
Brief History of St. Albertus Parish

excerpted from *Detroit's Oldest Polish Parish: St. Albertus 1872-1973 Centennial*

Polish immigrants arrived in Detroit as early as the 1850's, most of them Prussian Poles from the provinces of Poznań and West Prussia. Another group of immigrants, the Kashubs, were encouraged by the Prussians to emigrate from their villages in the regencies of Gdańsk (Danzig) and Kwidzyn (Marienwerder).

Since no ethnic Polish parish existed in Detroit at the time, most had to settle for attending services at St. Joseph's German Catholic Church (Griott between Riopelle and Orleans), or St. Mary's German Catholic Church (St. Antoine at Croghan [now Monroe]).

A variety of events occurred that eventually led to the establishment of an ethnic Polish parish:

- Parisville's Polish pastor, Fr. Simon **Wieczorek**, saw his parish destroyed by a major fire in October 1871;
- Detroit Poles organized a St. Stanislaus Kostka Society for the express purpose of amassing sufficient funds to build a church by and for Detroit Poles.
- Overcrowding at St. Joseph's Church led to plans for construction of a new building in the spring of 1870 (Orleans and Jay).
- By September of 1871, Bishop **Borgess** urged Rev. **Wieczorek** to organize the Detroit Poles with the intent building a Church that would be under the care of Fr. Simon's Resurrectionist Order.

The choice of St. Wojciech as the name for the new parish cannot be explained with certainty, but local tradition alleges the the date of the meeting in 1870 at which the parish was organized was April 23rd, the feast day of St. Wojciech.

Bishop **Borgess** delayed permission for the construction of the parish church, due to misgivings that the Polish immigrants raise sufficient funds.

The first parcel purchased for the parish was located on the west side of St. Aubin, south of the street now known as Canfield, at a cost of \$600, from Phillis **Beaubien**. Coincidentally, the parcel did not include the site of the present church building.

The contract for the building of the first church and rectory for the parish, was signed on 11 October 1871 by the architect (John **Wiessenhoffer**) and thirty charter members of the parish. The St. Albertus Centennial Jubilee Book records the names of twenty-five of those thirty charter members:

Joseph **Basemann**, Michael **Baseman**, Anton **Detloff**, Aug. **Frida**, Frank **Gajewski**, Joseph **Grenka**, Adolph **Hic**, Józef **Hildebrandt**, August **Jaskolski**, Johann **Klebba**, Jakób **Koss**, Martin **Koss**, Jan **Lemke**, Jakub **Lorkowski**, John **Lorkowski**, Albert **Melin**, Stanislaus **Melin**, Jacob **Mindak**, August **Morzegon**, Józef **Moszinski**, Ant. **Ostrowski**, Anton **Swiontek**, Telesfor **Tomalczyk**, Anton **Treppa**, and Józef **Tuske** (eighteen, or 70% of the signers, used an "x" mark, indicating they could not sign their own names).

When the structure was blessed and dedicated by Bishop **Borgess** less than one month later, on July 14, 1871, the name of patron saint Wojciech was inadequately translated from the Latin Adalbertus into the English Albertus.

The neighborhood which grew around the parish church was known by the Poles as "Wojciechowo," after the Polish name of the parish patron saint. Oddly enough, the parish was not located in the center of the pre-1871 Polish community, but at the northeastern fringe of the Polish community, and near the northeastern city limits of Detroit.

The first recorded baptism was that of Julian **Melin**, son of Stanislaw **Melin** and Anna **Rohr**, on 17 Jul 1872. The first recorded marriage was that of 32-year old Antoni **Basman** and 24-year old Emilia **Stober**. The first recorded funeral was that of three-month old Edward **Matilda**, who was buried 19 Jul 1872.

On 11 Jan 1873, three trustees purchased the property located at the southwest corner of St. Aubin and Canfield Streets, the parcel upon which the current parish church is located. The parish committee commenced construction of a school building on the site, without awaiting approval from Bishop **Borgess**, which resulted in Fr. **Wieczorek's** dismissal as pastor. The first elementary school in

St. Albertus Parish was finally put to use either in late 1873 or early 1874.

