



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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MINUTES  
RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
December 5, 2022  
9:30 am

Location:

R.I. Department of Business Regulation  
560 Jefferson Boulevard, Warwick, R.I.  
DBR Board Room, First Floor

I. MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Michael Abbott, AIA  
Dr. Patrick Malone  
Dr. Ronald Onorato, Chairman  
Ms. Martha Werenfels, AIA

MEMBERS ABSENT

Dr. Marisa Angell Brown  
Mr. Edward F. Sanderson  
Mr. Keith Stokes  
Vacant  
Vacant (archaeologist)  
Vacant (architectural historian)  
Vacant (landscape architect/historian)

STAFF PRESENT

Ms. Joanna Doherty, Principal Architectural Historian  
Mr. Jeffrey Emidy, Deputy Director

II. AGENDA

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 A.M. by Chairman Onorato.

2. Approval of minutes of October 3, 2022, meeting

On a motion by Mr. Abbott, seconded by Dr. Malone, the Review Board unanimously VOTED TO APPROVE the Minutes of October 3, 2022, without changes.

### 3. Interim Executive Director's Report

Mr. Emidy reported that:

- a) Regarding nomination processing updates
  - i. After the October meeting, Joanna Doherty sent the Newport Spring documentation to the National Park Service for review. It was approved on November 18<sup>th</sup>.
  - ii. Ms. Doherty has also been working on the edits for the St. Mary's Episcopal Church nomination, which the Board will see for final approval today.
  - iii. After preliminary presentations were made for the Elmwood Christian Church and Neutaconkanut Hill Park, both in Providence, at the last Review Board meeting, Ms. Doherty notified the owners of both properties of the results of the meeting and points raised during the Board's discussions. Ms. Doherty reported that representatives of both properties are in contact with the City of Providence regarding applying for Certified Local Government grants from the Commission to pay for the preparation of National Register nominations.
  - iv. Properties listed: The only listing since October's meeting is the approval of the Newport Spring information for additional to the Newport Historic District.
- b) Executive Director hiring process  
As he explained to the Board at the last meeting, Mr. Emidy has been approved by the Commission for appointment as Executive Director. The governor wants to meet with the chair of the search committee, Ruth Taylor, and with Mr. Emidy. The meeting with Ms. Taylor is happening this week. The state's Human Resources department has Mr. Emidy scheduled to start on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, but that has not been announced and will not be until after the meetings with the governor.
- c) He emailed the schedule of 2023 Review Board meetings to Board members with the agenda for this meeting. Meetings are February 6, April 3, June 5, August 7, October 2, and December 4. We have reserved the room at the Department of Business Regulation for all of the meetings, but the schedule posted on the Secretary of State's and our websites doesn't specify just in case something changes.
- d) The working group regarding the role of the Board met on October 25<sup>th</sup>. It really is a good group with a cast of smart people with varied and extensive experience. Among the topics that they discussed were
  - i. the establishment of the State Historic Preservation Act and the Procedures for the Protection of Historic Properties
  - ii. Enforcement of both
  - iii. The difference in the state and federal acts around properties that are eligible for listing, but not listed
  - iv. The State and National Registers are based on the surveys, but that information is out-of-date.

4. For vote: National Register of Historic Places final review  
St. Mary's Episcopal Church  
324 East Main Road, Portsmouth

Ms. Doherty made a presentation for final review of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, at 324 East Main Road, in Portsmouth. St. Mary's Episcopal Church occupies approximately 68 acres in southern Portsmouth, not far from the border with Middletown. Members of the congregation reached out to Commission staff a few years ago, interested in pursuing National Register listing. The Review Board gave its preliminary opinion that the property is eligible in 2018; today we are seeking final approval of the nomination.

The St. Mary's property fronts East Main Road, also known as Rte. 138, and backs up to St. Mary's Pond - a reservoir owned by the City of Newport. The western two thirds of the property are open space, protected with a conservation easement held by the Aquidneck Land Trust. The church, cemetery and associated buildings are clustered at the east end of the lot. The church is surrounded by a cemetery on three sides. To the southwest of the church are two non-contributing buildings: the Parish House, built in 2012, and the Gibbs House, from 1970, which was formerly an administration building, and is now leased to a school. A 1936 Rectory is located to the southeast of the church, closer to the road.

St. Mary's Church was built 1847-49, to designs by Richard Upjohn, who had by that time built a reputation as a church architect, specializing in the Gothic Revival style. It is constructed of fieldstone with brownstone trim and has a steeply pitched, gray slate roof. Buttresses mark the corners of the building, and a bell cote rises from the west end. There is an entry on the south elevation, within a gable-roof ell, and another entry on the west elevation. The chancel, which is narrower and shorter than the nave, extends off the east end of the nave. The windows are stained glass, and the window and door openings have pointed arches.

