



Before the Franciscans took over Old St. Peter's in 1875 and even before the founding of the city of Chicago, it might surprise you to know that Franciscans were with Rene-Robert LaSalle in 1680 as he canoed past Chicago on his way to explore the mouth of the Mississippi River. There were three of them. One was Fr. Louis Hennepin, O.F.M. who discovered St. Anthony Falls. Another was Fr. Gabriel de la Ribourde who was scalped by the Kickapoo Indians in Seneca, Illinois, where there is today a plaque next to St. Patrick's Church commemorating his death. The third Franciscan, Fr. Zenone Membre, O.F.M., made his way to Mackinac, Michigan. Still another Franciscan, Fr. Athanase Douay assisted the dying LaSalle at Navasota, Texas. He had also come through Chicago in 1687. To commemorate this first arrival of the Franciscans in Illinois, for a time there was an historical marker at South Shore Drive and 67th Street. A century later in 1763, two Franciscans, Luke and Hippolyte Collet came from Canada to work among the Indians at Cahokia, Illinois.

These courageous and adventuresome Franciscans were our Brothers in the Order, ancestors to those of us now ministering at St. Peter's. We have a proud heritage of missionary work in Illinois.



Fr. John Jung arrived in Chicago in 1845 and immediately he began collecting funds for the building of two new churches: St. Peter's and St. Joseph's. The site selected for the first St. Peter's Church was on the south side of Washington Street between Wells and Franklin Streets. St. Peter's was finished at the cost of \$1,000 and dedicated on August 2, 1846. It was a frame building, forty feet wide and sixty feet long with a seating capacity of 700.



Because businesses and railroads were moving into the vicinity of St. Peter's on Washington Street and driving the parishioners farther south and west, Rev. George Plathe who was given charge of the parish in 1853 saw the necessity to move to another site. The frame building was moved in two sections to a low and swampy lot on the southwest corner of Polk and Clark Streets purchased for the sum of \$2,500. The church stood at the southern end of the lot facing Clark Street. Some of the parishioners were never reconciled to the new location. Because of struggles with trustees, several pastors came, got discouraged and left. It was Rev. Herman Lierman through his quiet and conciliatory spirit who won the cooperation of his trustees.

In 1860 Rev. John Baptist Mager took charge as pastor and realized the need for a larger church for a growing St. Peter's Parish. With the approval of the trustees in early 1863 who collected the sum of \$10,000, the church was finished and dedicated in 1865 for the total amount of \$32,359. Fr. Mager did not survive the realization of his plans for new St. Peter's Church. Because of the worry and exertion of building, Fr. Mager died in 1865 at the young age of 35.



By 1870, Chicago's population numbered more than 500,000. St. Peter's had grown to a parish of 1,200 families with two schools. Then came the disastrous Chicago fire. On a Sunday night October 8, 1871, the church bells rang in alarm. The life of the city was swallowed up in devastating flames a mile wide and four miles long. Fanned by high winds, the fire, which started on the near west side, roared towards the lake and through the tinder-dry, frame buildings and came within two blocks of St. Peter's. The people of the parish were terrified and rushed into the church to pray. Here they found Fr. Fischer praying aloud and they distinctly heard his solemn vow to erect a church in honor of St. Anthony of Padua if God should spare his church and school. Suddenly the fire changed its course. The wind veered northward and St. Peter's church, school and people were spared. St. Anthony's Church was built a few years later. And from that day to this, St. Peter's has been the center of Chicago's Tuesday devotion to the miracle-worker of Padua. Late that evening a heavy rain put out the fire. Three-hundred lives were lost and 17,500 buildings destroyed for Chicago's total loss of \$190,000,000.

Another fire three years later, lasting only 11 hours, destroyed 650 homes for a loss of \$4,000,000 and caused many families to move farther south. Fr. Fischer fulfilled his vow and built St. Anthony's church in 1873. He also founded other south-side parishes: St. Augustine's, Immaculate Conception, and St. George's. The new pastor, Rev, Edward Froehlich, took over for only two years when the Franciscans arrived on the scene in 1875.

