St. Louis Roman Catholic Church Papers
[c. 1850-2006]

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Biographical Note:
St. Louis parish was founded on January 5th, 1829 through the beneficence of Louis Stephen LeCouteulx de Caumont, a French nobleman, the first resident Catholic of Buffalo and agent of the Holland Land Company. In his New Year’s Gift to Bishop Jean Dubois of New York, LeCouteulx deeded land for the erection of a church, cemetery, school and priest house for all Catholics.

In 1831, Rev. John Nicolas Mertz, a missionary priest, arrived in the village of Buffalo, becoming the areas first resident priest. Fr. Mertz immediately set about organizing a school and the construction of a church. The new log church, hewn from logs in the nearby forests was named “Lamb of God” after the depiction of the Lamb of God on a tabernacle door that Fr. Mertz brought with him from Europe. In 1836, St. John Neumann joined Fr. Mertz in ministering to the growing number of German speaking Catholics who had settled in the outlying villages surrounding Buffalo.

In 1838, seven men incorporated themselves under the laws of New York State into a Board of Trustees, thereby assuming the temporal affairs of the parish. In 1843 a larger brick church was built on the site of the log church by Rev. Alexander Pax. This new church was dedicated to St. Louis IX, the patron saint of Louis LeCouteulx.

After the death of LeCouteulx, a fierce rivalry between rival factions in the parish ensued. Disagreements between the trustees and Bishop John Hughes of New York resulted in the parish being placed under Interdict in 1843. This ended a year later. In the late 1840’s, disputes again broke out between the trustees and Bishop Timon resulting in the parish again being placed under Interdict. This second Interdict lasted until 1855. Time proved a great healer under the guidance of Rev. Joseph Sorg who became pastor in 1867. Highly esteemed by his parishioners, Fr. Sorg was given a final resting place in the Church Hall.

On March 25, 1885, fire broke out in the newly erected German American Music Hall across Edward Street. Due to high gusty winds, flames soon spread to the roof of the brick church. Despite valiant attempts by both parishioners and firemen, the church was totally destroyed. The fire claimed the lives of fireman George Roth and parishioner Joseph Grimm.
The next day, plans were set in motion for the construction of a new church in a grand continental gothic style. The first donation was made by Rev. Joseph Sorg and matched by parishioner and successful businessman Gerhard Lang. To assist in fundraising efforts, men of the parish organized the St. Louis Dramatic Circle, one of the nation’s earliest amateur theatrical groups which produced plays including the Shakespearean tragedy Hamlet.

Designed by the architectural firm of Schickel & Ditmar, the present church was richly adorned by local woodworkers and sculptors. The local firm of Riester & Frohe designed the windows in the nave clerestory and the Royal Munich Art Institute executed the sanctuary windows depicting the life of St. Louis IX of France. Our beautiful spire is the highest open laced spire in the United States and is a focal point of our city’s skyline. Our Kimball Organ was installed in 1903.

To celebrate our 175th anniversary, the parish completed a successful restoration of our beautiful church and the creation of a parish archives and museum. Through the dedicated effort of parishioners and friends, St. Louis Church has a bright and promising future and will continue to embrace the vision of our founder Louis LeCouteulx as a spiritual home for all Catholics. - By Michael A. Riester, Church Archivist

An additional history written by c. 1950 by Robert T. Bapst, Ph.D. can be found in the inventory.

**Scope and Contents:**
Ledger books; newspaper clippings; photographs; programs; registers; and school materials.

**Inventory:** See below.
Index and Introduction to

The Microfilmed

St. Louis Roman Catholic Church Papers
Buffalo, NY

(2 rolls)

Part of

The Buffalo State College Regional History Collection

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The Monroe Fordham Regional History Center Buffalo State College

This microfilming project was arranged and coordinated by Dr. E. O. Smith, Jr. The filming was done by James Prokos and Lynn Lombardo, both were students at Buffalo State College working under the auspices of the Buffalo State College Center for Regional History.

The 16MM film was filmed with a 34X lens

2007
A Brief History of Saint Louis Church

Compiled by Robert T. Bapst, Ph.D.

