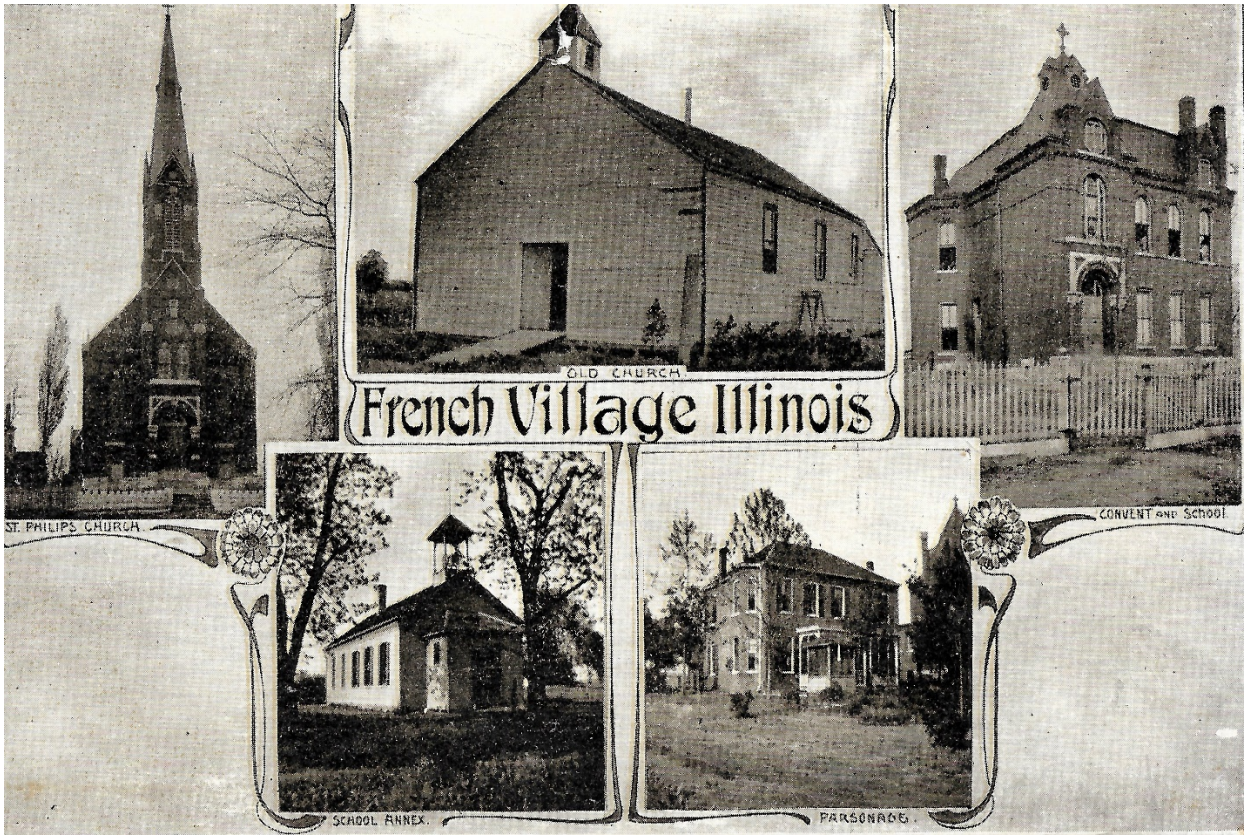
NARRATIVE HISTORY OF ST. PHILIP'S PARISH



Upon the Occasion of

ST. PHILIP'S and SISTER THEA BOWMAN

CHAPEL SIGN DEDICATION

April 22, 2022

Mass at 9:00 a.m.

