

“A Historian’s Perspective”



As the parish archivist and historian, my work is often restricted to the archives room in the Church Hall, sorting, cataloguing, translating and preserving documents and artifacts from the past. Sometimes, I receive calls from other museums with artifacts about St. Louis Church that they have inherited and wish to de-access from their collections and these artifacts and documents find their way home.

Frequent tours of the church and the museum, like the recent tour for the Western New York Genealogical Society, break the monotony and provide an opportunity to share our unique and special parish story with the public.

Special exhibits in the museum, like the current display on Nineteenth Century Pew Rent, provide an opportunity for creativity. There are also some long term projects which demand patience and discipline, as well as a working knowledge of Latin and German.

The transcribing project began three years ago. It involves the tedious task of recopying data from our sacramental registers which date from 1829. The baptism, marriage and burial registers reveal an incredibly intimate portrait of the people who over the past 184 years have shaped our parish story.

Although many of these records were microfilmed and are accessible to the public at the Central Library, to the untrained eye, many of the records are illegible, and so the reason for re-copying the data into a user friendly form.

These records give an accurate snapshot of the struggles of everyday life of our ancestors. I find the mid nineteenth century records (1840-1850) most interesting.

These baptism and marriage records parallel the great immigrations and the arrival of thousands into Buffalo, while the burial records mirror the over whelming health and sanitary challenges of the era. Despite the odds, America was the only hope of survival to these who faced almost certain death through starvation or conscription in their native lands.

The sheer numbers are staggering.

The number of baptisms rose from 247 in 1841 to 440 in 1847. Marriages more than doubled from 84 in 1845 to 221 in 1846. As the population climbed so did the number of burials from 46 in 1845 to 250 in 1849.

In the 1840’s, the spiritual welfare of the immigrants, fell to a few priests. Rev. Francis Guth was appointed by Bishop John Hughes of New York, to be the pastor of St. Louis church in 1844. Little is known of Francis Guth except for what he recorded in the sacramental registers. We do know that he was sent to St. Louis church at a time of unresolved crisis. His predecessor, Fr. Alexander Pax,

fled the church with the Holy Eucharist a year before and later returned to France as a result of threats to bodily harm received during the disputes between the Board of Trustees and Bishop Hughes.

Fr. Guth inherited a parish with deep divisions fueled by ethnic tensions and unresolved conflicts. Despite his attempts at bringing peace to his new flock, his pastorate would end with him leaving the parish along with the French parishioners in 1851.

Fr. Guth was assisted at times by his brother Rev. Michael Guth, who was stationed at Good Shepherd in Pendleton, who himself would later resign his post due to irreconcilable conflicts.

Disease was a constant companion to the immigrant. Without any sanitary precautions, water was drawn from one or two sources. Buffalo suffered terrible outbreaks of cholera in 1832 and again in 1848.

Burials at this time were done quickly to avoid any further spread of disease. Few had the luxury of wakes.

Fr. Guth would have been immersed in the day to day struggles of his flock. Let's take a mid summer's day, Friday August 17th 1849. His entire day would be spent in the St. Louis Cemetery, located on the outskirts of the city near the present corner of Best and Masten Streets. There were six parishioners awaiting burial. First, Raphael Barreau, son of Andreas Barreau, age 12, then David Martin, son of David Martin, age 2, then the widow, Maria Josephina Brun, age 57, then the infant, Jean Baptiste Roth, 9 mos. The afternoon culminated with the burial of Andreas Lang, age 33, together with his infant son, Johann, age 12 mos.

On a happier note, Fr. Guth would often celebrate multiple weddings on one day. Marriages were regularly performed on weekdays.

On Tuesday, November 6, 1849, he celebrated eight marriages: Josef Fromm, son of deceased Christian Fromm and Catherina Schmit, married Augusta Zachmann, daughter of deceased Albert and Maria Zachmann. Their witnesses were Ignaz Gass and Lambert Habestro.

Michael Gollwitzer, son of Michael Gollwitzer and Ursala Bauer, married Margareta Gleissner, daughter of deceased Georg Geissner and Barbara Krapf. Their witnesses were Josef Schiesel and Adam Werich.

Valentin Blechinger, son of Margareta Hausler, married Anna Maria Haeusler, daughter of Michael Haeusler and Anna Maria Benkert. Their witnesses were Franz Kuhn and Caspar Roth.