Rev. Dr. Robert T Bapst was a former superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools who was ordained to the Priesthood of the Diocese of Buffalo, New York at the age of 71. His home parish was St. Louis in Buffalo, which was where he served as an assistant pastor for his last seven years. 1880-1959.

"I have loved. O Lord, the beauty of Thy house and the place where Thy glory dwelleth." (Ps. 25)

With such utterance did the inspired Singer of Israel ardently long to worship in the House of the Lord, a longing that envisioned the magnificence of the temple at Jerusalem. By some three thousand years, the Psalmist anticipated feelings quite akin, as the devout worshipper at St. Louis, today, marvels at the restored beauty of this house of God, erected under the patronage of the sainted King of France. Back in the early days, when Buffalo was a little village, a Mr. Louis LeCouteulx was one of its well-to-do residents. A friend of his, Father Stephen Badin, a missionary priest from Kentucky, on a visit north, stopped off to be the guest of Mr. LeCouteulx for the greater part of the winter of 1828-1829. This is the Father Badin who was responsible for the purchase of the campus of Notre Dame University. His memory has since been perpetuated in the imposing hall of learning bearing his name, Badin Hall. Seeing the plight of the Catholics of this area, he persuaded his friend, Louis LeCouteulx, to donate a part of his large holdings for a Catholic Church. Mr. LeCouteulx, readily acquiesced to the suggestion, which proved to be the mustard seed from which grew the present flourishing parish of St. Louis. In 1829 he deeded the plot of ground on the corner of Main and Edward Streets as a site for a Catholic church and, in so doing, he kept his memory alive for all time, in the name given to the church that was later built thereon.

At that time there was no priest and it was only with the coming of Father John Nicholas Mertz, shortly thereafter, that the first congregation, in the present diocese of Buffalo, was organized. Father Mertz occupied a humble, little house on Pearl Street. In seeking quarters where he might conduct services and, at the same time, arrange for the instruction of the children, he was fortunate in being able to secure a frame building that had been a Methodist meeting house. This was made to serve his little flock as a church on Sundays, and as a school on week days.

After the fire that laid waste the village of Buffalo in 1813, this little settlement, within a short time, rose phoenix-like from its ashes. Its population increased rapidly and in 1832 it became a city. Father Mertz's congregation kept pace with the growth of the village and soon outgrew its quarters. It was then decided to build a new church on the site donated by Mr. LeCouteulx. Money was scarce and a simple log structure was all that the infant congregation could afford. The good people, however, gave cheerfully of their time and of their labor. Huge timbers were hewn in the forest in the vicinity of the present Delavan Avenue. These were hauled by oxen and were erected to form the frame structure of the church. The openings were filled with a composition of straw and clay. Progress, however, was very slow for it was not until 1832 that the first Catholic church in this territory was able to throw open its doors to the little congregation...
of hardy worshippers. When Father Mertz came to this country from Europe he brought with him a small bronze tabernacle that had on its door the symbolic figure of a lamb. It was from this that the new church derived its name: "The Lamb of God."

Father Mertz was now over seventy and the hard life he had endured was fast beginning to tell. He returned to Europe for a rest and remained there. Father Alexander Pax succeeded him. The new pastor soon recognized that the "Lamb of God" was but a make-shift affair, at best, and proceeded to make plans for a more commodious structure. Services were continued in the little church while above it and around it work was progressing on the new church. In time, the little building within was demolished and the new church, a spacious colonial brick building, was completed. It was opened in 1845 and was dedicated to St. Louis, the ninth king of France by that name. Father Pax's stay at St. Louis was beset with many difficulties. When his work in connection with the building of the new church was finished, he resigned his pastorate and returned to his native land. He, in turn, was succeeded by the Rev. Francis Guth. Up to this time, the St. Louis congregation was partly French and partly German. As time wore on relations had become so strained between the two that the French decided to move out and organize a church of their own. In this they were assisted by Father Guth who went with them as their first pastor. The brick building on the corner of Washington and Clinton Streets, the site of the present Lafayette Hotel, was purchased by them, converted into a church, and dedicated to St. Peter.

