

Solid As An Oak

*A Brief History of Saint James the Greater Church
Cincinnati, Ohio*

*On the Occasion of the 170th Anniversary of the Parish
and the Renovation of the Parish Church*





2013 is a significant year in the history of our parish. We are celebrating our 170th anniversary as a full parish and the completion of the renovation of our parish church. To mark this important time, I am happy to present this history of Saint James Church. This account is drawn from those written by our ancestors. It also includes information about the years since the last history was written as well as some new information about years long ago. I hope you enjoy reading about our parish.

Father Thomas Nolker



Saint James the Greater *Our Patron*

Who is Saint James the Greater?

James is one of the twelve apostles and the brother of John, who is also an apostle. (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 5:15; Acts 1:13 and 12:2). In Hebrew his name would have been Jacob. He was a fisherman from Galilee with his father Zebedee, his brother John, and the workmen they employed. (Mt 4:21; Mk 1:19-20; Lk 5:10). His mother was Salome (Mt 20:20-21).

Jesus called James and John to follow him just after he called Simon and his brother Andrew (Mt 4:21-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11).

In Mark 3:17 James and John are called the “Sons of Thunder” which might be a nickname based on their forthrightness in wanting to call down “fire from heaven” in retaliation for a Samaritan town not welcoming Jesus (Lk 9:54) or because they asked Jesus if they could sit on his right and left in the Kingdom (Mk 10:35ff; their mother asks in Mt 20:20ff).

James was also one of the three apostles present for the transfiguration of Jesus (Lk 9:28-36; Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8), at the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:37) and the agony in Gethsemani (Mt 26:37; Mk 14:33).

James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa. He is the only apostle whose death is recorded in scripture (Acts 12:2). Symbols of Saint James the Greater are a shell and the sword of martyrdom.

James, the son of Zebedee, has traditionally been called “the Greater” to distinguish him from James, son of Alphaeus, another apostle. He is traditionally called James the Less.

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The Pre-History

Parishes, like families and individuals, have lineages. There are ancestors who gave direction and context to those who followed. In 1840 the area now known as White Oak was dense woods and farms. Roads were being extended so people could travel more easily in the growing area of Green and Colerain Townships. Toll-gates existed in Creedville (at Hanley and Blue Rock), at the intersection of Colerain and Kirby, and at the end of Colerain in Northside. Passage was free for those going to and coming from church. Of course, travel was by horse, wagon or by walking.

The growing city of Cincinnati was 8 miles away, and the only Catholic churches were in the city. From 1808 until 1821 all of Ohio had been part of the diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky (now Louisville). The diocese of Cincinnati was established in 1821. When the Reverend Edward Fenwick, O.P. was appointed the first bishop of Cincinnati, there was only one Catholic church in the city – Christ Church at what is now Liberty and Vine Streets.

Bishop Fenwick moved this church to Sycamore St. and in 1825 he built St. Peter Cathedral at the present location of St. Francis Xavier Church. In 1834 Holy Trinity Church was built in the city and, then, in 1840 St. Mary's Church at 13th and Clay was founded. Not only did a growing population in the city require more parishes but it also required parishes based on language. German speaking parishes and English speaking parishes met the needs of different people. It is in this ancestry or lineage that we see the founding of Saint James.

The Beginning

Records seem to indicate that the predominantly German Catholic families in the area began to organize in April, 1840. It wasn't unusual in the 19th century for Catholics to come together and even build a church on their own. After all was ready, they would ask the bishop for a priest for their church. At what became known as "St. James Station," Father John Martin Henni, S.J. (pastor of Holy Trinity) celebrated the first Mass in a barn belonging to Sylvester Oehler on August 15, 1840. Jesuits continued serving the parish until 1851.

These founders quickly began to build their first church, a log cabin on land donated by the Oehler and Werth families on Burnt School House Road (now Cheviot Road). Their efforts were guided by Reverend Joseph Ferneding. Plans were made for a school as well. To build the church, they needed \$124.62; they raised \$66.62 ½. 1843 is regarded as the founding year of Saint James as a full parish.