August 2, 1846 to August 2, 2021 will mark the 175th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter's Church.



Within a half year of the Chicago fire in 1872, Bishop Thomas Foley, the Bishop administrator of Chicago, himself burnt out of church and home, invited the Franciscan to take charge of St. Peter's Church, stating in his letter to the Commissary Provincial, Fr, Maurice Klostermann, O.F.M., that the church was large and well built, was without a debt, was in the central part of the city and had a good school. Fr. Maurice wrote back to say that it was impossible for him to accept the offer at the time but he would gladly accept it as soon as circumstances permitted.



The time came three years later in 1875, thanks ironically to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who through his Kulturkampf (Germany's fight against Catholic culture) suppressed the friaries of the Franciscans in Germany and forced over 100 Franciscans to seek a new home in the United States. The exiles reached Teutopolis, Illinois on July 3 and 4. This was the beginning of what was to become the Franciscan Province of the Most Sacred Heart to which the Franciscans to this day belong.

It was Fr. Maurice's great pleasure to inform the Bishop of his readiness to take charge of St. Peter's at once. On July 29, 1875, the Franciscan arrived at St. Peter's. The first pastor was Fr. Liborius Schaefermeyer, O.F.M., who was formerly a diocesan priest and vicar general of the Alton (now Springfield) diocese. He arrived with four other friars.

The day they arrived was quite embarrassing. For some reason the parishioners had been frightened into believing that the “monks” [editor’s comment: we are friars, not monks] were coming to take over for themselves the church, the school, the house and lots, and that the parish had to support three or four priests instead of one! And so the slogan went around: “If Bismarck didn’t want them, neither do we.” Parishioners even went to the Bishop with a petition asking him to reconsider his decision.

When the friars arrived at the rectory, a parishioner led them to a parlor where they waited unnoticed, unfed, unattended from 9 a.m. until 3 in the afternoon. As the retiring pastor and his housekeeper finally took leave in the late afternoon, the Franciscans moved in. The situation got better on the following Monday when the Bishop celebrated Mass in St. Peter’s and introduced the Franciscans to the people and made it clear that the Franciscans were definitely here to stay. The following Sunday Fr. Liborius had the task to allay the suspicions and to calm the excited minds of his parishioners who, tense and expectantly, turned out as a whole parish to hear what this amiable and gentle Franciscan had to say. The Gospel that day began with the words: “Blessed are the eyes that see the things which you see.” He went on gently to explain the parable of the Good Samaritan. He concluded his homily by pointing out that he and his fellow friars had come not to rob them of their earthly goods but to save their souls and to lead them to eternal bliss. The hearts of the parishioners softened and suspicions gave way to confidence. Fr. Liborius became a beloved father of the parish whose name thereafter was held in benediction.

Besides building a new school and many other improvements, Fr. Liborius promoted the spiritual welfare of his parish, arranging a very successful 10-day mission in 1876 and organizing a married and a young ladies’ sodality. However, he had a problem with the teenage boys who, according to the chronicler, were “a pack of rowdy and corrupt young hoodlums.” Every effort of the pastor to organize them failed. Most of them left school, forgot their religion and went to work and joined gangs that later helped to bring Chicago its notoriety!

With the coming of the Franciscans St. Peter’s took on a new role. After the fires, hundreds of the staunchest Catholic families moved elsewhere. The railroad stations and freight depots, warehouses and wholesale houses were moving in. As a result, St. Peter’s parish was growing smaller and smaller. But as a spiritual center, it became a symbol of that Good Samaritan Fr. Liborius prophetically preached in his first sermon, as the Franciscans poured the curative oil of absolution on the wounds of penitents and administered the nourishment of the Eucharistic bread and wine to countless travelers on their way to God. Chicago Catholics beat a path to the church and to its confessionals. Travelers came in great numbers from the railroad terminals and from the hotels, including countless bishops and priests from the world over, and found their way to St. Peter’s doors. As many as 50 visiting priests a day celebrated Mass. The Franciscans were on duty or on call all day and every day of the week.