Five years after Fr. Joseph **Dąbrowski** convinced the Felician Sisters to leave Poland, and serve as teachers for the Poles of Polonia, Wisconsin, St. Albertus Pastor Fr. John **Wollowski** convinced the Felicians to teach at the parish school. Five Felicians arrived in Detroit on 17 Dec 1879.

In early 1880, Fr. **Wollowski** convinced the Felicians to move their Motherhouse from Polonia, Wisconsin, to Detroit. Construction of the Motherhouse, across St. Aubin from St. Albertus, was completed in September 1882.

When Fr. Dominik **Kolasinski** assumed the pastorate of St. Albertus in March of 1882, the congregation consisted of roughly 750 families. In November of 1882, Bishop **Borgess** acceded to a petition from Poles living west of Woodward, to establish their own parish (St. Casimir's, built at 23rd and Buchanan).

Despite the loss of several hundred parishioners to the newly-established St. Casimir's, Fr. **Kolasinski** embarked on a campaign to build the largest Catholic Church in Michigan.

Despite a majority (80%) of the parish trustees objecting to building the second church on the existing premises, and to the grand, expensive designs, Fr. **Kolasinski** obtained permission from Bishop **Borgess** in January 1883.

Building contracts were signed on 14 Feb 1884 for a new edifice (the current church building) at a cost of \$61,000. The cornerstone was laid on 29 Jun 1884; the building was completed on time and was dedicated on 4 Jul 1885. The church had a seating capacity of 2,500, steam heat, and was allegedly the first church in Detroit that employed incandescent electric lighting.

In 1885 the parish enrollment exceeded 1000 families, for the first time.

After complaints of financial mismanagement by the trustees, and his refusal to turn the parish financial records over to the chancery for an audit, Fr. **Kolasinski** was suspended by Bishop **Borgess** in November, 1885.

Though dismissed from the diocese, Fr. **Kolasinski** did not vacate the rectory until ordered to do so by a civil court decision, in April of 1886.

Fr. Joseph **Dąbrowski** was appointed to replace Fr. **Kolasinski**. As a result of two riotous disturbances in the church in December 1885, Fr.

Dąbrowski was only able to complete one Mass during his 16-month pastorate at St. Albertus; the parish was under interdict (closed) for all but the first five days of his pastorate (closed to all religious functions on account of the scandalous conduct of the congregation in disturbing religious services in the church). For nearly the last half of his pastorate, an unspecified number of St. Albertus parishioners were excommunicated.

The interdict remained in effect for about nineteen months not because the Bishop refused to revoke it, but because the followers of Fr. **Kolasinski** refused to open the church for use by any of the duly appointed successors of Fr. **Kolasinski**.

For the rest of his pastorate, Fr. **Dąbrowski** said Mass at the small chapel in the Felician Convent across the street from St. Albertus.

On Christmas Day, 1885, upon learning they could not attend services at either the Felician Motherhouse or St. Joseph's German Church, a crowd of 1000 well-dressed Poles marched to the Bishop's residence on Washington Ave. to request permission for Mass to be celebrated at St. Albertus.

When the Bishop would not see them, they marched back home. During the course of the day, all the windows at John **Lemke's** hardware store (#823 St. Aubin) were broken; 24-year old St. Albertus parishioner John **Lewicki** was killed when shots were fired from inside the hardware store.

The interdict was finally lifted on 26 June 1887, nearly two months after Bishop **Borgess** resigned his office.

In October 1888, Fr. **Bronikowski** received permission to raffle the original frame church building, which was removed from the premises. In the same month, the parish acquired two additional lots on St. Aubin north of Fremont (now Canfield). The second St. Albertus School was subsequently built on this site (in late 1892), during the pastorate of Rev. Florian **Chodniewicz**.

On 10 March 1889, Bishop John **Foley** ordained the Rev. John **Lemke**, son of John **Lemke**; he was the first native son of St. Albertus to be ordained, and possibly the first native-born Polish Detroitier to become a Catholic priest in the Detroit Diocese.

In 1889, former pastor Fr. **Kolasinski** erected his first Sweetest Heart of Mary Church several blocks west of St. Albertus, though the parish was not under the jurisdiction of Detroit Diocese.

