

PARISH  
**FEATURE**

# Rural architectural gem older than diocese

By Father Robert F. McNamara  
Guest contributor

The parishioners of St. Mary of the Assumption Church have two reasons to be proud of their church building. A. It is venerable — the second-oldest church in the Rochester diocese in terms of constant service (1855); B. Its architecture is distinguished.

Parishioner Glenn J. Kist recounts the origin of the congregation in his well-researched parish history, *For Everything There Is A Season*, published in 1978.

Irish Catholics began to settle in Monroe County's Town of Wheatland, Professor Kist tells us, in the late 1830s. Memorable among them was carriage-maker Patrick Rafferty. A go-getter and a man of deep piety, he has been aptly called "the founder of the Church in Scottsville." In 1841 he and others asked Father Bernard O'Reilly, pastor of the nearest Catholic church, St. Patrick's in Rochester, to come offer Mass for them. O'Reilly consented and celebrated the first Mass of record in Scottsville. He also arranged to say Mass there one Sunday each month.

The "Mass-house" he used on these visits was a room rented in a brick office building on the edge of town. In 1843, the Wheatland Catholics purchased a plot for a future permanent church. The brick "Mass-house" was on the lot they bought, so they remodeled it into a regular chapel, plus living quarters for a hoped-for pastor in residence. When they did get around to building the present church, they located it next to the brick house, which would serve as a full-fledged rectory until the current priests' house was built in 1911.

Thus far, Monroe County had been a part of the Diocese of New York. In 1847 it became a part of the newly established Diocese of Buffalo. To the delight of the Wheatland Catholics, the new bishop of Buffalo, Rt. Rev. John Timon, promoted their "mission" to the rank of parish, with a resident pastor.

By 1852 the parish population had risen to more than 600, some of them German, but the majority still Irish. With Patrick Rafferty yet in the vanguard, they began to plan the permanent church. Father James McGlew, appointed that year as the third resident pastor, gave them full cooperation. On one point the planners reached a quick consensus: they would build not in wood but in brick.

Construction started in the summer of 1853, and Bishop Timon was able to bless the cornerstone as early as August 15, 1853, the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But the congregation's enthusiasm was not matched by its assets. These were hard-working people, anything but opulent; furthermore during the 1850s the economy was shaky not only at home but throughout the nation. As a result, the building was not enclosed for another year, and it was impossible to use it for Mass until May, 1855. Even then the plastering was only partly finished, and the furnishings were makeshift.

Construction continued piecemeal for several decades. A one-story sacristy was



Lauren McFalls/Photo intern  
A model of Scottsville's St. Mary of the Assumption Church, which was first used for Mass in 1855, sits in front of the actual building.

later attached to the rear of the church; the painting of the Assumption (by W.H. Machen of Toledo, Ohio) was hung over the main altar in or after 1863; and the first stained-glass windows were set in their frames only in the 1880s. Nevertheless, the building was sufficiently completed for Bishop Timon to bless it on November 4, 1860.

On that rainy Sunday, the Buffalo prelate consecrated the altar at the 8 o'clock Mass; preached at the 10:30 high Mass and at afternoon vespers; quizzed and confirmed the confirmation class in the early evening; and finished off the evening by delivering a public lecture!

Although the sanctuary has now been remodeled in keeping with the liturgical changes prescribed by Vatican II, St. Mary's Church remains essentially the same today, both inside and out, as it

was in 1860.

We might wonder why Patrick Rafferty and his fellow parishioners ever undertook such an ambitious building program. One reason was surely their faith: God deserves the very best. (Timon himself had praised the church as "a fitting dwelling for the King of Heav-

en.") But they likely had another reason, too. In the 1850s there was a good deal of antipathy in America to immigrants, particularly Catholic immigrants. Therefore in Wheatland as well as elsewhere, Catholics often took pains to erect churches that were both substantial and attractive. It was their statement of "belonging" in the United States.

The architect-builder of St. Mary of the Assumption had certainly created a substantial and attractive house of God. Who was he? One Louis Charboneau (single n), "then of Rochester" we were later told. But this name does not appear in the customary public listings of the city.

Between 1850 and 1854, however, a Louis Charbonneau (double n), apparently a French Canadian, was mentioned in the parish registers of Our Lady of Victory French Church in Rochester. His name does not appear in later parish listings. He may, therefore, have lived in the "Flour City" for only a half-decade. That still would have given him time to draw up and, to a large extent, execute Neo-Romanesque plans for the Scottsville church building.

The end product is a red-brick structure of simple dignity. At first glance, one might conclude that it mirrors the typical Protestant meeting house. Yet a second glance proves that it is uniquely different. Apart from the cross on the spire, the most eye-catching variant is the "frieze" of round arches, wooden and supported by wooden corbels, that runs around beneath the cornices of the roof. These "corbel tables," painted white, (as are the spokes of the "rose window" and the vestibule windows below it) convey a remarkable feeling of harmony and serenity.

I have never seen a decorative device exactly like this wave of repeated arches. Whoever Louis Charboneau may have been, it seems to me that his use of these arches at St. Mary's of the Assumption makes the building one of sober elegance.

Father McNamara, archivist for the Rochester diocese, resides at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit.

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