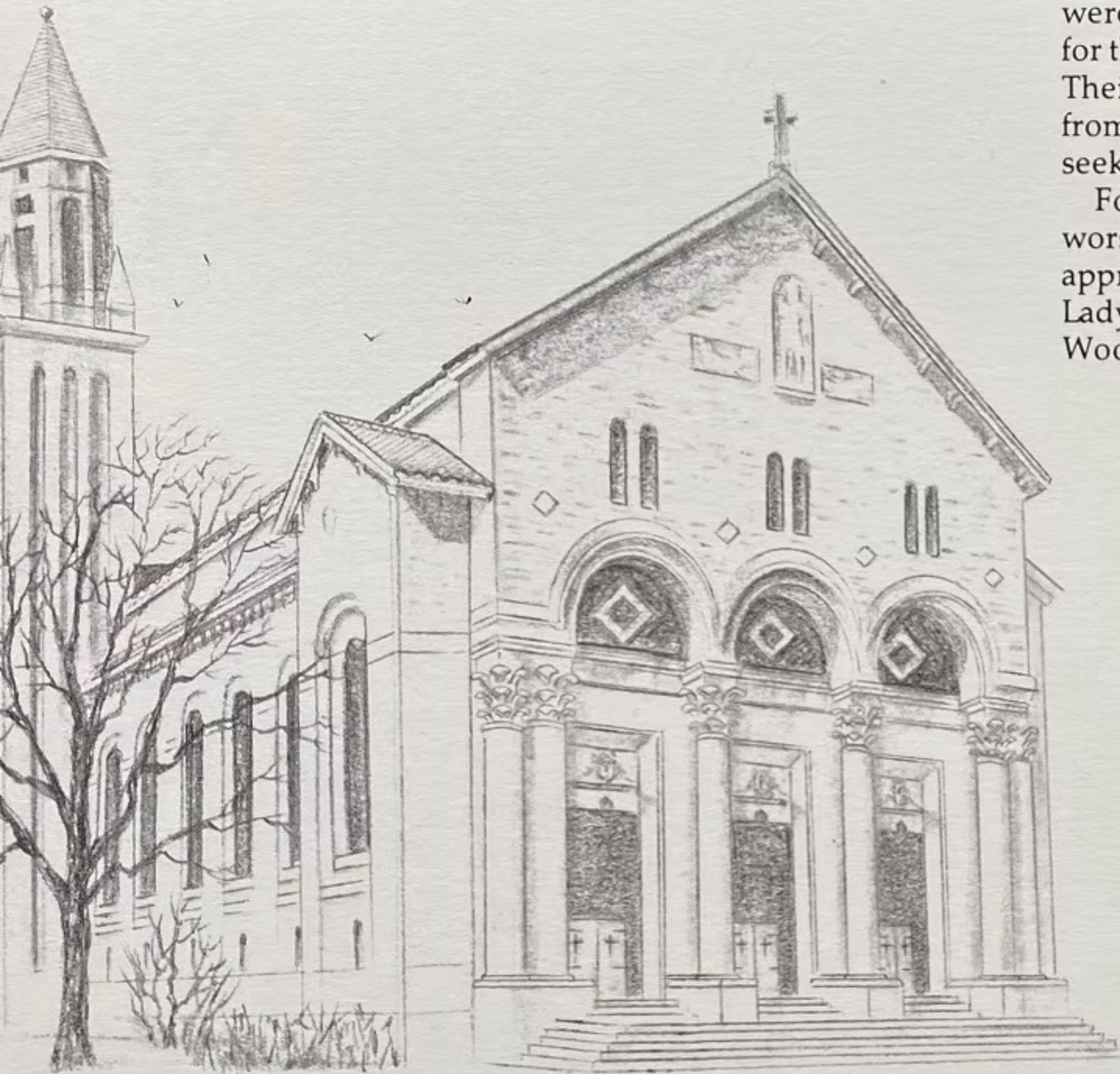


## ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH 1925-1927



The story of St. John the Baptist Church (formerly known as St. Jean Baptist Church) begins in the 1880's at a time when a number of large factories and mills were being built in Woodlawn, the western district of Pawtucket. To attract workers for their factories a number of mill owners set up employment agencies in Quebec. Their offer of wages twelve times the normal annual income that could be eked from a small Canadian farm attracted hundreds of French Canadian families seeking a better life.

For the new Franco-Americans an important part of that "better life" meant worshiping in their own church, a church where the priest spoke French and appreciated their heritage and customs. The first such church in the area was Our Lady of the Sacred Heart built in Central Falls in 1873. The French parishioners of Woodlawn felt the distance to Central Falls was too great. They wanted their own church nearby so in 1884 they petitioned Bishop Hendricken for permission to attend mass at the small chapel connected to the Woodlawn Home for the Aged.

In 1886, St. John's first trustees, Olivier Miclette and Magloire Audette along with a young priest, William Meenan, secured a loan from the Pawtucket Savings Bank in the amount of \$3,000 which financed the construction of a small wooden chapel facing Quincy Avenue on land now the domain of Route 95.

By 1896 the Franco-American congregation was fast outgrowing its original church. With a loan of \$45,000, construction of a new church was undertaken. The new 700 seat church was built of imported stone from Quebec and supported twin bell towers topped by spires. It had a series of long slender windows illuminating a high studded interior, accessed by three central entrances and sheltered by a grand portico.

Two separate and unrelated fires destroyed the second church in 1918. The first fire was caused by lightning. Nearly a year later, on October 17, 1918, a second fire, of unknown origin, completely destroyed St. John's while the parish priests were out in the community taking an annual census of their flock.

Bishop Hickey gave his permission for the construction of a new church (illustrated here) that would cost no more than \$250,000. A new site was chosen nearby and construction began on March 25, 1925. The architecture of St. John's is early Italian Renaissance and was designed by the Montreal firm of Ernest Cormier, Ltd.; that firm having proven itself by designing the University of Montreal as well as a sister church to St. John's in Montreal.

The present day church seats 2000 people. Its walls are illustrated with murals by Robert Mahais and panels by the French painter, Georges Desvallieres in whose work one can see the influence of Rouault, Picasso, Matisse and Bloy. Whether one is worshiper, art lover, or historian, St. John the Baptist Church inspires appreciation for its physical beauty as well as admiration for the Franco-Americans whose sacrifices made it possible.



November 18, 1983