

Grand-Pré, Nova Scotia
Commemorative Church
Grand-Pré National Historic Park

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Commemorative Church was built in 1922 by the Société Nationale de l'Assomption, with the assistance of the Dominion Atlantic Railway, as an Acadian commemorative monument. The Commemorative Church became the property of Parks Canada in 1957, at which time structural repairs were undertaken and the interior remodeled. See FHBRO Building Report 91-168.

Reasons For Designation

The Commemorative Church was designated Classified for its association with the commemoration of Canadian history and the promotion of tourism through the construction of monuments; for the French Regime architectural antecedents in its design; and for its importance as a national symbol of Acadian history and culture.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw an increased interest in Canada in the preservation of historic sites and in the commemoration of historically significant events and people. To commemorate the expulsion of the Acadians, historian John Frederic Herbin proposed the creation of a park at the supposed location of the Acadian parish church on the Minas Basin. The development of the Grand-Pré Commemorative Church and Park was the result of the combined efforts of the Société Nationale de l'Assomption, a society interested in Acadian history, and the Dominion Atlantic Railway, which promoted tourism in the interests of increased rail traffic. The Acadian expulsion had attained legendary status with the publication in the mid-1800s of the poem Evangeline by American author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Recognizing the popularity of the heroine among American tourists to the region, the Dominion Atlantic Railway provided funds to develop and promote the Land of Évangeline.

The Commemorative Church, intended to evoke the original Acadian church, was designed by Moncton architect René-Arthur Fréchet, possibly inspired by the ideas of Montreal architect Percy Nobbs. Nobbs, who was trained in the Arts and Crafts tradition in Britain and interested in Canadian vernacular architecture, also designed the surrounding park. Canadian sculptor Philippe Hébert created a statue to represent the mythical Évangeline for the park. The site quickly became an Acadian emblem and a popular tourist destination. The Church, the focal point of the park, continues to be visited by tourists and Acadian pilgrims from across North America, and is a national landmark.

Character Defining Elements

Grand-Pré, Nova Scotia
Commemorative Church (Continued)
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The heritage character of the Commemorative Church resides in its evocation of vernacular design, as evidenced in its massing, materials, and interior detailing; and in its historic setting.

The architect represented the original Acadian parish church with a design based on eighteenth-century French Regime churches from Québec. This design aesthetic is expressed in the rectangular plan, steeply-pitched bell-cast roof, simple steeple, ocular window in the gable, and round-headed multi-paned windows.

Similarly, the use of traditional building materials, such as the rough-cut fieldstone cladding and copper trim, emulated French Regime design. Removal of copper from the gutters and belfry has reduced this design relationship.

The unobstructed interior of the church was designed to function as a museum, as reflected in its open barrel-vaulted space, wide double doors, side windows, and large lunette over the entrance, while the "sacristy" served as a meeting room. A stained glass window, installed in the lunette in 1986, is in keeping with the original intentions of the architects. Renovations to the interior in 1957 involved the removal of the original quarry-tile floor and marble dado, possibly for structural reasons. The remaining original interior finishes, including vault and wall mouldings, denticulated cornice and window surrounds are typical of French Renaissance style as interpreted by Fréchet.

Much of the surrounding landscaped park designed by Nobbs remains unchanged since the 1920s, although the original main access from the railway station no longer exists.

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