

Maine Irish Heritage Center

34 Gray Street, Portland



Significance

Construction began on St. Dominic's Church in 1888 and was completed in 1893. For over one hundred years, the church was an important fixture in Portland's Irish community; by the end of World War II, St. Dominic's congregation had over 4,000 members. The Catholic Diocese closed the church in 1998, despite community protests and efforts to keep it open. The city of Portland acquired the church complex and later sold the buildings separately. In 2003, the Maine Irish Heritage Center purchased and began operating out of the church.

Project Scope

Since moving in to St. Dominic's, the Maine Irish Heritage Center has faced numerous challenges and obstacles. In 2006 a failed beam caused the 4,100-pound bell to fall two stories, damaging the tower's internal structure, followed by a storm that flooded the church basement. The Center closed for two years to make repairs, including the installation of structural steel beams to ensure the integrity of the tower.

Recently, the Center received a grant from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission for a master plan. Future plans include repairing the aging slate roof and restoration of the stain glass windows. Community Development Block Grants were used to install handicap access to the library, sanctuary, and basement space. New heat blowers allow for the sanctuary to be heated more efficiently in the winter. New space was created for the Joseph E. Brennan Archive and John Ford Center in the enclaves on either side of the altar.

Recognition

Although the Center recently received a grant from the Irish government to hire an executive director, the organization has otherwise been almost operated entirely by volunteers for the past thirteen years. The investment that the Center has put into the church – hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours of volunteer work – is substantial for an organization of its size. Their passion for Saint Dominic's and its history has allowed the building to continue to play an important role in Portland's Irish community.