

St. Stephen's Church  
1025 Napoleon Avenue

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: 1871-1888, Steeple, 1905-06  
Architect: Thomas W. Carter, Steeple by Favrdt & Livaudais

Nomination Information

Date: April 19, 1979  
Nominated by: William Pitts  
Secoded by : Anthony Bultman, Jane Ferguson

Recommended by : Bouligny Improvement Association

Site Description

Square 262, No lot subdivision  
6th M.D., 14th A.D.  
Zoning RM-2  
Lot Size: 320' x 300'

Owner: The Congregation of the Mission

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural significance, the fact that it was designed by an important architect, and its importance to the social, economic and cultural history of New Orleans. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 MGS, will be examined on an individual basis in order to produce information upon which a final decision will be made whether or not to designate the property.

Architectural Significance

According to records in the Office of Conveyance, the land upon which this church stands was acquired by the Congregation of the Mission in January of 1848.<sup>1</sup> Members of the Vincentian Order had been directed by Archbishop Blanc to found a mission church in what was then part of Jefferson City.<sup>2</sup> The present church is the result of the efforts of Father Anthony Verrina, the third pastor of St. Stephens, to build a church large enough to meet the needs of the growing parish. His appeal was evidently well received and by the late 1850's over \$25,000 had been raised.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas W. Carter was hired as the architect for the new church, and Thomas O'Neil served as the builder.<sup>4</sup> The cornerstone of the church was laid in an elaborate ceremony on November 20, 1871, with Archbishop Perche of New Orleans and Bishop Quinlan of Mobile officiating.<sup>5</sup> Construction took 16 years, and the first mass was celebrated on the feast of St. Stephen, December 26, 1887. The church was dedicated on January 1, 1888.<sup>6</sup> No reference was made to the cost of the completed church.

St. Stephen's is the second largest church in New Orleans after St. Joseph's on Tulane Avenue. It is the largest Gothic Revival church in the City and perhaps the entire state. St. Stephen's measures 216 feet in length and is 110 feet wide at the transepts, and has a seating capacity of approximately 2,000 persons.<sup>7</sup> The design of the church is derived in part from Minden Cathedral in Germany. The unusual roof design, composed of six gables which intersect the central gable roof which runs down the length of the church. The lack of characteristic clerestory above the nave found on most Gothic style churches is due to the use of the German "hallenkirche" plan. A hall church features a nave and side aisles of equal height. St. Mary's Assumption is another example of this church type, although smaller than St. Stephen's.

The Napoleon Avenue facade is dominated by the great hexagonal tower, open at the base to form an entrance porch. Between the great buttresses that support the tower are four pointed arches rising from multiple pilasters. These entrance arches are of sandstone, which provides a handsome contrast to the deep red-brown of the brickwork of the church. Above each of these arched openings is a niche which is enframed by a highly decorate gable, the trim of which is also sandstone. Special attention should be given to the gargoyles set at the base of each side of these gables. Such frivolous details are not common on local churches. The second stage of the tower features larged pointed arched windows with the stained glass set into fine Geometric tracery. These windows illuminate the organ loft inside the church. A clock stage, with four clock faces, is the next step up the tower. The open belfry and the towering duodecagonal or 24 sided spire were designed by Favrot and Livadais and erected in 1905-06.<sup>8</sup> The spire itself is a steel frame clad in terra-cotta tiles. The tower spire and the cross which surmounts them are over 200 feet tall, making this the tallest church spire in New Orleans. The two bays of the facade which flank the tower feature a small rose window set into a circle of yellow bricks. The entire bay is framed by a blind arch detailed by two concentric lines of yellow brick.