For almost half a century, St. Peter's French Church was a landmark in this city. During that same half century business had expanded rapidly in downtown Buffalo. Under the wise direction of Father Joseph Fenger, the pastor of the French church, the congregation decided to sell the old church and, with the proceeds of the sale, to build a new one. The site selected was on the corner of Main and Best Streets. In January 1900, the imposing stone structure, the new French church, was dedicated under the double title of St. Peter and Our Lady of Lourdes. To make the creation of this new parish possible, St. Louis was obliged to narrow its boundaries with the consequent narrowing of its financial resources.

In leaving St. Louis Church to accompany the French element of his congregation, it was Father Guth's hope to be free of an unhappy situation, of long standing, that had finally become intolerable. Dispute over the title to the property and the handling of finances were at the bottom of all the trouble. In 1838, quite unbeknownst to anyone, the trustees of St. Louis had applied for, and had obtained, a charter of incorporation, one that was wholly unsuited to a Catholic congregation and had never been intended for such. In 1841, Bishop Hughes of New York, in whose diocese Buffalo was at that time, in an effort to remedy the abuses throughout his diocese that had resulted from a system of dual control in church administration, issued a pastoral letter regulating the handling of church finances and, at the same time, making the system uniform in all the churches under his jurisdiction. Boards of Trustees, everywhere, acquiesced in the new arrangement with the sole exception of the trustees of St. Louis Church. The Bishop's plan was declared to be in direct conflict with the provisions of the Board's charter and a bitter quarrel ensued. When things went from bad to worse, Bishop Hughes placed the church under an interdict in 1843. The trustees, seeing members of the parish gradually drifting away in order to attend mass at St. Mary's Church, became frightened and sent an apology to the Bishop of New York. The apology was immediately accepted, the interdict lifted and peace restored, albeit a surface peace only, as later facts proved.
In the spring of 1847 Buffalo was formed into a diocese and on October 17 of the same year, the Rev. John Timon was consecrated first bishop of the new diocese. The Bishop had not been here any length of time when a spirit of opposition began to assert itself from the same old quarter. A year or two later, when he tried to carry out the prescriptions laid down in the pastoral letter referred to above, he encountered an opposition that was long and bitter. The church was again placed under an interdict which lasted until 1855. In that year Father Wenninger, a Jesuit missionary, received the Bishop's permission to open the church and to conduct a mission for the good people of the congregation. Father Wenninger's efforts proved highly successful. In fact, they marked the beginning of the end of the trouble. Time proved a great healer. The old wounds were beginning to heal rapidly, while old differences were set aside and, gradually, were all but forgotten. Perhaps it will be argued that this whole unfortunate episode would best have been omitted here; to have done so, would have meant suppressing an important part of an historical sketch, thus rendering the remaining parts suspect.

The coming of Father Joseph M. Sorg in 1867, to enter upon a pastorate that was destined to run twenty-one years, proved to be the dawn of a new era, an era of peace and good will. Father Sorg immediately enlarged the school and built the present rectory. Misfortune, however, was in the offing. On the evening of March 25, 1885, while Lenten services were going on in the church, word was brought to the pulpit that the Music Hall across the street was in flames. Lying in the path of a heavy March wind, the church was doomed. The congregation was directed to file out quickly and orderly. In the little time available, willing hands salvaged some of the church furnishings. Suddenly, the roar of the crowd outside told only too plainly that the church was afire. All eyes were focused on the roof. Like some ugly living thing, the fire crept along up there, breathing destruction and ruin along its path. The crowd below became breathlessly silent, sickened at so sorry a sight. In what seemed no time at all, the roof was in flames. They were making their way to the tower. Again a cry went up from the crowd. There, way up above the street, silhouetted against a background of flame, the figure of a man was seen crawling out upon the parapet of the tower. A Mr. John Grim had ascended the tower for some unknown reason. Was it to get some of his belongings in the tower, as rumor had it, or to direct the firemen to the tower? We may never know. Turning to go down, he found the staircase in flames. The firemen below spread a net for him. The crowd called to him to jump. The suspense was awful. Men and women wept. They saw no alternative for him other than to jump or fall back into a cauldron of flame. For a moment he stood upright, he jumped, then, plummeted to the ground. He missed the net and was killed.

