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. Francis Xavier Church
AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION
STREET & NUMBER
532 Market Street
CITY, TOWN
Parkersburg
STATE
West Virginia

3 CLASSIFICATION
CATEGORY
__DISTRICT
__BUILDING(S)
__STRUCTURE
__SITE
__OBJECT
OWNERSHIP
__PUBLIC
__PRIVATE
__BOTH
PUBLIC ACQUISITION
IN PROCESS
BEING CONSIDERED
STATUS
X OCCUPIED
__UNOCCUPIED
__WORK IN PROGRESS
ACCESSIBLE
YES RESTRICTED
YES UNRESTRICTED
NO
PRESENT USE
__AGRICULTURE
__COMMERCIAL
__EDUCATIONAL
__ENTERTAINMENT
__RELIGIOUS
__GOVERNMENT
__SCIENTIFIC
__INDUSTRIAL
__TRANSPORTATION
__MILITARY
__OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY
NAME
Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston
STREET & NUMBER
1300 Byron Street
CITY, TOWN
Wheeling
STATE
West Virginia

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC
Wood County Courthouse
STREET & NUMBER
Court Square
CITY, TOWN
Parkersburg
STATE
West Virginia

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
TITLE
DATE
__FEDERAL
__STATE
__COUNTY
__LOCAL
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS
CITY, TOWN
STATE
Visible from all major approaches to downtown Parkersburg, West Virginia, is the domical belfry and tower of St. Francis Xavier Church. The church is on the opposite side of the street and only several hundred feet north of another prominent downtown landmark, the Parkersburg City Hall. Immediately north of St. Francis Xavier on Market Street is the trestle approach of the over one-hundred year old B & O railroad bridge that crosses the Ohio River from Wood County to Washington County, Ohio.

Although St. Francis Xavier Church was built in 1869-70, little of the building's physical fabric has changed over the years resulting in a high degree of preservation of the original architecture. Significant in this regard as well is the excellent condition of murals embellishing the church's apse, side altars, and side aisles. These paintings comprise a series of religious scenes that are regarded among the most significant works of ecclesiastical art in West Virginia.

Church chroniclers have traditionally described the edifice as a "pure" example of French Gothic architecture. To be sure, elements of the Gothic are present in the building. However, these are subordinate to the dominant Romanesque order of the design. During the 1850s and 1860s the popularity of Romanesque revival style churches and public buildings in the United States exceeded the public fancy for the Gothic.

A generally heavy, monumental quality is present in the building, as opposed to the delicate, vertical elements of the Gothic. The predominance of round-arched windows and door openings, echoed in the loggias separating the aisles from the nave, and the presence of medieval elements such as the main portal's round compound arch, all figure in the Romanesque design of the building.

The church is planned in a simple three-part composition. A central entrance bell tower, truncated, and surmounted with a later metal-roofed domical belfry, is followed from west to east by a gable-roofed sanctuary, and then by a multi-sided apse containing skylights that illuminate the stained glass half-domical light above the main altar. Transepts are absent from the building's plan.

Engaged brick buttresses define each of the seven bays of the church's side elevations. The window heads are dressed in smooth sandstone voussoirs. Noteworthy in the front elevation details are the window and door surrounds of sandstone voussoirs that complement, in a picturesque fashion, the wooden modillion brackets of the eaves and raking eaves. Below the small shingled pent roof separating the third and fourth levels of the entrance tower, is an arcaded, wooden corbel table. Coupled arches with wooden mullions fill the arched
openings at the second and fourth levels of the tower. An empty
statuary niche with ornate millwork is seen in the third level of
the tower's front elevation.

The compound arch of the principal entrance is detailed with an
enriched wooden tympanum, a motif duplicated in the transoms of the
interior floor-length windows in the apse behind the main altar.

Several structural elements of the church are worthy of note. The
construction of the building above the sandstone foundation is of
two-feet thick brick masonry loadbearing walls. The tower, of similar
construction, has intermediate levels built of heavy timber and deck.

The barrel vault of the nave is spanned by bolted heavy timber
scissor-type trusses. The side segmental vaults are spanned with
triangular trusses. These heavy trusses are supported on interior
wood columns (styled as piers) spaced at approximately 15' 6" on
center at each side of the barrel vault and at the brick bearing
walls at the exterior. The vaulted ceilings are plaster and wood
lath which are supported by ceiling joists spanning in most cases
directly to the trusses. The ceiling of the nave and vaults of the
aisles are painted to simulate the ribs and other masonry features of
medieval vaulting.

The three-dimensional, architectonic quality of this decoration
is reflected in the seven paintings of scenes in the life of Christ
adorning the entire apse and panels above the side altars. Also
artistically significant in the church is the wooden Gothic main
altar, carved by Mr. M. Darius and dedicated with the new church in
1870.

