

R.C.I.A Church Tour
(written using the 1958 Centenary Book as a resource)

We will note that:

-Dogma of Immaculate Conception was declared by Pope Pius IX on Dec. 8, 1854.

-Lourdes visions began in February of 1858.

History of Catholicism in Alton Before 1858

+The First non-native or European men to gaze upon the beauty of the area were the explorers led by Pere (Father) Jacques Marquette, S.J. and Louis Joliet, who passed by on the Mississippi in 1673. (*Pere is French for "Father", and is pronounced "pare", not pier or Pierre.*)

+During the late 1700s, a pair of French Catholics from St. Louis erected a small cabin for trading purposes on the bank of Piasa Creek, which at that time flowed down Piasa Street and emptied into the Mississippi.

+By 1840, the Rev. George Hamilton was active in administering to the needs of the Catholic population of the city. A small frame building in Upper Alton was used as the church.

+The erection of St. Matthew's Church in 1844 at the corner of 3rd & Alby appears to be the real foundational point of Catholicity in Alton. This church was constructed under the direction of the Rev. Frs. P. M. McCabe and Michael Carroll, and was blessed by the Most Rev. P. P. LeFevre, co-adjutor and administrator of the Diocese of Detroit.

+In 1851, St. Matthew's Church, was destroyed by fire.

This incident, considered catastrophic at the time, resulted in a decision to move the site of the church to State Street.

+By 1856 SS. Peter & Paul's church held services conducted by Fr. Carroll.

+In 1857, when a large number of German families arrived in Alton, there was but this one Catholic Church. There was not another Catholic Church in Illinois closer than Carlinville. Toward the north, the nearest was at Jacksonville, Litchfield, East St. Louis, Grafton and surrounding communities were attended from Alton.

+The German immigrants were at a serious disadvantage among the English-speaking Catholics of the city. They were not only unable to understand the language in their daily affairs, but could not follow the sermons in the Cathedral, and confessions were difficult.

Churches of St. Mary's Parish

+The newly consecrated Bishop of Alton, Most Rev. Henry Damian Juncker, soon after his arrival in his Episcopal See arranged for separate German service hours in the Cathedral.

+Fr. John Menge, Chancellor of the Diocese, was charge w/ care o the spiritual needs of the Germans. W/ the steady German immigration, Fr. Menge urged that a separate church be built.

+About 40 German families populated the area at the time. A few lived in town, most rented farms at great distances.

+St. Mary's Parish was established October 17, 1858, and the church building was begun in November, 1858.

+Completed in May, 1859, this 2nd Catholic Church of the city of Alton was placed under the patronage of Mary: The Church of the Immaculate Conception.

Fr. Ostrop was appointed its 1st pastor immediately after his ordination on May 4, 1859.

+It was a 2-story brick structure containing apts. for the pastor and classrooms on the 1st floor. The church proper was on the 2nd floor.

+The new congregation eagerly attended religious services.

As an aside, we'll stop here to mention that St. Mary's was founded in 1858, the same year that Bernadette Soubirous received visions of the BVM in Lourdes, France. When the girl who would become St. Bernadette asked the beautiful lady what her name was, the Lady replied, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

+Just a year and a month after its completion, a tornado and hailstorm swept over Alton on Saturday night, June 2, 1860.

The church was entirely demolished along w/ about 150 other buildings of the city and our pastor was pinned beneath the ruins. He was freed that same evening and brought the Blessed Sacrament to safety.

Second Church Building

+Fr. Ostrop made immediately plans for a new church.

+But a debt of \$3000 remained.

And Bishop Juncker insisted that the current debt must be paid before new construction could begin. Besides his own congregation and the city of Alton, our first pastor proved himself quite adept at raising money for the glory of God, and personally solicited funds in Belleville, Quincy, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Dayton, as well as other Eastern cities. The debt was not only cancelled, but enough was raised to begin a second church bldg.

+Fr. Ostrop laid the cornerstone on the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, July 21, 1861.

The new St. Mary's measured 110 x 50 ft., with a tower almost 100 ft high.

