

The Old St. James Catholic Church

by Courtney Ryan



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During the early 1800s, a line of bishops and fathers tried to establish a Catholic following in Liberty; their efforts led to the establishment of St. James Catholic Church. The first mention of Catholicism in Liberty occurs in letters sent from Father Joseph Anthony Lutz, a priest of the St. Louis diocese, to Bishop Joseph Rosati, a French diocesan priest on loan to the St. Louis diocese from Lyons, France. In a letter dated November 12, 1828, Father Lutz wrote that he ““went recently to the town of Liberty and found there only one Catholic soul”” (Garraghan 31). At the time, Father Lutz was attempting to start a mission among a tribe of Native Americans along the Kansas River. Five years after the unsuccessful effort, Bishop Rosati sent Father Benedict Roux to minister to Catholics at Kawsmouth.

When Father Roux arrived in Liberty, Missouri, on November 4, 1833, it ““was the most considerable settlement at the time in Western Missouri, with a population at about six hundred”” (Garraghan 40). He became the first resident priest in that quarter of the St. Louis diocese. On November 5, 1833, Father Roux left Liberty for Clinton County and spoke with William Hughes, who had expressed to Bishop Rosati a desire for a Catholic settlement to be established. Father Roux thought that Liberty would be a suitable place for Hughes' proposal. Intolerance by Methodist and Baptist inhabitants of the area presented a prominent problem, so Father Roux ruled the area not ready for a Catholic establishment at the time. Father Christian Hoecken and other Jesuit missionaries decided to open a parish in Plattsburg and Liberty four years later.

In 1847, Father Patrick Ward, the out-mission priest, and the congregation worked to build their first parish church in Liberty. Previously, they worshipped in a facility donated by Hughes where the

house of worship would be built. The new structure cost \$2,500 and was located at 342 North Water Street; at the time, there were 170 members (“St. James Parish History”). Archbishop Peter Kenrick consecrated the church in 1848. Father Bernard Donnelly, the previous priest, also aided with construction.

A parish house was added to the grounds in 1870 and a two-story brick school building in 1874 by three Sisters of Humility of Mary. Later, the congregation tore down the original church and rectory to replace them with new buildings. Located one space north of the church, the brick building served as a school, convent, and dormitory for pupils. At the end of term in 1880, the Sisters gave the school building to the father of the time and left the area. From 1883 until 1890, the building became the Hawthorne Institute, a non-sectarian school for girls. After June of 1890, the second floor of the building became priest’s quarters and the first a place for worship services because the church building had been declared unsafe. When a new rectory was built in 1927, the brick building was sold as a private residence—a fire of unknown cause burned it to the ground in 1935.

Until Father Edward Mallen took over the parish in 1912, St. James did not have a resident priest. There were only 8 to 12 families attending at the time. When Father Mallen came to Liberty the year prior, Excelsior Springs had the only other Catholic church in Clay County. As the church was in shambles, plans were made to construct a new one. While traveling through Rome, Italy, and Austria, Father Mallen gathered hundreds of photos of churches and cathedrals in Europe and enlisted the help of Mr. LaPeer, a local architect. Told to consider the size of the congregation and its financial situation, LaPeer designed a blueprint based on Gothic architecture. Construction began in 1913 at 312 North Water Street (which was later renumbered as 342 N. Water St.); despite incredible effort on the part of the parishioners, the building could not be finished according to the plans due to lack of money. Father Mallen held the first mass in 1914 on Easter Sunday, and the church was dedicated that summer. Thanks to the effort of the congregants, the church paid its debt by the second Christmas after the building was built.

The church was built of vitrified brick with Carthage and Bedford stone trimmings. It had a 100 foot tower with a large bell. Five years after construction, a painting of the Crucifixion by a German painter graced the west wall of the sanctuary. Mrs. Jim McGowan donated Stations of the Cross, hand-painted on copper, in honor of her husband. Through the generous giving and work of the congregation, stained glass windows were installed shortly after the Stations of the Cross.