From a painting of the log cabin church

On January 6, 1844, *The Catholic Telegraph* reported: "Rev. Michael Heiss lately the pastor of the German Catholic Congregation of Covington, Ky., has kindly consented to assist the overburdened laborers on this side of the river, in gathering in the spiritual harvest. In the course of the month, he will visit the following stations: Sunday, January 7th St James Church, Green Township..." Later that year on May 11 *The Catholic Telegraph* reported that, "The church and graveyard of St. James Church, Green Township, were blessed Sunday, May 5, 1844 by Rev. Boeswald. The Bishop (John B. Purcell) preached to a large audience before the doors of the Church. The choir composed of members of 3 choirs from the German Catholic Churches of Cincinnati and Covington was excellent; 10 persons were confirmed. Two acres appropriated for the Church, schoolhouse and graveyard were deeded to the Bishop by Ambrose and Eva Oehler and Geo. and Theresa Werth."

In its early years, there was no residential pastor for Saint James. The pastors would visit on the weekends, staying on Saturday night at the homes of Conrad Briegel or Ignatius Mueller. The parish paid them 50 cents every Sunday for the trouble of housing the priest and stabling his horse.

The parish encompassed a very large area and the congregation continued to grow. Over the years, other parishes were formed from the territory of Saint James, the last being St. Ignatius in 1946 which took over half of the parish's remaining territory.

The Parish Grows

The growth in White Oak caused two major changes in the parish. In 1849 the parish completed construction of a



The church erected in 1849

new stone church which served the parish until 1962. 1851 saw the appointment of the first resident pastor, Reverend Francis J. Pabisch. A four room, two-story building was added to the church to serve as sacristy and residence for Father Pabisch.

In 1856, Father John C. Kraemer was appointed pastor. His pastorate was exciting for a number of reasons. The Civil War would be fought during this time and in 1866 part of the church walls and roof were blown away by what was termed a cyclone. As repairs were being made, another two-story addition consisting of eight rooms was included. This became a new rectory.

In 1873, the old one-room log cabin school was in need of repair. It was a two room structure, with the second room being the residence of the teacher. Until the beginning of the 20th century, all the teachers were lay person. Some of them were Sebastian Oehler, Anthony Maier, and others with last names of Dourson, Lohmiller, Wetzell and Lumler. Ninety-three families had children in the school in 1873 and tuition was 50 cents a month for each child.



The first brick school.

By 1874, a new brick school had been built. It was a two room schoolhouse and the teachers were Miss Wasnick and John Everhardy. In 1875, Father John H. Schoenfeld became pastor. In 1906 he invited the Sisters of St. Francis from Oldenburg, Indiana to staff the school. Sister Lucina

Fries arrived for the beginning of the school year in 1907 with another sister. A home on Burnt School House Road was bought as a residence for the Sisters.

The church was having some structural problems in 1899. This required adding brick columns on each corner, and inserting iron rods across the back and middle of the church.

The “Extravagance” of 1912

By the turn of the century, Saint James’ growth showed that a new school was needed. The 1874 two room structure was inadequate for many reasons. Father Schoenfeld began the work on the school but died before it was completed. Father Duerstock followed him and completed the school project. In 1912, a new 8-room brick school building was dedicated. It is recorded that parishioners criticized the extravagance of such a large school. The parish was growing and parish leadership planned wisely for the future. By 1943 Saint James School had 225 students and all the classrooms were being used. That sturdy building is the center and heart of our present school.

Before leaving Saint James in 1916 Father Duerstock had the interior of the church redone and installed a new high altar.

The 1920s and 1930s

When Father August C. Adelmann became pastor in 1916, Saint James was a parish of 175 families. His years at Saint James saw World War I and coincided with efforts to pay off the new school building. The 175 families pledged \$8,575.00 and actually gave about \$7,100 over four years. There was still a debt of \$17,000 that would remain when Father Henry (Harry) Meyer became pastor in 1920.