It was dedicated on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 12/8/1862.

Again by Divine coincidence, this was the same year that a chapel was built at the grotto in Lourdes, France, fulfilling one of the requests of our Blessed Lady.

+In 1869, the year the new church was consecrated, the congregation had increased to some 150 families and Sunday collections averaged \$1000 per year. This church stood in what is now known as "the square".

Present Church Building

- +During the late 1880s, the 2nd church rapidly became unserviceable.
- +Construction of the foundation walls of the current church was begun in 1891.
- +The design architect of this church was a Franciscan Brother Adrian, O.F.M., of St. Anthony's Monastery, St. Louis, MO, while the locally famed Lucas Pfeiffenberger of Alton was the supervising architect.
- +The foundation was completed in 1892 and a year later on July 16, 1893, the cornerstone was laid with appropriate ceremonies by the Most Rev. James Ryan, 3rd Bishop of Alton. The stone contains copies of the Telegraph, Sentinel-Democrat and Banner and a brief history of the parish in both English and Latin.
- +The walls and roof were completed during 1893.
- +The upper walls are of Bedford sandstone.
- +In 1894, the contractor, Vincent Wardein, supervised carpentry on the church; the original organ was moved from the old church, as were the bells and the tower clock.
- +The entire structure was completed and furnished in the summer of 1895. It measures approx 150 ft in length and 65 ft in width. The tower is about 96 ft high. Solemn Consecration took place Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1895.
- +In 1896 a pipe organ was installed.
- +1902 the High Altar was enlarged and the side altars rebuilt. This remodeling program was the result of a sacrilege committed on 4/14/1902. Ruffians entered the church and demolished the tabernacle door, carrying off the sacred vessels and the Blessed Sacrament.
- +On its Golden Jubilee (1908), St. Mary's received the blessing of Pope SAINT Pius X.
- +1918 – church redecorated for the 1st time.
- +1927 – gold tabernacle donated.
- +The relics in the high altar are those of the holy martyrs – Boniface and Maria Anna Jesu de Paradis.
- +1930 – inlaid mosaic stations of the cross donated.
- +1940 – the church was redecorated for the 2nd time. In connection w/ redecoration, marble steps at the High Altar, as well as a new marble communion rail and a new rubber floor covering for the sanctuary were donated and installed. A loudspeaker was installed and the new sanctuary light fixtures also date from this time.
- +1943 – the present stained glass art windows were donated and installed in the sanctuary.
- +1945 – present rose window installed. Organ rebuilt, including a new console comprising 3 manuals and pedal. The organ contains 40 stops, 1456 pipes and over a million feet of electrical wiring.

+Directly outside and behind our church is a small replica of the Grotto in Lourdes, France, where the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette in 1858. Our grotto was built and dedicated to all the boys and girls of St. Mary's who served in the Second World War.

- +1948 – new windows in the church proper.
- +Inside the church a new floor covering was installed, the entrance to the choir loft rearranged, and the rear of the church paneled. Electric fixtures were installed and the entire electric system rewired. White marble statues of the Sacred Heart and St. John the Apostle were donated and placed in the sanctuary.
- +In 1957 & 1958 the church was redecorated for the 3rd time in its sixty-three yr history. Simplicity was the guide in this redecoration program. No unnecessary frills were allowed which might distract the attention of the people. The original oak pews of the church were completely refinished and five new pews were added. +A cry room was added in the rear of the church. Confessionals were remodeled and refinished and a new baptismal font and stand were installed. White marble statues of the Pius X and St. Therese were also added.
- +The marble statue of St. Pius X was donated by the St. Vincent de Paul men in memory of Monsignor Brune.
- +The statue of St. Therese, donated by the School and Home Club, replaced the other statue removed during the renovating of the Church in the Centenary Year, 1958.
- +The most recent renovation of the church was in the early 1990s when the pipe organ which was installed in 1896 and customized by Prof. Heindlmayer in 1945 needed to be rebuilt and restored. This was the stepping off point for an extensive renovation when the gathering area with glass partition was put in, new baptismal font installed, new confessionals, the communion rail moved to the sides of the sanctuary, and a new altar of sacrifice, ambo and presider's chair installed.

