

HISTORY OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCH

FLORENCE, KY.

A paper presented before the Boone County Historical Society by Mr. Dutton Aylor on August 15, 1952.

The first white man to put foot in Boone County was the French Catholic, Longueil, whom history records as the first European to enter what is now the state of Kentucky. He stopped at Big Bone Lick, a place much visited by the Indians on account of the springs. The second explorer who came within this portion of Kentucky was Celeron, a Frenchman, in 1750, who was the first to explore the Ohio River from its source to its mouth. History records two captive Virginian women as having escaped from the Indians at Big Bone Springs in 1754 and safely making their way home. The greatest of all explorers was Daniel Boone, after whom our county was named. Kentucky was made a state in 1792 and this part of the state was included in Campbell County. Boone County was separated from Campbell County in 1798. All of Kentucky was considered a part of Fincastle County, Virginia, and claimed by that state. The land grants are either recorded in that county or in Campbell County, for in 1805 when the first deed book was opened in the new Boone County the land was already in the hands of individuals. The first deed shown in this county was made by Samuel Glore to David O'Neal, who sold ten acres on the Sugar Fork of Big Bone Creek for twenty dollars. Kenton County was a part of Campbell County, and Florence, which was formerly called Connersville for Paschal Conners, an early settler, and previously Maddenstown for Dr. Madden, is said to be older than Covington. Florence formed a link in the road which ran from Lexington to Georgetown and Cincinnati. The name of Connersville was changed by act of the Legislature, which incorporated the town of Florence on June 27, 1830, with the following trustees: B. A. Collins, Jacob Shotts, Henry Stuch and Wm. T. Bainbridge. In 1851 the Burlington and Florence Turnpike was begun, a mud road having previously been in existence.

In 1851 Cornelius Ahern, who was the instrument in the hands of God of starting the first Catholic Church in Boone County, came to Florence with his family. He found but two Catholics in the little village, Mrs. Scott, the wife of the village doctor, and Mr. and Mrs. Ferneding, who kept one of the village taverns. The Aherns naturally felt lonely without the Mass and invited Father Thomas R. Butler from Covington to say Mass. Father Butler came on a week-day in the latter part of the year. He arranged to say Mass on a Sunday and the word

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was spread abroad and the gathering proved to be so unexpectedly large that Mr. Ahern said then we surely need a church. Professor Andrew Collins, whose father, Andrew Collins, was one of the founders of the church, narrates that his father had just come to Taylorsport, near Bullittsville, in the year 1851, after a trip up the rivers from New Orleans, in which city he had landed from Ireland. He heard the Mass was to be said in Florence and traveled perhaps fifteen miles on horseback to be present. This was the beginning of the Catholic Church in Florence. Mass was always celebrated in Mr. Ahern's log cabin on Shelby Street and the old parishioners narrate that Mr. Ahern always insisted on those who came a long distance or who came fasting to Mass to participate in his hospitality. Father Butler arranged to come every three months and the village people took very kindly to him and invited him up to the Christian Church to explain the Catholic doctrine, which invitation Father Butler accepted.

Father DeMarie, an Italian priest, who came from time to time to say Mass in Florence in Mr. Ahern's log cabin, as did Bishop George Aloysius Carrell, the first Bishop of Covington, and also Father Guilfoyle, undertook to go on a missionary tour to raise funds for the church. Father Force was the first pastor appointed for Florence. The Catholics of the neighborhood had raised enough money to start building, together with that which Father DeMarie had collected, the old church on Shelby Street. Ezra K. Fish, a non-Catholic, on September 26, 1855, donated two lots, making a ninety foot front on Shelby Street and one hundred and twenty foot on Center Street. The parish purchased from him another lot adjoining on Shelby Street on June 21, 1856. This lot had a frontage of forty-two feet, extending one hundred and twenty feet back to an eight and one-half foot alley. The purchase price was seventy-five dollars. Mr. Ahern, who was a stone mason, built the stone foundation, with the help of the men in the congregation. While the church was being built, the Know Nothing propaganda was in full swing. Religious liberty was not accepted by a large number of American people as a principle or as a practice. However, there were not many bigots in the village, as is always the rule where people have personal contact with Catholics, but out in the country there were many Know Nothings. They had a lodge and a plot was formed to burn down the Catholic Church before completion. John Bradford, a prominent non-Catholic, warned Mr. Ahern. Mr. Ahern, Mr. ~~Dennedy~~ Dennedy, Mr. Collins and about twenty other members of the church assembled at the church and remained all night to guard it. There was no attack, owing, it is said, to the courageous action of Col. H. Buckner, who went to the meeting of the ~~Mr~~ Know Nothings and, laying a revolver on the table and

