

A History of St. Lawrence German Catholic Church

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Religious faith plays a central role in many people's lives.¹ For immigrants, religious worship may be a comforting familiarity in their new country, where other customs may seem strange. The story of St. Lawrence German Catholic Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, not only tells the history of a parish but also the story of many of the first German-Catholic families who lived in the Susquehanna Valley.

The history of Catholicism in the Harrisburg region dates back to the seventeenth century. By 1679, Jesuit missionaries had formed mission churches in Native American villages between Maryland and Canada and used the Susquehanna River as a major traveling route. Around 1727, John Harris established a trading post at the site of present-day Harrisburg. Large numbers of Scotch-Irish and Germans moved into this region, and by the end of the eighteenth century, many more immigrants of various nationalities had settled in the area. Many of these newcomers were Catholic. As early as 1791, Father William Elling of Lancaster visited the mission at Harrisburg once a month. In 1804, Jesuit Fathers from the Conewago Mission celebrated Mass in the homes of Harrisburg-area Catholics at irregular intervals. The first permanent Catholic church in Harrisburg was established in 1827 on the site of present-day St. Patrick's Cathedral on State Street. English- and German-speaking Catholics initially worshiped together, but by mid-century, the large number of German-Catholic immigrants to the area "necessitated a church in which the German-speaking people could worship and receive

¹ This paper has been edited by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, webmaster of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward website, found at <<http://www.old8thward.com>>.

instruction in their own language.”²

Ethnic parishes, also called national parishes, were being founded in many dioceses around the country during this period. Rather than restricting membership to people who resided within a specific geographical area, as remains the case in many Catholic parishes today, national parishes served the needs of a specific ethnic group. Many of the Catholics in the Harrisburg area were Irish immigrant laborers, who relocated between 1817 and 1822 to build the canal system in Pennsylvania.³ However, many Germans came to Pennsylvania in the late 1840s because of political upheaval in their native land. The national parish of St. Lawrence allowed the area’s German immigrants to maintain an “alternative cultural style within the Catholic setting.”⁴ Because of this, congregants were able to celebrate religious holidays and customs as they would have in their native land, and Mass was presented in German. Latin was used during Mass only where mandated by church authorities.⁵

In April 1859, a congregation of German-speaking Catholics was organized as a mission by Father Dryer of York. Father Dryer officiated until his death later that same year. On December 11, 1859, Rev. M. J. Maurer held services in the Odd Fellows Hall, which was located on the southeastern corner of Second and South Streets in the Eighth Ward of Harrisburg. From January 1 until September 1, 1860, when he was transferred to another parish, Rev. J. Vollmeyer of York held services twice a month. After this, Rev. Maurer again attended to the needs of the congregation until November 1, 1860, when Father Lawrence Schneider, assistant pastor of York, was sent to serve the German congregation. He purchased an old church building on Front Street between Walnut and Locust Streets, which was later demolished to make room for the

² *St. Lawrence Parish Centennial*, (1968), 15-16.

³ Kathleen Signor, “Diocesan History Summary,” *Diocese of Harrisburg* website, <<http://www.hbgdiocese.org/archives/diohistory.html>>, as viewed on 28 June 2005, 8.

⁴ Dolores Liptak, *Immigrants and their Church*, (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 98.

⁵ Theodore Stellwag, *St. Lawrence Church, Harrisburg, PA: A Brief History and Guide*, (1993), 7.

Henry Gilbert mansion. The church had been previously occupied by United Brethren and Dunkard congregations and was purchased from Robert Long for \$2,500.⁶

This church was dedicated on November 25, 1860, and St. Lawrence was chosen as the patron saint. St. Lawrence had been one of the seven deacons of Rome in the service of the pope, St. Sixtus II, upon his death in 258. After St. Sixtus II died, the prefect of Rome ordered St. Lawrence to turn over the church's valuables. Instead, St. Lawrence brought the sick and the poor to the official, stating, "Here is the church's treasure," because he had distributed the valuables to the poor. The prefect, believing that the priest was hiding the church's valuables, had St. Lawrence roasted alive on a gridiron. St. Lawrence's last words were "Turn me over now. I am done on this side." Because of this courage, St. Lawrence is often identified as the most celebrated martyr of Rome.⁷

