

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY  
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DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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

1 NAME

HISTORIC  
St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church, Convent, Rectory and School  
AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER  
251 Oxford Street  
CITY, TOWN  
Providence  
STATE  
Rhode Island  
VICINITY OF  
2 Rep. Edward Beard  
COUNTY  
Providence  
CODE  
44  
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT  
007

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC ACQUISITION	<input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
			<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
			<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME  
Roman Catholic Bishop of Providence / Talbot House, Inc.  
STREET & NUMBER  
1 Cathedral Square  
CITY, TOWN  
Providence  
VICINITY OF  
422 Pine Street  
STATE  
Rhode Island  
02903/ 02907

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.  
Providence City Hall  
STREET & NUMBER  
Dorrance & Washington Streets  
CITY, TOWN  
Providence  
STATE  
Rhode Island  
02903

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE  
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission  
DATE  
July 1975  
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS  
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Comm. 150 Benefit St.  
CITY, TOWN  
Providence, Rhode Island  
STATE  
02903

# DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

St. Michael's Catholic Church near the corner of Prairie Avenue and Oxford Street is the focal point of an architecturally harmonious group of buildings housing the various activities of the Catholic parish in South Providence. Flanking the Church on large landscaped sites, the convent, the school, and the rectory form a unified complex.

Saint Michael's Church, the heart of the complex, was completed in 1915 following the designs of architects Martin and Hall of Providence after a construction period spanning almost 25 years. The church is an Anglo-Norman Gothic style structure set on a raised basement executed in red brick with extensive red sandstone trim and a red slate roof. It is basilican in plan with a two-story gable-roofed, clerestory-lit nave extending back from a massive entrance tower flanked by one-story shed-roofed side aisles.

The principal elevation on Oxford Street is dominated by a forty-foot-square castellated tower with a large louvered belfry. The buttress-flanked entrance in the base of the tower is reached by terraced flights of red sandstone steps lit by lamp standards on sandstone piers. The main portal, sympathetically enlarged to the height of the haunch in 1930 from the original tripartite entrance motif, is the only exterior feature that has been altered from the original design. Over the entrance is a large traceried stained glass window.

The square-ended nave is six bays long and terminates in a traceried stained glass window identical to that of the tower. The one-story side aisles are buttressed and have elaborate flat-headed Gothic fenestration with sandstone hood moulds, architraves, and tracery. In the fifth bay of each aisle is a finely-carved gable-roofed sandstone traceried porch sheltering the aisle portals. The tall clerestory in the nave contains six arched and traceried stained glass windows with sandstone surrounds and hood-moulds.

The interior of the church follows the narthex, nave, side aisle, chancel, and sacristy plan of a medieval Anglo-Norman parish church, and was designed by Murphy, Hindle, and Wright, a well-known Providence firm with an extensive practice designing Catholic churches in the early twentieth century. The main entrance doors lead to the marble-walled narthex in the base of the tower. To the left of the entrance, beyond a pair of bronze grille doors, is the baptistry. The baptistry walls are sheathed in richly figured Siena marble to a height of 14 feet, with plaster above. The principal feature of the room, the baptismal font, is covered by an intricately carved marble miniature replica of a Gothic lantern, suspended by chains from an iron wall bracket so that it can be swung into place over the basin when the font is not in use. The window depicts the Baptism of Christ. To the right of the narthex are the stairs to the organ loft on the second level of the tower.

(See continuation sheet #1)

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Two pairs of linenfold-carved oak doors with diamond-quarreled stained-glass transoms in carved oak traceried frames, provide access from the narthex to the nave. The 2-story nave is separated from one-story side aisles by an arcade of massive marble-sheathed columns supporting the clerestory wall. The side aisles are finished with marble wainscoting to the height of the window sills. At the northern end of each aisle is a niche containing a side altar made of Siena marble, inlaid with religious symbols in mosaic and mother-of-pearl, and backed by a low, crested, crocketed, and pinnacled yellow marble reredos surmounted by a statue of the saint to whom the altar is dedicated. The ceilings of both the nave and side aisles are matched-board natural cypress vaults with decorated and gilded wood ribs and bosses.