So many colorful, talented, and energetic Franciscans and beloved pastors were stationed at Old St. Peter's from 1875 until 1953. There was the famous Brother Tim, six feet something with big sandals to match, who got up early every morning to get things started for the day and was known by hundreds of bishops and priests in the country who hustled over to St. Peter's in between trains at the old LaSalle Street Station to celebrate Mass and have breakfast. After Mass the sacristan would tell the visiting clergy: "Br. Tim has breakfast for you." Then there was the dynamic Fr. Patrick Maloney who took underprivileged young men in by the hundreds and fed, clothed, housed and got them jobs. He acquired an apartment building on 47th Street and housed homeless teen-aged orphan boys accommodating some 300 of them. Famous as St. Peter's Doorkeeper was Brother Canute Dregler who was St. Peter's porter for 40 years, getting up every day from early morning till late at night answering the front door for requests ranging from the serious to the ridiculous. In addition, he was St. Peter's bookkeeper and collector for the needs of the Holy Land. Only later was it learned that he suffered for years with foot and leg sores and pains. But he never complained. There were many other such Franciscan giants at Old St. Peter's who gave their all to the people they served and loved.



Different societies and sodalities flourished at Old St. Peter's. Among those still going strong at New St. Peter's are the various groups of Secular Franciscans, known then as the Third Order of St. Francis. Their history begins also in 1875 with the St. Elizabeth Fraternity of German-speaking Catholics. By 1921 there were 325 new members in the two English-speaking fraternities.. In 1927, St. Francis Fraternity numbered 1,770 tertiaries and St. Louis Fraternity, 2,280. Even then the tertiaries considered building a home for their aged members, which later was realized in the creation of Mayslake Village. The Antonians, the Young Peoples Fraternity of the Third Order, began in 1933 and was officially chartered in 1939. Some eventually became priests and Religious and some gave their lives in World War II, among them Joseph Auman who fought at Guadalcanal and was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Gift Shop, the Friars Legion, the Laymen's Retreat League. St. Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Order of Foresters, and a dozen more societies flourished at Old St. Peter's. The Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary had 5,285 members by 1930 and the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood in 1899 had 1,886 members.



**Fr. Terrence Thomas, O.F.M**

For various reasons—changing neighborhood, deteriorating structure— it was evident that Old St. Peter’s had seen its day. It was felt that a new church in a more advantageous spot was necessary. In July of 1942 the Franciscan purchased the Woods Theater building on Randolph and Dearborn Streets for their new church and friary. Fr. Terrence Thomas, O.F.M was given the task of mapping out and converting the building into a church and friary. The architect’s first impression was rather disconsolate: “Father, I think the Fathers bought a lemon.” Because of World War II, there was no thought of proceeding with the conversion. Fr. Terrence and the architects ultimately realized that the end result would only be a makeshift building which was already 30 years old. Fr. Terrence had argued to sell the Woods building, buy another site which would be more centrally located, and build from the ground up. Besides the war had brought undesirable changes to Randolph and Dearborn so that the neighborhood was no longer suited for a church. But the Provincial, at the insistence of a rather intransigent Provincial Treasurer, Fr. Maurice Lennon, O.F.M., would hear of no other move. Even though the war came to an end, there was no thought of proceeding with the work. Six years went by without any action.



**A Typical Friar's Bedroom**

In 1948 a new Provincial, Fr, Juvenal Emmanuel, O.F.M., was sympathetic to Fr. Terrence’s reasons but he thought it was impracticable. He agreed to talk it over with Cardinal Stritch, the Archbishop of Chicago. Surprisingly, without ever talking with Fr. Terrence, the Cardinal gave Fr. Juvenal the same reasons for a new site! Accordingly, permission was given to proceed with a new site. Plans were then made to sell the Woods building and simultaneously to buy the old LaSalle Theater building at 110 West Madison. Work began June 1, 1950.



