

History of St. Michael's Catholic Church and the town of St. Florian, Alabama

The town and surrounding community of Saint Florian is located on part of the land that made up the plantations of John and Matthew Wilson. The Wilsons purchased the land from the United States Government in 1818 and operated their plantations from that time on into the Civil War. John Wilson was killed by members of the Thrasher Party on April 30, 1865. In the years following his death, Wilson's estate of 2,436 acres was offered to Dr. J. H. Houser. He purchased the property. Dr. Houser was a priest of the diocese of Fort Wayne, Indiana and director of the Homestead Society of Cincinnati, Ohio. His intention in making this purchase was to establish a colony of German Catholic settlers in Alabama, as he had previously done in Tennessee with the colonies of Lawrenceburg, Loretto, St. Joseph, and St. Mary.

Fr. Houser sold the land to the settlers at a price of \$8 to \$15 per acre, depending on the location and improvement of the lots. The first settlers were reported to be Florian Rasch, John Kasmeier, Sr., Frank Breidanger, Adam Zulauf, and Theodor Woltering. Between 1872 and 1876 forty pieces of land were sold to forty families. Among these families were Martin and Mary Grossheim, the John B. Locker family, John Matthew and Mary Stumpe, Henry John Stumpe, Joseph Buffler family, Wendelin and Mary Schaut, Joseph Eckl family, the Wolfinger family.

When the early settlers came to St. Florian, their colony being of a religious nature, one of the first tasks was to build a place where they would worship God. In 1872, the parishioners built a simple frame church, 50 feet by 24 feet and soon after also built a parsonage. The first pastor of St. Michael's was Father Michael Mertz (Merz), who recorded the parish's first baptism in 1873. Florian Rasch is said to have made the first donation to the church when he gave a bell for the church tower. Because of this donation, it was decided to use his baptismal name, Florian, in giving a name to this new community. The original Church, which also served for a time as a school, was located across Church road from the present rectory. Around 1874, the Church was moved across the road and two additions were made in 1878 and 1879.

Although the frame church had been twice enlarged, the growing congregation was proving the church to be too small. For years, the people had talking of building a more permanent structure of brick or stone, a structure more fitting to the glory of God. However, dreams alone cannot build brick buildings, and the people of St. Michael's lacked the money that it would take to erect a structure of the size and quality that the settlers desired. When St. Michael's became heir to the Wolfinger estate, the seven thousand dollars from the estate were placed in a building fund for a new church.

An architect from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Mr. Brielmeier, was employed to draw the plans. In 1914, the excavation for the church was begun and the new church became a community effort. Parishioners quarried stone at Shoals Creek, donated by Robert Kilburn, and hauled it in their wagons to the building site. Parishioners also assisted the local stonemason, Mr. Casper Haeger, in laying the foundation. The cornerstone was laid in 1916.

By this time, enough money had been raised to finish the rough walls, the tower, and the roof. Here again the people contributed their time and talent. They cut trees from their property and took them to Ed Rasch's sawmill to be cut and planed into lumber for the church. Several parish members who were carpenters by trade did much work in building the church and were paid by the parish for their efforts and other parishioners helped with general carpentry. The carpenters included Conrad Gruber and Rudolph Langer, Sr. A cross for the towers and the smaller spires were brought to the church site by wagon from the train depot.

Now, the church was in a semi-finished condition. Walls had no plaster; the only floor was a rough sub-floor with cracks. Window openings were covered with canvas. Still, these conditions did not deter the parishioners from their regular worship of God. Finally, in 1924, the financial condition of the parish was such that they could ask for bids for the windows that are highlighted in the church still. The F. X. Zettler Company of Munich, Bavaria received the contract for the windows. Father Alphonse and the members of the board of Trustees had come to a decision on the saints and Biblical characters who were to be honored on the windows. Each window space was tagged with the name of the saint and the congregation was invited to choose which they would like to contribute. It was not long before financial responsibility for all the windows had been claimed. Due to the bombing in World War II, it was some time before the windows arrived and were installed.

As the years passed, additional improvements were made to the Church. The Buffler family had the interior of the church painted in memory of Edward Buffler who was killed in the service of his country in 1945. New pews and floor coverings were installed. Storm windows were installed to protect the windows. These and other improvements were made by the time of the centennial celebration in 1963. The above brief history is taken from the centennial publication for that celebration. In the 49 years since that time, many other improvements have been made to the church including the most recent investment in the integrity of the structure, a \$500,000 project that involved removing and replacing the bell tower and steeple in 2005 due to destruction by termites.