The organ gallery over the narthex is open to the nave and is faced with a low, carved oak parapet railing, inset with wood statues of Saint Michael and Saint Bernard. The huge stained-glass tower window in the organ gallery was fashioned by the John Hardman Company of London, as were all of the other stained-glass windows in the church, and depicts scenes from the lives of the Saints.

At the opposite end of the nave from the organ gallery is the sanctuary, which is sheathed in marble to a height of 14 feet. Above this marble the plaster walls are decorated with a running vine motif executed in Venetian glass mosaic encircling saintly figures on either side of the huge east window, which depicts the Crucifixion. The focal point of the sanctuary is the Siena marble reredos in front of the north window, with elaborately carved Gothic motifs of cresting, crockets, and pinnacles niched for statuary. The high altar, of grey Siena marble inlaid with Venetian glass mosaics and mother-of-pearl, has a recessed sculptured frontal piece depicting the Last Supper. The raised sanctuary is bounded by a low, pierced, Italian marble wall inlaid with bronze crosses in the flat top rail. As a result of changes in Catholic liturgical practice, a simple marble-slab altar table was placed in front of the high altar in the 1960's. In front of the sanctuary, abutting a column of the arcade on the left side of the nave, is the octagonal grey marble goblet pulpit.

The painted decorations of the church include extensive geometric wall stencilling in the nave and sanctuary. The soffits of the arcade are richly painted with symbolic motifs, while murals depicting the

(See continuation sheet #2)

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lives of the saints are contained in the triforium panels. The original Gothic-style lantern lighting fixtures of hand-wrought Swedish metal and antique brass are still in use in the aisle arches, but have been supplemented by unobtrusive modern spot lights installed in 1958.

Few changes have been made in the interior of St. Michael's since its completion in 1915. The original Grueby tile aisle floors were replaced with new mosaic tile floors around 1940 when the entire church was repaved with a cement composition. In 1939 eleven new bells were installed in the tower. In 1958 the unornamented interior wall surfaces of the church were repainted in softer, lighter colors to improve the chronically poor lighting situation, but most of the wall surfaces with original painted decoration and stencilling were not touched. The original oak pews are in excellent condition.

The Rectory, to the east of the church, was designed by Ambrose Murphy in 1924-25 to house the parish offices and the priests' residence. It is a functional, red brick, three-story flank-gable symmetrical structure designed without reference to any particular architectural style. A slightly projecting one-story entrance pavillion in a vaguely classical motif and open side loggias, now partially enclosed, are the principal architectural features of the exterior. The interior is composed of simply finished residential-scale rooms arranged along both sides of a long transverse corridor. The principal rooms on the first floor, notably the dining room, are trimmed with natural oak woodwork and dadoes.

The convent to the west of the church, also designed by Ambrose Murphy, is a 3½-story crossgabled red brick and sandstone structure with Tudor detailing constructed in 1929. A large plain brick two-story addition was added to the Oxford Street elevation in 1957. The principal architectural features of this complicated and picturesque "U" shaped structure are the carved sandstone oriel windows, the Gothic exterior door architraves, the brick and sandstone side portico, and the ornamental carved sandstone panels inset in the gables. The convent has a green terra cotta tile roof and contains a series of simply-finished residential scale rooms. The convent has been occupied since 1975 by Talbot House, Inc., an alcoholic rehabilitation center.

(See continuation sheet #3)

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Immediately behind the convent facing Gordon Avenue is the 1925 parish school. A two-story red brick building set on a raised basement and capped with a parapet and flat roof, the school lacks exterior ornamentation. The principal feature of the "U"-shaped building is the projecting one-story central entrance vestibule. The interior contains 16 classrooms, a nurse's room, and a principal's office on the two main floors, with a cafeteria and several additional classrooms in the basement.