The architects encountered many difficulties with the ground during the process of pile driving. About 640 pilings were driven into the ground, seventy feet down to hard-pan. On these the entire building rests. The winter of that year was one of the severest in Chicago history. The building next door had to be underpinned. One obstacle after another arose and consumed a lot of time. Finally in July of 1951, 650 tons of steel columns and girders rose rapidly from the solid foundation. Then another bad winter intervened. In late March of 1952, work continued on the building. Finally, after two years later than anticipated, the new St. Peter's was finished and the Friars moved in. The church was dedicated on September 7, 1953.



**The Cross Being Installed**

What is striking about the New St Peter's is the gigantic marble Christ of the Loop which looks compassionately upon all passers-by. The architects designed a crucifix so heroic in size that anyone passing by would be immediately struck with awe. The molder of the clay model, Arvid Srauss, was instructed to produce a figure of Christ in extreme agony, face drawn, muscles straining, and yet virile and alive. From rough blocks of Georgia pink Etowah marble, Mr. J. Watts sculpted the 18-foot, 26-ton figure of Christ in four months during the summer of 1951 with the help of two assistants and pneumatic drills. Mr. Watts, a Scotchman who rolled his R's, was a sculptor of national repute whose works are in many cities of the country. Among his masterpieces is Chicago's Buckingham Fountain in Grant Park.

This new shrine of prayer at the time accommodated 1250 people on the main floor and 250 in the balcony. The pinkish-tan Minnesota marble walls, the pink Tennessee marble floors, the colorful roseate stained-glass window above at the rear of the church dedicated to Mary, Queen of Peace emitting the only rays of sunshine, the ornamental ceiling and ornate chandeliers, the majestic reredos with its brilliant white Carrara-marble Crucifixion group and statues of Sts. Peter and Paul over the high altar, the ten Botticino marble panels in bas-relief depicting scenes from the life of St. Francis taking the place of art glass windows in the nave the shrine statues, especially the moving copy of Michelangelo's Pieta, the fourteen confessionals in walnut. All lend an atmosphere of artistic beauty and attest to the solemnity, devotion, and purpose of the interior of the church. All this was achieved at the cost of \$4,000,000



**Completed Building**

The New St. Peter's is more than a physical building housing not only a beautiful church, offices, and a friary on the third, fourth, and fifth floors which the Franciscans call home. It is mainly a spiritual oasis amidst the canyons of Chicago's Loop for those thirsting to be fed with the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist, a restful haven for those wishing the quiet of prayer, and a refuge for the troubled and the penitent seeking absolution. St. Peter's has welcomed everyone regardless of stature or status. Among its notable visitors, one stands out dramatically: the visit of St. Pope John Paul II on October 4, 1979

For the past 67 years the Franciscans, like the Franciscans of Old St. Peter's, have served the people of Chicago and the world with unstinting devotion. Fr. Terrence Thomas, O.F.M. was the wonder-worker who shepherded the acquisition of the Woods site and the LaSalle Theater site and helped conceive the exterior and interior of the church while he was still pastor of a large parish in Dubuque, Iowa. He was New St. Peter's builder and first pastor. The same organizations thriving at Old St. Peter's were continued at New St. Peter's. And the Friars not only brought their talents and pastoral zeal to their new present location but also broadened out to assist in supply ministry at other parishes, in giving retreats around the country, and especially in concern for the poor. The saintly Fr. Philip Marquard, O.F.M. began what is today Franciscan Outreach.

We hope you have enjoyed these past historical segments of the coming of the Franciscans to Chicago and to their ministry at Old and New St. Peter's. In Word, in Sacrament, and in Reconciliation, the Franciscans have been the tangible faces of God's mercy and pastoral dedication to millions of people during their 145 years of presence in Chicago. For the future, they ask that you support them with your financial help so that they can continue to do what they do best: serve you with that unique brand of Franciscan hospitality and welcome to all.