Interior of the church around 1920

Father Meyer’s time was marked by the Great Depression. Just before that historic economic collapse, he completed a new rectory for the parish. It was located across Hubble Road from the church and school. The old rectory became the house for the Sisters. A history written by one of his successors (Father Louis J. Abt) for the parish’s centennial in 1943 described the new rectory this way: “When “Open House” was announced early in 1928, the people who visited

it, stood amazed, never realizing that such an improvement was possible in White Oak. Electrically equipped with Stove, Refrigerator, Washer and Sweeper, hot and cold running city water, heated with a hot-water boiler, hardwood flooring, these and many more are some of the features of the parish house.” The parish had bought the ten acres on Hubble Road for \$20,000 and spent another \$25,000 building the house. Even with the Depression, half of that \$45,000 was paid off by 1931 when Father Meyer left Saint James.

One of the other significant achievements of Father Meyer was that in 1926 the parish discontinued the use of “pew rents” as a means of income. Instead, they began a regular collection at each Sunday Mass using envelopes.

Father Louis J. Abt succeeded Father Meyer. According to the history of the parish he wrote in 1943 for the parish centennial, some of the highpoints of his time at Saint James up to that time were:

- ❖ Building interior restrooms in the school in 1931 for \$5,000.00
- ❖ Adding another classroom to the school in the basement of the rectory in 1932.
- ❖ School and church roofs were repaired in 1933 and fully replaced in 1937.
- ❖ In 1938 the statues and stations in the church were repainted and the candlesticks and sanctuary lamps were gold-plated.
- ❖ Over the years, walls were washed, new linoleum was put into buildings and “two Rex-air sweepers were bought, one for the parish house and the other for the Church and Sisters’ residence.”

On June 9, 1935 the parish celebrated the first ordination to the priesthood of one of its own. Father Edgar Oehler was a member of the Society of the Divine Word.¹

In preparation for the parish centennial the following year, in 1942 the interior of the church was frescoed by Joseph Gruber; the exterior was painted by Charles Kammer; the statues, altars and pews were painted and grained in a wood-like finish. A new tabernacle and candlesticks were purchased as well as a new organ and carpeting for the sanctuary. All of this was accomplished for \$2,850.00 and the parish was debt free by 1943’s celebration.

The Great Fire

With a headline reading “Interior of Church in Ruins; White Oak Fire Loss \$25,000” the Cincinnati Enquirer reported on the December 4, 1944 fire in the church. The article explains what happened: “An intensely smoky fire of undetermined origin burned out the auditorium floor and



Newly decorated church in 1942

pews seating 300 persons in St. James Church, Cheviot and Hubble Roads, White Oak, yesterday causing approximately \$25,000 damage to the 95-year-old brick-walled edifice.” The Sisters of St. Francis who lived next door to the church discovered the fire. The floor of the nave and the pews collapsed into the 5 foot crawl space beneath the church. The altars, paintings and statues were badly damaged by water and smoke. All this was reported by the newspaper plus the names of the firemen who fought the fire. The walls, windows and sanctuary were saved. Over the next year the flooring was rebuilt and the whole church redecorated.



The church after the fire; a celebration with those who served in the military during World War II.

Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s the trend of people moving to the suburbs increased. This meant that Saint James was growing rapidly. In 1955 a new convent was built for the Sisters of Saint Francis as more Sisters were needed to teach in the school. 1956 saw the addition of a north wing to the 1912 school building. Again, indicative of the generosity of

¹ Father Oehler became a chemist and paleontologist, teaching at the University of Peking, China; San Carlos University in Cebu, the Philippines; and Divine Word College, Epworth, Iowa. Father Oehler returned to White

Oak in retirement. He died March 3, 1974 and is buried in the parish cemetery.

the parishioners, the \$90,000.00 debt for the school was paid off in 4 years.