Minor alterations of the building include the replacement in
1895 of the original stained glass windows destroyed by an explosion
of nitroglycerine on the nearby Little Kanawha River. The new glass
was installed soon after the disaster by the G. C. Riordan Company
of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1915 a belfry-cupola was erected on the
tower to replace the formerly used enclosed belfry. Three bells
were acquired, the largest, the St. Catherine bell, was hung in place
in 1915; the two smaller bells, the St. Patrickbell, and the St.
Bridget bell, were purchased and hung in 1917. The original oak
pews were replaced with nearly exact copies in 1977. A plain railing
separating the nave from the altar was replaced with one of Gothic styling sometime after 1907.

A program of restoration is now (1978) underway at St. Francis Xavier Church. In response to recent changes in Church liturgy, planning for the revision of the Church sanctuary respecting its historic and significant architectural elements is in progress.
The Saint Francis Xavier Church, a landmark on Market Street in downtown Parkersburg, Wood County, West Virginia, is significant for its well preserved architecture and for its mural paintings that are regarded in West Virginia as highly important works of art. The high quality of the exterior proportion and detail, the design and balance of the sanctuary with its ornate Gothic altar, and the artistic quality and craftsmanship of the interior, are all factors of note in determination of the building's significance.

Catholic families had settled in the Parkersburg area as early as 1800. These settlers were attended by priests who came down the Ohio from Wheeling. In 1850 the Diocese of Wheeling was established by Pope Pius IX. The Bishop of Richmond, Virginia, Richard V. Whelan, was made head of the Diocese. On a missionary journey to the Parkersburg area in 1847, Bishop Whelan purchased lot no. 95 for a sum of $306.00 upon which the present St. Francis Xavier Church now stands. A brick church was erected on the site in the period 1849-51.

With the discovery of oil at the neighboring Wood and Wirt County Communities of Volcano, Petroleum, and Burning Springs, and the coming of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the population of Parkersburg expanded considerably, and more Catholic families settled in the area. By 1867 the parish had grown to such a degree that it was deemed advisable to build a large church.

Accordingly, under the guidance of the first official pastor, Very Reverend Henry F. Parke, plans were made for the erection of a more capacious structure. The old church was torn down, apparently early in 1869, and the cornerstone of the new church was laid on Sunday afternoon, May 9, 1869 - an imposing ceremony which included an hour-long discourse by Bishop Whelan before three or four thousand people. The cornerstone containing a copper box sealed with local memorabilia was placed in the foundation at the southeast corner of the building.

Architect of the new church was Mr. P. C. Keeley, and the contractor was Mr. Lysander Dudley of Parkersburg. The architecture was an adaptive Romanesque design with Gothic influences. Total cost of the project was $85,000, a huge sum for those times.
The building was dedicated in October 1870. From the time of razing the small first church to this date, services were said to have been held in a building on Seventh Street which had formerly been used as a government hospital.

In recent decades an increasing interest has been focused on the magnificent mural paintings in the church. They were painted by a German artist named Daniel Mueller and commissioned by the third pastor, Very Reverend John McBride. Many visitors, including artists from this country and abroad, have visited Parkersburg for the purpose of viewing these paintings, and noting the three-dimensional, bas-relief style. There are seven paintings: the ones on the sanctuary walls depict the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and Ascension. Over the altar to St. Mary is a scene depicting Her presence in heaven. Over the altar to Joseph is a representation of the death of St. Francis Xavier on the Island of Sancha in the Japanese Sea. Paintings in a similar style, believed to be at least in part by the same artist, are in the Rotunda of the National Capitol in Washington, D. C. Records in the Art and Reference Division of the Architect of the Capitol do not indicate the names of assistants of Messrs. Brumidi and Castaggini, though acquisition of the names of decorative painters who are supposed to have worked for these artists has been ongoing in recent years. Research on this interesting association with the U. S. Capitol may be documented in future studies.
MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

GEOPHORICAL DATA
ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 3/4 acre

QUADRANGLE NAME Parkersburg

UTM REFERENCES
A 17 [415,4,3,0] B [2,0]
ZONING EASTING NORTING
C [2,0] D [2,0]

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION
The property is located on a city lot bound to the north by the rectory and the trestle of the B & O Railroad and Sixth Street, to the west by Market Street, to the east by an alley, and to the south by property owned by the Parkersburg National Bank.

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

FORM PREPARED BY
NAME / TITLE Rodney S. Collins, Research Assistant

ORGANIZATION West Virginia Department of Culture and History

STREET & NUMBER The Cultural Center, Capitol Complex

CITY OR TOWN Charleston

STATE West Virginia

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION
THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL ____ STATE X LOCAL X

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 Clarence Ellsworth September 6, 1978

TITLE

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

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

GPO 921-803