Bishop Michael McGovern – Celebrant & Homilist

Fr. Carroll Mizicko, OFM, Concelebrant

NARRATIVE HISTORY OF ST. PHILIP'S PARISH

PERIOD 1: THE FIRST CATHOLICS IN "FRENCH VILLAGE" (THE ST. PHILIP CHURCH REGION)

Father Jacques Marquette, the French Jesuit missionary and explorer, was the first Catholic to set eyes upon land which would later become the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois. This took place in the summer of 1673, when Father Marquette, accompanied by the French-Canadian explorer, Louis Jolliet, paddled their canoes down the Mississippi River past the future City of St. Louis, Missouri, and the future village of Cahokia, Illinois. The first Catholic Mass in this area was celebrated 25 years later in what would become the Village of Cahokia by other missionary priests from French Canada on December 8, 1698, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Soon after this Mass, in January, 1699, these missionaries established a permanent mission in Cahokia which they called Holy Family. A log church and rectory were dedicated there on May 14, 1699, the date which is considered the founding of the Holy Family Parish.

The first settlers came to the area near what would become St. Philip Church (Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School) during the 1800 to 1820 period. Among these early settlers was Mr. Lawrence Schoenberger, who had come to the US in 1789. Shortly after Schoenberger settled in the area, several French families from Cahokia moved to the area, too. Among the names of these Cahokia families was Pensoneau, Trotier, Tourjeant, Bonneau, Gonville, Chartrand, Roulard, Graundine, LePage, and Valentin. They were followed shortly by the Germain and Soul families. This area of settlement was called "French Village," and it was distinct from "Illinoistown" (East St. Louis) a few miles to the west.

In 1834, these French Village families conveyed several parcels of land along the Vincennes-St. Louis Trail (present day Church Lane) to Bishop Rosati of St. Louis with the intention of a Catholic Church being built there. Although it would be a few years before the church building was erected, a Catholic Mass was celebrated by Father John Francis Regis Loisel on October 27, 1836, in the home of the Germain family. This home was located near what is now 8107 Church Lane, slightly west of St. Philip Church/Sister Thea Bowman School.

PERIOD 2: THE FIRST ST. PHILIP CHURCH

The formal establishment of St. Philip's Parish is considered to be April 18, 1841. On that day, Father Loisel said Mass once again at the Germain home on Church Lane, and he began keeping a formal record for baptisms, marriages, and burials. These records indicate that two people were baptized by Father Loisel that day: Jules Cyril Pensoneau and Nicholas Boul.

Because of failing health, Father Loisel soon left French Village and retired to St. Louis. A Vincentian priest by the name of Father P. J. Doutreluignue came to serve the spiritual needs of the French Village community, and it was Father Doutreluignue who completed the arrangements for the construction of the first church building at the St. Philip/Sister Thea Bowman School and Chapel. The lumber for this building was obtained from a

local sawmill while the stone for the foundation was quarried from the nearby bluffs. This first church building was a fame structure measuring 36 feet by 54 feet and it was ready for the first Mass by August 1842. The new Church building was dedicated on July 16, 1843, by Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick of St. Louis. Archbishop Kenrick also confirmed a group of some 36 parishioners that day.

Although Father Doutreluignue served at St. Philip for only a brief period, he worked in the area for nearly 50 years. Besides St. Philip's, he also built a church at Centreville Station in 1863. Father Joseph Petit became St. Philip's first resident pastor in 1859. He lived in a small home nearby, and he conducted catechism classes in this home for the young Catholics of the parish. Father John Peter Klein became St. Philip's pastor in 1871. Like Father Petit, Father Klein did his best to instruct the young Catholic children of the parish without there being a parish Catholic school.

It should be mentioned here that the City of East St. Louis was formally established on April 1, 1861. Prior to this, it was known as Illinoistown. By 1870, East St. Louis had a population of slightly more than 5,000 people.

