

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Terraced to a slight rise above street level, the St. Mary Magdalen Church (1911), Rectory (1921) and Cemetery (c.1844). Complex presents a commanding appearance in the center of the small town of Abbeville. Despite some alterations and a new building to the rear, the church complex retains its National Register eligibility.

Church:

The symmetrical building has a three part facade and a central projecting tower with a louvered belfry and an octagonal spire. The church is an eclectic example of early twentieth century Romanesque Revival details implanted on a Gothic cruciform basilica. The body of the church is red brick with buff colored brickwork accenting the arched doors and windows, the corbel tables and the string courses. The slightly projecting buttresses stationed between aisle windows, at corners and continuing around the ambulatory reinforce the outer walls.

The eclectic theme continues throughout the interior featuring eighteen columns with composite gold-leafed capitals. Arches springing from these capitals create arcades which separate the barrel vaulted nave and barrel vaulted aisles. The transverse arches define the six interior bays. The sanctuary with a marble high altar is contained within a semicircular apse under a half dome.

Alterations include: (1) There was a fire in the apse in 1981 which necessitated redecorating the sanctuary, including a new altar canopy.

(2) A terraced deck at the main entrance was added in 1961.

(3) There is new wood detailing in the narthex, including arches, doors, and paneling. (The openings and walls themselves are original.)

(4) There is a low rear modern addition containing a prayer chapel.

Assessment of Integrity:

Most of these changes have been minor. The only exception is the addition to the rear, and this has very little visual impact because it is set to the rear and is low in profile. In addition to changes made to the church, the complex has received a modern ministries building. Although this is a non-contributing element, it is low in profile and set to the rear. (It is connected to the church via a breezeway.) There is also a small modern shed immediately to the rear of the church. It is non-contributing

Rectory:

The masonry three bay central hall plan rectory is basically an "American Foursquare." A double tiered gallery extends across the front and one of the side elevations. The second story gallery features Italian Renaissance arcading and teas relief oeil-de-boeuf motifs. Following the eclectic theme, French windows open onto the galleries from all adjacent rooms while all other fenestration is double hung sash. A geometric beveled glass double leaf front entrance introduces the shoulder molded details of the interior. Although it has been necessary to reproduce portions of the woodwork, much of the original remains. The rectory is an integral part of the complex because it reflects the early twentieth century eclecticism seen in the church, albeit in a different style. It is listed as a contributing element.

Cemetery:

The Church of St. Mary Magdalen was established on the present site in 1844. However, due to an early fire, records were destroyed and the current parish records begin on February 20, 1854. The first burial was recorded on February 25, 1854 when Father Fotier recorded the burial in the parish cemetery of the son of Sevene Primeau. Although the present tombstones and monuments are largely twentieth century, nineteenth century wrought iron crosses, common in early Louisiana, are also in evidence. Therefore, it is believed that the cemetery is the only evidence of the church's 1844 inception. In addition, collections of wrought iron crosses of the type found in the cemetery are considered very rare. For these reasons, the cemetery is listed as a contributing element.

TOTAL NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING ELEMENTS: 3 (church, rectory & cemetery)

TOTAL # OF NON-CONTRIBUTING ELEMENTS: 2 (ministries building and shed)

Specific dates 1911 (church)
Builder/Architect Contractor: Eugene Guillot, New Iberia

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)
Criterion C

St. Mary Magdalen Church is locally significant in the area of architecture within the context of Vermilion Parish. The almost complete survey of this rural parish has identified 501 historic structures, most of which date from the early twentieth century. Most of these structures are either bungalows, cottages, or plain single story commercial buildings. The survey indicates that there are no pretentious institutional buildings other than St. Mary Magdalen and only one other distinguished example of twentieth century eclectic architecture. This is the Bank of Abbeville, located within a National Register district. The church is dominant within the parish not only for its use of polychromatic masonry construction, but for its sophisticated eclectic combination of Gothic and Romanesque Revival styling, following the current trends in ecclesiastical architecture. St. Mary Magdalen is not only an outstanding architectural landmark in the parish, but is also a local landmark because its spire rises far above all other buildings in Abbeville.

Major Bibliographical References

Louisiana Historic Structures Survey, Vermilion Parish.

Baudier, Roger and Sas-Jaworsky, Lydia. The History of Saint Mary Magdalen Parish. Booklet history of church published by the St. Mary Magdalen Parish in 1976.