Father Mallen served as St. James' priest until 1955, except for a couple years of service in Oklahoma. During Father Mallen's time as priest, the number of parishioners increased from 170 in 1938 to 255 in 1949. It continued to grow and reached 1,650 in 1984. For a church designed to seat 400, this presented a problem. Even before membership escalated to that point, the church tried to gather funds for a newer and larger church in 1959; however, this dream was not realized. Instead, the church underwent a serious renovation in 1965: a new heating/cooling system was put in place, the old altar was replaced with a walnut alter, matching pedestals were bought to hold the tabernacle and the statue of the Virgin Mary, new matching pews were installed, the walls of the nave were painted light blue and the ceiling white, walnut paneling was mounted, and fluorescent cove lighting brightened the new interior.

When the Precious Blood Fathers took control of the parish in 1977, mass transferred to the Precious Blood seminary chapel on Ruth Ewing Road because the church was too small. Although several sites were considered, authority figures decided in 1978 that a new church would be built at 309 South Stewart Road. The property, consisting of a church, rectory, and parish offices, was finished in 1981 and dedicated on April 5, 1981. In 1996, the church expanded to include an activity center, complete with a stage, kitchen, gym and meeting rooms; a cafeteria; music and art rooms; six more classrooms; and more parking spaces.

After the congregation left, the church building on North Water Street faced new owners, renovations, and the threat of demolition. In 1982, George and Normalee Carter bought St. James and worked hard to restore it in hope that another congregation would make it their home. The Carters cleaned up a lot of pigeon guano from the belfry, polished the bell, restored some of the windows, removed the carpeting and cleaned the maple hard-wood floors, and used many gallons of paint. Despite the care the Carters put into the building, no church family adopted the building; instead, Howard L. Miller, a St. Joseph developer, purchased it sometime in the mid-1980s. Miller tried to turn it into low-income housing, but the financing fell through so the building sat dormant for several years while he tried to sell—Miller even offered demolition as an option while under pressure from officials concerning code violations. Ending the debate over whether the building was worth saving, David Kimbrell bought the church in December 1990 with the intention of launching a dinner theater. His alternative plan, if zoning officials would not agree, was to turn it into a private residence. Neither of these plans transpired: Kimbrell alternatively opened James Inn, a bed and breakfast, in 1993. Some officials and citizens struggled to come to terms with the building's new identity; however, Kimbrell and others considered it a way of preserving history.

Kimbrell's dedication led to a striking finish that resulted in full rooms most weekends after only seven months of operation (Garrison). Check-in took place at an altar with a brass cash register, above which hung the original mural depicting the Crucifixion from 1918. Guests could relax in a whirlwind pool in the old choir loft or an outdoor hot tub on the deck, exercise on the lower level, or check out the library. Visitors enjoyed breakfast in a nook with 40-foot high ceilings surrounded by natural light from 25-foot high arched windows. The seven bedrooms had four-poster, queen-sized beds, a Jacuzzi, and local antiques for décor. With the renovations also came full access for persons with disabilities.

It is unclear when James Inn sold, but the next owners, Richard Held and Matthew Wilson, opened the Steeple Inn and Spa on October 1, 2007 (Borgedalen). According to reviews still available online, it was well-received. Steeple Inn boasted between four and six guest quarters with queen-sized beds fitted with handmade bedding, cable television, wireless internet access, and lofted bathrooms with two-person jet tubs. Guests could enjoy the spa services, a hair salon, the restored sanctuary, live grand piano music, the library, or utilize one of the meeting rooms.

In 2011, Family Bible Church of Liberty opened Kidzone Creations after the Steeple Inn closed ("Imagine a place where your child"). Kidzone is a faith-based early learning childcare center, and remains the current function of the address. The diverse history of 342 N. Water St. makes it a true testament to historic preservation. Through the hard work and care of many owners, the structure has survived threats of demolition, the discontent of city officials and residents, and times of abandonment. With each new identity, the former St. James Catholic Church building takes a step into the future and leaves footprints in history.

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