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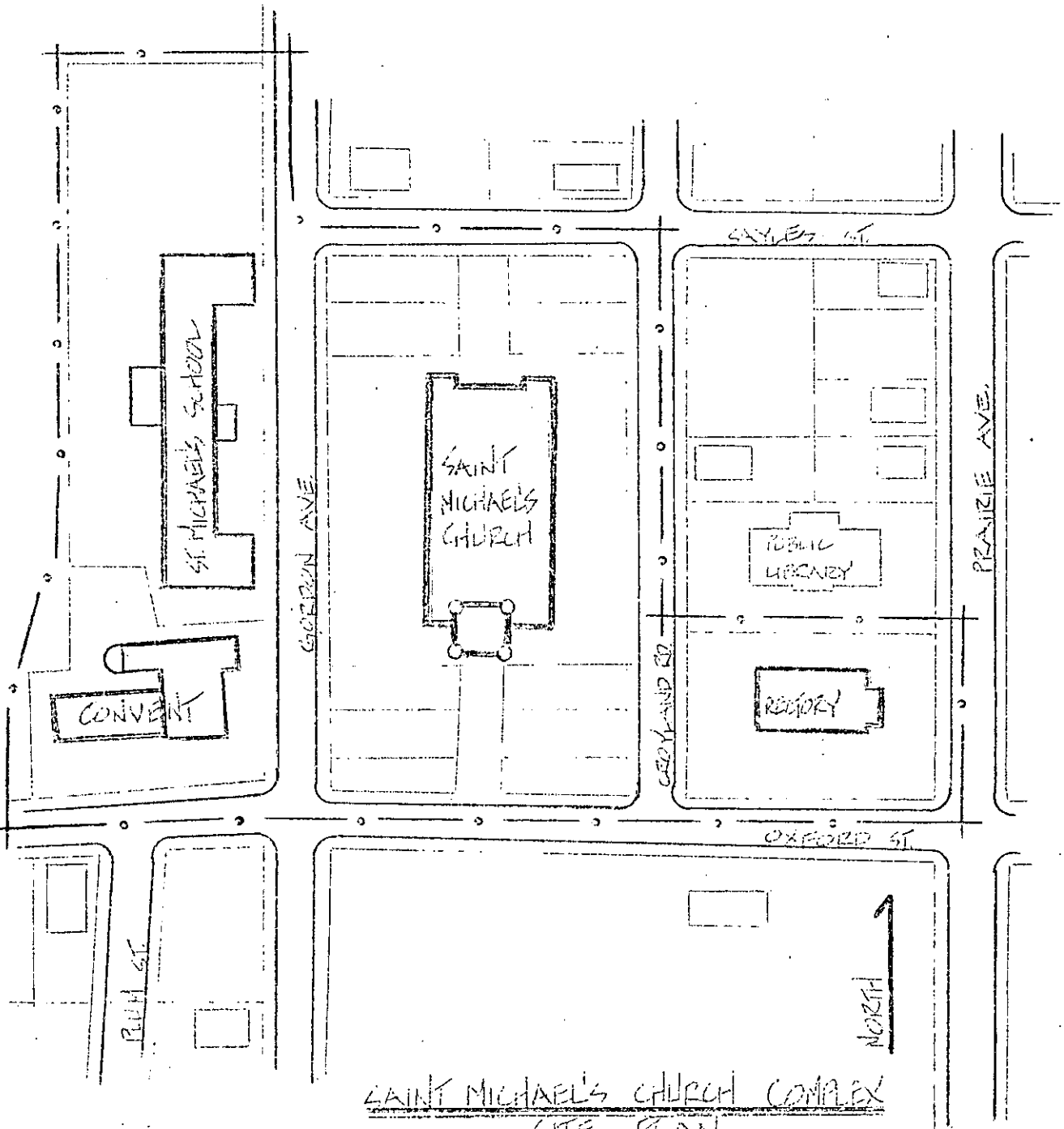
CONTINUATION SHEET

4

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5



SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH COMPLEX  
SITE PLAN  
NO SCALE

