

St. Peter's was the first Catholic Church built in Montgomery. And since its beginning in 1834, the church has unceasingly provided an active Catholic presence in Montgomery. From the eve of the Civil War to the dawning of the civil rights movement, St. Peter's location has enabled the church to be a witness to monumental events that have shaped Alabama and the nation's history. This short history of St. Peter's has attempted to be not just a discussion of the church building and resident clergy. Therefore, included also is the history of Montgomery, other Catholic Churches and institutions, some interesting facts about a few past parishioners and, to demonstrate how St. Peter's was affected by these institutions and people and the effect that St. Peter's then had on those same Catholic institutions and people.

### *The Beginning*

First, it must be stated that prior to the settlement of what is now Montgomery and the creation of St. Peter's Parish, there was an earlier Catholic presence in the area. The first Roman Catholic presence, in what is now Montgomery, can be attributed possibly to the Spanish expedition of Hernando de Soto in 1540. This 'entrada' (expedition of exploration and conquest) took de Soto from Tampa Bay to Texas between 1539-1542. Though this famed 'entrada' is still a controversy among historians, it is affirmed that the expedition did cross Alabama and Spanish priests accompanied most, if not all, expeditions. So very possibly these priests were the first to celebrate Mass in the area near Montgomery. (Hall pp. 12-21)

### *Diocesan History*

Bishop Toolen's first statement as Bishop to the people of the Diocese of Mobile was that their diocese was a missionary Diocese. Though Bishop Toolen stated this in 1927, it remains a fact in many areas of the Archdiocese today. However, the first Bishop of Mobile, Michael Portier, faced a monumental task of even establishing a mission in his new dominion in 1826. As Apostolic Vicarate, Portier's dominion consisted of the whole state of Alabama and all of northwest Florida, stretching to the present day Jacksonville. His clergy consisted to two priests and one subdeacon. Unfortunately, the two priests soon departed for New Orleans and Portier was left with only his subdeacon, Gabriel Chalon, a cousin of Portier (Catholic Week, p. 9). Chalon would later become the first pastor of St. Peter's. Bishop Portier returned to Europe in 1828 in an effort to recruit priests for his depleted vicarate. He returned to Mobile in 1830 with two priests and six Seminarians from Lyons, France. By this time, his vicarate had been elevated to a diocese. These brave men would become the first of many to serve as missionary priests, planting the seeds of Catholicism in the fertile ground of the Mobile Diocese.

One such area was the vastly expanding city of Montgomery. Montgomery, incorporated in 1819, was situated on the bluffs overlooking the Alabama River and strategically located in the heart of the "Black Belt" area of central Alabama. It was in this black belt area that enormous amounts of cotton were grown. Montgomery, would eventually become the political, economic and social center of South Central Alabama. In the early 1830's most Christian denominations began to build their own churches within the parameters of Montgomery. By 1831, the Catholic population of Montgomery held its first public Mass in a building near the Exchange Hotel on what is now Commerce Street. For the most part, Catholic activities in the city would take place at the home of a Mrs. Gardiner at the corner of Church and Molton streets.

By 1833, the Catholic community has attained the needed resources to build the first St. Peter's Church. Mr. Edward Hanrick, a prominent Catholic in Montgomery, donated land located at the intersection of Lawrence and Adams streets to build the new church structure. This site would remain the permanent location of St. Peter's Church. Thus in 1834, a small frame church was completed and dedicated by Bishop Portier on April 25, 1834. Parishioners decided on the name of St. Peter's for this new parish, deriving the name from the famed Apostle Peter and the Mother Church located in the eternal city of Rome. It is a befitting name, because in its long history, St. Peter's would be the rock on which Catholicism would grow in Montgomery

As stated earlier, the first pastor of St. Peter's was the cousin of Bishop Portier, The Reverend Gabriel Chalon. Father Chalon served the parish for three years and his arduous labor ensured a strong, though small Catholic presence in Montgomery. After three years of dedication to St. Peter's, Chalon was transferred by Bishop Portier to Mobile. After a promising beginning, St. Peter's entered a period of uncertainty by not having a resident priest. During this period, various priests came to St. Peter's for short periods of time. These included Fathers Mahoney, Hackett, and Rampo. Yet, even with the absence of a resident pastor, the parishioners remained steadfast in their faith.