PERIOD 3: THE SECOND ST. PHILIP CHURCH AND THE NEW ST. PHILIP SCHOOL

Between its founding in 1841 and 1888, St. Philip's had "belonged" to 3 Catholic dioceses: St. Louis, Chicago, and Alton. But in 1888, St. Philip Church became part of the newly created Diocese of Belleville, under the direction of Bishop John Janssen. Shortly after becoming part of the Belleville Diocese, Father Felix Ferbers arrived as the new pastor at St. Philip's in 1890. Father Ferbers took the initiative towards building a new church building for the parish. The old building was almost 50 years old now, and it was in deteriorating condition. The cornerstone for the new church was laid on April 26, 1891, just 8 days after the parish had celebrated the Golden Jubilee of its founding. The church was constructed in the Romanesque style, measuring 90 feet long and 44 feet wide, with an impressive 140-foot spire. The capacity of the new church was approximately 320 people. The formal dedication ceremony took place on December 2, 1891, with Bishop Janssen being in charge.

Upon completing the new church building, consideration was given to building a school building for St. Philip's. Although there had been talk for several years of starting a Catholic school at St. Philip's, there had been some hesitancy due to the need for a new church building. But Bishop Janssen was supportive of a school being built. At the dedication of the church, Bishop Janssen said "I wish you would at once plan to build a school in your parish. It would indeed be a great source of happiness to me if I could leave your parish tonight with the assurance that a school will soon be built here."

Father Klein, Pastor Emeritus of St. Philip, offered his own savings to help build the school, and then Bishop Janssen pledged $500 to the project! The cornerstone for the school and a convent was laid by Father Klein, and the new building was ready for students by September 1893. The School Sisters of Notre Dame taught at St. Philip's School, a ministry they would continue for 100 years.

Father Ferbers was replaced as pastor in 1898 by Father Aloys Wegman. Father Wegman was extremely interested in the continued development of the new St. Philip School. He acquired a school building at the west end of the St. Philip's property from the East St. Louis public school district. From 1863 to 1906, this public-school building

was used to educate the children of the area, including the children of St. Philip's parishioners. In 1906, a new public school was built in Edgemont, and St. Philip's paid $1,300 for the old school. This building, along with the 1893 school building and another small building added in 1910 had a capacity of 275. Father Ferbers served as pastor for 10 years until 1908 when Father Christopher Goelz was installed as pastor. Between its founding in 1841 and Father Wegman leaving in 1908, 19 men served as pastor at St. Philip. But Father Goelz remained as pastor for 43 years until he retired in 1951.

PERIOD 4: THE THIRD ST. PHILIP CHURCH: THE GROWTH YEARS

In 1951, Father Goelz was replaced as pastor by the 39-year-old Father John Fournie. Father Fournie, who had been a military chaplain during World War II, served as pastor of St. Philip's for 25 years until 1976. At around the time that Father Fournie took over as pastor of St. Philip's, both the City of East St. Louis and the Catholic Church in East St. Louis were experiencing significant growth. Shortly after the end of World War II, the area around St. Philip's was part of a post-war economic and building boom. New subdivisions were constructed on what had been farmland. In September 1947, St. Philip's school opened with an enrollment of 325 students! By 1950, the numbers were up to 343.

In 1950, there were 13 Catholic parishes in East St. Louis, and the city had reached the zenith of its population with over 82,000 residents. There were 2 successful Catholic high schools operating in East St. Louis. St. Teresa Academy had opened as an elementary boarding school for girls in 1894. By the late 1920s, St. Teresa's had transitioned into a girl's high school operated by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ (the Ruma Sisters). In 1929, Central Catholic High School for boys was opened under the direction of the Brothers of Mary, and by 1953, a "new" boys high school was opened as Assumption High School at the intersection of Kingshighway and St. Clair Avenue.

Soon after becoming pastor, Father Fournie began making plans for a new school building for St. Philip's to accommodate a growing student population. On May 25, 1952, ground was broken for the new school with the cornerstone being laid for the building by Father Fournie on October 13. The new St. Philip School was dedicated by Bishop Albert Zuroweste, the third bishop of the Diocese of Belleville on October 4, 1953. The school had a record enrollment of 450 students in ten new classrooms, a clinic, library, and administrative section. Most parishioners made donations to the building.