To provide for its immediate needs, the congregation, under the direction of its pastor, immediately began a frame structure in the school yard which ran along the front of the school. In three weeks time this temporary church was completed. Plans were then drawn for the new church by an architect of note, a Mr. Schickel of New York City. These were approved and construction began on the new St. Louis Church which stands even today, as an unrivalled gem of architecture, in the very heart of a city of beautiful churches. The wonder of it all is the necessary courage that was forthcoming to attempt so magnificent an undertaking. Stone upon stone the structure rose until that memorable day, when an American flag floated from the great Gothic cross surmounting the glorious steeple, telling all the world that St. Louis had risen from its ruin, a thing of beauty for all time, dedicated by the good people of St. Louis to the greater honor and
The cornerstone was laid on May 29, 1886. Three years later, on August 25, 1889, the Feast of St. Louis, the doors were opened to admit an admiring congregation to the first religious service.

The new St. Louis Church is Gothic in style of architecture, cruciform in shape, and is built entirely of stone from the basement to the tip of the cross. Its architecture bears a striking resemblance to that of the great cathedral in Cologne, the differences being such added refinements in ornamentation serving to compensate for the difference in the overall dimension of the latter. This fact enables Cologne to support two identical towers. Originally, each church had a small bell steeple erected over the intersection of the transept and the nave. Back in the early twenties lightning struck St. Louis and in the extensive repairs made to the roof, the little steeple wasn't replaced because of the added cost. It was at that time that the interior of the church was last painted. Hanging in the sacristy of the church there is a large picture of the cathedral of Cologne, which would lend itself to any comparative study of the two churches. The building, exclusive of all movable furnishings, was erected at a total cost of $265,000, labor being the chief item of cost. A comparison of the costs then with the costs of like items today, should give an approximate estimate of the present value of the church. Values are either based on demand or are determined by the cost of replacement at present prices. Skilled labor, as instance modelers in plaster, received one dollar per day, whereas skilled labor today receives in excess of three dollars an hour, a ratio of 1 to 24. The contract for painting and gilding the entire interior was let at $1,900, and this provided for whatever additional costs were made necessary because of new construction. On this same basis, the job just finished would approximate $45,000, again yielding the ratio of 1 to 24. Applying the ratio of 1 to 24 to the overall cost, we arrive at a figure between five and six millions as the approximate value of our church, making due allowance for the labor saving devices since introduced into the building trades.

Father Sorg did not live to see his church finished. He died in 1888. His successor was the Rev. Dr. Paul Hoelscher who came to St. Louis Church as pastor at the age of 36 years and who served for 28 years. Those who remember him will recall a man of reserved demeanor, yet kindly withal; second to none in learning; prudent and wise, yet forceful and energetic- a holy priest. During his pastorate the church was finished, finished and paid for. It needed every one of the qualities possessed by Dr. Hoelscher to accomplish this, and to be able to present the church for consecration early in his incumbency as pastor. He was made the recipient of many a rich donation for the church, from both Catholic and Protestant. Suffice it to mention but one of each.

A Mr. E. G. Spaulding, a member of Congress during Lincoln's administration, resided in Main Street, diagonally opposite the church. An interesting sidelight is to be found in the fact that this same E. G. Spaulding in 1861 saved the U. S. Treasury from bankruptcy by fathering a bill in Congress whereby Treasury Notes, payable on demand, became legal tender. Because of this he was ever after known as "The Father of the Greenback." Mr. Spaulding gave the beautiful tower clock, jocularly remarking to Dr. Hoelscher that now he would be able to follow the time as he sat in his front window. Perhaps most outstanding was the gift of the marble high altar, costing $16,000, donated by Miss Emma Lang, a Catholic, the daughter of Gerhard Lang, who, together with members of his family, gave generously, even though anonymously, in those early years. Among the beautiful furnishings installed by Monsignor Hoelscher, especial mention must be made of the organ, an instrument recognized as one of the finest church organs in the country. The tall stained glass windows in the upper sanctuary, depicting scenes from the life of St. Louis,
were installed about this time as were also the windows on both sides of the church. Exquisite in conception, color and form, the windows are an inspiration to those within the church, and a silent sermon to the passerby during evening services. Space will not allow for hardly more than the mere mention of the Stations of the Cross, the four side alters and the fine marble statuary in the transept; the statues of St. Francis and St. Anthony, each carved from a single block of wood, as were the busts of the Evangelists surrounding the pulpit; the communion rail of Australian marble, and, lastly, the statue of St. Louis that graces the main entrance of the church, with a background of floral design carved in the stone. Monsignor Hoelscher died in 1916. May his soul rest in peace. Let us now pass to his successor.