The City of Montgomery also continued to be steadfast in its growth. By the mid 1840's the population and wealth of the state was shifting to the South. The power structure of the region was determined to have the state Capital returned to the Black Belt region. The Capital had first been at Cahaba. Huntsville served as the seat of government until the State House in Cahaba was completed. However, due to floods and epidemics at Cahaba, the Capital was moved to Tuscaloosa in 1826. Thus a political battle was fought between the less wealthy small farmers of Northern Alabama and the rich plantation owners of Southern Alabama.

It would seem that Montgomery held the "ace in the stack" to insure the capital being returned to the southern portion of the state. Montgomery offered to provide \$75,000.00 as well as land located at the end of Dexter Avenue if the state legislature would move the Capitol to Montgomery. This offer virtually closed any debate on the necessity of raising taxes in order to move the Capitol, as well as ending the argument by legislators of Northern Alabama that moving the Capitol would cost enormous amounts of money. Finally, in 1846, the legislature voted to allow Montgomery to become the Capitol city of the state. (Flynt pp. 116).

It would seem fitting that, after such a rewarding asset coming to Montgomery, the parish of St. Peter's would receive its own resident pastor in 1850, that being its own. This new pastor was Anthony Dominic Pellicer. Father Pellicer led the parish in its efforts to build a new church edifice on the corner of Lawrence and Adams Streets. Pellicer had great zeal in his efforts to raise money for this undertaking. The priest went to Mexico City to raise funds for the building project. He was successful in obtaining funds, but his stagecoach was attacked by bandits on his return to Montgomery and those funds were lost. Pellicer, undaunted, traveled to Cuba, where he was successful in obtaining funds once again. By 1851, Pellicer and the parishioners enough capital to contract with a firm to build the new church atop the hill overlooking Montgomery. The Spanish style church was completed in 1852 and was dedicated on September 10, 1853 by Bishop Timon of Louisiana, assisted by Bishop Portier of Mobile (Catholic Week p. 53). The Spanish facade of the new church would be the lasting architectural design of St. Peter's. The

question does arise, "Why in the middle of the antebellum South was a Spanish style church built?" There is no bonafide answer to this question. However, it could be surmised that with the expedition to Mexico and Cuba to raise funds for the church, Pellicer derived the idea for a Spanish missionary style edifice. Regardless of where the idea came from, St. Peter's has become one of the most unique architecturally designed churches in Montgomery.

### *Physical History*

Other physical enhancements would take place at St. Peter's in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under the direction of Father Dennis Savage, in 1881-82 the church was enlarged by 25 feet along the front of the edifice and the towers were added to the structure. This addition to St. Peter's Church could very well explain why the front steps facing Lawrence are almost vertical and end at the street. It is evident that this expansion had a very little space. The church complex was very much blocked by other structures on the north and east sides and Lawrence and Adams streets on the west and south. But overall, these additions only enhanced the grandeur of the church. Father Savage also made extensive changes to the interior of the church by the addition of new altars as well as installing a new pipe organ in 1891. This organ was recorded as being one of the oldest in the state and one of the finest built during that period.

The organ was a Kilgen model built by the Kilgen Organ Company of St. Louis, Missouri. In a letter dated 1891 to Mr. George Kilgen, Rentzi Thomas, then organist at the Presbyterian Church in Montgomery said of the organ "...the action is excellent and the voicing and tone all that could be desired." (Church Organ Fund Drive). Not only did the sound of the organ gain admiration, the artistic beauty was something to behold. The pipes were adorned with fleur-de-lis from top to bottom. The color pattern consisted of blues, greens, red, gold, silver and bronze. One could not help but notice this magnificent instrument that provided sacred music to the parish until the 1950's. Mechanical problems finally resulted in the organ not operating properly and its being silenced after a very brief period on the 1960's.

