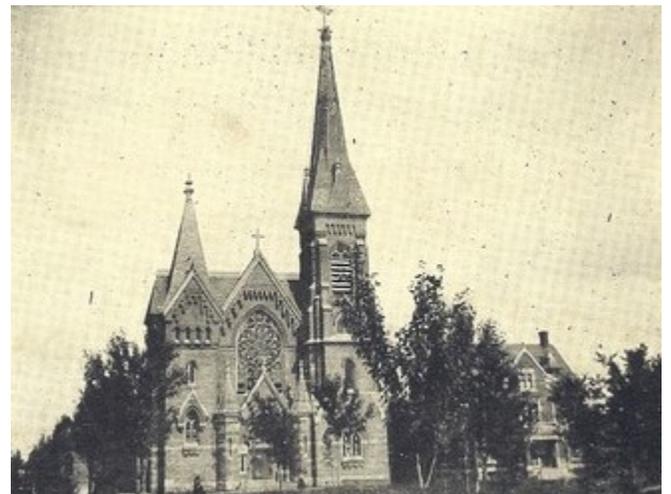


205 W Blodgett Avenue
Architectural Style: Gothic “High Victorian Gothic”
St. John the Baptist Catholic Church

Built in 1893, the church was designed by Adolphus Druiding. Its shape & details reflect Gothic’s historic theme of “reaching to heaven.” The main façade has 2 steeples; taller with belfry & lantern above, spire atop, & stepped buttresses on its corners; smaller with no belfry or lantern & a different spire. The church’s nave walls have stepped buttresses. The semi circular apse is visible atop the north façade. Windows of various sizes & shapes have pointed arches; stained glass shows a variety of patterns; “Rose Window” above the main entry. The original entry has Gothic detailing. Primary materials are brick & limestone. A variety of brick corbelling patterns are repeated, reflecting Gothic’s origins when churches were built by local people sharing their skills over decades of time.



The history of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church is a history of progress from simple beginnings. . . a history encompassing the countless persons whose religious spirit, sacrifice and fortitude opened the way for the founding and growth of the Marshfield parish. Even though setbacks were encountered along the way, progress has carried the parish forward.

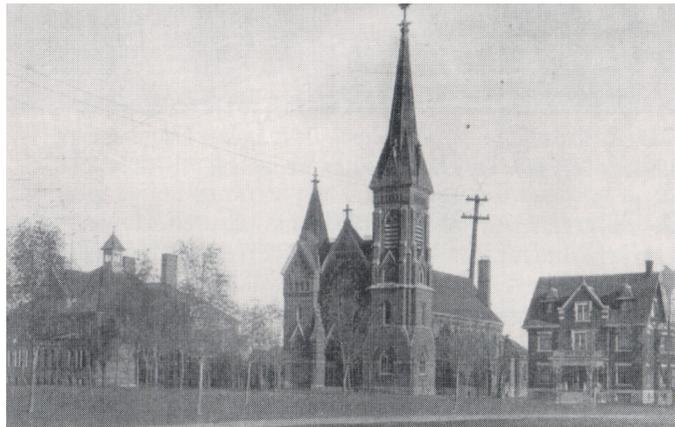
As early as 1874, Mass is said to have been offered here periodically in privately-owned homes and in a district school house with priests circling in and out from Grand Rapids (now Wisconsin Rapids), Stevens Point, Medford and Menasha. Naturally enough, occasional divine worship in those days was conducted under makeshift conditions. Legend has it that Father Pernin of Grand Rapids offered the First Mass in Marshfield in the home of Louis Rivers in the 100 block of what today is W. Depot Street. A daughter of the Rivers family, educated in a Stevens Point Church School, later conducted catechism classes in her parent's home here.

Toward the close of 1877, when Wisconsin as a state was less than 30 years old, and Marshfield's status as a city was still six years in the future, the Most Rev. Michael Heiss, first bishop of the La Crosse Diocese, gave permission to build a church in Marshfield. It was that act that launched the formal history of St. John the Baptist Parish which has become the spiritual home of an estimated 5,000 persons.

The present church of St. John's facing Columbia Park, is the second structure erected on the same site and christened with the name St. John the Baptist. The first church, a 40 by 80 foot frame structure, began taking shape in 1881. The completed structure was dedicated July 27, 1882. The original frame church was moved in August 1892 to make room for the new church and eventually became the site of the present rectory.

The Church of St. John's today is more than a large, old and beautiful building. For over 100 years it has looked out on Columbia Park as a notable landmark of Marshfield and a monument to the early settlers whose love and sacrifice built this place of worship.

Father Eisen was pastor of St. John's Parish when the present church was built. He left us a written account of his pastorate here and flowing from its pages is a wealth of information relating to the construction and cost of the church and its furnishings. Among the early entries we read that "plans for the proposed new structure were received September 14, 1892 from Architect Druiding, of Chicago. On September 27, 1892 the contract was let to Henry Hoffmann, of Appleton, whose bid of \$22,725 was the lowest of six bids opened September 26, 1892 in the presence of the pastor and the trustees."



St. John's Catholic Church as it appeared in the early 1900s, with the school on the left, the rectory on the right.



