

## Fences and Walls of the St. John's Ecclesiastical District



Heritage NL

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By Michael Philpott

### Introduction

The St. John's Ecclesiastical District was first recognized by the City of St. John's for its distinct heritage character in 2005 with the addition of section 7.2.3 to the St. John's Municipal Plan. It was further recognized as a National Historic Site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 2008 following a joint effort by property owners, the City of St. John's, and Heritage NL (Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador).

The stone walls and iron fences of the Ecclesiastical District are not listed among its [Character-Defining Elements](#), however they contribute significantly to one's experience of the District by framing views and controlling approaches to each site and structure. In the case of one site on Long's Hill, a low wall and fence are the only physical reminders of lost buildings. As such, walls and fences should be incorporated into conservation efforts and their removal or replacement should be avoided. Reinstatement of fences and walls for which there is sufficient evidence should also be considered, while repairs to surviving fences should follow best conservation practices.

This report describes the walls and fences of the district as observed during a field survey on June 8th, 2021. Description is divided into the following sections: the Anglican Cathedral and its churchyard, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (the Kirk) and environs, the Basilica and related Roman Catholic properties, and Belvedere Cemetery.

### Anglican Cathedral and Churchyard

The most complete fence in the district surrounds the Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. While several sections were removed from the northern perimeter at the time of my visit, they appear to be stored on-site for reinstatement.



**Fig. 1. Fleur-de-lis and cross finials of the Anglican Cathedral. Source: Heritage NL**

The Anglican fence consists of square palings topped by *fleur-de-lis* finials. Sections of fence are supported by larger-diameter posts topped by large *cercelée* crosses. Low-height sections of fence are supported by two horizontal rails while taller sections are supported by three rails and have pointed half-height palings between each full paling. Rail profiles vary, with many having been replaced with rectangular or hollow stock. Earlier sections are solid iron with bullnose details. The fence is braced to the ground and supported against the Cathedral, in places, by curved iron brackets.

The *fleur-de-lis* carries many meanings but is often associated with royalty and the holy trinity. It can also be symbolic of enlightenment, fecundity, and grace (Jobes 1962).



**Fig. 2. Taller sections of fence have three rails and half-height mid-palings. Source: Heritage NL**

The fence around the Cathedral stands atop a stone wall of grey random ashlar with sandstone caps. At its highest, along Duckworth Street, the wall stands at over six feet and retains the churchyard above. In other areas the wall drops in height, disappearing entirely on the uphill side. A similar stone wall supports the lower end of the Anglican rectory and clergy house property.

## The Kirk and Environs



**Figs. 3 & 4. Painted finials of The Kirk. Source: Heritage NL.**

The Kirk's most substantial section of iron fence leads up the steep incline from Queen's Road to the level of the church. Here, floral crosses top alternating, tall and short, round palings. An orb finial softens otherwise more geometric, square posts with chamfers and notches. The finials of the fence at the Kirk are painted gold, though this may be a modern design choice. A unique feature of The Kirk's fence is a round handrail attached to the bottom of each post. This section of fence was likely installed in 1880 when the installation of a "handscope and substantial iron fence" was observed (figure 5).

**WE notice that a handsome and substantial iron fence is being erected around St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.**

**Fig. 5. Source: Evening Telegram, May 14th, 1880.**

The Kirk's fence is set in the cement cap of a low, grey ashlar wall with strap or ribbon pointing. At the top of the hill, the stone transitions to a brown ashlar similar to that used for the church's foundation (figure 6).



**Fig. 6. The transition from grey to brown ashlar. Note the handrail detail. Source: Heritage NL**

In 1903, A. Murray of the Consolidated Foundry was recorded as making a "fine job" of an iron fence around the old cemetery on Long's Hill (figure 7). This likely refers to a Catholic cemetery enclosed by the stone wall below the Kirk. The current fence atop this wall is modern and no evidence for its previous form survives.