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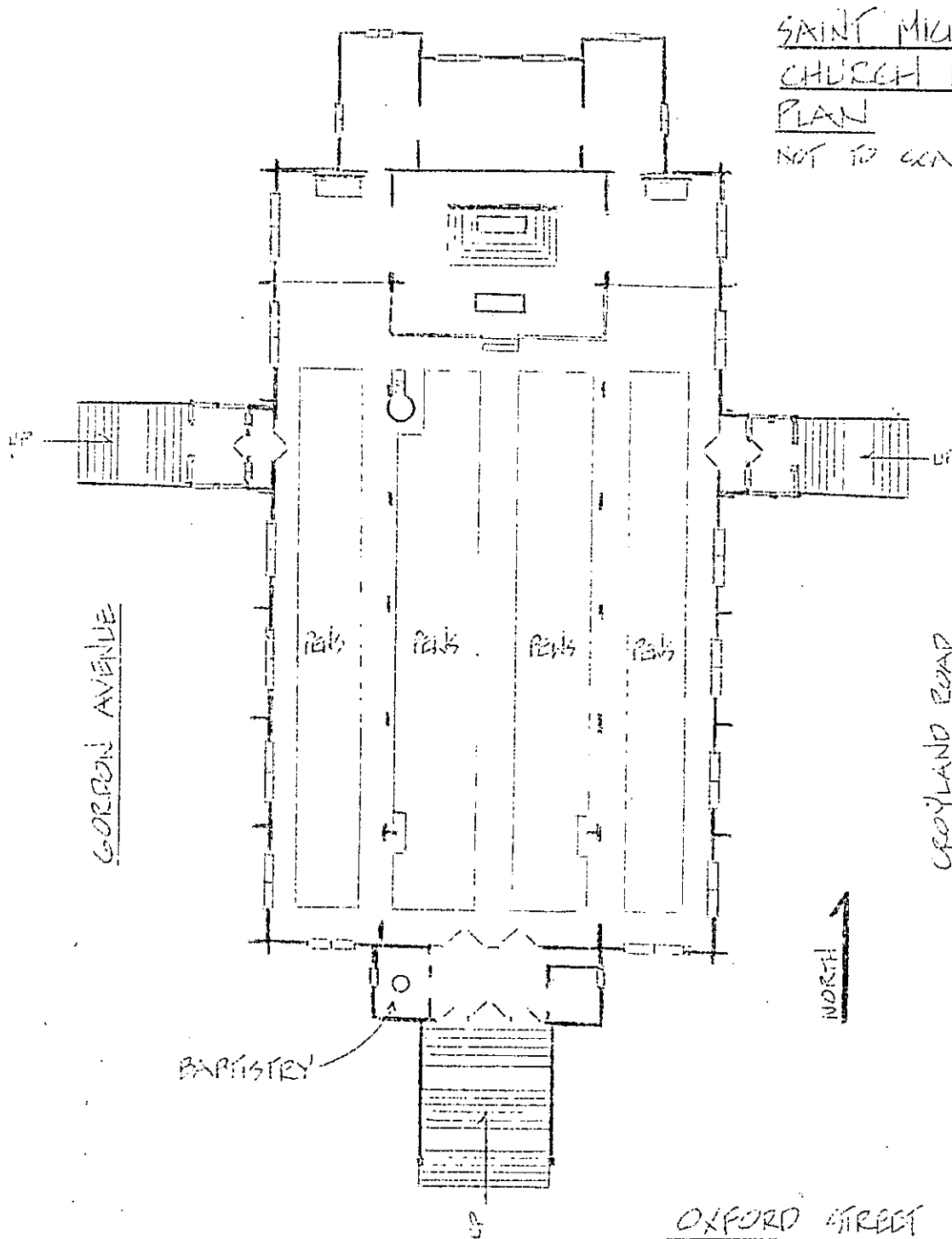
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in the Victorian Gothic style by Providence architect James Murphy, and dedicated to St. Michael in November of 1868. This church was constructed adjacent to the older wooden church near the southwest corner of Prairie Avenue and Oxford Street; both of these buildings have since been razed.

From the time of the founding of the congregation until the early twentieth century, the Irish population of the neighborhood steadily increased in size until almost the entire South Providence area was Irish. St. Michael's during these years became the center of social and political life in Providence's largest Irish Catholic neighborhood.

In 1891 a larger site was acquired between Croyland Road and Gordon Avenue on Oxford Street and shortly thereafter construction was begun on the present church. The lower church, the basement of the present structure, was completed and occupied in 1906. In 1915 the entire church was dedicated. The completed Saint Michael's was one of the chief architectural monuments of the Irish community in Providence and represents twenty-four years of striving and sacrifice on the part of the primarily working class immigrant congregation at the turn of the century.