A shed-roof sacristy extends off the north side of the chancel, and a small projection, added in 1939, provides access to the basement. The central doorway contains paired doors known as the "Bridal Doors," which are only opened on special occasions – the principal entry is the one in the one-story, gabled ell on the south side.

On the interior, plaster walls are scored to mimic masonry blocks and wood floors are partially carpeted. The ceiling, painted a deep blue to symbolize heaven, is supported by an exposed truss system with chamfered beams. Window openings are deeply recessed. The baptismal font is limestone with a gilded bowl. The chancel has similar finishes to the nave, except that the deep blue ceiling is decorated with gold, stenciled stars. The entry vestibule floor is mosaic tile, and dates to a 1908 renovation, as do the doors. The vestibule walls and ceiling are plaster; wood trim delineates the doors and windows; there is also a wood chair rail and exposed rafters in the ceiling.

Directly across from the entry vestibule, on the north wall of the nave, is a memorial to George and Mary Gibbs, commissioned by their daughter, Sarah Gibbs, the founder of St.

Mary's Parish. George Gibbs, a prominent merchant, died in 1803 while his wife, Mary Channing Gibbs, followed in 1824. The marble monument, which is approximately nine feet tall by five feet wide, features a bas relief figurative panel that depicts George and Mary Gibbs standing to either side of an angel. A lengthy inscription is set below. The monument is framed with classically-inspired pilasters and pediment. It was completed in 1842 – before construction had begun on the church – and is mounted within a niche that was designed to contain it. The Gibbs monument was created by the American sculptor Horatio Greenough in his studio in Florence. Born in Boston in 1805, Greenough was the first American to make sculpture his profession. After attending Harvard, Greenough moved to Italy, where he spent most of his life until he died in 1852. He created statues, portrait busts, and reliefs. Well-known works include two works at the Capitol: a statue of George Washington executed in 1841 and a piece called “The Rescue,” from 1853.

The church contains 17 stained-glass windows, three of which appear to be original. Located in the sacristy and above the “Bridal Doors,” these windows feature colored glass set in a diamond pattern. The remaining 14 stained glass windows were installed between ca. 1870 and 1973; most are memorials to members of the congregation. The large window in the east wall of the chancel, above the altar, is dedicated to Gardner Blanchard Perry. Dating to circa 1905 and depicting the ascension of Christ, the window is attributed to a British firm, Heaton, Butler and Bayne. The firm was formed by stained-glass artists Clement Heaton and James Butler in the 1850s, who were joined in 1862 by Robert Turnill Bayne. The firm was known for using medieval techniques and a wide range of colored glass, and its work can be found in churches all over the United Kingdom, including Westminster Abbey, as well as abroad.

All four windows on the north side of the nave, as well as two in the vestibule, were installed ca. 1907-14. They feature fish-scale patterns and natural motifs and are the last known works created by Frederic Crowninshield. Born in Boston in 1845, Crowninshield trained as a mural and fresco painter in Europe, but began working in stained glass in 1879. He established a stained-glass firm in Boston in 1883, which soon relocated to New York City. In 1906, unhappy with the increasing commercialization of the medium and wishing to focus more on painting and poetry, Crowninshield decided to close his stained-glass studio – but not before completing these windows for St. Mary's, which were apparently one of his last, if not the very last, commissions.

The final stained-glass windows installed at St. Mary's are located to either side of the “Bridal Doors.” Utilizing botanical imagery, they were installed in 1973 and produced by the Willet Stained Glass Company of Philadelphia, which was founded in 1898.

Underneath the church, below the chancel, is a small crypt that contains nine members of the Gibbs and Channing families – relations of Sarah Gibbs – who died between 1813 and 1837 – well before the church was constructed. A cemetery surrounds the church on three sides, occupying about 20 acres and including over 2,000 burials. The cemetery is divided by narrow asphalt drives into sections, and features specimen trees and flowering shrubs. Like in the crypt, some of those buried in the cemetery died before the church was established; the earliest stones date to 1797 and 1816. The stone for Mary Lawton Vinson, which depicts a winged death's head, was carved by Henry Bull, noted Newport

stone carver who was associated with the John Stevens Shop. Between 1791 and 1819, the land upon which St. Mary's was built was owned by the Vinson family. These stones originally stood in a family burial plot south of the present Rectory – they were moved sometime after 1892. Sarah Gibbs, who founded St. Mary's, died in 1866. Her grave is marked by a carved white granite marker, resembling a sarcophagus, that was designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt. Another notable monument marks the grave of Frederick Wiggins (d. 1869), a Newport banker. Executed in the Gothic Revival style and made of sandstone, the marker may have been designed by Richard Upjohn & Son, who are known to have designed other, similar, funerary monuments.