The parish was served by a succession of visiting pastors for nearly a decade. Father Schneider acted as pastor until February 1861, when Rev. Maurer once again served the congregation. In September 1861, Rev. Hann took over the church. In January 1862, Rev. Karl Shafroth of Columbia succeeded Father Hann, and he held services twice each month until December 1863. That month Rev. William Pieper took over the congregation. He served the parish for nearly five years, visiting the parish nearly twice each month. In April 1868, Rev. J. B. Frisch was appointed the first resident pastor, who stayed until the end of the year.⁸ The Diocese of Harrisburg was also formed in 1868, and the Most Reverend Jeremiah Shanahan was its bishop. Previously, Harrisburg had been part of the Diocese of Philadelphia. The new

⁶ *Parish Centennial*, 15-16; *History of St. Lawrence Church*, (Harrisburg: Diocese of Harrisburg Archives, 1916), 1-2.

⁷ Stellwag, 1993.

⁸ *Souvenir History: St. Lawrence's Church*, (Harrisburg: Middletown Press, 1901), 2-3.

diocese served 25,000 Catholics in fifteen counties.⁹

The next pastor was to become legendary in St. Lawrence's history. In January 1869, Father Clement A. Koppnagel was appointed rector, a position he would hold for the next 22 years. A native of the Province of Westphalia, Germany, Koppnagel had studied at the University of Munster and completed his preparation for the priesthood at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Overbook, Pennsylvania. He was ordained to the Holy Priesthood in Philadelphia by Archbishop Wood on May 10, 1866. After serving at St. John's Church, Haycock, he came to the newly established Diocese of Harrisburg and was appointed pastor of St. Lawrence parish. He was described as a "towering figure" and a man of "zeal, talent, and vision."¹⁰

Father Koppnagel wanted to provide his congregation with a new church commensurate with the size of its growing membership, so in 1873 he sold the church property on Front Street to Henry Gilbert for \$7000. He purchased a property on Walnut Street in the Eighth Ward from Constantine Benitz, Mrs. Osler, and the Young estate for \$11,500. The property was L-shaped with frontage on Walnut Street; the shorter arm of the "L" extended along Short Street and was to become the site of the rectory, a school, and a convent. Father Koppnagel had been trained in carpentry and stone masonry in Germany, which were skills that he would put to good use in his new church home. A temporary church building was constructed immediately, and the permanent church was built around and over the temporary structure in which services were being held.¹¹

The new church building was one of the largest in the city of Harrisburg. It was built under the supervision of and with the manual labor of Father Koppnagel. He drew the plans for the new church, and he also supervised the work of the masons, carpenters, and bricklayers

⁹ *Parish Centennial*, 16-17.

¹⁰ *St. Lawrence Church History*, 2; *Parish Centennial*, 17.

¹¹ *Parish Centennial*, 17.

that would construct the exterior walls and erect the roof. Koppernagel did the majority of the interior work. He was assisted occasionally by Edward Moeslein, who would later become St. Lawrence's school director, and a handful of other parishioners. Father Koppernagel did the window staining, made the pulpit and altars, and formed the pews.¹² Koppernagel often worked until two or three in the morning in order to complete the interior woodwork, which took over eight years to complete. One parishioner recalled how the women of the church often held "sand-paper parties" to sand the scroll work that Koppernagel and Moeslein had cut with their saws.¹³ The new church was one of the finest specimens of Gothic style architecture in the mid-Atlantic region and cost over \$75,000 to construct.¹⁴

In a 1912 newspaper article, J. Howard Wert described in flowery prose how Father Koppernagel constructed the interior of the church. He wrote that Koppernagel

. . . sawed and hewed and carved until creations of beauty stood forth beneath his chisel and mallet. . . . He personally selected every piece of lumber and in the whole interior of St. Lawrence church, you cannot find a single defective or inferior stick. With Father Koppernagel the welfare of St. Lawrence congregation and the building for them of a suitable place for the worship of the Almighty had become a life work which absorbed his whole soul and being.¹⁵

The new church was dedicated in September 1878 even though the final touches to the interior were not finished until later. Father Koppernagel designed and finished the side altars in 1882 and the high altar in 1884.¹⁶

Many German national churches opened their own parochial schools; these schools sought to preserve their children's faith and sense of ethnic identity. In such schools, the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anonymous letter to St. Lawrence Church Association, (Harrisburg: Diocese of Harrisburg Archives), 3.

¹⁴ "Handsome Church in Extension Plan," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 17 November 1911.

¹⁵ Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, eds., *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward*, (Charleston: Arcadia, 2002), 35.