St. Mary's School

- +The German Catholics of Alton had a parochial school before they had a church of their own. Fr. Menge rented a room in a house at the corner of 6th and Ridge Streets for the first school.
- +By 1859 the basement of the church served as a school.
- +W/ the building of the 2nd church, also came a new school, a small brick building on the west side of the church.
- +In 1930 the present school building was erected under the direct of Fr. Brune. Msgr. Suddes encouraged parishioners to donate to the school in order to keep it free for the families.
- +Recently 4 new classrooms and Suddes' Hall were added to the school under the direction of Fr. John Paul Klein, OMV.
- +In 2006, St. Mary's moved their middle school to the old St. Matthew's school building because of rising student population.
- +Historically served by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Presently served by our beloved Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

St. Mary's Church

The actual name of St. Mary's is *The Church of the Immaculate Conception*. (This is the same title that the Blessed Virgin Mary' used to identify herself to St. Bernadette at Lourdes in 1858, "I am the Immaculate Conception.") The first St. Mary's was built for the German Catholic community in Alton in May 1859. This two-story brick structure was unfortunately destroyed by a tornado in June 1860.

This present building is actually the third St. Mary's. It was completed in the summer of 1895. It measures approximately 150' in length and 65' in width. The tower is about 96' high. Candles in sconces along the side walls and crosses inscribed in the marble on either side of the entranceway signify it as being a consecrated church. The four "Bells of St. Mary's" were cast in St. Louis in the early 1880's and are dedicated, in ascending order of size, to St. Joseph, the Immaculate Conception, St. Theresia of Avila, and St. John the Apostle.

Church altars normally contain a relic(s) of one of the martyrs of the Church. Our high altar contains the relics of the holy martyrs Boniface (he is Patron Saint of Germany) and Maria Anna Jesus de Paradis. The high altar also includes a statue of St. Aloysius Gonzaga on the left and of St. Clare on the right. St. Aloysius is patron saint of youths and therefore was likely installed as a tribute to the young people of the parish. St. Clare is displayed on our altar because of her great devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. She is shown holding a "monstrance" (an ornate receptacle for displaying the Holy Eucharist).

St. Mary's has always been blessed with dedicated pastors. You will still hear people speak with great affection of Monsignor James A. Suddes. Msgr. Suddes was pastor of St. Mary's from 1954 – 1987 (he also served as assistant pastor at St. Mary's from 1938 to 1947). For 33 years Monsignor focused on the individuals and families under his care, tending to their spiritual needs selflessly and making sure their children were properly educated. He knew everyone by name. Msgr. Suddes passed away in 1997. Diocesan priests always served St. Mary's until 1987 when priests and brothers of the religious community of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary were called to serve our parish (the Oblates' central base in the United States is in Boston). Fr. Jim Walther, O.M.V., is presently St. Mary's 11th pastor and began serving in this position in Jan., 2002.

Music has always been integral to the history of St. Mary's. At no time throughout its history has St. Mary's been without a choir. At some points in time it boasted of several choirs. In 1923 St. Mary's was most fortunate in securing the services of Professor Max Hiendlmayr upon his arrival from Germany in 1923. He served in this position throughout the rest of his life. For many years he was not only the organist, but also the choir director and composer of much of its music. Most noted among his compositions was his "Mass of the Immaculate Conception," based on the theme of Schubert's *Ave Maria*. He died in 1972. Ken and Jean Conrady then served for 33 years as organist and choir director. They recently retired, but still regularly lend their services to our liturgies. Our new choir director is Mrs. Anna Haine and she is assisted by several dedicated organists and pianists. Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve is always a glorious experience with our choir and musicians.

Located directly outside and behind our church is a small replica of the Grotto in Lourdes, France, where the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette in 1858. Our grotto was built and dedicated to all those in the parish who served in World War II. At certain times of the year, St. Mary's holds communal rosary services at the Grotto and each May the children of St. Mary's "crown" this statue of our Mother at the grotto.