**A GOOD JOB.** — Mr. A. Murray is erecting, for the Consolidated Foundry Co., an iron railing and fence around the old cemetery, Long's Hill. It will be a fine job when finished.

Fig. 7. Source: *Evening Telegram*, June 23rd, 1903.

Consolidated Foundry was the name of John Angel's Hamilton Avenue operation after 1886. Angel had immigrated from Nova Scotia to run Charles Fox Bennett's west-end foundry in 1847. Following a fire, Angel established his own shop in 1856 and acquired Bennett's rebuilt operation in 1870. Angel's foundry would eventually merge with the St. John's Nail Manufacturing Company to form United Nail and Foundry in 1930 (Collier 2011). While no surviving ironwork in the District has been linked to his foundry, Angel advertised cast iron railings "of pretty design" (figure 8) and was responsible for work in the area.



Fig. 8. Source: *Evening Telegram*, August 11th, 1899.

Next to The Kirk are the former sites of the Methodist College/Holloway School and College Residence. A portion of fence survives atop a low ashlar wall with a concrete cap. Both posts and palings are square in profile, notched, and exhibit a spear motif. Details of the fence are not uniform and the surface appears hammered. This suggests it is wrought rather than cast iron, the only such example outside the Belvedere Cemetery. The tops of palings have been capped with angle iron, likely due to safety concerns. On several occasions children were reported to have been either injured by or hung from the spear points (figure 9). The spear is a common symbol in historic ironwork and is associated with command, creation, honour, and youth.

**HUNG TO A FENCE.**—A boy named Snelgrove had a narrow escape last evening. Young Snelgrove, with another playmate, was engaged climbing the iron fence around the Methodist College, when the tail of his coat got caught in the railing, and he was suspended for nearly five minutes, when noticed by a young man named Duggan, who saved the boy from hanging.

Fig. 9. Source: *Evening Telegram*, April 21st, 1897.

Above the Kirk is a further section of spear-headed fence, though of a simpler style with alternating simple points and spearheads. These sections are supported by posts similar to those leading up the Kirk with a large endpost. The eight-sided, tapered post is topped by onion dome or flame (figures 10 & 11) and likely formed part of a gate or marked the end of the property. The same posts were once installed at the front of the Methodist College (figure 12).



Fig. 10 & 11. Source: *Heritage NL*



Fig. 12. The Methodist College/Holloway School following the 1925 fire. Source: Terrence Dawe

## Basilica Complex



**Figs. 13 & 14. A finial and gate exhibit the lily motif of Hugh Dougherty. Source: Heritage NL**

The Basilica Cathedral of St. John the Baptist retains several sections of a once more extensive fence. The extant fence begins near the Bishop's Palace and runs along Bonaventure Avenue, broken by a gate and driveway leading to the Palace. At the intersection with Military Road the fence turns a corner onto the Basilica property to border a greenspace adjacent the parking lot. The Basilica's fence once ran further along Military Road, however this section was taken down for street-widening in 1905 (figure 15).

**TO WIDEN MILITARY ROAD. —**  
**The work of widening Military Road in front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral commenced this morning. The iron fence is being taken down and Saint John's arch will also be taken down and moved back about eight feet. This will improve the street very materially, and by taking away the curve will render the work of the firemen much easier in driving their engines along that way when going to fires.**

**Fig. 15. Source: Evening Telegram, April 28th, 1905.**

The round palings of the Basilica's fence are topped by lily or *fleur-de-lis* finials (figures 13 & 14), though of a more literal sort than the

symbolic lilies of the Anglican Cathedral. These are known to be the work of Hugh Dougherty (1854-1926), a Scottish-born ships' engineer and metalworker who opened the Avalon Iron Foundry Company on Playhouse Hill in 1879 (figure 16). Dougherty advertised aggressively and may have challenged the large foundries of the west end if not for the Great Fire of 1892 when his building was razed to prevent the spread of fire to the north. Dougherty did not reopen his foundry but continued to work and mentor new generations of metalworkers including nephew Hughie Brennan (Dr. Anne Walsh, discussion with author, June 23rd, 2021).