The continued prominence of St. Michael's as the center of community life in Providence's most prosperous and populous Irish neighborhood in the first three decades of the twentieth century was manifested in the construction of a complex of new auxiliary buildings around the church including the present rectory built in 1925, replacing an 1877 building, the sixteen-room school also built in 1925, and the convent completed in 1929. In addition to these structures, the original church property across the street on Prairie Avenue included a parish recreation hall, housed in the remodeled 1868 church building that burned in 1969, and the adjacent 1861 St. Aloysius Orphan's Asylum, razed in the 1960's. That this large and varied complex of Catholic institutional buildings was the recognized focus of community life in South Providence up through the 1920's was manifested by the siting of the new public branch library immediately adjacent to the rectory in 1930.

St. Michael's was the most populous Catholic parish in New England up through the 1950's and St. Michael's school had grown into the largest Catholic school in the diocese of Providence by 1959. Although changes in the ethnic composition of the neighborhood since the 1950's

(See continuation sheet #7)



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have diminished the Irish Catholic congregation of St. Michael's significantly, the recent migration into the area of a sizeable Spanish-speaking Catholic population has revived the parish's historic role as the center of community life in South Providence.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1891-1915; 1925, 1929 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Martin & Hall; Ambrose Murphy  
Murphy, Hindle & Wright, Archts.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The St. Michael's Church complex is of both architectural and historical importance to the city of Providence. The convent, school and rectory form a harmonious English Gothic style ecclesiastical grouping centering on the massive Anglo-Norman church, which is the principal architectural monument in the neighborhood.

The architects for the church exterior, Martin and Hall of Providence, were a prominent local firm with a large practice in institutional and commercial structures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among their works are the Natural History Museum in Roger Williams Park, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, St. Xavier's Convent on Broad Street, and the State Normal School on Smith Hill. St. Michael's is the finest known church design by the firm in the Gothic Revival style.

The excellence of the workmanship and the richness of the materials make St. Michael's highly original Anglo-Gothic interior one of the finest in Providence. The architects for the interior, Murphy, Hindle, and Wright, were talented designers who executed many Catholic churches in the Providence area, including St. Ann's on Branch Avenue and Holy Ghost on Knight Street. The somber Anglo-Gothic design of St. Michael's is unique in the firm's work, which is more typically characterized by a rather florid, polychromed, North Italian Renaissance style of decoration. The rectory, the school, and the convent form a complementary setting for the church, and echo its red sandstone and brick materials. The complex is a landmark in the South Side of Providence, widely visible from the major approaches to the city, and its spacious landscaped site provides a pleasantly green space in a densely built-up neighborhood of primarily 2 and 3 family wooden tenement houses.

The St. Michael's Catholic Church complex has historic significance as the traditional center of Catholic community life in South Providence. The congregation of St. Michael's was founded in 1857 as the Mission Church of St. Bernard to serve the growing Irish immigrant community in the area. For ten years the congregation met in a wooden Greek Revival style former Baptist church acquired in 1857. In 1867 construction was begun on a new building, a brick structure designed

(See continuation sheet #6)

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Cady, John Hutchins, The Civic & Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, R. I., 1957).  
One Hundred Years, St. Michael's Parish, (Prov. R. I., 1959).  
 Providence Journal; 10-2-15; 3-2-19; 1-5-69.  
 Diocese of Providence, Archives, Cathedral Square, Providence, R.I.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approx. 2 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,9	29,9	3,6,0	4,6	3,0	4,3,0	B	1,9	29,9	3,8,0	4,6	3,0	3,9,0
	ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING			ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING			
c	1,9	29,9	4,4,0	4,6	3,0	4,0,0	D	1,9	29,9	4,6,0	4,6	30	3,3,0

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

E 19 299280 4630220 F 19 299220 4630400

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Leslie J. Vollmert

ORGANIZATION

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

DATE

Aug. 26, 1976

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

401-277-2678

CITY OR TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

## 12 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

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE 11/10/76

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER



**ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH COMPLEX  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND**

