
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-14

St. Joseph's Seminary
1200 Varnum Street NE
Square 3917 Lot 886

Meeting Date: May 26, 2022
Applicant: The Josephites
Affected ANC: 5A

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate St. Joseph's Seminary at 1200 Varnum Street NE a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and recommends that the nomination, with revisions, be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance under National Register Criteria A (history) and C (architecture). The period of significance extends from 1929, the completion of the main block of the seminary building to 1958, the date of construction of the chapel wing.

Architectural and Historical Background

St. Joseph's Seminary is a large and handsome, four-story, red brick Colonial Revival/Renaissance Revival-style building that was constructed by and for the Society of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart and dedicated in 1930. Established in America in 1893, the Society is an interracial, intercultural community of Catholic priests and brothers committed to serving the African American community. It traces its American roots to the post-Civil War era when, in 1871, the Saint Joseph Society for Foreign Missions in Mill Hill, London, England established a mission in Baltimore, MD devoted to providing schools and missions for freed persons. The missionaries, who became known as Josephites, studied in England and then traveled to the United States, setting up parishes and schools around the country. In 1893, Cardinal James Gibbons of the Archdiocese of Baltimore offered to accept the Josephites as an independent American organization, known as the St. Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart. Over time, the mission broadened its services, staffing schools, parishes, and special ministries throughout the country, including several D.C. churches and church schools. In 1929, the Josephites, still headquartered in Baltimore, completed construction of a seminary in Washington, D.C. near Catholic University. In its first few years, students at the seminary attended classes at Catholic University, but soon the seminary established its own faculties of philosophy and theology and ultimately provided a four-year collegiate-level education and advanced studies that led to ordination to the priesthood of the Society of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. The seminary closed for academic studies in 1971, but continues to house Josephite seminarians during the school year, as well as retired Josephite and other priests and unaffiliated renters.

To construct its seminary building, the Josephites selected an approximately five-acre site in Brookland, once part of a larger, 60-acre farm, near Catholic University. Upon completion of the building, the seminary joined other Catholic institutions and Orders that had already built their

own colleges and associated institutions in the vicinity to take advantage of the educational and support services of the University. Like St. Joseph's, most of the institutions occupied extensive, multi-acre parcels that were historically part of working farms or estates. The existence of these institutions on those large parcels limited full implementation of the 1893 Permanent Highway Plan—the established street plan for the District beyond the original city limits. This resulted in unique development patterns in the area and helped to preserve a sense of the earlier, rural nature of the area. In recent years, many of these institutions have subdivided their large parcels for partial development as has St. Joseph's Seminary. Still St. Joseph's and others continue to occupy some of the largest remaining tracts of land in the city, and together and individually contribute profoundly to the distinctive character of the Brookland neighborhood.

St. Joseph's Seminary, a four-story U-shaped brick building, offers a commanding presence at the top of a hill on the 1200 block of Varnum Street NE. The building faces south to Varnum Street with a drive running in front of it and connecting the property to 12th Street NE on the west and Sargent Road (13th Street) on the east. From the height of the hill, the seminary overlooks a grassy hillside sloping south. Several large and notable mature trees on this south slope and a copse of trees lining the west side of the property along 12th Street NE, provide an abundance of shade and a tranquil setting. Several sculptural elements, such as statuary and a bell, are judiciously placed between the seminary building and Varnum Street. At the north end of the site, the wings of the U-shaped building enclose an open court, which, until recently, opened to a flat and grassy field area. The Josephites sold this north section of its property and a townhouse development is nearing completion on the site.

The seminary building was designed by Maginnis & Walsh, a Boston-based architecture firm that was widely known and respected for its many Catholic institutional buildings across the United States. The firm had made a name for itself in 1909 when it designed the Collegiate Gothic Gasson Hall at Boston College in Chestnut Hill. The building, with its soaring central tower, earned the firm great professional and public acclaim and inspired the erection of a host of other Gothic Revival-style tower buildings on university campuses like that at Princeton (Cleveland Tower, 1913); Yale (Harkness Tower, 1917); the University of Pittsburgh (Cathedral of Learning, 1926); Duke (Chapel, 1930); and Sewanee (All Saints' Chapel, 1950). At least ten of the firm's buildings can be found in D.C., not the least of which is the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception at 400 Michigan Avenue, built in 1922.