**AVALON IRON FOUNDRY COMPANY,**  
**LIMITED.**  
 Play-house Hill, opposite Becks' Cove Fire Break

**THE MANAGEMENT** of the above named Company, desire most respectfully to intimate to the General Public, that they are now prepared to receive and execute orders for Iron and Brass

**CASTINGS & FITTINGS**  
 OF EVERY DESCRIPTION.

Stoves, Railings, Gothic Grates—plain and ornamental—Iron, Ship and Bridge Work; Machinery for Mills, all kinds of Machinery for Factories; Windlass Gear and General Ships' Work.

*All work in the Engineering line will be attended to with the greatest punctuality and at the most moderate rates.*

**JOB WORK** of every description in Engineering. Foundry Work, and every Department set forth above, will always receive prompt attention and be executed on the most favorable terms.

**HUGH DOHERTY, Manager.**  
 Nov18,3m

**Fig. 16. Source: Evening Telegram, December 6th, 1880.**

While Dougherty's finials are the more common type, they are interspersed in places with another variety (figure 16). These appear to be later replacements and their source is unknown, though they too resemble stylized lilies.



**Fig. 16. Replacement finials alongside Dougherty's. Source: Heritage NL**



The Basilica's fences are mounted on several types of low masonry wall. The dominant type is coursed, rock-faced ashlar with granite caps, though other sections appear to be capped with sandstone. Several large pillars are also built of dressed sandstone.



**Fig. 17. Fence in front of the Presentation Convent**  
*Some posts have been replaced with simple modern forms. Source: Heritage NL*

Dougherty's finials make another appearance in front of the Presentation Convent where they are painted gold and supported by iron posts with floral and fountain-like elements (figure 17). Adjacent the nearby Mercy Convent chapel are yet more takes on the *fleur-de-lis* (figure 18). These smaller and more stylized lilies transition back to Dougherty's dominant form as the fence turns the corner onto Military Road. Here, fence sections are supported by posts resembling those leading to the Kirk (figure 19). Given the Kirk was fenced during the AIFC's period of activity it is possible Dougherty was responsible for both.



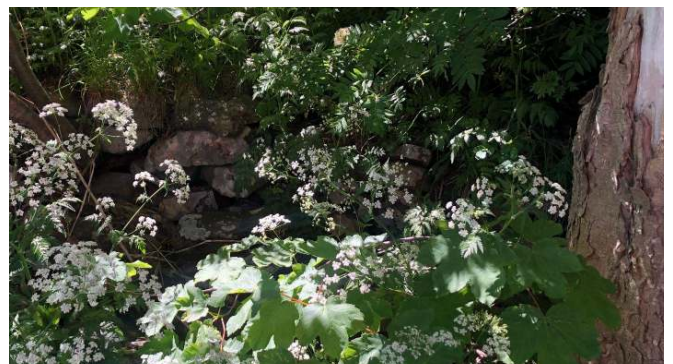
**Fig. 18. Finials next to Mercy Convent chapel.**  
*Source: Heritage NL*



**Fig. 19. Finials and post of the Mercy Convent on Military Road. Source: Heritage NL**

The last fence of note in this cluster belongs to St. Bonaventure's, where simple, pointed palings are supported by three rails along Bonaventure Avenue. Two different types of construction are evident, suggesting two periods of work. The earlier of these sections may date to 1925 when a "beautiful steel fence" was erected around the grounds (*The Adelpian* 1926). In July 1940, the fence was painted "a pleasant green" (*The Adelpian* 1940). While the fence at St. Bon's is not as fine as those found elsewhere in the District, it defines a significant landscape.

## Belvedere Cemetery



**Fig. 20. Remnants of a dry-laid stone wall along the lane to Belvedere. Source: Heritage NL**

On the lane between Bonaventure Avenue and the former Belvedere convent/residence lies what appear to be remnants of a dry-laid stone wall (figure 20). Though hidden, this fragment may hint at a historic landscape which has largely been lost to development.



