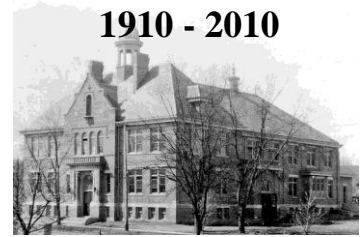


## St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Parish

No. 2 of a Series on Our Parish's First 100 Years

*This week's article continues with the history of Catholicism in Burlington prior to the establishment of St. Charles.*



1910 - 2010

Rev. Michael Wisbauer, who was appointed in 1847 as the first permanent pastor of the parish that was then called St. Sebastian's, served Burlington Catholics until his death on December 20, 1889. Under Father Wisbauer's care, the parish grew and prospered as more and more settlers, many of them immigrants from Germany and Ireland, were attracted to the Burlington area. By 1854, a short 7 years after St. Sebastian's Church was dedicated, the church building was proving to be too small and the need for a larger church became more and more pressing.



Rev. Michael Wisbauer

In 1854 the parish resolved to build a larger church and the foundation for the second church building, which now serves as St. Mary's Grade School annex, was begun in the autumn of that year. The structure was to be 45 by 110 feet, and it was to have a stately steeple. In September 1855, after Bishop John Martin Henni of Milwaukee had administered the sacrament of Confirmation in St. Sebastian's Church, he presided at the laying of the cornerstone of the new church, which was to bear the name of the Immaculate Conception.

With little money in the church treasury, the parishioners went to work collecting the stones and bringing them to the building site. It is said that as construction of the walls progressed, a ramp was built, up which blindfolded horses would haul wagons holding the stones. For lack of money, the work progressed slowly, sometimes being suspended for extended periods, so that it took fully five years to complete construction. The masonry work was managed by Joseph Wackerman and John Rueter, the carpentry work by Henry Burhans and Henry Rueter, and the rafters and steeple by John Kemptner, who was greatly interested in the entire project.

On December 8, 1859, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the new church was solemnly dedicated by Bishop Henni. On the following day, the Bishop administered the Sacrament of Confirmation and blessed a new bell. Then, and for some time thereafter, the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was considered one of the most beautiful churches in Wisconsin.

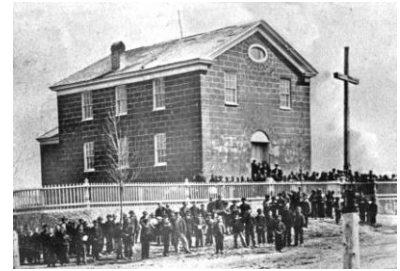
The following December, three Sisters from the Notre Dame Convent in Milwaukee came to Burlington to take charge of the education of parish children. Exactly when the first Catholic school classes started is not known, but three laymen, Joseph Koch, Mr. Beck, and Mr. Dietrich, were earlier teachers. The school was in the building that still stands on the Hillside corner of Jefferson and McHenry Streets, just a block from the current St. Mary's Church. The Sisters lived on the first floor, with the school rooms on the second floor. Classes were held in both English and German.



Church of the Immaculate Conception, about 1880. Original parsonage at right.

In 1861, the school was moved to the former St. Sebastian building, and the Sisters moved to the former parsonage. Newspaper articles in the 1870s and 1880s referred to the school as St. Joseph's Catholic School.

In April 1885 some of the Catholics in the Burlington area sent a petition to Archbishop Henni, signed by over 120 heads of household, to establish a second Catholic parish in the village, if the Archbishop gave permission. This action coincided with a general feeling among the English and Irish Catholics in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee at that time that the German Catholics



Former St. Sebastian Church building after conversion to school

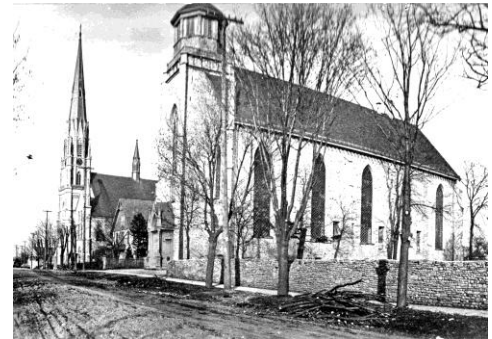
were being favored. One of the Burlington newspapers reported that it was quite probable that a new church would be built, and the other newspaper reported a rumor a few months later that the Irish Catholics had made an offer for the VanSlyke property on which to build a new church. However, nothing further was found in subsequent issues of either newspaper over the next 20 some years on the question of a second church.



Rev. Theodore Jacobs

After Father Wisbauer's death in 1889, the Capuchin Fathers took charge of the Immaculate Conception congregation until May 1890, when Father Theodore Jacobs became pastor. Father Jacobs, who was born in Somers in Kenosha County and whose first pastoral charge was St. John the Baptist Church at Paris, personally bought the property on the corner of McHenry and State Streets from the Sisters of Notre Dame (who had

earlier obtained it from Father Wisbauer for "a song - and a very short one") and donated it to the congregation on the condition that they would build a new church and parsonage on the grounds. The congregation accepted the offer and, on December 10, 1891, the new church was dedicated. The former church was thoroughly renovated, the steeple was taken down, and the building was divided into two floors, with five schoolrooms on the first floor and a hall on the second floor. By 1901 St. Mary's congregation was debt-free.



St. Mary's 1891 Church (left) and renovated 1859 Church (right) with steeple removed. Photo about 1900.

Until his death in January 1912, Father Jacobs continued to guide and improve the spiritual life of his parishioners and to initiate and oversee (and sometimes personally fund) projects to improve St. Mary's Church and school. He was also a lawyer and a strongly civic-minded man with a willingness to put his abilities to work for others. He owned and rented out some properties in the city; served for a time as vice president of the Bank of Burlington; and was one of the founders, a director, and vice president for several terms of the Security Lightning Rod Company. One interesting sidenote on Father Jacobs is that an 1895 article mentioned that, through his efforts, four cans of black bass and walleyed pike fry were deposited in Brown's Lake.

The last major project to which Father Jacobs gave his attention was the formation of a new Catholic parish in Burlington. The formal planning for the new parish began in 1908 and culminated in the dedication of the new St. Charles Church and school building in 1910.

*(to be continued)*