The following year, in 1890, St. Josaphat's was erected two blocks west of Sweetest Heart, as much to relieve the pressure on St. Albertus as to offer an alternative to Kolasinski's "Cathedral."

A fourth offshoot from St. Albertus was organized in 1898, with the establishment of St. Stanislaus Koska Parish. Located about thirteen blocks south of St. Albertus, it began with 500-700 families drawn from St. Albertus, St. Josaphat, and Sweetest Heart of Mary.

In 1907, a fifth offshoot of St. Albertus was established six blocks to the northeast, and dedicated to St. Hyacinth (Jacek).

The following year saw the establishment of yet another offshoot to St. Albertus, named for St. Florian, and located in Hamtramck.

Under the pastorate of Fr. John Mueller, from 1894 til 1913, the number of families in the parish climbed from 1,500 to 2,000.

The third and last school built for the parish was completed in 1917 at a cost of \$250,000.

The parish celebrated its golden jubilee in 1920. A commemorative booklet contained the names of seventy-two members of the Honorary Committee of the Golden Jubilee, which included the names of some of the earliest founders of the parish or their immediate descendants:

Jan Baka, Jan Becker, Edward Bernack, Józef Biak, Antoni Boza, Jan Brzozowski, Marcin Cwiejkowski, Józef Cylke, Jan Detloff, Michał Domzalski, Jan Dopke, Franciszek Elwart, Antoni Fleming, Jan Fleming Sr., Jan Fleming (Jr.), Józef Fleming, Edward Gajewski, Robert Glowczewski, Pani Gneba, Antoni Gojke, Józef Gojke, Teofil Gostomski, Franciszek Grenka, Marcin Grenka, Antoni Herr, Konstancja Herr, Pani Herr & family, Jan Hildebrandt, Józef Jagła, Jan Kamiński, Józef Karsznia, Albert Klebba, Jan Klebba, Xawery B. Konkel, Antoni Kortas, Julia Koss, Jan Kreft, Marcin Kulwicki, August Kuntz, Dr. Stan. Lachajewski, Alexander Lemke, Bazyli Lemke, Antoni Lepke, Józef Lorkowski, Idzi Maisel, Franciszek Majk, Jan Miotke, Pani Mulawa, Antoni Nowe, Jan Ostrowski, Marcin Ostrowski, August Pryba, Franciszek Schmidt, Antoni Sikora, Józef Sikora, Jan Skrzycki, Tomasz Sobkowiak,

August Steinhabel, Jan Steinhabel, August Stieber, Franciszek Strzyzewski, Antoni Szkotzke, August Szornak, Franciszek Trebiza, Antoni Trepka, Jan Wagner, Jan Welsland, Jakób Wolff, Bernard Zentarski, and Jan Zynda.

It should be noted that the golden jubilee was celebrated two years prior to the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of the first parish church; they apparently wished to celebrate the anniversary of the St. Albertus community, as opposed to the buildings.

In May of 1932, parishioner Clara Święczkowska witnesses the realization of her dream when the Polish Army Veterans Home was opened in Utica under the auspices of the St. Albertus Polish Activities League.

In 1932, Fr. Bernard Ciesielski, the first native-born Detroitier to pastor St. Albertus, reported a total membership of 1,100 families.

By 1952, the parish membership would decline to around 700 families.

In June of 1966, the oldest Polish parochial school in Detroit closed its doors after ninety-plus years of operation.

In 1973, the parish celebrated 100 years of service to Detroit Polonia.

In January of 1978, the parish was placed on the National Register of Historic Places; the following year, the Detroit City Council formally created the St. Albertus Historic District.

In 1990, unable to meet the standards of viability established by the Archdiocese of Detroit, St. Albertus was formally closed.

As of this writing, the former St. Albertus parish complex is being maintained by the Polish American Historic Site Association. It is being utilized as a center of Polish history and culture, and is open to the public for various religious and cultural events.

For further information, or to receive the bi-monthly newsletter *Pamiętka*, write to: P.A.H.S.A., 4186 St. Aubin, Detroit, MI 48207.