The Belvedere cemetery itself contains dozens of examples of iron fences and railings, however variety among them is limited. Gravesite fencing exhibits a relatively small number of design elements. A full survey of fences in the cemetery was beyond the scope of this report but a selection is described below.



***Figs. 21-24. Simple finials of the Belvedere cemetery. Source: Heritage NL***

Many fences in the Belvedere cemetery exhibit simplified versions of symbology found throughout the Ecclesiastical District - crosses and lilies (figures 21-24). In some cases the shamrock, a symbol of Ireland and the holy trinity, takes the place of the cross, likely in reference to the nationality of those interred. Wrought iron is used alongside cast iron in the cemetery. Many examples of the former were likely crafted locally.

Other fences exhibit identical elements to those found elsewhere in the District. The small *fleur-de-lis* of the Mercy Convent (figure 25), the floral cross of the Kirk (figure 26), Dougherty's lily (figure 27), and the posts found at both the Kirk and the Mercy Convent (figure 28) each make appearances. These are often combined with other design elements at the same gravesite.



***Figs. 25-28. Belvedere elements found elsewhere in the District. Source: Heritage NL***

Still other plots exhibit fine cast iron unique within the District (figure 29). A larger survey may find these elements elsewhere in St. John's, though they may also have been custom works ordered by families of those interred.

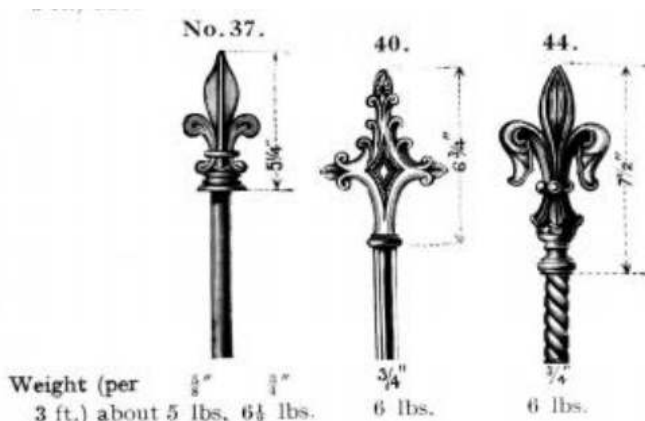


***Fig. 29. Cast iron unique within the District exhibits fine floral elements. Source: Heritage NL***

## Conclusion

The iron fences of the St. John's Ecclesiastical District were largely erected in the 1880s during the heyday of architectural ironwork. In keeping with Victorian tastes and the imagery of the late-19th century aesthetic movement, surviving fences are dominated by floral and organic forms. These findings echo those of Diane Tye in her examination of ornamental iron fencing in the Monkstown Road area of the city (Tye 1988).

No makers' marks were observed during this preliminary survey. At least one fence was cast locally while most were likely imported from foundries in Scotland, England, or the northeastern United States. Tye likewise found that a minority of fences exhibited marks and that only 1/5th of those marked were locally produced. Contemporary catalogues abound with similar, though not identical, iron details (figure 30).



**Fig. 30. The catalogue of one Scottish foundry includes a floral cross (no. 40) similar to those found at the Kirk and Belvedere Cemetery. Source: "General Castings," Callendar Iron Co. Limited**

The stone walls of the district are predominantly ashlar with a variety of stone types and coursing. Those to the southeast are rock-faced and appear to be local granite, while the walls of the Kirk and the Basilica exhibit different varieties of stone and dressing. Though they present conservation challenges, these walls are less prone to wear and loss than the iron elements that adorn them.

*The author thanks Dr. Anne Walsh for sharing her knowledge of ancestor Hugh Dougherty's life and work, as well as images from his surviving notebook.*

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## Resources

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