St. John's Catholic Church as it appeared in the early 1950s, with the school on the left, the rectory on the right.

Masonry work on the church foundation began in the fall of 1892, less than six months following Father Eisen's arrival in Marshfield. "Severe winter weather," the priest wrote, "halted progress from November until the following April, but the foundation was completed June 1893." The Most Rev. James Schwebach, Bishop of LaCrosse, officiated at the cornerstone laying Sunday, May 21, 1893. According to Father Eisen "the weather was very fine and about 3,000 persons attended."

The Marshfield Times of that era reported that "ceremonies as a whole were the grandest Catholic demonstration ever witnessed in Marshfield.

As construction of the church progressed so did procurement of furnishings for the building. Father Eisen notes that bids for all of the stained glass windows in the church ranged from \$1,225 to \$1,500. A Chicago firm, lowest of four bidders, was awarded the window contract. Church pews, still in use, were purchased from a Manitowoc firm for \$1,050.

Three bells weighing a total of 2,625 pounds were blessed by Father Eisen and installed in the main church spire Sunday, November 12, 1893. "St. Mary's," the largest bell, and "St. Joseph's," the smallest bell, were purchased by the parish at a total cost of \$347.90. "St. Ignatius," the third bell, was a gift of Father Ignatius Schaller, second pastor of the parish and presumably had been used in the first church of St. John's. In later years electrical mechanism replaced ropes to give sound when the bells were struck.

The new church was dedicated and blessed January 7, 1894 by Bishop Schwebach. According to a contemporary newspaper account "the church probably is the finest in LaCrosse Diocese, modern in all its appointments and architectural design, a monument that will stand for ages."

There appears to be no reference in Father Eisen's memoirs to the altars used in the present church when it was dedicated. Presumably they were brought from the first church for temporary use. Father Eisen's records note that the two side altars we see in the church today, dedicated to God under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, "were set up on August 8 and 9 and blessed on August 11, 1895." Each altar cost \$350. The statues were obtained from a Milwaukee firm for \$194.

Father Eisen recorded that the present high altar was installed in St. John's October 1, 1905. The Marshfield News reported that "the handsome new altar cost about \$2,500 and is a work of art lighted with 150 incandescent lamps." Before removal of the electric lights in later years, the glow from the lights added brilliance to the main altar at services on special occasions.

Possessing the beauty of traditional gothic, St. John's reflects a style of architecture of earlier centuries. There is no steel in the building, only stone, brick and wood. The interior from wall to wall is accented by arched beams of wood without supporting pillars. The only pillars in the church lend support to the choir loft at the rear of the church nave.

The main church spire serves as a belfry and capped by a 7 1/4 by 11 1/2 foot cross. In use for many years, the cross was lowered in recent times, repaired and covered with 23 carat gold-leaf. It weighs 150 pounds and its tip soars over 200 feet from the ground.



Interior of St. John's, with Communion railing and the original oil paintings on the sanctuary walls.

The interior of St. John's, striking in appearance at all times, kindles into even greater radiance when sunlight streams through stained glass windows, the gifts of parish organizations and individuals of earlier times. Dominating the east wall of the church are windows donated by St. Joseph's Unterstetzungsverein (insurance society); the Irish and French Ladies; Peter Weiland, Frederick Doll, Stephen Luecke and Father Eisen. Windows in the west wall were gifts of John and Emma Stauber; the Herz Hesu Frauenverein (Sacred Heart Ladies Society); Philip Adler, Michael Steinmetz; Jungfrauen Verein (Young Ladies Society) and John Juno. Names of donors appear at the base of each window. A window in the upper portion of the church facade is said to have been provided by the Catholic Knights of Wisconsin.

Spaced between the windows of the east and west walls are the Stations of the Cross, imposing groupings of figures beautifully crafted from wood.

Dominating the choir loft are organ pipes whose tones have echoed through the church since 1913. The organ has been reconditioned periodically with the work entrusted to experts, but it retains its original appearance and speaks out with richness of voice.

Since its construction St. John's has been repaired and refurbished several times. The entire church interior was redecorated and underwent other changes in 1975. The effect of the new interior decorative design of Conrad Schmidt Company, of Milwaukee, is one of restrained elegance providing a restful and attractive atmosphere. The prevailing color is bone white enlivened by contrasting and well-balanced yellow and gold tones.

All but one of the canvas paintings which for many years had encrusted the sanctuary area and the underside of the choir loft were removed. When parishioners now observe the canopy above the high altar they see and an outstanding decorating achievement . . . a soft golden like background sprinkled with fleur-de-lis. While the church was being decorated the altars and pews were retouched; the ornate pulpit was lowered; new pendant electrical fixtures intensified interior lighting and carpeting of floors and stairways provided color and absorption of sound.

It seems hardly likely that there ever will be any significant changes in the architecture of St. John's. After more than 100 years the church with its lofty spires still dominates the city and the surrounding countryside.

Excerpts from Centennial History of St. John's compiled by Floyd Tuchsher for the Marshfield History Project, Volume 1, "The Marshfield Story, 1872-1997: Piecing Together Our Past," pages 124-126.

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Additional information on this building is available on the Wisconsin Historical Society's website:
<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Property/HI55573>