

Our Mother of Sorrows Roman Catholic Church
Westmont Neighborhood
424 Tioga Street
Johnstown
Cambria County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5727

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OUR MOTHER OF SORROWS ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Location: 424 Tioga Street, Westmont, Johnstown, Cambria County, Pa.

Description: Stone building with flat, rusticated facade designed as early twentieth-century interpretation of a medieval English church. Stone construction, solid facade is pierced by a trio of lancet windows, surmounted by a statue niche of Mary, Mother of Sorrows and a Celtic cross. The stained glass in the lancet windows features a portrait of Mary. The glass is worked in the extremely minute detail of Medieval tradition. The entry is framed by a graduated stone arch and stained-glass transom window.

The interior is dominated by a polychrome mosaic of Mary, Mother of Sorrows, flanked by six angels. Execution of the mosaic borrows from early Christian ichnographical precedent while incorporating the popular contemporary angularity of the Art Deco style. Early medieval pointed arches divide the functional areas of the space. One massive brick arch divides the altar area from the congregation, while another frames the mosaic. The altar is flanked by an inaccessible gallery area on either side, framed by heavy oak pointed arches. All pews and interior woodwork are of dark oak.

Stout rectangular stone pillars and piers support solid side walls of stone. Stone keystones and capitals contrast with brick voussoirs to create stone arches that flank the aisles. These are surmounted by clerestory windows depicting biblical figures such as Eve, the major prophets, and New Testament saints.

The dark brown wooden roof is supported by decorative cantilevered trusses. Roof truss beams are painted in a polychrome geometric design. Stout braces rest on corbels which bear heraldic shields. Side aisles are pierced by tripartite groups of latticed translucent glass windows. The central panel of each grouping features a stained-glass window depicting a stations of the cross, each of Christ's stops on the journey to Calvary. A celtic cross stands beside the church, commemorating its founder, Stephen A. Ward, 1886-1963.

History: The Church was founded on November 3, 1920. Before this time, Catholic residents of Westmont, Southmont and Upper Yoder Township attended St. John Gualbert Catholic Church in Johnstown. Stephen A. Ward, assistant at this church, became the new pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Parish, consisting of 80 families. Rev. Ward became an influential figure in early twentieth-century Westmont by promoting ecumenism, the practice of productive cooperation between diverse religious groups.

The cornerstone for this church was laid in May 1923, and the building was dedicated September 14, 1924. The Church building, designed by Pittsburgh architect Carlton Strong, was designed along the model of Early English Gothic churches to serve Roman Catholic liturgy. The architect followed a truth in construction principal made popular by John Ruskin in the nineteenth century, by employing authentic materials. No imitation materials were used. The floors are Vermont slate. Welsh quarry tile is used in the sanctuary and the mensa of the high altar. All other construction materials are of local origin.

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Henry Hunt Studios of Pittsburgh designed the lancet windows. Charles J. Connick of Boston, Mass., executed the clerestory windows on the gospel side of the church. The transom window above the main entry and the clerestory windows on the epistle side were created by the D'Ascenzo Studios of Philadelphia.

The original property, which included a residence used as a rectory and the site of the Church, was purchased from Telford Lewis in 1922. A parochial grade school was built and opened in 1946. In 1950 a home across the street from the church was purchased from the Joseph Callet estate for use as a convent. The home had formerly been used as a Jewish center. It functioned as a convent until it was razed and replaced by a parking lot.

Sources:

Church histories for Our Mother of Sorrows Church, 1955 and 1958, files of the parish office.

Interviews with a current parish priest and a nun who occupied the convent immediately after acquisition by the parish.

Sanborn Map Co., Westmont, Pennsylvania (New York, 1913).

Project Information: This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP). An overview of history of the city (HABS No. PA-5669) and an overview of the neighborhood of Westmont (HABS No. PA-5671) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the downtown and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Natalie Gillespie in August 1988 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian, and Kim E. Wallace, the supervisory historian of the project. Gillespie's and other project historians' work was published as The Character of a Steel Mill City: Four Historic Neighborhoods of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1989), edited by Kim E. Wallace. Illustrations in the publication include large format photographs taken by HAER photographer Jet Lowe and 35 mm photographs taken by the project historians.