Monsignor Laudenbach, better known as Father Laudenbach, both nationally and even internationally, came to St. Louis as pastor in January 1917 when he was 41 years of age. He served as pastor for 27 years, dying in December 1943. Physically a big man, Father Laudenbach was also a big man mentally and, in all his dealings, he impressed one as a big man in every way. He was a splendid priest, loved by all with whom he came into contact. He loved people and the people loved him, but his chief love was his God and his church. Like his predecessors, Father Laudenbach possessed exquisite taste. He always maintained that the cheap and the tawdry were not for the Courts of the King. Even today, dealers with whom he did business, will recall his oft repeated slogan: "The best is none too good for the House of God." An instance of the practical application of this philosophy of his may be seen in the purchase of the magnificent set of gold brocade vestments, the anonymous gift of an esteemed parishioner. Designed throughout by Father Laudenbach, the vestments were made in Crefeld and in Munich and are representative of the finest in ecclesiastical art. The cost, when bought 25 years ago, was approximately $5,000. The cost today, assuming it were possible to reproduce them, would easily amount to triple the original cost. A man of imposing physique, possessed of a keen sense of humor and the ability ofpopularizing his talks, Father Laudenbach was ever in demand as a public speaker. It needed but one of his genial smiles, and he had his audience with him. He was a theological with whom it was a delight to cross swords, a liturgist of the first rank, a great lover of books -he was truly a man of parts. Those who knew him intimately, knew him as a man of great faith and solid piety, unsurpassed as a father confessor, a consoler of the sick and a father of the poor. His charities were exhaustive; they kept him poor until the day that he died -peniless. With Monsignor Laudenbach's death, a seventy-five year period, in which there were only three pastors at St. Louis, came to an end.

Father Michael A. Anstett was appointed to succeed Monsignor Laudenbach in 1944. He was then 69 years old and served but four and a half years as pastor. He had had a very successful pastorate at St. Agnes before coming to St. Louis. He was a deeply spiritual man, mild, and unassuming. During his short incumbency he accomplished much in the spiritual life of the parish. Father Anstett died at the altar. On the morning of September 23, 1948, he had just finished the last prayer of the Mass and was about to impart the Blessing, when he dropped dead.

While at St. Agnes, Father Anstett had with him a very capable assistant, a "right bower," so to speak, in the administration of parish affairs. Coming to St. Louis he lost no time in securing the transfer of his former assistant and this marked Father Schwartz’s first introduction to St. Louis. Shortly after Father Anstett's death, Father Howard J. Schwartz was appointed to succeed him. Father Schwartz was quite at home in St. Louis when he was appointed pastor of a congregation
whose affection he had already succeeded in winning. In assuming the pastorate he had the advantage of a firsthand acquaintanceship, acquired while he served as assistant pastor, with everything that pertained to his new position. From the first he gave promise of proving himself a worthy successor of the great men who had preceded him. While it is much too early to give a definitive sketch of the present pastor of St. Louis, for always, "The best is yet to be," one pronounced characteristic has already begun to manifest itself, namely, that he, in the service of God and his Church, like St. Paul, longs "to be all things to all men." His charity is part of himself for no effort appears too great nor does any objective seem too small to engage his help, provided only, that his assistance redounded to the well-being of his fellow-man, be it a matter of financial relief, material comfort, or peace of soul. May God "fill him with length of days" wherein to continue the labors so auspiciously begun.

And so, we bring our little history to a close. Much that might have proved interesting has, of necessity, been omitted, since it were futile to attempt to encompass within these few pages the complete history of 125 years. What is offered herein should serve to refresh the memories of persons and incidents, long since "gone but not forgotten." Others, especially those of later generations, may learn, perhaps for the first time, something of the hardships endured, and the obstacles overcome, by their forebears. May Almighty God, to Whose greater honor and glory this magnificent temple has been erected, through the intercession of our Blessed Lady and that of our heavenly patron, Saint Louis, bless us, one and all on this our anniversary day, and throughout all the years that lie ahead.
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