Adam Geisner, son of Christian Geisner and Anna Maria Esslinger, married Barbara Hennes, daughter of Johann Hennes and Barbara Ruffling. Their witnesses were Jakob Clemens and Wilhelm Hennes.

Johann Koehl, son of Andreas Koehl and deceased Anna Maria Schall, married Maria Elisabetha Bosche, daughter of Jean Bosche and Barbara Niederhoefer. Their witnesses were Frederic Beingsesser and Ferdinand Weber.

Georg Siegenstill, son of deceased Catherine Stich, married Margaretha Stabenvoll, daughter of Sebald Stabenvoll and the deceased Catherina Bauer. Their witnesses were George Dederl and Andreas Zinckel.

Joseph Frossard, son of deceased Jean Claude Frossard and Maria Charpiot, married Hanna Besancon, daughter of Constantin Besancon and Maria Josephina Vape. Their witnesses were Celestine Guenon and Francois Besancon.

Karl Gukler, son of Peter and the deceased Margaretha Dubach, married Maria Laux, daughter of deceased Xavier Laux and Margaretha Ensler. Their witnesses were Johann Diederig and Josef Kiefer.

Fr. Guth worked tirelessly. On Sunday, July 30, 1848, presumably after a full Mass schedule, he celebrated seventeen baptisms.

John Carroll, son of Carol Anne Murray, born on 7/18/48. His godparents were Timothy and Margaret Murray.

Anton Kiefer, son of Franz and Elizabeth Klein, born on 7/21/48. His godparents were Anton and Anna Wellmann.

Maria Blaser, daughter of Josef and Anna Steckinger, born on 7/21/48. Her godparents were Theodore Hark and Rosina Buehl.

Elizabeth Hodes, daughter of Remigius and Christina Betz, born on 7/20/48. Her godparents were Katherine Schiller and Johann Paul Schiller.

Isabell Kelschen, daughter of Johann and Rebekka Biller, born on 3/17/47. Her godparents were Katherine Dorfi (Duffy?) and Daniel Karel (Carroll?).

Johann Zimmermann, son of Johann and Elizabeth Felsherr, born on 7/27/48. His godparents were Andreas Sebald and Katherine Zimmermann.

Adrienne Elizabeth Nasswar, daughter of Dominic and Elizabeth Grinot, born on 7/27/48. Her godparents were Peter Nasswar and Elizabeth Nasswar.

Maria Magdalena Jost, daughter of Josef and Adela Mossak, born on 7/24/48. Her godparents were Josef Staub and Maria Anna Mossak.

Wilhelm Ernst, son of Gabriel and Theresia Borer, born on 7/10/48. His godparents were Johann Koch and Maria Nebrich.

Johann Robauer, son of Johann and Rosalia Waldmueller, born on 7/7/48. His godparents were Martin Weber and Anna Maria Weber.

Sara Johanna Malwen, daughter of Karl and Margaretha Donovan, born 7/20/48. Her godparents were Theresia Schaller and Thomas Nicklas.

Leon Seibert, son of Valentin and Maria Anna Krug, born on 6/28/48. Her godparents were Lorenz Gilch and Adrienne Gilch.

Katherina Eberle, daughter of Kaspar and Theresia Feist, born on 7/12/48. Her godparents were Xavier Schwarz and Katharina Feist.

Katharina Zahm, daughter of Johann and Maria Ursala Krumholz, born on 7/30/48. Her godparents were Peter Zahm and Katherina Mischo.

Peter Guck, son of Thomas Stephan Guck and Margaretha Woppmann, born on 7/16/48. His godparents were Peter Fuchs and Margaretha Fuchs.

And finally, he ended his day with the baptism of the week old twin sons of Jakob Weichl and Maria Elisabeth Reitenbach (Jakob, whose godparents were Johann Martin Jueng and Margaretha Jueng and Johann, whose godparents were Johann Hemmerl and Magdalena Hemmerl).

Examining the thousands of names and events of these early folk has afforded me a real sense of humility and respect for what they endured. In the midst of turbulent times and the ever present fear of sickness and death, our fore-bearers and their priests clung to their strong and fervent Faith. Perhaps they managed to keep alive simply in the hope that their children might have an easier time.

My goal with this project is to format the data from these priceless nineteenth century sacramental records to a user friendly format, accessible to our parishioners and the many persons researching their genealogies. If you are interested in researching your early WNY Catholic family roots, contact me through our website at genealogy@stlouiscchurch.org.