Finally, in 1989, under the direction of Monsignor Kevin Duignan and concerned parishioners, action was taken to restore the organ as well as to establish an endowment fund to insure the proper maintenance of the organ and provide for qualified personnel to play the organ. The goal for the endowment was set at \$200,000.00. The restoration project was to be under the direction of M.P. Proscia and Associates of Bowden, Ga. The fund-raising and the restoration was proceeding as planned when a tragic fire swept the warehouse in Georgia where the organ was being restored. The May 17, 1990 fire destroyed all of the organ except the artistic pipes which were being restored at another location in North Carolina. This unfortunate incident would have seemed to end any hopes to restore the grandeur of the music at St. Peter's. However, it was decided that an organ of comparable worth and size would be sought to replace the Kilgen. At present, the endowment continues to receive pledges, and there are positive prospects for a new organ to grace our organ loft.

Probably the most enriching symbol of the interior of the church are the 14 stained glass windows installed in 1922 by the Emil Frey Art Glass Company of St. Louis, Missouri under the direction of Father Patrick Turner. Two of the windows depart from biblical emphasis. These two windows located on either side of the back of the church are American Army and Navy.

These were probably Father Turner's favorite windows due to his service as Knights of Columbus Chaplain in France during World War One. He was later commissioned in the U.S. Army to serve as Chaplain to the 104<sup>th</sup> Ammunition Train (Catholic Week p. 53).

There is conflicting opinion even today in regard to where the stained glass windows were manufactured. Though the windows representing Biblical themes were purchased through the Frey company in St. Louis, the fourth window from the entrance on the right side of the church not only has inscribed at its base the name of Emil Frey, but also includes these words "Munich, Germany". Thus, most parishioners argue that the intense color and beauty of each window could only mean that the windows were manufactured in Germany. However, Father Turner stated in a newspaper article that he was convinced that American artisans are not surpassed by Europeans. The article in which this statement was found dealt with the dedication of the stained glass windows. Unfortunately, there is no official documentation to solve this friendly disagreement. Regardless of where the windows were made, the church was greatly enhanced by the beauty of each window.

Through the years many other physical improvements were made to the church. The most significant interior changes came after Vatican Council II (1962-65). With decrees from the Vatican Council II Committee on the Liturgy, renovations were mandated to the interior of the church to insure proper exercise of the liturgy in the post Vatican II Church. As a result of these mandated liturgical changes, the altar railings were removed as well as the excessive amounts of statuary found in the sanctuary of the church. The beautiful and ornate altars remain as a testament to the unique and traditional beauty of the church.

In 1968, plans were made for the parish of St. Peter's to build a new church rectory and parish hall. This new structure was to be built on the former site of the antebellum rectory. The new complex, completed in 1969, reflected the Spanish design of the historical church. The parish hall was named Francis V. Cusack Hall, in honor of Father Cusack who was responsible for the building of the new complex and served as both assistant pastor and pastor for a period spanning 17 years. At present a conservation effort continues to insure proper maintenance of the historical church. In July of 1990, restoration began on the towers to repair leaks and repaint the twin structures. The parish continues to provide for and strive towards the preservation of the history and beauty that St. Peter's represents for all Catholics of Alabama.

Although Father Pellicer was an excellent administrator and fund raiser, the priest was also noted for his dynamic spiritual direction of the parish. He ardently preached the doctrines of the Church, as well as having a compassionate heart, for all citizens of Montgomery, Pellicer's ability for leadership would be particularly useful at St. Peter's during the Civil War period. The primary issue in Congress was the slave question. Many times the issue divided Congress but compromise always seemed to prevail and preserve the Union. However, by the 1860 Presidential elections, the issue of slavery was the primary concern to all candidates. The favorite to win the election, Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, was opposed to allowing any more territories into the Union as slave states. This, of course, outraged Southern slave owners who at the time were expanding their agricultural economy into the new frontiers. It was decided by Southern politicians that if Lincoln was elected President, that the Southern States only alternative was secession from the Union.