But within a few years, even this new school was too small! The school library was turned into a classroom, the quilting room in the rectory became another classroom, while a room in the convent basement was used as still another classroom. The 1955 enrollment was 635 students. An addition was built the following year when the parish registered 1,250 families. By the mid-1960s, each grade enrolled an average of 80 students for a total school enrollment of more than 650 students.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck St. Philip's shortly after the new school opened when a fire broke out in the church basement on April 18, 1956, which was ironically the 115th anniversary of the founding of the parish. Within a few hours, the entire building was engulfed in flames and the towering steeple came crashing to the ground. But Father

Fournie and the parishioners of St. Philip's would not be overcome. On April 28, 1956, just ten days after the fire, approximately sixty-five local men worked all day to clear the site of the debris remaining from the fire, and 2 days later, Father Fournie helped break ground for a new church building.

A local contractor and St. Philip's parishioner, John L. Keeley and Sons, constructed the new church building at cost, and Mr. Keeley also made a significant financial contribution to the project. By that August, the cornerstone was laid, and the church was dedicated by Bishop Zuroweste, less than 5 months after the tragic fire. Father Fournie had planned for this new church building to be only a temporary church. His plans were to build a new convent, rectory, and impressive church on the property. The "old" church would then be used as a gymnasium. Unfortunately, these plans were never realized.

Father Fournie (he was named Monsignor in 1959) proved to be a dynamic force at St. Philip's. He helped organize a summer parish festival with rides, concessions, booths, food, and of course bingo! The first festival in 1951 netted the parish $9,320, while by 1956, the net profits had grown to $16,571. In 1955, St. Philip's hosted the annual Christ the King rally for East St. Louis Catholics in November. A large parade of Holy Name members from the East St. Louis and Belleville area along with several bands proceeded to the St. Philip's grounds. St. Philip's started its own outdoor Corpus Christi procession in the late 1950s, and the parish developed an excellent CCD program for Catholic students in the public schools.

In addition to everything else, Father Fournie loved sports. A fine tennis player and golfer himself, he developed an impressive sports program at St. Philip's. At one time, St. Philip's had 83 teams, all in official uniforms, competing in basketball, volleyball, baseball, and softball. The school also had competitions in football, track, swimming, tennis and golf. The famous American tennis star, Jimmy Connors, attended St. Philip's and was a member of the tennis club. There were seven ball diamonds and two tennis courts at the parish complex. In 1952, the parish sponsored the first of 23 annual Patrons Dinners, at which a well-known sports figure spoke.

In 1957, Father Fournie opened a summer camp for children called Camp St. Philip. Initially, he rented the facilities of Camp Vandeventer in Waterloo and Camp Piasa near Grafton, but within a few years, this Camp St. Philip grew into the Belleville Diocese's Camp Ondessonk, which is still in operation today!

PERIOD 5: THE DECLINE OF ST. PHILIP'S PARISH

But at the same time that St. Philip's was experiencing such growth and success, especially during the 1960s, events and forces were at work which would radically alter the history of the St. Philip's community. The first set of altering events was the changes to the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council, while the second group of transitional forces was the major demographic changes to the neighborhood around St. Philip's.

The Second Vatican Council, which was in session from 1962 to 1965, brought about signifcant changes to the liturgical and spritual activities of ordinary Catholics, including the parishioners at St. Philip's. No longer was the Mass celebrated by the priest in Latin with his back to the congregation. Rather, the priest said the Mass in English while facing the people. The large pipe organ so common in Catholic churches was no longer the only musical instrument played at Mass, and "guitar Masses" became common. Such activities as parish bible studies, adult discussion groups, and inter-faith prayer services happened regularly where prior to the Council such events were rare in a Catholic parish. As was true with Catholics elsewhere, many parishioners at St. Philip's believed the church they had grown up with and had known forever was being taken away from them.