The side elevations are divided into seven bays by the buttresses which support the walls. Two simple but substantial brick string courses divide the walls horizontally. The bay closest to the facade is the narrowest, and is topped by a small hipped roof. The second bay includes the side entrances to the church, composed of a series of receding pointed arches with supporting pilasters. The detailing of these side entrances is executed in sandstone. The upper section of this bay as well as the next four is occupied by a group of three lancet windows, the center window being taller than those which flank it. These windows are filled with stained glass. The lower sections of the third, fourth, and fifth bays features a single lancet window, the stained glass of which moves on a center pivot.

The rearmost bay is the widest of the seven, and forms the transepts of the church. This bay is dominated by a large rose window of stained glass set in wheel tracery. The great mass of this tracery is characteristic of 1870's and 80's Gothic Revival churches, in which tracery design for rose windows became less decorative and more overpowering in scale and design. The rear elevation of the church is formed by the semi-circular ~~apse~~ which houses the altar. The apse is flanked by the vestry and sacristy to form a handsome tripartite composition. The only alteration that has been made to the church since its dedication are the recently installed entry doors set in an aluminum frame. While not in keeping with the quality of the overall church design, they should not be considered an irrevocable change.

#### Architect

Thomas W. Carter, the architect for the church, was born in London, England and immigrated to the United States in 1869. He evidently arrived in New Orleans in 1870, for he entered the competition for the design of Temple Sinai, which was won by Charles Lewis Hillger. In addition to St. Stephen's Church, Carter's other New Orleans work include the handsome Italianate style commercial building at 200 Magazine built in 1881, and the brick wings of the Fink Asylum. His largest work after St. Stephen's is the Ascension Catholic Church in Donaldsonville, Louisiana.<sup>10</sup>

Favrot and Livadais, architects for the open stage of the hexagonal tower and the surmounting steeple, were among the most active firms in New Orleans during the first quarter of the 20th century. The firms best known work is the main office of the Hibernia National Bank at 313 Carondelet built in 1920-21. They also designed the monumental Richardsonian Romanesque style house at 4717 St. Charles Avenue for W. Perry Brown in 1902.

Historic Personages

The congregation of St. Stephen's has been ably served by its pastors through the years. Several of the pastors served for a decade or longer. In terms of the construction of the present church, Father Anthony Verrina, C.M. should be singled out for special credit. Father Verrina initiated the drive to build the church, and in his second term as pastor, saw the church completed and dedicated.<sup>11</sup>

Social, Economic & Cultural History

The origins of St. Stephen's Church can be traced back to 1849, when the Vincentian Brothers purchased a square of ground in East Boulligny, then a part of Jefferson City, and erected a small frame chapel at the corner of Napoleon and Camp. The first mass was celebrated on January 1, 1860. The congregation grew rapidly and on June 8, 1861 mass was first celebrated in a larger chapel which adjoined the first structure. By the end of the 1860's the need to build an even larger church was recognized and Father Anthony Verrina, Pastor of St. Stephen's initiated a fund raising campaign for its construction. By 1871, when the cornerstone was laid, Jefferson City had been annexed to New Orleans as the Sixth District, which a population of more than 20,000 people, surely justifying the erection of a much larger building to accommodate an expanding congregation. St. Stephen's was built to serve a large parish, and was not associated with any one particular ethnic group, as was the case with many earlier Catholic churches in New Orleans. Begun as a mission church, St. Stephen's has grown over the years and is now the second largest Catholic Church in <sup>12</sup>New Orleans, continuing to serve the needs of its parish and congregation.

Footnotes

1. Conveyance Book 15, Folio 425
2. Roger Baudier. The Catholic Church in Louisiana. New Orleans, 1939
3. The Daily Picayune, November 12, 1899.
4. The Daily Picayune, November 21, 1871.
5. Ibid.
6. The Daily Picayune, January 2, 1888.
7. Ibid.
8. The Daily Picayune, December 31, 1906.
9. Jubilate Deo: A Centennial History of the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission. New Orleans, 1949.
10. Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Louisiana. Chicago, 1892.
11. Jubilate Deo
12. The Catholic Church in Louisiana