

Wisconsin Historical Society: St. Mary's church complex listed on the state register of historic places

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Oshkosh, WI. – The Wisconsin Historical Society placed the St. Mary's Church Complex (Oshkosh, Winnebago County) on the State Register of Historic Places in February of 2021.

St. Mary's Catholic Church Complex at 605 Merritt Avenue in Oshkosh is a group of buildings constructed between 1886 and 1925 for a growing German Catholic congregation. Anchored by a cathedral-like Gothic Revival church designed by prominent Chicago-based architect Adolphus Druiding, the property also includes a Mediterranean Revival style rectory and an elementary school which was completed in 1904. In 1925, the school was expanded to include a large high school wing and a community-focused parish hall.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the fledgling city of Oshkosh experienced an influx of Catholic immigrants, primarily Irish and Germans, who sought work in the area's lumber industry. The city's existing Catholic parish, St. Peter's, was soon overwhelmed with new worshippers. In 1856, German parishioners were granted permission to establish their own parish which they named St. Mary's. Soon thereafter, they erected a small wood-frame church and school on Merritt Avenue. As its congregation expanded, St. Mary's outgrew its modest facilities. When the Green Bay Diocese began discussing the relocation of its seat to Oshkosh, St. Mary's commissioned a new cathedral design from architect Adolphus Druiding, the preeminent architect of German Catholic churches in the Midwest. Although the Diocese ultimately remained in Green Bay, St. Mary's proceeded with the construction of its massive new church. When it was completed in 1892, it accommodated over a thousand parishioners. The exuberant, high-style Gothic

Revival design, with its distinctive German Gothic church hall plan, provided parishioners with a tangible link to their homeland.

St. Mary's Parish continued to grow as it entered the twentieth century. In 1904, a brick elementary school designed by the Milwaukee firm of E. Brielmaier and Sons was erected next to the church. In the 1920s, the parish hired the local firm Auler & Jensen to design several new facilities including a spacious, two-story rectory which attached to the rear of the church. A new high-school wing was added to the school which provided additional classrooms, a library, and a double-height gymnasium open to the community. A parish hall addition connected to the high school wing was also developed for community use, offering a bowling alley and auditorium for wholesome indoor entertainment. Today, St. Mary's Catholic Church Complex remains a cornerstone of German Catholic history in Oshkosh. The church itself serves as an excellent local example of the Gothic Revival style and represents Adolphus Druiding's leading role in German ethnic church building in the late nineteenth century.

The State Register is Wisconsin's official list of state properties determined to be significant to Wisconsin's heritage. The State Historic Preservation Office at the Wisconsin Historical Society administers both the State Register and National Register in Wisconsin.

To learn more about the State and National Register programs in Wisconsin, visit www.wisconsinhistory.org.