

Staff Photo by Wade Speer

Ceiling and altar at St. Mary's Church show intricate craftsmanship.

St. Mary's Church Still Stands Despite Bombing, Fire, Schism

By MICHAEL TROUCHE
Post-Courier Reporter

One of Charleston's long-hidden gems now fully exposed by the convention center development is St. Mary's Catholic Church at 89 Hasell St.

The beauty of the neo-classical style church belies a turbulent history. St. Mary's has endured religious schism and intolerance, natural disaster, military bombardment and, most recently, tremors from pile-driving for the proposed convention center.

The property on which the Hasell Street church stands was purchased in 1789 by a trusteeship representing the small band of Irish immigrants that made up the Catholic community of Charleston. On it stood a dilapidated wooden guest house, which was established by the Rev. Thomas Keating as the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Annunciation on Aug. 24, 1789. This action was particularly significant in that it occurred a full year prior to repeal of a 1696 South

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congregation of St. Mary's were well-acquainted with persecution at the hands of the English and were forced to contend with continued intolerance at the hands of the predominantly Protestant Charleston population, which occasionally tarred and feathered Catholics.

This, no doubt, fostered a zealous spirit of defiance among segments of the congregation that would lead to later troubles for St. Mary's.

As the original Catholic Church in the Carolinas and Georgia, St. Mary's attracted Catholic immigrants of other nationalities during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Particularly notable was the influx of French

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... St. Mary's Church Has Turbulent History

Continued From Page 1-B

Catholics fleeing the uprisings in Santo Domingo during the 1790s. As oppressed Catholics, they were welcomed by the congregation at St. Mary's, and their group included white plantation owners as well as black servants.

The graveyard that surrounds the old church is still a testimonial to its diversified background, with epitaphs in Latin, English and French. Two daughters of the famed Count de Grasse, hero of the battle of Yorktown during the Revolution, lie interred on the west side of the church.

With the help of the French immigrants, who nearly doubled the size of the congregation, the old wooden structure was razed and replaced by a brick church in 1806. In spite of the influence of the French segment of the congregation, as indicated by the fact that official records of St. Mary's were written in French from 1796 to 1822, the trusteeship that controlled the Hasell Street property remained in the hands of a small, fiercely independent Irish cadre.

It was the unwillingness of the trustees to accept ecumenical authority that led to the infamous 1816-18 "Charleston Schism." The conflict arose as the result of the appointment of a Rev. De Cloriviere as pastor of St. Mary's on Feb. 28, 1816. Well-known as a royalist emigre from France, De Cloriviere was feared by the trustees, who refused to acknowledge his authority over church property at St. Mary's.

This action was clearly in violation of apostolic canon 40 of the Roman Catholic church, which forbids investiture or control of church property by laymen. The congregation split, some following De Cloriviere, who established a chapel on Cannon Street, while others remained steadfast in opposition despite an interdict placed on St. Mary's by Archbishop Neale of Philadelphia.

The schism and interdict ended with the departure of De Cloriviere in December 1818, but the trusteeship did not officially give up title to St. Mary's until 1907. The return of St. Mary's to the good graces of Catholicism was due to the work of the Right Rev. John England, first bishop of the diocese of Charleston. Bishop England, who used St. Mary's as the diocese cathedral until purchase of the present site at Broad and Legare Streets in 1822, persuaded the congregation of St. Mary's

to adopt a constitutional proprietorship of church property while accepting the ecumenical decisions of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Tranquility at St. Mary's was interrupted by the great fire that swept Charleston on April 28, 1838, reducing the church to ruins. The cornerstone of the present structure was laid on Aug. 15, 1838, and in it was placed a copper box containing newspapers of the day, a parchment including names of local and church officials, and a bottle of seeds with directions as to how to sow them should they be found centuries later.

The new church, which was completed on June 6, 1839, is adorned with a painting of the crucifixion salvaged from the ruins of the earlier structure. Painted in 1814 by Charlestonian John S. Cogdell, the canvas was repaired by the artist and restored to its present position behind the main altar.

Included in the walls and floors of the new church were the graves of priests and parishioners for whom there was no longer room in the tiny adjoining cemetery.

St. Mary's averted near disaster during the War Between the States, weathering several years of random bombardment

from Union cannon. One shell dislodged the Cogdell painting and another landed in the sanctuary during Sunday mass. In the late stages of the war, frequency of the shelling forced evacuation of the church and scarred the south wall of St. Mary's with marks that are still evident today. Gravestones shattered by the shells were left in a pile until 1896, when they were used in the foundation of the church's marble altar.

St. Mary's underwent a major beautification project in the less turbulent Victorian period. In 1880, four massive Ionic columns with wrought-iron gates were added to the church's portico. In 1896, in addition to the marble altar, 23 oils depicting various holy scenes painted by the renowned Cesare Porta of Rome were placed on the walls of the church. In the same year, each of the church's 25 windows was replaced with an elaborate stained-glass montage made by the Royal Bavarian establishment of Munich.

Today, St. Mary's stands in contrast to its stark surroundings as an object of beauty and serenity. Only the silent tenants within its walls and surrounding graveyard could understand how paradoxical that image is.