Montgomery, 54% of the white male only voters cast ballots supporting the State Rights' candidate, John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky, while only 8% of the voters supported the national Democratic party nominee, Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln was not even on the ballot in Montgomery, as was the case in most Southern States (Flynt p. 29). While the state of Alabama favored the State Rights' candidate, the majority of the voters in the Union cast ballots for Lincoln. With this, the Southern states prepared for secession. In February, 1861, delegates from Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia and Louisiana, met at the Capitol in Montgomery to organize a government for the Confederate States of America. On February 18, 1861, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi was inaugurated on the steps of the Capitol. Montgomery would remain the Capitol of the Confederacy until delegates voted in May of 1861 to move the Capitol to Richmond, Virginia.

Although there is not a record to verify that any parishioner at St. Peter's was involved in any debate taking place just a few blocks from the church, it should be noted that most Catholics in the South and Montgomery agreed with the majority of Southern Whites on the issues of slavery and secession from the Union. A few parishioners from St. Peter's even owned slaves. Father Pellicer kept a separate Baptismal record for slaves. The record was titled "Baptismal record for Colored People" (Baptismal records, St. Peter's archives.). In his many entries into this record, he documents the names of the slaves baptized as well as the owners of the slaves. There were 168 slave baptisms recorded at St. Peter's from December 15, 1861 through 1865 (Smith, p. 64).

The Bishop of Mobile, John Quinlan, was present during the Battle of Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862). Over 24,000 Confederate and Union soldiers were lost in the battle. One Confederate soldier killed in this horrific battle was buried by Father Pellicer. The record of burial records the following: "Eighteen hundred and sixty two, A.D., on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, I, the undersigned pastor of Montgomery (St. Peter's) interred Major Robert Armsted, age about 35 years, who was killed on the battlefield (Shiloh) on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April. Surprisingly, 'A.D. Pellicer' (*record of burial, p. 25, St. Peter Archives*) is the only entry into the burial record that indicates the burial of a soldier killed during the Civil War. In discussing the burial records, it should be pointed out that on April 6, 1863, the City Council of Montgomery sold to the Catholic community, a section of land to be used for Catholic burials (*History of Oakwood Cemetery*).

In 1864, Father Pellicer was transferred to Mobile. Father Dominic Manucy was appointed pastor of St. Peter's that same year. Manucy was noted for his intellect and superior theological training. During his tenure at St. Peter's, Manucy would be instrumental in bringing many converts into the Church. Manucy is also noted for his aid and spiritual guidance to the parish during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. In 1874, Father Manucy was appointed Titular Bishop of Selma and Vicar Apostolic of Brownsville, Texas. On December 8, 1874, Father Manucy and former pastor of St. Peter's Anthony Pellicer were consecrated Bishops at the Cathedral in Mobile. Father Pellicer was appointed the First Bishop of San Antonio, Texas. Manucy would be appointed Bishop of Mobile, March 9, 1884, but resigned within the year. The Bishop died in Mobile on December 4, 1885, before returning to Brownsville as the reappointed Vicarate.

The parallels between the two priests were unique. Pellicer and Manucy were cousins, native Floridians, classmates at Spring Hill College and ordained priests on the same date (August 15, 1850). Manucy would follow Pellicer as pastor of St. Peter's, and as stated above, both priests would be consecrated Bishops to Vicarates in Texas on the same day.

Early in the parish's history it gave five men for the service of the church. These were Fathers William Duncan (1862); Henry Semple, S.J., (1879); Patrick Costello (1905); Eugene Sands (1913); and George Moeller (1919).