calling God to witness, stated that he would shoot the man who put a match to the Catholic Church. He was known as a man of his word and this interference broke up the plot. In the meantime the village people also declared they would help defend the church. The first Catholic Church was built of frame. Its dimensions were twenty-five by forty feet. A steeple topped it off about thirty feet high. There was a gallery and the building could accommodate about four hundred, as there were no pews, but plain pine benches. The building cost six hundred dollars to erect, and was dedicated in June, 1856. There was no resident pastor. Father Force said Mass once a month and seems to have made Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, his headquarters for the baptismal records for Florence from 1855 to 1861 are to be found in the records in Mt. Sterling. The early priests were missionary priests going on horseback from one mission or station to another.

Among the pioneer Catholics were Cornelius Ahern, James Dennedy, Martin Farrell, Joseph Sullivan, Andrew Collins, Thomas Golden, John Usher, Joseph Ferneding, Thomas Dorsey, Michael Carey, Mrs. Dr. Scott, Mrs. Fred Cull, Mrs. Fred Rich, and Mrs. Henry Oelsner.

The early non-Catholic friends included Col. Ezra Fish, Spencer Fish, Jonathan Williams, John Bradford, and the Price, Buckner, Stevens, and Carpenter families.

There was no resident pastor appointed for St. Paul's Church until Father Bent, who came in 1874. From Father Force's time until Father Bent, the following priests officiated at Florence: L. D. Willie, 1862; W. J. D'Arcy, 1863; A. Egelmeers, 1864-65; Abbot S. Hiermann, O.S.B., 1865; Rev. James McNerney, 1865-66; L. Young, 1867; J. F. Van de Wiel in 1867; George A. Watson, 1867-69; John A. McGill, 1869; Jas. W. Smith, 1869-70; J. F. Whelan, 1870-74.

Father Bent built the addition to the church which gave room for the sanctuary and established the first school, and its first teacher was Miss Murphy. School was taught in the church. Father McNerney built a school room on the lot purchased from Mr. Fish. Father Bent lived in Florence in an old brick house on the south side of Shelby Street, the first building from Main Street. The church purchased the house on Main Street, the second door from Burlington Road, and in this house Fathers Kolb, Kathman and McCaffrey lived. Father McNerney returned to Florence and was here from July, 1877, until November, 1878, when he was succeeded by Father Burke, who was pastor here for the long period of eleven years. Father Burke installed pews in the church and spent about two thousand dollars of his own

money on the church. Father Burke kept the records of the church in good order. The baptismal records show two baptisms performed by Bishop A. M. Toebe at Williamstown and also a baptism by Father Lambert in 1877. The priests assigned to Florence always had the care of mission churches, and the baptismal records cover many of the surrounding towns such as New Liberty, Warsaw, and Williamstown. Four missions were served by Father Burke: Walton, Verona, Independence, and Florence. As a consequence there was Mass in St. Paul's only once a month. Father Wm. Gorey was Father Burke's successor until 1891. Father J. B. Kolb was appointed on April 1 of that year and remained for thirteen years, exceeding the period of service of any of the pastors to the present date.

The mission at Walton was dropped from Florence and Father Kolb built a church at Erlanger.

