

A Brief Unofficial History of Saints Peter & Paul Parish, Rochester, NY
April 2006

Saints Peter and Paul parish began in 1843 near the original Erie Canal as the city of Rochester's fourth Roman Catholic church. At that time, German-speaking immigrants in the city outnumbered the largely Irish population. West side expansion drew German Catholic immigrants from the centrally located St. Joseph's church. The first church, known then as St. Peter the Apostle, was a wooden structure with a stone basement built with funds from the parishioners themselves. Its original cornerstone and church bell are incorporated in today's church building. It was later moved and modified to become the parish schoolhouse. It was destroyed by fire in December 1867. The first pastor, a Franciscan priest, lived in the church basement which also housed the initial school accommodating 80 pupils taught by a male teacher. The parish experienced turbulent growing pains from its very beginnings regarding lay ownership of parish property. Bishop Timon's personal intervention ended the ill feelings in 1862. The era coincided with the virulent Anti-Catholic sentiments of the Know Nothings political party.

Attesting to Rochester's reputation as the nation's first boomtown, the parish doubled in size during a three-year period to include 1,676 parishioners. The congregation soon outgrew its first church building at King and East Maple Streets. A new church constructed of brick and stone seated six hundred people in pews with an additional one hundred in an upper rear gallery. It was consecrated on the original church site in 1859 and renamed Saints Peter & Paul Church. A bell tower with two new bells was added seven years later. School Sisters of Notre Dame staffed the school starting in 1859 and their service continued unbroken until 1972. Enrollment grew to 512 students with completion of the new school in 1868. Women's Rights leader Susan B. Anthony lived nearby at the time and she was visited often by fellow Abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Tragedy struck on the Feast of the Three Kings in January 1869 during a parish fund-raising celebration held in the three-story school. A newspaper account relates that one thousand people were in attendance in the school built to accommodate about five hundred students. At the close of a musical performance on the second floor, a first floor pillar collapsed causing the floor to fall through in a cone-shaped manner. The panic-stricken overflow crowd on the third floor, fearing a similar collapse, ran to the stairway creating a crush of humanity. Eight persons died and fifty were injured severely in the ensuing chaos. The church bells, which had been used for years by the City's fire department to summon aid, rang out for a massive emergency response. Arriving on the scene to administer Last Rites and calm the crowd was the newly-installed Bishop Bernard McQuaid.

By 1870 the parish enrollment climbed to 2,500 members. Not far from the church was the Ohio Basin, a rectangular body of water where the Erie Canal & Genesee Valley Canal joined together. The world-renowned Cunningham Carriage Manufactory was nearby and a women's shoe factory was just around the corner. The church campus included a convent, rectory and a social hall complete with bowling alleys. The pastoral leadership of Reverend Sinclair spanned forty years and gave the parish great stability. He was the first pastor of a local German parish to require scholastic instruction conducted in English. The church was renovated around the turn of the century and a new electric-powered organ was installed and blessed in 1903. It is the same unused organ system in the contemporary church's loft. The 1859 church's high altar, side altars, many stained glass windows and life-sized statues adorn the current church.

Mutual assistance was a parish charism from the very beginning. The St. Francis Xavier Mutual Aid Society, whose membership plaques still adorn the school basement, provided death benefits and other forms of assistance to its members from the 1860s until, at least, the 1920s. Groups like the St. Peter's Society, the Knights and Ladies of St. John and other parish societies helped promote social welfare and preservation of the Catholic faith over several generations. There had been a parish credit union which continued through the 1950s. Father Emil Gefell became pastor in the early part of the 1900s and his exceptional leadership exceeded forty years as well.

The need to eliminate railroad crossings at street level in the city of Rochester led to neighborhood changes around 1910. The Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway purchased the King Street church property at this time. Funds from the sale enabled the purchase of land at West Main and Brown Streets near Bulls Head. An ambitious building program, begun in 1911, developed a new church and school plus the renovation of private homes to create the rectory and convent. For about a year the former church was used by the new Italian parish, St. Lucy's, until their new church was completed. The deconsecrated church and other parish properties were razed soon thereafter to make way for a five-story warehouse which exists today.

The architectural firm of Gordon and Madden designed the Lombard Romanesque-style current church which was one of the first locally to use structural steel for its barrel vault ceiling and roof construction. Fr. Gefell's familiarity with classical Roman architecture from his years of study in Italy aided the design process. The bell tower was patterned on one from Lucca, Italy. The parish was heavily in debt and interior decoration of the church had to wait until the late 1920s. Professor Gonippo Raggi and his sons transformed the interior over two years with international award-winning original sacred art and examples borrowing from the style of the Renaissance painter Raphael. It was completed weeks before the Stock Market Crash of 1929.

The parish thrived during the first half of the Twentieth Century while Rochester's industrial might was emerging. Italian immigration grew considerably in the neighborhood around the 1920s and the parish celebrated with alternating Sauerkraut and Spaghetti Suppers. National public policies in the 1930s which encouraged suburban development, however, began to have a slow but subtle effect on the parish. The exponential growth of automobiles affected the neighborhood which lacked residential garages and parking space. Trolleys discontinued service on West Main Street before the Second World War. During the postwar period the trickle of migration away from the city center became a steady flow. Abandonment of the subway bed in the mid

1950s, originally the Erie Canal, to create the Interstate 490 expressway was the harbinger of neighborhood deterioration. Loss of housing for expressway ramps and the sounds of dynamiting roadbeds at night foretold the collapse of the parish neighborhood.

