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*** Preserving historic houses of worship" is the theme of the 20th conference of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission this weekend.**

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NEWPORT - Some 500 people from across New England descended on the City by the Sea yesterday for the annual statewide historic preservation conference, and some of them learned of an architectural mystery of local significance.

When an architect began work five years ago on the building at 19 Sherman St. -- which the owner planned to subdivide into condominiums -- some design features piqued curiosity.

Now, there is some evidence that the building may have housed Rhode Island's oldest Roman Catholic church, several experts who researched the building said yesterday. It is a tantalizing -- but not definitive -- suggestion in what is the nation's most heavily Catholic state.

The findings made up one of 25 presentations on the theme of "preserving historic houses of worship" at the 20th annual historic preservation conference sponsored by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission. Participants hailed from Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut -- and one presenter from Philadelphia.

After investigating the building, the evidence leans more toward it having been the church than not, according to Richard Greenwood, project review official with the Rhode Island preservation group.

The story starts with a building that began as a school -- housing the Trevett Academy -- in 1808 or 1809. Then, in about 1828, the property was purchased to start the state's first Roman Catholic Church, the parish of St. Mary. Sometime afterward, the story goes, the building was moved to Sherman Street.

The current owner agreed to let state and city preservationists check it out. People nearby spoke of it as having once been a church.

Then, evidence emerged.

Tucked beneath its current appearance, the building has some faded areas painted in what is believed to be Prussian blue, a color that came into wide use at the time the church would have been established.

Some details inside the building suggest a different roof design and, possibly, an old church steeple.

The building did not contain a foundation. Jim Garman, an assistant professor at Roger Williams University, who researched old records, including documents at the offices of the archdiocese in Boston, said yesterday that means the building did not need to carry the weight of a chimney. And there was no framing for a chimney to be found, which lends weight to the arguments about the building's use.

Still, Garman said, there is "the absence of a smoking gun" to say without question that the building was once the church.

Though the building will become condo units, the features believed to be from the church remain intact and essentially "sealed" beneath the current use, the preservation officials said. No arrangement could be worked out to use the building in a historic way.

"Perhaps 100 years from now, or 200 years from now, if it's still standing, someone will be able to make more sense of it," said Garman.

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