After the departure of Fr. Manucy, Fr. Dennis Savage, a native of Cork County, Ireland, was appointed pastor of St. Peter's. He would remain pastor of the parish until 1919, when he retired because of his age and health. The honorary title of Monsignor was bestowed upon him on June 29, 1915. He celebrated his Golden Jubilee as a priest on October 15, 1919. Father Savage was noted for many accomplishments at St. Peter's. Probably the greatest contribution to the Catholic community in Montgomery was his dedication to Catholic education. Father Savage was very much involved with then Bishop Quinlan in bringing the Sisters of Loretto to Montgomery. The Sisters were noted for their excellent schools throughout the western part of the country.

In August of 1871, a parishioner named William Maloney provided in his will that, after bequests to St. Peter's church, the remainder of his monetary resources be used to establish a Catholic school in Montgomery. The will also stated that such a school, as was tradition at the time, be administered by nuns. The Maloney estate provided \$500 directly to the school as well as an additional \$4,500 which was placed under the supervision of Bishop Quinlan to be used as he deemed necessary to accomplish the task of opening a school. Thus, by 1873, the Sisters of Loretto agreed to establish a school in Montgomery. By 1875, the school had 10 sisters, an enrollment of 175 girls and 40 boys (Lipscomb, p. 112). Catholic education continued to grow in Montgomery. In 1897, Father Savage was able to secure the Jourdan mansion on the corner of Adams and McDonough streets to be used for the boys education. The girls attended class in the Gerald mansion at the corner of Adams and Lawrence. Thus for many years, Catholic education would take place in two Greek Revival antebellum mansions.

By 1950, plans were announced to erect a new St. Mary's of Loretto High School at the former site of the boys school on the corner of Adams and McDonough. The new complex was completed in 1951. By the late 1960's, the Catholic High School had once again moved, this time to Vaughn Road. In 1962 the grade school administered by the Sisters relocated to Queen of Mercy parish.

Father Savage not only brought the Sisters of Loretto to establish a permanent Catholic education system in Montgomery, he also was instrumental in bringing the Daughters of Charity to Montgomery to provide the first hospital for the city of Montgomery. The Daughters of Charity established St. Margaret's hospital, which existed under their direction until 1988, when the structure was sold to the Humana Corporation.

On November 29, 1922, Monsignor Savage died and was buried in St. Margaret's Cemetery, where on the traditional Celtic Cross which marks his burial place are the words "May the sweet blessing of God be on his soul."

Father Savage was succeeded by Fr. Patrick Turner, D.D., who was also a native Irishman. Prior to arriving at St. Peter's, Fr. Turner served as Chaplain to U.S. Servicemen in World War I. Due to his connection with the military, he was noted for being an advisor and champion in many matters of interest to ex-servicemen. His devotion for veterans is exemplified in the stained glass windows located in the church (see physical history). His concern for the Catholic faith would also be visible in the creation of a missionary church located in the Capitol Heights area. St. Bede's, founded in 1925, would in later years become the largest Catholic church in Montgomery.

In 1927, Father E.J. Hackett, D.D., V.F., became pastor of St. Peter's. In 1928 he became yet another of the priests assigned to St. Peter's to attain the title of Monsignor. Hackett was one of the great intellects of the diocese, thus in 1929, he was made Vicar General of the Diocese. Another Irish connection assumed the pastorate of St. Peter's in December, 1929. Father John O'Kelly, a native of Meath Kerry, Ireland. He remained pastor until November, 1932. Father James Rogers became pastor of St. Peter's in November, 1932, and would remain at St. Peter's for 35 years. Rogers would be the pastor of St. Peter's during some of the most challenging times in world and church history. His tenure at St. Peter's began during the middle of the greatest Depression. St. Peter's, as well as most other churches in Montgomery would provide aid the populace during this bleak economic hardship.