¹⁶ *History of St. Lawrence*, 2.

German language was taught as well as German customs.¹⁷ St. Lawrence opened a small parochial school in 1873, and August Karle, who was the church organist, served as teacher. Two years later, Father Koppnagel expanded the school and secured the services of the Sisters of Christian Charity to teach the children. The sisters of Christian Charity were an order of religious nuns founded in Germany in 1849 by the Blessed Pauline von Mallinkrodt. The charitable activities of the Sisters were disrupted by the *Kulturkampf*, which was a conflict between the government under Bismarck and the Roman Catholic Church. Bismarck sought to limit the influence of the church in Germany, and many of the sisters emigrated to the United States to continue their work.¹⁸ Four sisters arrived in Harrisburg from their motherhouse in Scranton on September 6, 1875. The conditions that awaited the Sisters were less than ideal. The diary of Sister Meinolpha described the scene. She wrote that

Upon our arrival we were met by the Reverend Father Koppnagel, Pastor of St. Lawrence Parish, who conducted us to our modest home, the former rectory. We were received into a poor parish, laboring at the time under straitened circumstances—a heavy debt occasioned by the erection of a large new church. Quite naturally, the situation caused us many a hardship too. Many difficulties of another kind were also our lot, but with God’s help we gradually overcame them.¹⁹

Two days after their arrival, the Sisters opened the parish school. The pastor’s parlor in the adjoining house served as a classroom for the upper class, and the sister’s parlor was the classroom for the lower class. Fifty children started school that first day, which was more than had been expected. By the end of the first year, over one-hundred students were enrolled. Sister Carola taught the upper class, Sister Meinolpha the lower class, Sister Julie taught needlework, and Sister Maxima acted as housekeeper.²⁰ The early sisters at St. Lawrence spoke German as

¹⁷ Liptak, 94-98.

¹⁸ “Kulturkampf,” *Nationmaster.com*, <<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Kulturkampf>>, as viewed on 28 June 2005.

¹⁹ *St. Lawrence School, Harrisburg, PA: Sisters of Christian Charity 100th Anniversary*, (1975), 4-5.

²⁰ *History of St. Lawrence*, 3.

did many of the parishioners at that time. Subjects were taught in German in one session and in English in the other session.²¹

The 1880s was a decade of growth and excitement for the school. On April 16, 1880, Mother Pauline, founder of the order of the Sisters of Christian Charity, began a four day visit with the sisters and their schoolchildren. This was part of her worldwide trip to visit the missions established by the order. This visit remains a milestone in St. Lawrence Church history because Mother Pauline is currently a candidate for beatification and eventual canonization, which will establish her as a saint.²² In 1884, a single first grade was introduced, and the sacristy of the church was used as a classroom for these thirty children. One sister noted that many of the grandmothers enjoyed staying in the church in order to hear the children recite their lessons. In 1887, a new wooden school building opened, providing two classrooms, one on each level.²³ During this time period, the parish population increased by the arrival of many Austrian and Hungarian immigrants to the Harrisburg area.²⁴

Father Koppnagel's health suffered under the strain of constructing the church interior at night while maintaining his priestly duties during the day. He took great pride and satisfaction in his work to beautify the church. Even though his doctor advised him to stop, Koppnagel moved his work-bench into the sacristy to continue with his work, but he eventually had to be physically stopped from working because of his health. One account recalled Rev. Koppnagel's enthusiasm and happiness whenever he was working on the church. This account states that ". . . his health became so bad that his tools had to be removed almost by force . . . he sat down in the old school yard, shed tears and said 'They are taking my play-things from

²¹ *Sisters Charity Anniversary*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *History of St. Lawrence*, 3.

²⁴ *Stellwag*, 7.

me’.”²⁵ Koppnagel continued to be in poor health until he died on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1891. He is buried at the Mt. Calvary Cemetery in Harrisburg.

Rev. James Huber acted as a temporary pastor until Rev. Frank E. Seubert was appointed to serve at St. Lawrence on January 14, 1892. Construction of a large school and parish hall on Short Street was started in 1896. Classes were organized into grades in the new school for the first time, and by 1900, almost 140 students were divided into six grades. The subjects taught were Catholic and Biblical History, arithmetic, geography, United States history, hygiene, German and English reading, penmanship, grammar, and composition. Needlework was taught to the girls and drawing to the boys. A house was also bought on Short Street as a new convent for the sisters. Seubert was pastor until July 27, 1899, when his ill health caused him to be transferred to Elizabethtown.

