

St. Michael Historian



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Why Preservation Matters

by Bob Zahler

Contrary to conventional thinking, hanging on to “things” is not necessarily bad. Sometimes we hang on to things because they are useful now or they could be useful in the future. My grandmother had old cigar boxes full of “stuff.” I recall a ball of string that was composed of short pieces of string tied end to end. When I suggested that we throw out some of this junk, she replied with, “you throw it out, and two weeks later you’re looking for it!” I’ve learned many times how right she was. Sometimes we hang on to things because they make us feel good or remind us of the person to whom it once belonged. My mantel clock, for example, was a wedding gift to my grandparents in 1927, and as a child I clearly remember seeing it set on my grandparent’s buffet and hearing the sound of its chimes. When I received it, it wasn’t working; and over the last 25 years I’ve spent more than the cost of two new ones to keep it running. But I still like it because I have memories attached to it, and it still looks and sounds nice.

Preservation is sometimes difficult for practical-minded people, but that’s only because we too often look at things from the perspective of the usefulness of the object in its intended purpose. In other words, if something is no longer being used as originally intended, then it should be tossed aside. However, objects, and buildings in particular, serve more than just one purpose. When the pioneers of St. Michael built the Historic Catholic Church, it wasn’t just to hold divine services for the congregation. It was built to inspire, to be beautiful, to remind both residents and visitors of what kind of people lived here. Because it was meant to be a reflection of the congregation’s love for God, they hired a famous Chicago architect, Adolphus Druiding, to design it. St. Michael’s Historic Church is a classic example of Druiding’s love of gothic revival



St. Michael’s Historic Catholic Church was built between 1890 and 1892. It was designed by famed Chicago architect Adolphus Druiding in the then popular neo-gothic style. This photo is from about the year 1910.

architecture. An Internet search of Adolphus Druiding leads one to find other examples of beautiful churches scattered throughout the upper Midwest. Historically and prolifically, few architects have contributed more to Catholic architecture in the United States than Adolphus Druiding. In other words, here in St. Michael we have a piece of building art in our community; a gift to the street; a sculpture made of brick and stained glass. Imagine the emptiness, the bleakness, if it were not there to look at or if it was altered drastically from its current, classic appearance.

John Ruskin, one of the leading art critics of the Victorian Era, once said, “Architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought. We may live without her and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”

We should preserve buildings like the Historic Church of St. Michael, not because it is practical (and I believe there can still be a practical use for this building) but because it helps form our collective memory. It reminds us of the people who struggled hard to establish this community. Two church buildings preceded this 1890 structure, but they were built of necessity and were ordinary in appearance. This one was built, in a way, to be a trophy of triumph. Yes, it glorified God and served a need for more space, but it also demonstrated what this community of pioneer immigrants had accomplished in less than fifty years since cutting the first timber and scratching out the first farms. It was larger than necessary and an impractical building to heat and maintain, but that wasn't the point. It was built to be beautiful; and it needs to remain there to continue to inspire not only this generation, but also future generations of how God blesses those who sacrifice, work hard, and persevere in humble obedience.



St. Michael's Historic Catholic Church has been the dominant feature of the landscape for 125 years. This photo is from 1909. In 1979 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, but the designation does not protect it from alteration or destruction.

Preserving the Historic Church should not be the sole responsibility of the parish, however. The church is part of the landscape that belongs to all of us. We all lose if it is severely altered, or worse, destroyed. Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Places says, "Preservation strengthens a partnership that makes for orderly growth and change in our communities: the perpetual partnership among the past, the present and the future. This dynamic partnership encourages each generation to utilize the best of contemporary thought and technology without rejecting the history, culture, traditions and values on which our lives and our futures are built. When it's allowed to work as it's supposed to, this partnership shapes the sense of continuity that art historian Sigfried Giedion says is 'part of the very backbone of human dignity.'"

The parish of St. Michael has already announced that the Historic Church is for sale, and so there is a risk of losing the building as we now know it. Even though the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, there is no law that protects it from destruction or extreme alteration. This building is a major feature of our visual environment; it is *the* landmark that points to the heart of the community. Regardless of religious affiliation, the church is a symbol of who we are as a community; but it could be lost if we don't begin to organize to preserve it.