At the start of the 1960s the church still filled its former 900-seat capacity several times for the Sunday celebrations of the Mass. But times were changing rapidly. The pressing demand for affordable urban housing led to speculative block-busting techniques which turned the neighborhood's large single-family homes into multiple occupancy residences in a short period of time. The nearby neighborhood anchor Rochester General Hospital was demolished in 1964. Urban poverty, formerly concentrated in two city wards, spread into the Bulls Head neighborhood and 19th Ward as housing values declined dramatically. The lure of new and low cost housing in the city's western suburbs was strengthened with favorable lending practices available to some but not all. Anxiety over the neighborhood's future led to the classic pattern of "white flight" whereby longtime parish residents moved to the suburbs. People who moved into the neighborhood did not, for the most part, come from Roman Catholic backgrounds. The "urban renewal" of the 1960s and '70s created the city's Inner Loop which had the unintended effect of disuniting and isolating all urban neighborhoods from the city's financial center.

Auto and noise pollution increased. The thriving Bulls Head Plaza, built on the site of former Catholic orphanages, withered as suburban shopping malls spread across the landscape. The urban unrest of the 1960s hit the southwest city neighborhood hard. The rapidly-shrinking parishioner base imploded like a collapsing skyscraper. Rochester's Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the pioneering television evangelizer, invited the missionary Order of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus & Mary in 1968 to assume direction of the parish of Saints Peter & Paul. In 1972 the parish school was closed after nearly 130 years of continuous service due to dwindling enrollment. For a few years the school was used as a tutoring center by the City School District but later became vacant. The parish's initial mission, providing a spiritual and religious background to its immigrant members succeeded. It gave its members roots and wings. But it was time to relate to a new mission in tune with the times.

In 1982 the parish became "sick of being sick". The parish willed, with God's grace, to heal itself. Parishioners and staff began St. Peter's Kitchen which served a hot midday meal weekdays in the former school basement. A clothing ministry followed soon thereafter. Both continue to this day. The parish became a "lighthouse" drawing both persons in need from the neighborhood and volunteers from across the region to assist them. The award-winning and exemplary Saints Peter & Paul Day Care Center transformed the lower floors of the former rectory with the gleeful sounds of children's voices. The day care center transferred direction to another agency in the mid-1990s and relocated elsewhere in 2002. The upper floors and classrooms of the former school building were renovated in the late 1980s to become Saints Peter & Paul Mutual Housing which has now become Fairchild Place which is affiliated with Sojourner House. Today's grassroots advocacy group, Neighborhood United, began in the rectory basement in the early 1990s. Efforts spearheaded by members of this group played a part in the creation, in the mid-1990s, of the neighboring Main Quest drug rehabilitation program, now operated by DePaul. Main Quest incorporated the former convent as its administration building. The parish has played a role in the creation and maintenance of a dozen small neighborhood floral gardens.

The combination of a strong faith community, good stewardship of parish buildings and commitment to serve the neighborhood replaced creeping and corrosive negativism. A sense of hope, best exemplified by the restoration of the Church's sacred art marked the start of the new millennium. A repair and adaptation campaign conducted at the time of the parish sesquicentennial in 1993 helped to stabilize the physical condition of the church and aid handicapped access. The parish began partnering with neighboring parishes in the Lyell Avenue area in the late 1990s. Restructuring within the Sacred Hearts order of priests led to their departure in 1996. A realignment of parish partnerships for Saints Peter & Paul began with the Roman Catholic Churches of the 19th Ward a few years later.

The inexorable forces of the decline in the number of priests nationally, decreased number of Roman Catholics living in the neighborhood, increased operational costs and aging buildings in need of major repairs brought Saints Peter & Paul parish to a mounting crisis. The Diocese of Rochester, over a multiyear basis, created the opportunity for neighboring parishes to forge a common future. The Pastoral Planning process brought together the Roman Catholic churches of the 19th Ward, Saints Peter & Paul church and the Emmanuel Church of the Deaf to pray, research, plan and propose together a way to maintain a vital Roman Catholic worship and ministerial presence in southwest Rochester. Based on the guidelines set before them by the Bishop, the parishioner-driven process came to the very painful conclusion --- only one worship site among four churches could be sustained. The churches of Our Lady of Good Counsel, St. Augustine and Saints Peter & Paul would need to close and their properties put up for sale. The remaining worship site, St. Monica Church, would become the home to a unified parish composed of members from the churches that were closed. The synergy of five faith communities working as one carries the best traditions of these parishes forward.

The closing celebratory Mass for St. Augustine will be held Sunday April 23rd and at Our Lady of Good Counsel on Sunday, May 7th. Both services will be at 2:00p.m. with receptions following at Logan's Party House, 1420 Scottsville Road. The closing Mass for Saints Peter and Paul will follow its sale and at a date to be announced later.

Written and updated by John E. Curran, April 2006 from a variety of sources including a parish history by Fr. Robert Fox; The Life & Letters of Bishop McQuaid: The History of Catholic Rochester Before His Episcopate by Frederick Zwierlein; The Diocese of Rochester 1868-1968 by Fr. Robert F. McNamara; materials from the Rare Book Room at the University of Rochester; Local History Division (RPL) and the Archives of the Diocese of Rochester.