A	19	299360	4630430
B	19	299380	4630390
C	19	299440	4630400
D	19	299460	4630330
E	19	299280	4630220
F	19	299220	4630400

**St Michael's**

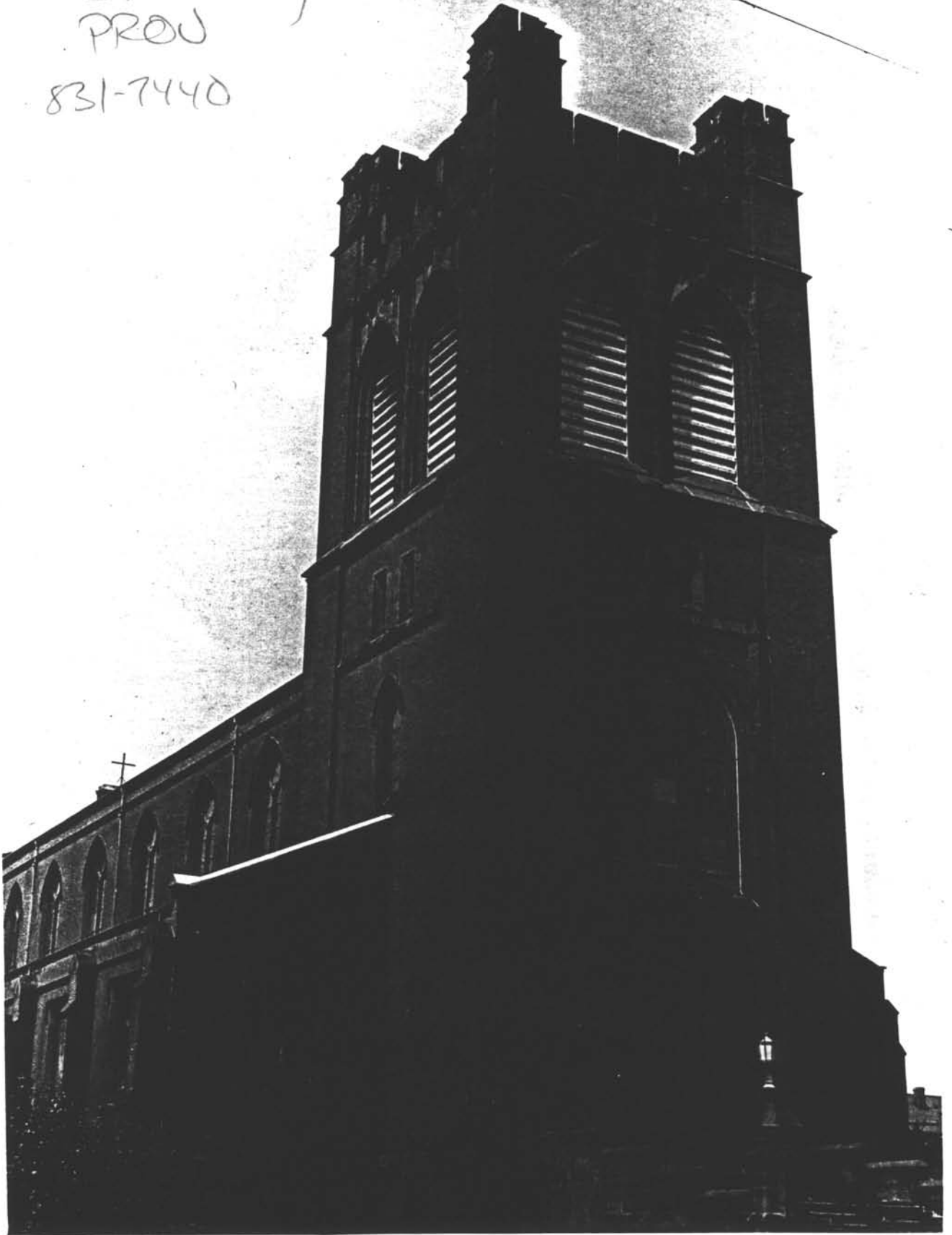
Borrowed by ANR - 9/16/92

PPS

21 Meeting St

PROU

831-7440





Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Leslie J. Vollmert.

Date: July, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the South Elevation of St. Michael's.

Photo #: 1







Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Beth Cohen

Date: August, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the nave looking north.

Photo #: 2



Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex.

