

Who Built the Chapel of the Assumption and when was it built?

Detroit diocesan records give the year 1832 as the founding year of Assumption Grotto Church. A new group of German immigrants arrived that year and were warned away from the heavily populated center of town, because a cholera epidemic was raging. Cholera epidemics raged through Detroit in two waves in the early 1800s. The first was in 1832 and another in 1834. Silas Farmer and Paré would both record in their histories how "the plague fastened itself on the city taking its daily toll. Many persons left their businesses and fled from the city only to find that in the country the fear and excitement was greater than in Detroit." Mail carts were ordered to stop and all the passengers questioned before entering neighboring towns. People from Detroit were turned out of hotels and their baggage thrown out after them. Pontiac had a body of armed men stationed outside the city to prevent ingress. Bridges were torn up to prevent people from entering their villages. Businesses were suspended to such an extent that grass grew up in the middle of the principal streets and at night tar barrels were used to disinfect the air and lit up the night sky. The tolling of church bells for the dead was so continuous that it oppressed the living and they begged for relief from the fearsome sound. Fr. Gabriel Richard would write during the 1832 plague: "Since July 6th there have been 51 deaths, nearly all from cholera in my parish of St. Anne alone!" The deaths in 1832 totaled 96 in number and the second wave in 1834 claimed over 700 victims. On September 13, 1832, Fr. Richard himself, after ministering to the sick, was one of the last victims of the 1832 outbreak. Paré pp. 409-411

Note that there is a large stone in our Grotto commemorating the heroic charity of Fr. Richard during the 1832 Cholera epidemic.

This was the dire condition of the city upon the arrival of the Neustadt Germans in 1832. In our 1982 parish history book, Catherine Bicknell interviewed Michael Diegel, the grandson of Ludwig Diegel. Michael recalled his grandfather as saying that when they had arrived they were warned away from the city: "Get out of here! Get out of here! Everyone is dying." It is probable that they were directed away from the city to this area because a previous group of Germans is known to have arrived and settled here in 1830. We suspect that, considering their circumstances, most arriving with little or nothing, their first priority was to provide shelter for their families from the elements. With a plague going on in the city these newcomers were also looked upon with suspicion and fear. The new settlers had to find ways for their families to eat and survive the winters. Was there time to build a chapel, or, was the chapel already here waiting for them to share with the other French Catholics known to reside in the area? Hessian Road today's (Houston Whitter) was still a little distance from the location of our church, so why, if they built the chapel didn't they build it closer to their own land? The following account indicates that the chapel could have already been here even before the 1830 group arrived. The Methodist historian W. P. Sugars in his book, *Tales of a Forgotten Village*, (pp.18-19), describes the burial of Louis Michael Trembley in 1825 and gives another much earlier date for the arrival of the chapel.

"Beloved by both whites and Indians, he was laid to rest beside a little log chapel seven miles from Detroit. Nobody knows when this chapel was built, but this is supposed to have been one of the first burials on the grounds. It was built after the fashion of many of the homes of the day, a low log structure plastered on the outside with clay. It had no priest, being a part of St. Anne's parish, and was built for christenings, weddings, and burials, with an occasional celebration of the Mass, for it was a long walk to St. Anne's." Louis Trembley's daughter Theresa would later marry Henry Connor and settle on her father's estate. Henry Connor was paymaster to the Indians and was known as "White Hair" by the Chippewa's. In 1818 he became supervisor of Grosse Pointe Township and the name of Trembley's Creek was changed to Connor's Creek.

This account is interesting from several points of view, first in that W.P. Sugars was a Methodist historian and so he is disinterested. It is also interesting because our parish was exactly seven miles from Detroit. In the old days, distance was measured from the City Hall. The Brinkmans shooting range and Seven mile house was next door to the church on today's Seymour or Six Mile Road. Joseph and Mary Wirtz purchased land from Dagobert Juif for the old Eight Mile House located on today's Seven Mile road. It is also interesting to note that Dagobert Juif who arrived in Detroit around 1828 and settled the land which would later become the center of social activity for the Conner Creek area. The Wirtz and Juif families are buried in our cemetery along with Tremblays and several other early French families.

