The York College Child and Family Center, an affordable child care and education program for the children of York students, opened in 2009 on the redeveloped site of the former St. Monica’s Catholic Church, a historically significant Early Romanesque Revival-style brick church built for $25,000 in 1856 to serve the then-growing Irish Catholic population in Jamaica. The City of New York took over the church building in 1973 as part of the York College Urban Renewal Site, but a lack of plans for the vacant structure left it vandalized and in disrepair long after completion of York’s campus in the mid-1980s. During a torrential rainstorm in 1998 the church collapsed. St. Monica’s brick façade and bell tower were later restored and incorporated into a steel and glass building during the $7 million reconstruction of the site. Part of the York campus, the child care center at 94-12 160th St. meets the need for affordable and flexible care for the children of low-income student parents. St. Monica’s was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, after the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the church a landmark in 1979, detailing its historical significance to Queens and to New York’s Roman Catholic Church as follows:

Built in 1856-57 for $25,000, St. Monica’s is a basilica-shaped church. It is one of the earlier surviving examples of Early Romanesque Revival architecture in New York and one of the only Roman Catholic Churches in the city executed in this style.
Archbishop John Hughes initiated an immense building program. When he died in 1864, his legacy encompassed 85 churches, including St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan and St. Monica’s.

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 13, 1979, Designation List 124
LP-1017

ST. MONICA’S CHURCH, 94-20 160th Street, Borough of Queens.
Built: 1856-57; Builder: Anders Peterson under the supervision of Reverend Anthony Farley.
Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 10103, Lot 16 in part.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the St. Monica’s Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 17). The hearing has been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Built in 1856-57 Saint Monica’s Roman Catholic Church was constructed by master mason Anders Peterson under the supervision of the Reverend Anthony Farley. Marked by its distinctive central campanile, a feature reminiscent of the Romanesque architecture of northern Italy, Saint Monica’s is one of the only and earliest surviving examples of Early Romanesque Revival architecture in New York, and one of the only Roman Catholic Churches in the city executed in this style.

At the beginning of the 19th century the Roman Catholic Church of America included about 50 priests, 50 churches and a congregation of 100,000 members. Since Maryland was the only one of the thirteen original colonies to tolerate Catholicism, Baltimore was chosen seat for the first American bishop who was appointed in 1789. By 1808 the growth of the new nation had attracted many more European Catholics, and New York City was made one of four new Catholic dioceses. From the three churches in New York City the priests journeyed by horse and boat to the Catholics throughout the neighboring countryside. Finally in 1822 St. Paul’s church was built in Brooklyn, and it shared the duties of ministering to the out-missions.

By 1838 Jamaica had acquired a sizeable Irish Catholic population. Many of the large farms employed Irish laborers, and the construction of the Long Island Railroad along Jamaica Avenue in the 1830s brought an increasing number of Irish workers to the area. In October of 1838 Father Michael Curran of Harlem offered the first Mass to about 200 area Catholics in the home of John McLaughlin, a blacksmith. Within a few months of this first gathering, the village of Jamaica became an out-mission of St. Paul’s in Brooklyn. Recognizing the needs of the Catholics in Jamaica St. Paul’s priest, Father Richard Waters began a campaign in June of 1839 to collect money for the establishment of a church.

In July of 1839 the Augustine priest James O’Donnell succeeded Father Waters and continued the project at Jamaica. Land was secured, not far from the present church site and on June 7, 1840, a small frame church was dedicated to Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine. When a resident-pastor was finally secured in 1848, St. Monica’s established out-missions of its own at Flushing, Southold, Westbury, Cold Spring and Far Rockaway.

Between 1841 and 1850, crop failures in Ireland prompted the arrival of nearly 100,000 Catholic immigrants to the United States. A large proportion of these people settled in New York and as a result of the increasing importance of the diocese, it was elevated to an archdiocese. Under New York’s nationally prominent archbishop, John Hughes, a substantial building program was initiated. Besides the architectural masterpiece of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan, Hughes left
an archdiocese of 150 priests, 85 churches, 3 colleges, 50 schools and over 400,000 parishioners when he died in 1864.

One of these churches was a new brick structure designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style for St. Monica’s in Jamaica. In 1854 at the age of 40, Father Anthony Farley, who was born in County Cavan, Ireland, began his influential term as pastor of St. Monica’s. Farley began plans for the construction of a new church on five lots of land on Washington Street (now 160th Street). Four of these lots, near the old frame church, were given to the church by a French woman from New York and Farley purchased the fifth. The priest selected Jamaica master mason Anders Peterson, a Dane who also owned a local grist mill, as contractor. Peterson figures prominently in contemporary building history of the area and was also responsible for the fine masonry of the First Reformed Church (1861-63) and of Grace Episcopal Church (1861-63). The cornerstone of the building was laid in 1856 and on August 15, 1857, Bishop Loughlin, the first Bishop of Brooklyn, presided over the dedication of the church.

Built in brick for $25,000, St. Monica’s is a basilica-shaped church, 49.5 feet wide and 97 feet long. The design which is an example of the Early Romanesque Revival in America is characterized by its tall central campanile, round-arched openings, corbel tables and pilaster strips. Following the success of Richard Upjohn’s introduction of the style to the United States with his Church of the Pilgrims (1844-46) in Brooklyn and James Renwick’s Church of the Puritan’s (1846) in Manhattan, the Early Romanesque Revival became a popular mode for building during the 1850s and 1860s. This style, which had become so well regarded by the non-Anglican (Episcopal) Protestant sects, was extensively adopted in New York.

Saint Monica’s was was in the vanguard of churches to adopt the new style.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the St. Monica’s Church has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, St. Monica’s Church is one of the earliest surviving examples of Early Romanesque Revival architecture in New York, that the church is marked by a distinctive central campanile reminiscent of the Romanesque architecture of northern Italy, that it was constructed in 1856-57 by a master mason Anders Peterson under the supervision of Reverend Anthony Farley, that the present church is the second Roman Catholic Church on the site, that between 1891 and 1893 an apse was added to the eastern end of the church, and that St. Monica’s will link the new buildings of York College with Jamaica’s tradition of fine building.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated as a Landmark the St. Monica’s Church, 94-20 160th Street, Borough of Queens and designates Tax Map Block 10103, Lot 16 in part, Borough of Queens as its Landmark Site.