Providence, Rhode Island

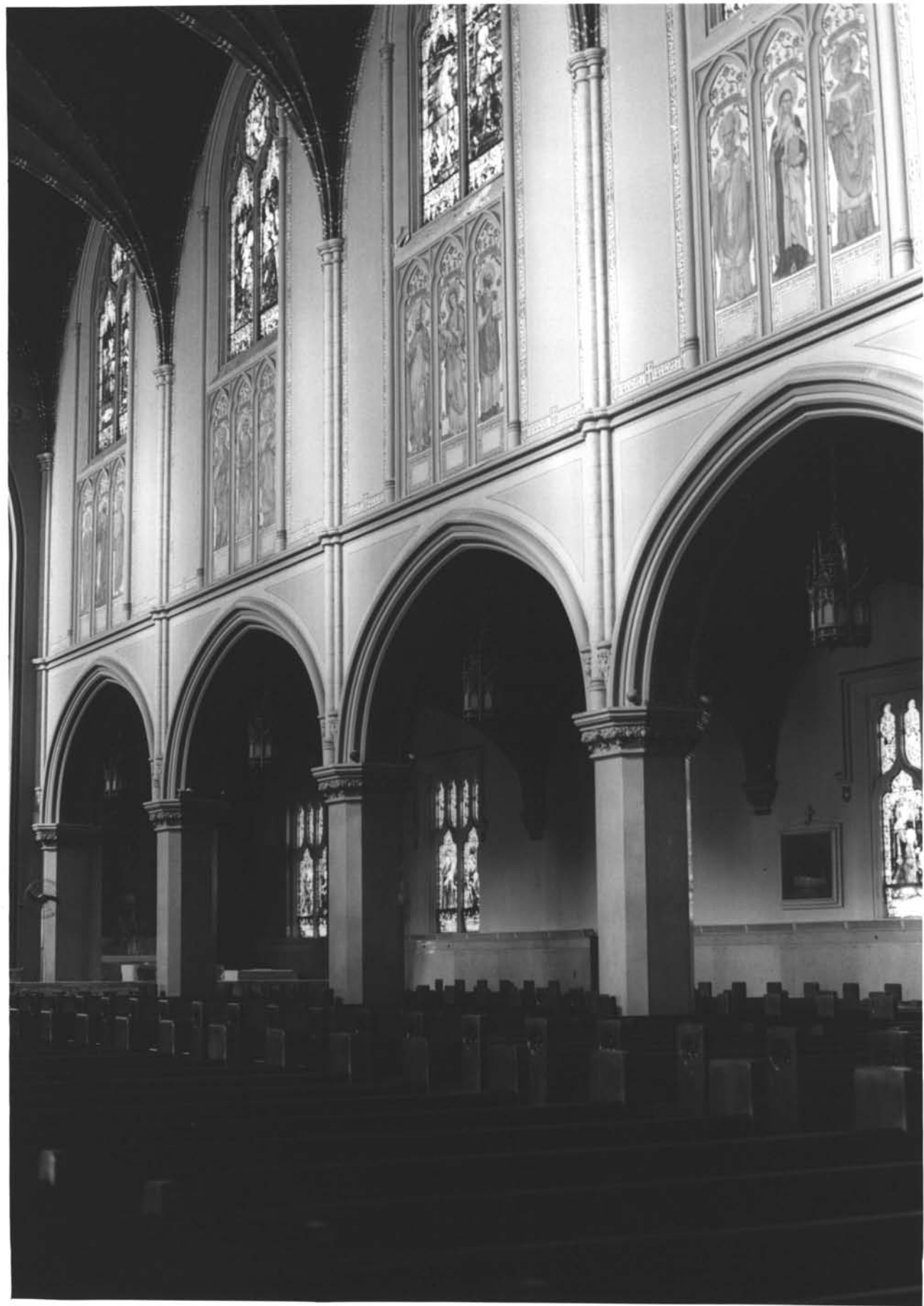
Photographer: Beth Cohen

Date: August, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the sanctuary looking north.

