

The Story of St. Matthew Parish

Rev. Roman Weinzapfel was the first to pay Mt. Vernon regular visits, celebrating the sacred liturgy in the house of brothers Schenk who settled here from St. Philip in 1851.

The need for a Catholic Church during the tenure of Rev. Weinzapfel was reflected in the following excerpt from the *Wahrheits Freund*, a local newspaper of that period.

“A very advantageous location and fine town but Catholics were shy to locate here because there is no church or any prospects for one. Now, that difficulty has been removed. Recently, ground for a church has been secured in the healthiest part of the town and, God willing, a brick church will be built on it this year before winter.” (newspaper dated August 7, 1856.)

On July 16, 1856, Hiram P. and Mary Castleberry sold and conveyed to the Rt. Rev. DeSt. Palais, Bishop of Vincennes, the following tract of ground: lots 136 and 139 in Williams part of Mt. Vernon.

All of lot 139 and the south part of lot 136 were used for construction of the first church. Upon it was erected a two-story brick building, 40 by 22 feet, intended ultimately for a schoolhouse or parsonage, but the flooring of the second story being omitted, it was at the time used for church purposes.

After that, the citizens subscribed liberally the total outlay was \$2,000. *The church was placed under the patronage of St. Matthew and, in October, 1857, was blessed by Rev. E.J.Durbin.*

This event was noted in the Dec. 31, 1857 issue of the Wahrheits Freunds as follows: “The brick church in Mt. Vernon this last summer was blessed. It is only a temporary church so arranged that it can be easily turned into a school and teachers dwelling.

The site for the permanent church is left free with the expectations that, in a few years, a larger church will be required.”

In July, 1858, Father Weinzapfel visited the church for the last time. Rev. Patrick McDermott attended from Evansville from September, 1858 until August 1859.

For two years after, Rev. Paul Wagner visited the church from St. Wendel on the fourth Sunday of each month.

It was next attended from Vincennes by the Rev. John Contin and Rev. Gustave Ginsz from 1862 until 1865.

In 1865, the Rev. H.J. Diestel residing at St. Philip, took charge of the parish. He attended the place faithfully and in 1867, erected a spacious one-story frame house, which was to serve as a schoolhouse and parsonage.

Rev. John Sondermann was appointed the first resident pastor on Nov. 11, 1868, and remained there until May 15, 1874. He found a small congregation and \$2,000 in debts. He paid the debt in a few years, and, beside, bought ground for a cemetery and added a second story to his residence, not mentioning many other improvements.

The school, also, was in a flourishing condition. The following quotation appeared in the Christmas 1871 edition of the Wahrheits Freund: "Christmas collection \$55.00, good for a parish where nearly all are yet wanting in every way. Located on the Ohio river, and got a railroad from Mt. Vernon to Chicago is now being built. The church is too small and we badly need a new one. We have a good school in charge of Teacher Weiss. It keeps the people scratching to make financial ends meet. Formerly Mt. Vernon was attended from St. Philips."

From May, 1874, until autumn of 1876, Re. Matthias A. Gillig was pastor. He left at his own option.

Following Rev. Matthias Gillig, the congregation was without a pastor for seven months. Rev. J.J. Schoentrup took charge in July, 1877.

At that time the congregation consisted of 73 families. The school had an enrollment of 126 children, some of whom were non-Catholics. Seeing that the church was entirely too small to accommodate the congregation, Rev. Schoentrup decided to build a new church. He obtained very liberal subscriptions from Catholics and non-Catholics. The church was begun in the summer of 1879, and was completed in July, 1880. The building is Roman style, 112 by 50 feet, with a steeple 146 feet high. Bishop Chatard blessed the church Oct. 10, 1880. The cost of the building was \$10,000, the interior furnishings \$1,700.

On July 27, 1882, Rev. J.J. Schoentrup purchased from the trustees of the First Presbyterian Church of Mt. Vernon, lot 137 of Williams part of the city of Mt. Vernon for the sum of \$1,250.

This purchase was made for school purposes. He introduced the Sisters of St. Francis to take charge of the parish school.

The Rev. A. Koesters served the parish from 1883 to 1884. In December, 1885, the Rev. Francis B. Luebbermann was placed in charge of the parish and served until 1917.

In the year 1900, St. Matthew parish acquired 80 acres of land in Point Township, Posey County, about 12 miles southwest of Mt. Vernon. Forty acres were donated by G.B. Menzies and General Alvin P. Hovey, the other 40 acres being purchased by the parish for the sum of \$550. A colonization project was begun in the adjacent territory.

A number of Catholic families, the Dennings, Vaals, Schwindels, Rohlmans and Schlacters and others from the St. Meinrad and Ferdinand, Indiana parishes set up new homesteads in the community.

Under the direction of Fr. Luebbermann, a frame church 72 by 35 feet, was built on the acquired land. It was dedicated in October, 1902, under the title of Poor Souls Chapel.

This mission was attended from St. Matthew until 1907 but was gradually abandoned with the advent of hard surface roads from Mt. Vernon. In the year 1937, Poor Souls Chapel was destroyed by fire. The 80 acres of land is still in possession of St. Matthew parish.

On December 6, 1900, Melissa A. McArthur sold and conveyed to St. Mary's Convent and Academy of Enfield, Illinois, lot 138 of Williams part of the city of Mt. Vernon, Indiana and this property was later conveyed by St. Mary's Convent and Academy to St. Matthew parish on March 19, 1906.

Fr. Luebbermann's pastorate of 32 years is not only the longest in the history of St. Matthew Church but was distinguished by spiritual and financial advancement as well as increased community understanding of the Catholic faith.

During his administration, the present brick convent (former rectory) and the present brick rectory were erected along with a large two-story brick school building located at the corner of 5th and Mulberry streets.

The entire second floor of the school was a large hall with a stage and was used by all the Mt. Vernon community for many social and civic events. The stage was used by the school children for plays, programs and concerts and by the adults of the community for "home talent productions" so popular up until the forties. St. Matthew's annual "fair" was also held in the hall.

Reference: Taken out of the St. Matthew's 1879-1979 Centennial Directory