

The St. Mary Congregational Church is a small frame building located on the edge of a residential district in Abbeville, Louisiana. Built in 1905 to replace an earlier building, the church features elements of the Gothic Revival style of architecture. Alterations have been confined to small rear appendages and to the interior.

The three bay, gable fronted church has a prominent corner tower. The three-stage square tower marks the entrance of the building and projects slightly from the front and side walls of the church. All three stages of the tower are ornamented with similar details. The first two stages have small projecting "roofs" or canopies that wrap around all of the exposed sides of the tower. These mock roofs, as well as the low-pitched pyramidal roof on the third stage, are all ornamented with brackets. The unusual design of these openwork brackets denotes a floral motif popular during the late Victorian era. Arches with pointed tops also decorate each tier of the tower, in the form of a window and door on the first floor and wood slatted vents on the second and third stages.

The church's pointed top windows and front door should be viewed as Gothic Revival arched fenestration. The windows are evenly spaced on the front and two sides of the building. The thin muntins that divide the panes of colored glass in the windows are designed to give the impression that two narrow arches are grouped within the framework of one larger pointed arch. The window design is indicative of tracery work popular in Gothic and Gothic Revival architecture. The steeply pitched main roof is accentuated by plain bungalow type brackets at the front and rear gables, which would indicate an early re-roofing project.

The rear elevation has a gabled extension of unknown age. The minister indicated that it is a relatively new addition, but architectural evidence is inconclusive. The extension, though shorter than the original church, shares the same weatherboard, decorative features, and windows. Within the last twenty years, two smaller additions have been added to the rear of the church to accommodate a kitchen/dining area and offices for the minister. Although these additions are obviously new, they are built of similar materials as the original building.

The interior of the church has been modernized to include a tiled ceiling and paneling. The ceiling has not been lowered, and the original beaded board wainscoting is still in place.

Assessment of Integrity:

St. Mary Congregational Church is being nominated to the Register as a rare example of the Gothic Revival taste in Vermilion Parish. Because it retains all of its original Gothic Revival features, there is no integrity issue.

Significant Date:	1905
Architect/Builder:	Unknown
Criterion	C

The St. Mary Congregational Church is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is a rare example of the Gothic Revival style in Vermilion Parish.

Although its use is not entirely restricted to churches, the Gothic Revival style is most closely associated with religious architecture. The style's popularity is largely the result of a reform effort, known as the ecclesiological movement, which originated within England's Anglican Church in the 1830s. By the 1840s it had reached the United States, where it spread through the Episcopal Church. Proponents of the movement believed the Middle Ages to have been an "Age of Faith" in which devout people built "good buildings." These "good buildings" (medieval Gothic Churches) were by definition Christian and were considered the most appropriate modes for church architecture. The movement's tenets eventually spread beyond the Episcopal Church to indirectly influence members of many Christian denominations. Thus, it is largely as a result of the ecclesiological movement that the Gothic Revival became the church style of choice for Victorians and later generations of Americans. This influence has lasted well into the twentieth century.

Vermilion Parish, although a long settled parish, is dominated by turn-of-the-century and later architecture. It has a complement of Queen Anne Revival and Craftsman (Arts and Crafts) residences. However, the parish is largely lacking in resources reflecting the Gothic Revival style. According to the standing structures survey, only four of the 668 buildings over 50 years of age display Gothic styling.

Two of these four are undistinguished examples which have Gothic elements applied to their facades. The St. Mary Congregational Church is one of the two remaining, more fully articulated examples. As a rare, though late, example of a popular national style, the St. Mary Congregational Church is an important building within Vermilion Parish.

Historical Note

The St. Mary Congregational Church also fits within a larger picture of evangelism and education in the South after the Civil War. The land and financing for the current building were given the St. Mary Church by the American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1905. The AMA, founded in New York in 1846, was a benevolent society whose goals were to abolish slavery and establish schools and churches for minorities in the South and West. The association first appeared in Louisiana near the end of the Civil War where they concentrated their efforts in larger cities such as Baton Rouge and New Orleans and near forts and camps where large numbers of Native Guards (all black Union troops) were camped.

By the mid-1870s the AMA was dominated by Congregationalists. While their primary goal was to educate, they redoubled their efforts to build churches and to expand the membership of the denomination. By 1885, when the St. Mary Congregational Church was first established, there were thirteen AMA financed churches in Louisiana. Today, very few of these congregations are still meeting. To date, St. Mary's is the only known all-black Congregationalist church still meeting in the state.

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