Father William K. Kathman was appointed pastor September 1, 1904, and to him is to be given the credit of inaugurating the building of the present pretty brick church building and pastor's residence. The cost of both was \$14,000. Father McCaffrey was appointed his successor on May 11, 1911, and carried to completion the building of the present church plant. Father McCaffrey was the first priest to say two Masses on Sunday, one in Florence and one in Independence, nine miles away. Father John F. O'Dwyer came on January 28, 1913, and one of his first acts was to close the school. He improved the church grounds with roads and walks. His successor was Father John Kroger, who came on January 1, 1916, and remained only nine months. His successor was father Lelen, who sold two acres of the church property to reduce the church debt which was dragging along during the war period. Rev. Gerald J. Connolly came on October 1, 1918. Father Connolly converted the old church building into a modern hall, with stage, scenery, folding chairs, electric lights, and purchased a moving picture machine. Mr. and Mrs. John R. Miller on January 18, 1920, from the estate of their son, John Miller, donated one thousand dollars, the largest single gift ever made to the parish. The parishioners also contributed towards the reduction of the church debt during 1919 and 1920 by a total subscription of one thousand six hundred and five dollars. Father Connolly was transferred to Brooksville, Kentucky, June 8, 1921, and was succeeded at Florence by Reverend Herbert J. Egbring.

During the summer the concrete highway linking Florence to Covington was completed. Electric lights were installed in

the church and residence and two side altars were obtained from Holy Cross Church, Latonia, Kentucky.

On the first Saturday in August, 1921, the first picnic was held on the church grounds. The response from parishioners and friends in the city was beyond all expectations and enough money was cleared to pay off the debt of fifteen hundred dollars and to make needed repairs on the buildings.

September, 1923, was a very blessed month for the parish. On the tenth day of the month the parochial school was reopened, after being closed for ten years. The old school room was repaired and converted into a modern sanitary classroom. The enrollment was twenty-five pupils. The services of the Benedictine Sisters were obtained and Sister Mary Irene, O.S.B., the only child of the parish to enter religious life, was placed in charge. Her residence was at Erlanger, and the trip back and forth was made daily by bus. One week later, owing to the difficulty of having eight grades in one room, the sacristy was utilized as a second classroom, and Miss Catherine Bauers became the teacher of the four lower grades.

During the fall of this year a modern steam heating system was installed in the church.

In 1924 the interior of the church was painted for the first time and a large main altar was purchased. All the statues were renewed and repaired, and a vestment case, confessional and baptismal font were donated.

New families had moved into the district, attendance at school had increased, so that a new building was necessary. A total of twenty-five hundred dollars was subscribed for a new school. On March 30, 1925, ground was broken and the construction began under the direction of B. A. Herzog. Work progressed rapidly and the school was dedicated September 13, 1925, by Right Rev. Francis W. Howard, D.D., Bishop of Covington, before the largest gathering ever assembled in the town. School opened the next day, with Sister Mary Irene, O.S.B., and Sister Mary Grace, O.S.B., as the teachers, and forty-three pupils enrolled.

The old church building on Shelby Street was rapidly falling into decay. Accordingly it was condemned by the town officials, and razed by the men of the parish in January, 1926. The lumber was used to construct a large hall in the rear of the present church, and is used regularly for entertainments, social

gatherings and society meetings. The dramatic club organized in 1927 has made great progress and offers wonderful opportunities to the young people of the parish.

The growth of the congregation has not been rapid, but it has been steady, and as it grew it advanced materially and spiritually. The mission preached by Rev. Clement Carroll, C.P. in November, 1929, was an inspiration to the community, and a thousand Holy Communions were received during the week.

As the occasion demanded and the means permitted, modern improvements were made. Natural gas was installed, furniture and stage equipment procured for the hall, and a steel safety tabernacle donated for the altar. New desks were placed in the school, and a fully equipped playground established in the school yard.

For all of these improvements, the Ladies Society worked untiringly. This group has been of great assistance to the parish. Through their efforts an organ was purchased for the church and they have assisted materially in reducing the church debt.

The school enrollment in September 1930, was ninety-four pupils and a third classroom was opened. The Holy Name Society was organized during the winter.

At the present time we have a very complete group of buildings: a beautiful church, a modern school, and an up-to-date auditorium. The three societies are well organized and meet regularly.

Father Egbring served at St. Paul until 1939. Rev. August Muench was pastor from May 21 to July 16, 1939 and was followed by Father Edmund Priest for the period of July 16, 1939 to April 15, 1940. Rev. Edward W. Carlin was assigned here on April 15, 1940, and is the present pastor.

This sketch briefly portrays the history of St. Paul Church and is a tribute to the goodwill and cooperation of the parishioners, without which the efforts of the pastor would be of little avail.