By 1961 everyone realized that the church no longer was adequate for the parish. People were standing outside trying to hear the Mass each Sunday. A new church was designed and the basement was begun. On Easter Sunday, 1962, Father Harold Thorburn celebrated the first Mass in the "basement church" which would serve the parish until November, 1980. This basement church cost \$262,000.00.



The wedding of Barron Charles Merten and Bernice Jean Renneker in the basement church on May 5, 1962.

Another Addition to the School

On the site of the old church, Father Thorburn oversaw the construction of another wing to the school with twelve classrooms and a meeting hall on the lowest level. This was completed in 1963 for \$120,000.00. The needs of the parish soon stretched beyond its facilities again. In 1968, with an enrollment of 1250 students in 7 grades, an additional six classrooms were built for \$85,000.00. The school was staffed by 11 Sisters of Saint Francis and 22 lay teachers. With all this building and the expansion of the programs offered for the whole parish during these years, the parish debt was only \$25,000.00 in 1969.

The Parish Grows Rapidly

When Father Victor C. Koegel became pastor in 1969 the growth in the parish was significant. Expanding housing developments brought more families to Saint James. The Parish reached over 2500 families with 1400 students in grades 2 to 8 in the school. This made the parish one of the largest in the Archdiocese and the school was the largest Catholic grade school in Ohio.

This was also the time when all parishes were working hard to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. In 1972 the church was renovated so the congregation would be closer to the altar and actually seated all around the sanctuary. Parish Councils (now called Pastoral Councils) were

developing along with all the other parish structures and organizations that make up a modern parish.

In 1974 Reverend Robert Stricker was appointed co-pastor with Father Koegel. This was an experiment in parish



Interior of the "basement church" with changes made in 1972

leadership across the archdiocese which did not endure. Father Stricker left Saint James in 1977 and Father Koegel remained as pastor until 1981.



The church built in 1980

A New Church Is Built

By 1976 plans were beginning for an office annex to the rectory and the building of a new church. Ground was broken for the church in June, 1979 and Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin consecrated the new church on November 7, 1980.

In more recent years, the parish no longer grew at the rate of the middle of the 20th century. There simply was no significant room left in White Oak for new large subdivisions. This does not mean that parish needs didn't grow and change.

Adult religious education and an abundance of parish organizations all required space and resources. The parish staff expanded to include a Director of Religious Education, lay Pastoral Associates and expanded office support staff. But the number of priests decreased from four in the 1970s to two by the 1990s.



Interior of the 1980 church before renovation in 2013

The Offices and Gym – And More Classrooms

In 1995 Father Raymond E. Larger oversaw the construction of another addition to the school and the building of the Parish Center for the parish offices and a gym. This new Parish center also contained four meetings rooms to meet the growing demands for parish activities. This required the demolition of the rectory and convent. The Sisters had left the school and the convent had been used as a home for the elderly.

Between 1988 and 2007 Saint James School won four Blue Ribbons from the United States Department of Education for its outstanding program. No other private elementary school has achieved this honor. The school has not only grown in the number of classrooms over its 170 years, it has consistently grown in academic excellence and is recognized as one of the premier schools of the Archdiocese.

A Renovated Church

As a result of a renewal process for the parish in 2009-2010, Father Thomas C. Nolker, the Worship Commission, Finance Council and Pastoral Council began studying the feasibility of renovating the church. After deliberation by a committee formed to study and guide the renovation, work began in January 2013. For 4½ months the parish once again used the church hall, the former “basement church,” as its worship space. On May 11, 2013 the renovated church was opened for prayer. New flooring, additional stained glass windows and new pews were part of the total redesign. At the same time, efforts were made to preserve historic elements from the 1849 church that could still be found at the parish. One was a crucifix commemorating a parish mission given by Reverend P. Karlstatter, S.J. during the first week of December, 1878. Also brought into the new space was a large stone tablet

written in German indicating the church was built in 1849 and renovated in 1868.



