

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

St. Joseph Cathedral is a plaster-over-brick Gothic Revival structure located on a busy street corner in downtown Baton Rouge. Parishioners erected the original building in 1853 and added a soaring spire with iron cross in 1891. In 1924 officials of the Catholic church enlarged the building through the addition of transepts and a sacristy. At this time the interior was extensively remodeled, a process which was repeated in 1967. As a result, the interior has lost some of its historic character. However, the exterior changes of the 1890s and 1920s echo the styling of the 1853 portion and enhance rather than compromise the status of the building as a downtown architectural landmark. Thus, St. Joseph Cathedral is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

A product of the Gothic Revival movement which spread from England to America during the mid years of the nineteenth century, St. Joseph reflects the earliest period of Gothic architecture as built in England during the Middle Ages. For example, the building is symmetrical and has a monochrome color scheme. It is entered through three sets of tall double doors inscribed within three even taller pointed arch openings. These openings are protected from the elements by dripstones with corbelled stops. Like those of the earlier English churches, the stained glass lancet windows of the nave are narrow and lack tracery. The building's diagonal corner buttresses with recessed pointed arched panels and wall buttresses of the same design are also indicative of Early English Gothic. These buttresses are surmounted by pyramidal pinnacles with crockets. Crockets and pinnacles also anchor the base of the spire. Elements from the Decorated and Perpendicular periods of the Gothic movement appear on the bell tower. These include a large niche which shelters a statue of St. Joseph and sets of louvered lancet openings with plate tracery piercing each of the tower's four sides. The centrally placed tower and accompanying corner buttresses project forward slightly from the main building. Other Gothic elements on the exterior include a distinctive decorated parapet displaying a quatrefoil course above a blind arcade of pointed arches and a terra relief Gothic cross above the cathedral's main entrance.

The interior space is defined by a cruciform plan whose eastern transept is larger than that on the west. Two confessional chambers flank the central entrance door and a sunken baptismal font fills the space between this door and the pews flanking the central aisle. The focus of the church is its elevated sanctuary with a marble altar and travertine-covered rear wall supporting a large modern wooden sculpture of Christ on the Cross. The cathedral's timber frame ceiling, a product of the 1920s renovation, is an adaptation of the English hammerbeam roof.

Assessment of Integrity:

As mentioned previously, the cathedral has undergone a number of alterations and additions since its 1853 construction date. These include:

1. The addition of a semi-circular sanctuary and a grotto in 1866.
2. The erection of the bell tower, spire, and cross, totaling 195 feet in height, in 1891. Apparently, lancet windows were also added to the facade above two of the three entrances at this time.
3. Installation of a clock in the tower and a terra cotta statue in the exterior niche in 1896, as well as the plastering of the exterior brick walls.
4. Installation of new leaded stained glass windows from Munich, Germany, between 1911 and 1918.

5. The removal of the grotto, erection of new transepts and sacristies, and total remodeling of the sanctuary and nave between 1921 and 1924

6. 1966-68: Replacement of the bell tower and spire (which had been damaged by Hurricane Betsy) with an exact replica; the construction of a raised plaza adjoining the building's facade; and a second remodeling of the interior highlighted by installation of a travertine wall and wooden sculpture on the sanctuary's rear wall.

Despite these changes, St. Joseph Cathedral retains a strong Gothic character. Most of the exterior alterations have contributed to or expanded upon the building's original design, and the construction of the interior's 1920s English hammerbeam ceiling also reinforces the church's Gothic styling. St. Joseph continues to stand as a downtown landmark of distinction, just as it did during the second half of the nineteenth century. For these reasons, the church is worthy of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Non-Contributing Elements

Abutting the east side of the church is a bishop's burial court. Because it does not meet the criteria exceptions for cemeteries, it is listed as a noncontributing element. State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Significant dates	1853; 1891; 1924
Architect/Builder	Father John Cambiaso, S. J. (1853 architect)

St. Joseph Cathedral is locally significant in the area of architecture as a distinctive landmark in the Baton Rouge Central Business District.

Although the official founding date of Baton Rouge is recognized as 1719, the community has retained only a relatively small number of buildings from its past. In fact, the Architectural and Historical Survey of Downtown Baton Rouge, completed in 1934, identifies only 124 buildings 50 years of age or older. Of these structures, the vast majority are either uninspiring late nineteenth and early twentieth century frame residences or undistinguished vernacular commercial buildings from the same era. The Central Business District also contains a number of vacant lots where older commercial buildings or houses once stood. Against this background, perhaps ten buildings of real architectural quality remain. St. Joseph Cathedral ranks as one of these.

St. Joseph is one of six downtown buildings reflecting the influence of Gothic architecture as interpreted by Americans in the nineteenth and again in the early twentieth century. With its 1853 construction date, the building stands as the second oldest Gothic structure in the community. In addition, it still retains at least forty percent of its original fabric despite undergoing a series of additions and renovations over the years. St. Joseph's most important visual feature is its Gothic verticality, emphasized by its soaring bell tower and spire and by the paneled corner and wall buttresses which rise almost the entire height of the core structure. These buttresses, in turn, are surmounted by crockets and pinnacles, features lacking on the Central Business District's other Gothic buildings. Another stylistic feature which contributes to the Cathedral's status as a local landmark is its distinctive parapet, composed of a blind pointed arcade supporting a course of quatrefoils. Other important Gothic characteristics are the Cathedral's lances windows, dripstones over tall entrance openings, a niche for statuary, and plate tracery piercing all sides of the bell tower.

Note on Architect/Builder:

Father John Cambiaso (Cambiazo) was a member of the Jesuit order. During his career In Louisiana he also designed at least two New Orleans churches, the Church of the Immaculate Conception (c.1856) on Baronne Street and St. Maurice Church (1857) at 605 St. Maurice Avenue.

Major Bibliographical References

Uter, Rev. Frank M., "Saint Joseph Cathedral Parish, 1792-1988...And the Spirit Continues." Galion, Ohio: United Church Directories, 1988. This volume contains various valuable historic photographs of St. Joseph.

Robison, R. Warren, Louisiana Church Architecture. Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, USL Architecture Series, No. 2, 1984.

Architectural and Historical Survey of Downtown Baton Rouge. Foundation for Historical Louisiana and City of Baton Rouge - Parish of East Baton Rouge, July 1984.