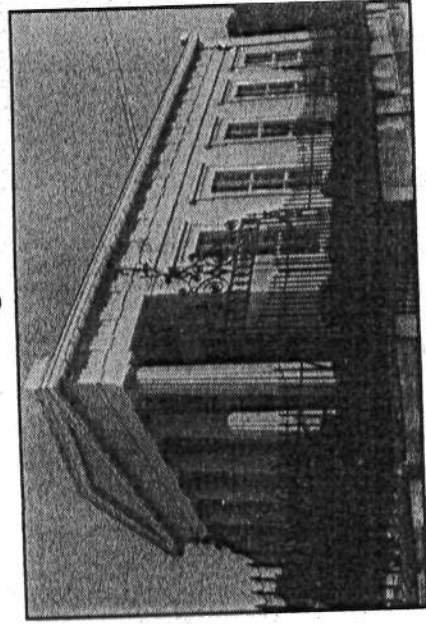
Beth Elohim, St. Mary's close ties a symbol of tolerance

By Robert N. Rosen
and Lawrence E. Richter

Any event is an occasion to celebrate religious freedom, and one special event will be Sunday, Oct. 19, from 12 noon until 2 p.m. on Hasell Street between Meeting and King streets. K.K. Beth Elohim Synagogue and St. Mary's Catholic Church are putting on a block party to celebrate 200 years of sharing that block. While the occasion will be festive and (mercifully) there will be no speech making, it is a good time to pause and consider the contribution Charleston and Charlestonians have made to religious freedom.

Kahal Kadish Beth Elohim (Holy Congregational House of God), one of the oldest congregations in the United States, was founded in 1749. There had been Jews living in South Carolina since 1695, and by 1794 the congregation was large enough (and Colonial Charleston tolerant enough) to build South Carolina's first synagogue on Hasell Street. It was situated on the lot in such a way that the congregation would be facing east toward Jerusalem.

The building burned down in the Great Fire of 1838 that swept that part of the city, but the 1794 iron fence remains. An even larger structure was built by 1841, one of Charleston's first Greek Revival buildings. That synagogue still stands. At the time it was built, it was likely the most imposing and grandest synagogue building in the United States. After all, in 1820, Charleston had a larger Jewish population than either New York or Philadelphia. It is an incredible fact to record, but a fact nevertheless, that the first congregation allowed to build a synagogue in Boston, Ohebei

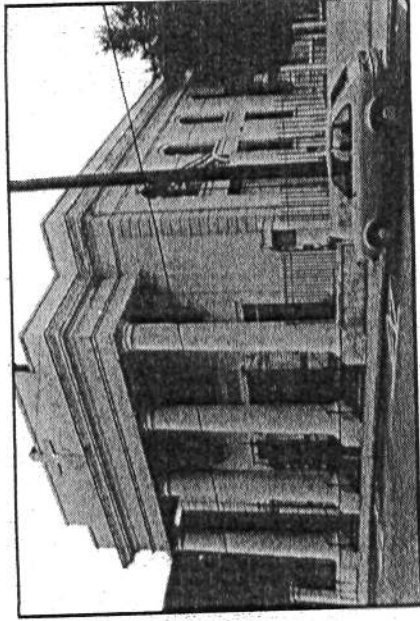


K.K. Beth Elohim Synagogue.

Shalom, was built in 1851.

Catholicism, like Judaism, was a minority religion in early Charleston. English settlers feared the great Catholic power, Spain. Nevertheless, the first mass was celebrated in Charleston in 1786. Bishop John England, the first Catholic bishop in the South, came to Charleston from Belfast, Ireland, in 1820. St. Mary's, known as the mother church of the Carolinas and Georgia, was founded in 1789. It, too, burned in the fire of 1838. Florence Hennessy wrote in her history of St. Mary's:

"The great fire in April 1838 burned a large segment of town, including much of Ansonborough and King Street. In addition to their own loss, the parishioners of St. Mary's mourned the loss of their neighboring synagogue, Kahal Kadish Beth Elohim, located direct-



St. Mary's Catholic Church

ly across the street on Hasell Street. Friends in both joy and suffering, both of these communities — Christian and Jewish — praised God in the midst of the anguish and pain, and both commenced the task of rebuilding simultaneously."

As the century progressed, Irish Catholics poured in to Charleston. By the 1820s and 1830s, fully one-eighth of Charleston's population was Irish, and St. Patrick's Day became a favorite holiday. One of the first Catholic newspapers in the country was published in Charleston, which also was home to a convent built in 1839. The Hibernian Society flourished and, in 1840, erected a handsome hall at 105 Meeting St., which still stands. By the 1850s, the Catholic community erected the great cathedral at Broad and Legare streets.

No one knows why St. Mary's was built across the

street from Beth Elohim. The location was once a Methodist meeting house. At the time the properties were originally acquired by their respective congregations, the area was home to newly arrived immigrants.

Unlike the rest of North America, indeed the rest of the Western world, South Carolina has a long history of tolerance and ecumenism. The humorous story has been told that a tornado blew down the fence of St. Mary's Church, and members of the congregation were trying to pull it back upright when Rabbi Raisin of Beth Elohim walked across the street. The priest at St. Mary's asked him to help put the gate up, and the rabbi said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Father, you know I cannot help you prop-a-gate."

In the beautiful tradition of ecumenism, love and respect, delegations from St. Mary's and Beth Elohim periodically visit and attend each other's worship service. When St. Mary's celebrated its bicentennial, one of the readers at a celebration Mass was Beth Elohim's Rabbi Rosenthal, who read a Scripture verse from the pulpit in English and Hebrew.

For more than 150 years, the oldest Jewish house of worship in the South has stood across the street from the oldest Catholic Church in the South, each congregation respecting the other's beliefs and traditions, and both a part of a larger community that respected and nurtured both of them.

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St. Mary's Church