When Sarah Gibbs purchased the land upon which St. Mary's would be built, a late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> c. farmhouse stood on the property; it became the parsonage. In 1936, the farmhouse was demolished and replaced by the rectory that still stands today. With its symmetrical, five-bays-wide façade and center entry with sidelights and fanlight, the building evokes the Colonial Revival style. It retains wood shingle siding and wood trim; the window sash are replacements. The Rectory has a center hall plan and includes some Colonial Revival details, such as the living room fireplace and built-in corner cupboard in the dining room. Historic wood flooring, plaster walls, and wood trim all survive, as does the stair balustrade. Overall, the Rectory retains good integrity on both the exterior and interior.

The two other buildings on the St. Mary's property – Gibbs House and the Parish House - are non-contributing. Built as an administration building in 1970, Gibbs House was renovated extensively in 2018 and is now used as a school. It is non-contributing due to loss of exterior and interior integrity. The Parish House, built in 2012, is non-contributing due to age.

The St. Mary's Church property also includes a number of historic dry-laid stone walls. They line the street frontage, delineate the northern and southern lot boundaries, and subdivide some interior areas of the property.

St. Mary's Parish was founded in 1843 by Sarah Gibbs, whose summer estate, Oakland Farm, was located nearby. Gibbs was one of ten children born to George Gibbs II and Mary Channing Gibbs. The family lived in Newport and worshipped at Trinity Episcopal Church. In 1796, when Sarah was about 14, her father and uncle, Walter Channing, acquired 70 acres in southern Portsmouth, which they named "Oakland Farm." The two men were partners in the firm Gibbs & Channing, a worldwide shipping and trading company. The firm later dissolved and in the division of assets, Channing conveyed his interest in Oakland Farm to the Gibbs heirs. Sarah Gibbs eventually became the sole owner of the estate and, after living most of her adult life in Boston, made it her year-round residence. Just south of Oakland Farm was a farm which had been owned by the Vinson family from 1791-1819, when it was purchased by Thomas Potter. In 1844, Sarah Gibbs purchased the farm from Potter for the express purpose of constructing a church and seminary. Just a few years later, St. Mary's Church was built on the site.

In 1843, Sarah Gibbs, working with the rector of Newport's Trinity Church, founded St. Mary's Parish as a mission of Trinity Church. The congregation initially gathered at

Oakland Farm and in nearby schoolhouses. In 1845, Gibbs donated \$2,000 for the construction of a wood-frame, Gothic Revival-style church on a ½-acre lot in Middletown, just over the line from Portsmouth: the Church of the Holy Cross. It was designed by Richard Upjohn – who would soon design the other church within St. Mary’s Parish: St. Mary’s Church in Portsmouth.

Richard Upjohn was a British-born architect who moved to America in 1828. He lived for a few years in New Bedford before moving to Boston in 1834, where he worked with Alexander Parrish. Soon he moved to New York City, where he lived out the remainder of his life. He built a nationally-successful career with a specialty in Gothic Revival-style churches, though he also worked in other modes. Upjohn’s Rhode Island works span a couple of decades and include residential and ecclesiastical commissions; most are on Aquidneck Island. With the exception of Kingscote, all of Upjohn’s Rhode Island work came after the job that cemented his reputation: Trinity Church in New York City.

There have been changes to the St. Mary’s Church property over time. A number of stained-glass windows were installed between ca. 1870 and 1973. In 1927, a Parish Hall was constructed on a 2-acre lot immediately to the south of the church – on land donated by William H. Vanderbilt III. This building still stands, but is no longer owned by the parish and serves as a daycare center. In 1936, the old farmhouse that was used as a parsonage was demolished, and the new Rectory built. Gibbs House was constructed in 1970 and the new Parish House in 2012, but overall, the property retains a high level of integrity.

St. Mary’s Church is being nominated to the National Register at the local level of significance under Criterion A for religion and Criterion C for architecture and art. The Period of significance is 1842-1973; 1842 being the date when the Gibbs Memorial was completed, and 1973 being the date of last stained-glass window installation.

Mr. Abbott stated that this is a wonderful property and nomination. Dr. Onorato thanked Kathy Cavanaugh [the consultant who prepared the nomination] and Ms. Doherty.

A motion to approve the nomination to the National Register was made by Ms. Werenfels and seconded by Mr. Abbott. The Board voted unanimously to approve the motion.

## 5. Announcements

The next meeting will be held on Monday, February 6, 2023.

## 6. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:05 A.M.

Minutes recorded by,



Jeffrey D. Emidy  
Interim Executive Director  
Interim State Historic Preservation Officer

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