

OUR LADY OF LOURDES AND THE CITY

In honor of the Our Lady of Lourdes Mass for the City, at which we will pray for the continued success of the City and its citizens, this will be the first of frequent articles about the history of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish and the city it grew with.

When the original Church building was constructed in 1855 by the Universalists, it was located in the Village of St. Anthony, which itself was founded in 1849. In 1872 both the Village of St. Anthony and the City of Minneapolis merged, and five years later, the local French Catholics founded Our Lady of Lourdes. The prosperity of both the Church and city has been intermingled ever since.

The heart of the church building was constructed by the First Universalist Church in 1855 and became the first stone Universalist church in the city. It was a rectangular Greek Revival style building measuring 67 by 44 feet, built of native limestone from just a few blocks away along the Mississippi River. This style was a reflection of the "temple of reason" which was significant to Universalist teachings. The waning numbers of the congregation could not support the upkeep of the building, so they abandoned the structure in 1866.

While all of this was taking place, the French-Canadian population of modern day Northeast Minneapolis was worshipping roughly three fourths of a mile away at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church. Initially, most immigrants to the Village of St. Anthony were French-Canadian, and by 1855, they made up roughly half of the village's population.

Around this time, immigrants from different European nations found their way to the area, and the population of the diocese rose from 8,000 Catholics in 1853 to over 50,000 by 1858. This caused a problem to arise at St. Anthony of Padua. The French speaking priests had a very hard time keeping the peace between the many different languages within the church. This resulted in a few of the cultures breaking away and establishing their own churches, such as the Germans did with St. Boniface, and the Polish with All Saints.

The two tenants that stayed were the French and the Irish, and in 1860, an Irish priest was assigned to the parish. To no one's surprise, this move did not ease tensions. As the next few years passed, the French congregation of St. Anthony of Padua decided they wanted to keep true to their roots, and the only way they could accomplish this was to find a new home. They needed to raise a fair amount of money and find a suitable location that was still close enough for their congregation to be able to reach, and in 1877, God answered their prayers when the First Universalist Church building went up for sale.

The French congregation acted quickly and purchased the land and building, and officially named their new parish Notre Dame de Lourdes after the Marian apparition that happened merely 19 years earlier.

The small Greek Revival building did not meet the immediate needs of the Church, so once more money was raised, they transformed their house of worship into one that looked like a proper Catholic church. From 1880-1883, most of the major changes occurred that would make the church into a very small version of French Gothic cathedral. The church was enlarged to 135 by 65 feet, a higher-pitched wooden roof was put over the flatter Greek Revival roof, a sacristy was added to the east side, and doorways were installed in the northwest and southwest corners of the church with curved stone staircases leading up to them.

During the latter portion of the 19th century, the English Protestants of Canada were alienating the French Catholics, which saw a mass immigration of those French-Canadians to the United States. With 3,700,000 new immigrants coming to the U.S., many of them sought a familiar setting, and Minneapolis provided just that with their saw and flour mills and openness to new cultures and traditions. Because of this, Our Lady of Lourdes saw a massive increase in membership. In 1882, the parish had 350 families from Canada alone, and in 1900, that jumped to 400.

As the City of Minneapolis was growing, so was the Church. They both welcomed with open arms those who were looking for a new place to raise their families, and it was this positive and accepting nature of the Church and city that made both what they are today.

With the Church and city seeing immediate success, the future was looking bright.

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