The turn of the century was a time of growth and change for St. Lawrence German Catholic Church. The church register of this period shows the characteristics of parish life at St. Lawrence. In the fiscal year 1905-1906, 430 individuals from 115 families were members of the church. There were forty-eight baptisms and seven deaths noted. Five marriages between Catholic couples and two “mixed” marriages were performed. Fifty-two boys and fifty-one girls attended the church’s parochial school, and only three children attended public school. This small number of public school pupils attests to how important the parishioners of St. Lawrence viewed Catholic school attendance. Pew rentals that year brought in \$1,028, and the Easter collection amounted to \$126.50. In the previous year, the pastor earned a salary of \$999.96, while the sisters received \$600 total. Data sent to the Census Bureau for the 1910 census indicated that Masses were conducted in both English and German.

A new priest would also lead the congregation into the new century. Rev. Stephen M.

²⁵ Anonymous letter, 3-4.

Wiest was appointed rector and began his pastorate on August 4, 1899. He found a debt of nearly \$21,000 against the church property and realized that many repairs and improvements to the church were necessary. He quickly reduced the church debt and saw to the maintenance of the parish buildings. The sanctuary of the church was enlarged, and the altars were painted and gilded. In 1907, construction of the “combination building,” which consisted of a combined parish hall and schoolhouse, were completed. Apparently, this building was quite progressive for its time. An article in the October 12, 1907, *Harrisburg Telegraph* stated that “the magnificent new combination building . . . of spacious and modern design . . . will compare very favorably with the finest and most up-to-date parish houses of the larger cities.” The building consisted of a library, pool room, club rooms, and a kitchen on the first floor, six “up-to-date” school rooms on the second floor, and a large auditorium capable of seating five- to six-hundred people on the third floor. The building was heated by steam and was capable of being lit by either electricity or gas. It also had stained glass windows and hardwood maple floors with tiled corridors.²⁶ This renovation and expansion campaign proved to be untimely. Although a *1901 Souvenir History* of the church optimistically predicted that “(p)resent indications point to a new era of prosperity and improvement in our midst” because of the construction of the new Capitol building and the creation of parks in the city, the days of the Fifth and Walnut church building were already limited.²⁷

Rev. Wiest died in September 1910 and was succeeded by Rev. Peter S. Huegel.. Father Huegel was a native of St. Joseph’s parish in Lancaster and had studied at St. Vincent Seminary, Latrobe, and at St. Charles’ Seminary in Philadelphia. He was ordained on June 1, 1901, and served at churches in New Freedom, Bonneauville, and Middletown before being assigned to St.

²⁶ “Cornerstone will be Laid Tomorrow,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 12 October 1907.

²⁷ *Souvenir History*.

Lawrence. His pastorate was marked by one of the most eventful periods in the history of St. Lawrence Church. By the mid-1910s, the character of St. Lawrence parish had changed. The membership of the church grew little as immigration into Harrisburg stagnated, and three new parishes were established in the city, which competed with St. Lawrence for members. The passage of the Fox-Tunis Bill in 1911, which provided for the expansion of the Capital Park into the Eighth Ward, necessitated the eventual demolition of Koppernagel's church building. Many Catholics at the same time felt that the era of national parishes had ended, and the administration of the Diocese of Harrisburg believed that St. Lawrence had "outlived its usefulness and should be disbanded."²⁸ The St. Lawrence parishioners absolutely disagreed and wished to construct a new building. The Diocese proposed that St. Lawrence be merged with St. Mary's Church on Maclay Street. The parishioners at St. Mary's, misunderstanding the proposition and fearing that they were being forced out of their own church building, also protested, and the idea was dropped. The decision was then made to relocate St. Lawrence Church to a new location in Harrisburg.

Selection of the new site was difficult and led to many disagreements among the parishioners. In 1912, the Diocese wanted the church to relocate to a site on State Street near Front Street. The church eventually took an option on this tract of land but was advised by the bishop not to purchase it until payment for the present St. Lawrence church was received from the state. In October 1915, the state offered a price of \$110,000 to purchase the church, but this offer was rejected by a vote of the congregation. The state made a second offer of \$116,000, which was also rejected. At a December meeting the congregation voted to ask for \$135,000, as they believed this would be a fair cost for the current building and for construction of a new church and school complex. The state rejected this figure and offered \$125,000, and Bishop

²⁸ *History of St. Lawrence*, 6.