The parish offices and gym are in the parish center built in 1995.

The Legacy of Faith

The legacy inherited from those founding families is primarily a strong faith. With that faith, the people of this parish have weathered the events of history and the various



The renovated church in 2013

moments - good and bad - in their individual lives. It has created a strong bond between families that have been here since the earliest days of the parish and for families who are new to the area. Whether a person is a fifth generation St. James parishioner or has been here only a few weeks, it is the heritage of sharing the Catholic faith that unites people.

Throughout this history it has been pointed out how parishioners paid their way through the years. It is also a proud characteristic of the parish, gained from our ancestors, that the parish is always financially sound. This is more than just a point of finance. It shows the deep participation of parishioners in the life of the parish and their sense of responsibility for sustaining and growing the parish. Parishioners at Saint James, in each age, know they are the Church of God and this place is home to them all. That pride and commitment are part of the legacy of those first families who gathered for Mass in Oehler's barn. One hundred seventy-three years later the people of Saint James the Greater Church, White Oak, carry on their fervor for the faith.



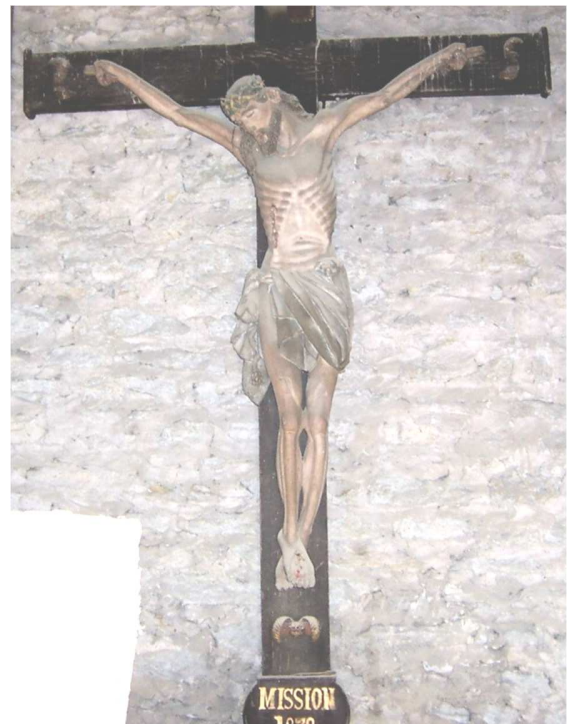
Oehler's barn



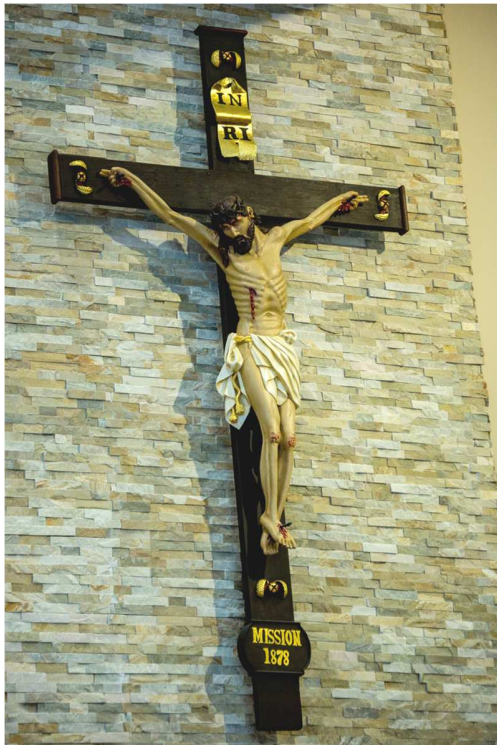
Saint James Church 1849 – 1962



Demolition of the 1849 church



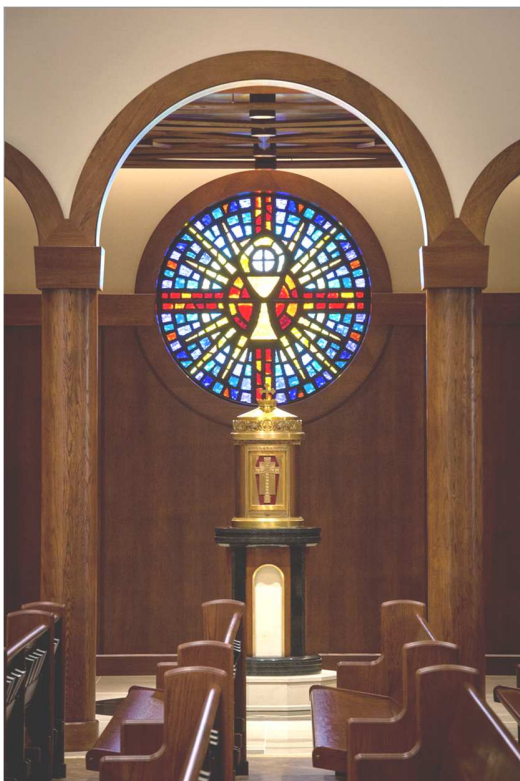
*1878 crucifix before restoration
hanging in the cemetery chapel*



1878 crucifix after restoration



The baptismal font and sanctuary



The Blessed Sacrament Chapel



The new sanctuary

Pastors of Saint James

John M. Henni	1840-1843
Michael Heiss	1843-1846
Joseph Ferneding	1843-1846
