof with two front peaks;
- returned eaves on gable ends of convent;
- eaves brackets;
- decorative quoining;
- stone construction;
- stone foundation;
- symmetrical facade of ashlar stone;
- portico on main facade;
- size, style, trim and placement of large, rectangular windows, and;
- massing, dimensions, orientation and location.

Elements of interior design including:

- decorative ceiling work by Pindikowsky.

All those elements that relate to the environmental value of the convent, including:

- location within the Ecclesiastical District in central St. John's;
- location of the convent in relation to the Presentation School;
- connection of the convent, via interior passages and exterior footpaths, to other buildings that form a Roman Catholic complex centred on the Basilica;
- prominent hilltop location, and;

prominent hilltop location, and  
-visibility from the road.

## Notes

In 1862 Bishop Mullock gave the convent the famous statue “The Veiled Virgin” by Giovanni Strazza.

## LOCATION AND HISTORY

### Community

St. John's

### Municipality

City of St. John's

### Civic Address

180 Military Road

### Construction (circa)

1853 - 1853

### Builder

James Purcell, Patrick Keough

### Style

Irregular

## Statement of Significance



Aerial view of St. John's Ecclesiastical District outlined in red

### **St. John's Ecclesiastical District**

#### **Formal Recognition Type**

City of St. John's Heritage Building, Structure, Land or Area

#### **Description of Historic Place**

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District is a large, linear shaped parcel of land located in the center of St. John's, in the one of the oldest sections of town. This district includes churches, convents, monasteries, schools, fraternal meeting houses and cemeteries and evokes a visual panorama of imposing masonry buildings of varying architectural styles. Within this organically patterned landscape and generous open spaces are some of the province's most important 19th century "mother churches", including representatives from most major denominations prevalent in Newfoundland and Labrador. The buildings vary in size, scale and formality and the district exemplifies its strong educational thrust through the continued uses of many of the buildings for their intended purposes, such as the schools and churches. The district spans an area of more than 61 acres. The natural evolution of the area is evident through its architecture and mature green space and newer buildings included within the district boundaries have been designed to be sympathetic to the styles of the original buildings. The designation is purely commemorative and includes all buildings, lands, landscape features, structures and remains within the boundaries.

#### **Heritage Value**

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District has a strong historic association with religion and education for Newfoundland and Labrador. The collection of ecclesiastical and fraternal buildings, which

comprise the district, represents the pivotal role of the churches in St. John's society in matters spiritual, educational, charitable, political and recreational for more than 175 years. Although many of these historic functions have been taken over by the provincial government, the area continues to contribute strongly to the community through the various schools and the churches whose facilities serve many cultural and social needs and expressions. It is the spiritual center of St. John's and of the founding religions and it is used by many groups and faiths for ongoing cultural and social activities.

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District is also historically valuable because of its associations with the religious leaders who were the overseers of daily operations. In a town whose population was once divided along religious lines, individual buildings and clusters thereof are associated with personalities who sat in the seats of religious power and the people who found themselves under their guidance. The denominational clusters of buildings serve to emphasize both the differences and similarities of each religious group at the same time. The buildings remain as imposing, lasting reminders of the institutions responsible for their construction and the contribution of these religious institutions to the community, both positive and negative.

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District achieves aesthetic value through the formal styles, scales and placements of buildings, landscape features and structures, which show the roles and dominance of religion in the history and development of the capital city. The overall visual impact of the area is achieved through the uses of varying materials, architectural styles, open spaces and statuary whereas today areas like the Ecclesiastical District are no longer being built. Where religion played a crucial and fundamental role in developing the community, these buildings stand as physical testaments to this influence. Also aesthetically valuable is the use of natural, enduring materials which dominate the district landscape. The buildings, constructed in stone and brick, reach skyward with their spires and towers, yet remain solidly firm on their well-built foundations. The varied ornamentations, statuary, grave markers, monuments and fencing, paired with the mature trees and generous use of green space, all combine in a cohesive and organic manner.

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District achieves environmental value in several ways. The district is a visual landmark for fishermen. Situated on upwards-sloping land the brick and granite buildings rise above the harbour, marking the way for fishermen returning from the fishing grounds as they enter St. John's harbour. This visual landmark continues to be used to this day, and the views of the district from the harbour, as well as the views of the harbour from the district are considered valuable to the community. Other environmental values include the footpaths, the close proximity of the buildings to each other and the back alleyways reminiscent of 19th century St. John's; a trend that doesn't exist in newer parts of the city. The area was intentionally picked by early church leaders to emphasize the dominant position of the churches. The big stone churches held the leaders of society who, in their infinite wisdom, could peer down on the masses of common folk and pass down their laws and rules. The physical location of the church buildings deliberately forced the less-enlightened to look up to the church: a literal reaction to a figurative idea.

### **Character Defining Elements**

All those elements that relate to the variety and the uses of formal architectural styles and designs often typical of each denomination, including but not limited to:

- Gothic Revival, Classic, Romanesque, Second Empire and Georgian masonry buildings; -high quality of craftsmanship;
- the uses of architectural features typically found on specific architectural styles such as arched window and door openings on the Gothic Revival Anglican Cathedral and the Latin cross layout of the Romanesque Catholic Basilica;
- use of symbols and inscribed identifications such as those found on the BIS (Benevolent Irish Society) building in the forms of carved stonework and statuary on the exterior façade of the building;
- decorative elements which reflect the grandness of the buildings, including stained glass windows, towers, spires, belfries, the Basilica Arch and grand entryways with generous open green space;
- dominating nature of spires in an area where they stand out among primarily low buildings; and
- various roof shapes, windows and door openings, massing, size and orientation.

All those elements that relate to the predominant use of high quality, durable materials, and to the variety of these materials, including:

- use of locally quarried granite and bluestone incorporated into masonry buildings;
- use of imported stone incorporated into masonry buildings; and
- use of slate and other durable materials.

All those elements that relate to the physical location of the district, including:

- prominent location on a hill/ slope making it visible and symbolic;
- existing major views to and from the district;
- informal organic layout and the ability to read the natural land use patterns and circulation routes;
- relationship of major religious institutional buildings to their immediate setting and surroundings; and
- interrelationship of buildings and denominational clusters, such as the Roman Catholic cluster of its convent, monastery, church and school.

All unique and special elements that define the district's long and religious/educational history, including:

- formal landscape elements such as walls, fencing, statuary, grave markers, Basilica Arch and monuments;
- the interrelationship between buildings, such as the nearness of the Presentation Convent, the Basilica, the Monastery and St. Bon's School, and the ability to access each by footpaths marked out for more than 175 years, and through back doors and alleyways;
- non-formal and traditional treed footpaths and monuments, including unmarked trails through cemeteries; and
- openness of landscape;



All those elements that reflect the continuing uses of the district, including:

- religious, educational and community uses for cultural purposes.

### Location and History

Community	St. John's
Municipality	City of St. John's
Construction (circa)	1826 - 1923
Style	Other
Website Link	<a href="http://www.stjohns.ca/index.jsp">http://www.stjohns.ca/index.jsp</a>

### Additional Photos





PRELIMINARY DRAFT



Presentation Sisters Convent  
Renovation Project



**PRELIMINARY DRAFT**



Presentation Sisters Convent  
Renovation Project

The Motherhouse Courtyard  
Proposed Renovation



**PRELIMINARY DRAFT**



Presentation Sisters Convent  
Renovation Project