The neighborhood demographic changes, however, were felt even more deeply by the people of St. Philip's. Most St. Philip's neighborhoods were becoming racially diverse. Between 1950 and 1980, the total population of East St. Louis had fallen from 82,000 to 55,000. By 1990, the number had dropped to around 40,000. As many White families moved out of the area, Black families bought or rented homes around St. Philip's. Since most of the new families were not Catholic, the number of families in St. Philip's dropped dramatically. As would be expected, enrollment in the Catholic school dropped precipitously as well. Membership in parish organizations fell, too. The number of families who moved out of St. Philip's Parish between 1971 and 1979 was twice as large as the number of families who remained.

And while all these painful changes were happening, the parish struggled to deal with 2 more fires to their property. A fire on Christmas Eve, 1965, did extensive damage to the church's servers' sacristy, storerooms, sanctuary, gym, and the kitchen. The second fire broke out on September 27, 1970, and it damaged the priests' sacristy, and the ceilings of the church nave and the cafeteria.

When Monsignor Fournie left as pastor of St. Philip's in 1976, he was replaced by Father Al Jerome, a native of Holy Family in Cahokia. The financial situation Father Jerome inherited was quite bleak. There were unpaid bills for both church and school totaling over $30,000, and there was a bank debt of $2,400. The parish also owed $135,000 to a diocesan building fund, while the Sisters teaching in the school had not been paid in 6 months. Signicant cuts in personnel and equipment followed.

Within 18 months, however, Father Jerome was transferred to Holy Family in Cahokia with Father Robert O'Shea taking over as St. Philip's pastor. But 6 months later, Father Tom Barrett replaced Father O'Shea. By 1982, the school enrollment had dropped to less than 300 students, and St. Philip's School joined with other Catholic Schools in East St. Louis to explore ways to bring about the consolidation of Catholic elementary school education in the city.

PERIOD 6: ST. PHILIP'S CLOSES/THE SISTER THEA BOWMAN YEARS

By 1989, St. Philip's School was 1 of only 3 Catholic grade schools which remained open in East St. Louis, the other 2 schools being St Patrick, and St. Joseph. St. Martin

of Tours in nearby Washington Park was still open, too. At the high school level, due to falling enrollments, Assumption and St. Teresa's had been forced to combine into a single coed Catholic high school in 1974 operating at the Assumption campus, and then in 1989, the coed Assumption High School was forced to close because of a lack of students. That same year, it was decided to close these 4 elementary schools and merge them into the "new" Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School which would operate at the St. Philip's School campus on Church Street. The school is named for Sister Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. Sister Thea Bowman (1937-1990) was a dynamic Black Catholic woman who made major contributions to the ministry of the Catholic Church to her fellow African-Americans. She was also a scholar, an educator, preacher, poet, dancer and singer. She passed away from cancer in 1990, and she has left a legacy that will inspire, instruct, and enlighten generations to come.

Although St. Philip's Church remained open after the school closed, the number of familes in the parish continued to drop. Thus, in 2006. St. Philip's Church, which had been operating for 145 years closed. It was combined with the East St. Louis Catholic parishes of St. Patrick, St. Joseph, and St. John Francis Regis to create a "new" St. Augustine of Hippo Parish. St. Augustine operated at the old St. Joseph Church as that building was in the best physical condition of the 4 churches.

Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School continues to operate on the campus of the "old" St. Philip's Church and School. The St. Philip's church building serves as a chapel for Sister Thea Bowman School, while the gymnasium and cafeteria continue to be used by Sister Thea students. The average enrollment of the school over the past 5 years has been 124 students. More than 95% of its students are African-American, and they come from a variety of faith traditions. 6% of Sister Thea Bowman students are Catholic. The school provides a holistic approach to learning, and it includes a curriculum which integrates music and the arts for all of students. Sister Thea Bowman School also features a "Peacemaker Program" and a discipline approach based on respect and responsibility.

John Waide

March, 2022