SO, WAS THERE ALREADY A CHAPEL IN THE AREA BEFORE THE GERMANS SETTLED HERE?

The Catholic Almanac for 1839 for the first time stated that the little log church the Germans built was located near Fort Gratiot Road and was called "The Chapel of the Assumption." Is it possible that a log chapel may have already existed on the site where the Germans settled and that they rebuilt or repaired an existing structure? This possibility gives some credence to a news article stating that the settlers prayed with the Indians who also made pilgrimages to the grounds indicating the grounds were already sacred to the Indians before the construction of the chapel. Grotto: #Ch159e-1907

Emma Cottong (Juif), the daughter of Dagobert, related an incident from her youth indicating the presence of Indians in the area. An Indian squaw wandered into their home during lunch. After a knock, the door was pushed open and she, accompanied by a large dog, appeared holding a staff. She helped herself to some food, gave some to her dog, and then left. Another story came from her brother Joseph Juif, who married Margaret (Altar). During the winter Indians came to the Altar house and threw deer and bear meat on the cook stove to fry. Spilo's Articles #5B-004, 5B-019.

Fr. Baraga in May of 1831 commented that during the five days he spent in Detroit his time was filled with preaching and hearing confessions and that there were many French and German Catholics

residing there Paré's History: pg. 402.

There is a documented early French presence in the Conner's Creek area before the arrival of the Germans from Neustadt. Recent genealogical research on early parish families shows the Tremblay's and other French families were well established in the area: The Champagnes, Dubays, Meldrums, Juifs, Pitres, Laderoutes and Fourniers were around Hamtramck Twp., and Connor's Creek many before the arrival of Neustadt Germans. Did the Tremblay (or another French family) construct an earlier chapel for the Catholic landowners in the area? It is possible for the same reason as for the Germans: it was a long walk to St. Anne's. So when a missionary priest was in the vicinity on his way to outlying missions in Mt. Clemens or Marine City, Mass could be said and baptisms performed for the community around Conner's Creek.

The following account in Sugars' History of Leesville indicates that the French did build the Creek School House: "On the far side of the Creek Road, built close to the intersection, was the small frame home of David Tremblay, or Trombly as it had been spelled since the occupation of Detroit by British troops. His home was located near the Creek School which was probably built by the early French settlers for the education of their children." W.P. Sugars' History of Leesville, pg. 36.

David Trombly descended from the Trembley family line that came to Grosse Pt. Area around 1735. They established their homestead where the Detroit City Airport Hanger now stands. Joseph Louis Tremblay was Granted 640 Acres adjoining Connor Creek and Operated a water powered saw mill on Connor Creek. The mill fell into disuse after the death of Joseph Louis who died young. So far our records indicate that his son Eustache converted the property into a brickyard. Eustache was also the cousin of Louis Michael Tremblay who according to Sugars may have been the first burial on our parish grounds.

Arthur Trombly also descended from the same family line. He was interviewed in 1986 when he was 94 years old and remembered the chapel as always being there. He did not recall talk on who built it. Arthur's branch of the Trombly family stemmed from Jeremiah Tremblay, brother of Jauvier who inherited the brickyard near Connor and Ft. Gratiot Road when his father Eustache died in 1875. Arthur's parents were Jeremiah Trombly and Mary (Diegel). Jeremiah was the son of Jerome Tremblay and Sophie (Fournier) Jerome was the son of Jauvier Tremblay and Elizabeth (Baumgartner). Jauvier was the son of Eustache Tremblay and Cecelia (Rivard) Eustache's father was Joseph Louis who was granted the original 640 acres.

The Sugars' account is only one account and sketchy at that. Sugars does not give a source for his information to be validated. Since another source has yet to be discovered we are unable to claim the 1825 date. This does, however, make for an interesting story.— 2007