Shanahan advised the church to accept this bid. The resolution to accept this payment passed on December 26, 1915.²⁹

The congregation searched further for a site for the new church, as they felt that the land on State Street was too near St. Patrick's Cathedral. On January 30, 1916, the parish voted to purchase a site on Front and Boas Streets, but this site was objected to by Rev. Hassett of St. Patrick's parish for unknown reasons. Two other possible sites had been rejected by the parishioners. The first location, on Front and Cherry Streets, was deemed "questionable as to the morals of the vicinity." One church member reminded the congregation that they did not "want a location as poor as the one we had."³⁰ Parishioners worried that the sisters would be upset by the language that they would hear through the open windows of the convent on a Saturday night on Cherry Street. "Our sisters and priests have been in a dirt hole long enough," exclaimed one parishioner.³¹ The site was also more expensive and provided less room than other prospective sites. A second site, located on Third and Herr Streets, was also listed as "undesirable."

Even though it would be farther away for many members of the congregation, the site on Front and Boas was eventually chosen as the "cheapest, best and cleanest location."³² Once again, however, this site was rejected by Diocese officials, and ultimately, it was decided that the initial site, on State Street near Front Street on Buttonwood, would be selected. Father Huegel received a letter from the Bishop authorizing him to purchase two properties at 110 and 114 State Street for \$38,000; the property on 112 State could not be purchased for any price. The 110 State Street property had been the site of the Kepner mansion, which was built by Harrisburg's

²⁹ Ibid., 4-20.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 25-26, 29.

³² Ibid., 24.

first mayor.³³

Construction on the new church was to begin the last week of June 1916. March 1917 was chosen as the vacate date of the church building on Walnut. The architect of the new church was Paul Monaghan of Philadelphia, who originally was from Harrisburg and had attended St. Lawrence School as a child. The cornerstone of the new church was laid on October 22, 1916; this was the first public event presided over by Bishop Philip R. McDevitt following his instillation after Bishop Shanahan's death. Construction delays and quality problems with subcontractors delayed the completion of the new church. The last Mass at the Walnut street site was conducted in May of 1917, and the congregation attended Mass in the new school social hall until construction was completed. The church on State Street was consecrated on April 20, 1918, in honor of St. Lawrence, and Bishop McDevitt celebrated a Solemn Pontifical Mass the next day.³⁴

More than just memories of the old St. Lawrence lived on in the new church. The organ from the original church, which had been installed in the 1890s, was refurbished and placed in the new church. The nativity scene, which had been purchased with nickels and dimes donated by St. Lawrence schoolchildren, was also used at Christmas time. Several statues that graced the old church were featured in a special shrine room in the new church. However, the closing of the old St. Lawrence Church marked the end of an era in the parish's German ethnic history. With massive German immigration at an end, many second-generation German-Americans saw their identification primarily as American rather than German.³⁵ Hostility and suspicion of German-Americans during World War I also led to decreased emphasis on the special ethnic needs of

³³ Stellwag, 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 8-11, 13.

³⁵ Liptak, 106.

parishioners at the new St. Lawrence.³⁶ The entrance of the United States into the war with Germany in 1916 marked the end of the use of German in St. Lawrence church services.³⁷ Like their tenacious ancestors, the parishioners of St. Lawrence Church weathered the changes and thrived into the twentieth century. Shifting population patterns, decreased church membership, and tight finances caused the Diocese of Harrisburg to reorganize its parishes in the early 1990s, and St. Lawrence Church closed several years later.³⁸

The Forum of the State Education building now stands on the site of Koppnagel's magnificent church, and its replacement structure on State Street remains unused. Most of St. Lawrence's parishioners transferred to St. Patrick's Cathedral or dispersed into neighboring churches. And although many of Harrisburg's Catholics today may not realize it, St. Lawrence German Catholic Church played an important role in their ancestors' ability to cope in their new home by providing them with religious and cultural stability. While the descendants of St. Lawrence parishioners no longer form a unique congregation, they have discovered, much like their patron saint, that a church's members are its true treasure.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁷ *Souvenir History*, 5.

³⁸ Kathleen Signor, "Diocesan History Summary," *Diocese of Harrisburg* website, <<http://www.hbgdiocese.org/archive/diohistory.html>>, as viewed on 28 June, 2005.