Although the firm regularly designed buildings in the Gothic Revival style and inspired the style's use by other architects, it was adept at designing buildings in other styles. In D.C., the firm's work runs the gamut from Gothic Revival (the Theological College at 401 Michigan Avenue NE, 1917 and Blessed Sacrament Church at 5841 Chevy Chase Parkway, 1933); to Byzantine Revival (the National Shrine, 1922; and the Notre Dame Chapel at Trinity College, 1921); to Renaissance Revival (Holy Rosary Church at 595 3rd Street NW, 1919), to the stately Colonial Revival/Renaissance Revival-style St. Joseph's Seminary building, 1929. The firm's buildings are not characterized by style, but rather by their superior design and craftsmanship no matter the style.

Evaluation

St. Joseph's Seminary meets DC Designation Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism), E (Artistry) and F (Creative Masters) and National Register Criteria A and C. The application argues that the property meets DC Designation Criterion B as one of many Catholic institutions that established itself in Brookland near Catholic University, and for contributing to the distinctive pattern of development in the neighborhood. The Catholic enclave near the University contributed to and helped define the historical and visual character of Brookland that persists today. Staff concurs with this, but would like to see the nomination enhanced by a better description and historical analysis of the site. Such revisions would provide some background on the 19th century rural history of the land, highlight surviving landscape features, and identify the sculptural elements on the property that are associated with St. Joseph's Seminary.

The application argues that the seminary building is significant for its architecture as an important work of Maginnis & Walsh, the leading Catholic architects of the era, and as an exceptional and commanding example of Colonial Revival-style institutional design. The National Register recognizes the architecture firm of Maginnis & Walsh as a Master Architect and has many buildings from several different states listed for their association with the firm. St. Joseph's Seminary should be included, as well, as it qualifies as an excellent example of the firm's work in D.C., even if it is somewhat overshadowed by the architecturally striking and neighboring National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, also by Maginnis & Walsh (eminently eligible, but not designated). Indeed, staff believes that all ten of the firm's D.C. buildings would qualify for designation.

On another architectural note, the application describes the chapel wing summarily as a product of a second phase of construction, dating to 1958, but it is not entirely clear what constitutes the chapel wing, nor who may have designed it. The 1929 plans anticipated a later chapel addition that may or may not have been designed by Maginnis & Walsh. Staff recommends that the nomination be enhanced so that there is more clarity on the chronology and architectural history of the chapel wing.

In addition to being the work of a master, the application finds that the building qualifies under architecture as an excellent example of the Colonial Revival style. Staff does not believe that the application provides enough of an analysis to make this case either in providing adequate background on the style or in comparing the building to other institutional buildings in the city that are reflective of the style. Also, the building has enough elements, namely the central tower and carved stonework in the central entry bay, that reflect a Renaissance Revival/Baroque Revival style making the argument for it being a good example of Colonial Revival style less compelling. For those reasons, staff recommends that the National Register nomination be revised to simply focus on the significance of the building as the work of Maginnis & Walsh, known for their quality of design and stylistic eclecticism. A discussion of the building's style can be made as part of the analysis of the firm's work.



Period of Significance

The Period of Significance extends from 1929 to 1958 from the date of construction of the seminary building to completion of the chapel wing.

Boundaries

The boundaries comprise Lot 886 in Square 3917 and consist of a four-acre parcel of land. Lot 866 was historically part of a larger tract that was subdivided for residential development north of the seminary building. Although the new development closely abuts the seminary building to the north, the building and its hilltop setting oriented to the south, along with its gracious lawn and mature trees remain intact.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board approve the application for St. Joseph's Seminary and that the nomination, with revisions, be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.