Who was Reverend John W Balta?

by *Stephen Samuel Barthel*

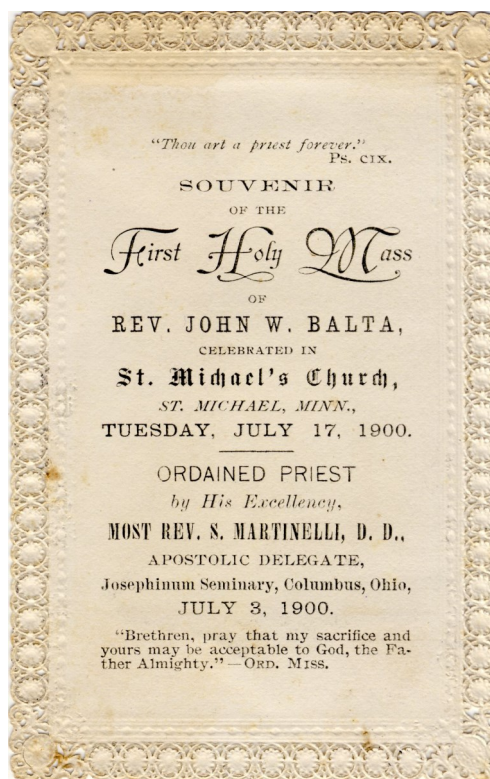
Upon scanning various memorial cards, I noticed there was a Reverend John Balta, who celebrated his first mass in St. Michael on July 17, 1900. He was ordained a Catholic priest two weeks earlier at Josephinum Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, according to the memorial card. Who was this man and what connection did he have with the village of St. Michael? As far as I knew, there was no Balta among the settlers of St. Michael.

Determined to find his connection with St. Michael, I checked the 1900 census and found him listed in Ohio with Peter Schirmers, Ferdinand Valerius, and Peter Eicher, fellow seminary students from St. Michael. These names I did recognize. I checked the www.findagrave.com website and found that Peter Schirmers was buried in Albertville, Minnesota; Ferdinand Valerius in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky; and Peter Eicher in St. Michael. I could find nothing more on John Balta, other than connections with Pennsylvania.

Not everything is available online, so I contacted Michael Fry, who is the Archivist for the Pontifical College Josephinum. He supplied me with information on John Balta, which mentions that he was born in Brainerd, Minnesota. Both of his parents died while he was very young. He was in an orphanage in Minneapolis and was later taken in by the John and Emily (Aydt) Zachmann family. (John and Emily also had a son, Otto, who became a priest.)



Fr. John Balta, an orphan, was raised by the John and Emily Zachmann family in St. Michael and was included on a collage made in the 1920s of native sons who became priests from the parish. The above photo is taken from that collage.



John Balta attended the St. Michael parish school and entered the Josephinum Seminary in 1889. His first assignment was St. Nicholas Parish in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. After serving three years in Wilkes-Barre, he was given permission to go to Rome to further his studies. He received his Doctorate degree in Canon and Civil Law. He returned to Pennsylvania and was named pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Honesdale. He died on December 10, 1914 in Scranton, Pennsylvania and was buried in Honesdale.

For detailed information on Reverend John Balta see <https://familysearch.org/tree/#view=ancestor&person=L6PH-3WL>. You will need to sign in and create an account to view in Family Tree. The account is free and secured. Once in, click on Memories.

Souvenirs of a priest's first mass have been common for many years. The one at left from Fr. John Balta's first mass in St. Michael has a delicate border of paper lace like a doily. This one is in English, but Fr. Balta also had some printed in German since in 1900 most people in St. Michael were still conversing in German. It is probable that Fr. Balta also delivered his first homily that day in German as well.

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.

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Jaeb's 66, St. Michael's First Filling Station

By Bob Zahler

According to Robert G. Zahler, (1895-1992) the first automobile in St. Michael was owned by John Marx and appeared about 1904. It would be, however, many years before there would be a business devoted to automobile service. John Jaeb had been a village blacksmith since before 1899. While gas pumps started to appear by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century by the dancehall and Schumm's Tavern, it was John Jaeb and his son Allen who established the first full-service filling station, carrying the Philips 66 line of petroleum products. John Jaeb added a gas pump in front of the blacksmith shop in the 1920s, but by the late 1930s the business focused solely on automobiles with oil changes and tire repair as well as gasoline sales. Allen Jaeb teamed up with brother-in-law Erwin Zahler for a few years in the late 1940s and early 50s, adding DeLaval milk equipment, Admiral appliances, and Bendex televisions to the business mix. Allen Jaeb remained in business on the corner of Central Avenue and 1st Street until his retirement in 1971, when the filling station was sold to Dale and Marion Meyer. St. Michael Liquors now occupies this location.



The photo above was taken about 1948 when Allen Jaeb and Ewin Zahler partnered in the filling station and appliance business. Jaeb's 66 was also one of the main stops to catch up on the latest village news.

Upcoming Events

Monday, March 9 – Monthly Board of Directors meeting, 7:00 PM in the Gries and Lenhardt Room.

Monday, April 13 – ANNUAL MEETING. Election of five members to the Board of Directors for a three-year term, 7:00 PM in the Gries and Lenhardt Room.

Monday, May 11 – Monthly Board of Directors meeting. Stephen S. Barthel will have a presentation following the meeting on the subject of how to download photos and items to the Internet. Both the meeting and the presentation will be in the Gries and Lenhardt Room.