Many historians state that Montgomery fared better during the Depressions than most communities in Alabama. Montgomery suffered less economic hardship due to the presence of the Army Air Corps at Maxwell Field. The base would further aid the economic condition of the city when under the persuasion of Congressman Lister Hill, the U.S. Army moved the Air Corps Tactical School from Virginia to Maxwell (Flynt p. 102). Lister Hill, who would later be elected U.S. Senator from Alabama, was baptized along with his twin sister, Amelie Hill Laslie, by Bishop O'Sullivan of Mobile at their parent's home in Montgomery on April 28, 1895 (Record of Baptisms 1890-1902, p. 25, St. Peter's Archives).

As the nation slowly recovered from the great Depression, it approached entrance into World War II. With the nation's entrance into the war, Maxwell Field played yet a larger roll in the national defense. Servicemen throughout the U.S. as well as from Allied countries converged upon Montgomery. Maxwell Air Force Base would continue to play a major role in national defense in the post war era. Maxwell's presence in Montgomery would also bring an increased number of Catholics to the community, many of whom would retire in Montgomery.

Montgomery had an overall population growth in the postwar period. However, the growing urban population would not locate in the traditional neighborhoods around the downtown area. Rather, the expanding population would move into the new subdivisions located in the South and Eastern sections of the city. Most of the Catholic population would follow the trend.

The Diocese of Mobile was well aware of this urban movement and in 1955, Our Lady Queen of Mercy Parish was completed on Narrow Lane Road in southeast Montgomery. The most substantial growth extended eastward along the Atlanta Highway. By 1969, the once missionary church of St. Bede's had relocated further east on Atlanta Highway. This eastward population growth resulted in St. Bede's becoming the largest Catholic church in the city.

### *East Montgomery*

The eastward movement trend was further enhanced with the completion of interstate 85 in the late 1960's. The completion of this massive artery through Montgomery had a two-pronged effect upon St. Peter's. It would virtually assure a convenient and direct access to and from the downtown area for those citizens living on the east side. The result was that more families locating to the east side from the traditional neighborhoods which were part of St. Peter's boundaries. By cutting through the heart of the boundaries of St. Peter's, the interstate brought about the lowering of property values and destroying many of the beautiful homes that were part of St. Peter's heritage.

Although the parish lost many families in the post war era, the Mother Church of Montgomery continued to have a steady influx of active parishioners. Fathers Cusack, McGuinness, O'Connor and Dyer and Monsignor Kevin Duignan continued the rich heritage of providing excellent pastoral leadership to St. Peter's. The parish is committed to insuring a continued Catholic presence in downtown Montgomery. Though the church of St. Peter's is a historic building, it is not a museum. Rather, it is a living church that reflects on the past in order to proceed into the future.

The parish of St. Peter's has enjoyed a long and rewarding experience in Montgomery. One must never forget the dedication of the first parishioners and priests of St. Peter's. Starting as a Missionary church in a Missionary Diocese, St. Peter's would later become the most important Catholic church in central Alabama, with Missionary priests serving other central Alabama communities.

St. Peter's would also witness the expansion of the Catholic faith in Montgomery as St. Andrews (1910), St. Bede's (1925), and Our Lady Queen of Mercy (1955) would be direct daughter churches of St. Peter's. Thus, St. Peter's has truly been a "rock" to which the Catholic faith was built in Montgomery. The heritage of 156 years of service to our Lord is one which we will continue with pride.

Works cited:

- 1) "History of the Diocese of Mobile," The Catholic Week, special edition for the Sesquicentennial of the Diocese of Mobile, November 23, 1979.
- 2) Flynt, Wayne; Montgomery. (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, 1980)
- 3) Lipscomb, Oscar H., "The Administration of John Quinlan-Second Bishop of Mobile; 1859-1883" Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, Mar-Dec. 1967

- 4) Smith, Alice V., "Survey of Civil War Legislation" (unpublished) August 15, 1985
- 5) "The Church Organ Fund" - brief description of organ for fund raising: St. Peter's Church, 1989
- 6) History of Oakwood Cemetery: St. Peter's Parish Archives, date unknown