Photo #: 3



Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

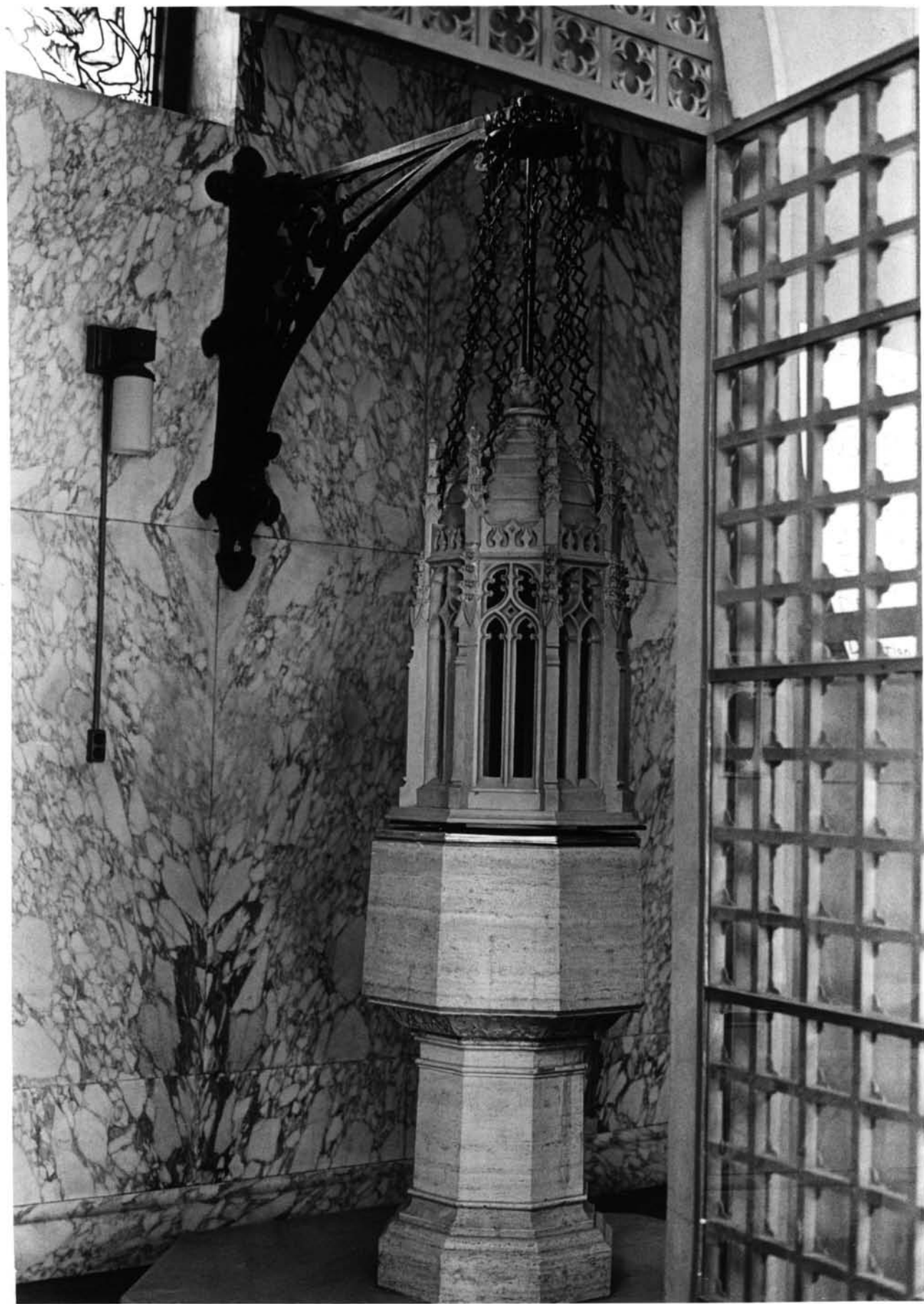
Photographer: Beth Cohen

Date: August, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the east clerestory wall.

Photo #: 4



Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Beth Cohen

Date: October, 1976

Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

View of the baptistry.

Photograph #4A





Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Leslie J. Vollmert

Date: July, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the south elevation of the rectory.

Photo #: 5



Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Leslie J. Vollmert

Date: July, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the south elevation of the convent.

Photo #: 6



Saint Michael's Catholic Church Complex

Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer: Leslie J. Vollmert

Date: July, 1976

Negative: R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

View of the east elevation of the school.

Photo#: 7