Joseph Ewig, S.J.	1846-1848
Joseph Weber, S.J.	1848-1851
Francis J. Pabisch	1851-1856
John C. Kraemer	1856-1875
John H. Schoenfeld	1875-1912
Joseph T. Duerstock	1912-1916
Augustine C. Adelman	1916-1920
G. Henry Meyer	1920-1931
Louis J. Abt	1931-1946
Louis J. Evers	1946-1951
David P. Powers	1951-1955
Harold A. Thorburn	1955-1969
Victor C. Koegel	1969-1981
Robert A. Stricker	1974-1977
Robert J. Mooney	1981-1991
Raymond E. Larger	1991-2002
Thomas C. Nolker	2002-

Notes

Father Henni became the first Bishop of Milwaukee on March 19, 1844 and the first archbishop of Milwaukee on June 3, 1875.

Father Heiss became the Bishop of La Cross, WI on September 6, 1868 and the Coadjutor Archbishop of Milwaukee on March 14, 1880 and the Archbishop of Milwaukee on September 7, 1881.

Pictures Used

Many pictures are from the parish files or were copied from previous histories and articles about the parish. We thank the parishioners who have shared additional photos.

Pictures of the renovated church were taken by John Klare.

Oldest Parishes in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati by year of founding

1818	Christ Church, which became St. Peter in Chains Cathedral
1830	St. Martin, St. Martin
1832	St. Stephen, Hamilton
1834	Holy Trinity, Cincinnati
	St. Augustine, Minster
1836	St. Mary, Arnheim
	St. John, Maria Stein
1837	Emmanuel, Dayton
1838	St. Michael, Fort Loramie
1839	St. Henry, St. Henry
	St. Joseph, St. Joseph
	St. Joseph, Wapakoneta
	St. Philomena, Stonelick
	St. Denis, Versailles
1840	Old St. Mary's, Cincinnati
	St. Michael, Ripley
	St. James the Greater
1842	Our Lady of Victory (originally St. Stephen), Cincinnati
1843	St. Mary, Piqua
1844	St. John the Baptist (Green Street), Cincinnati
	St. Peter (Later called St. Bonaventure), Cincinnati
	St. Rose, St. Rose



The parish coat of arms

The parish symbol or coat of arms shows the gold shell of Saint James in the lower portion. The upper portion shows the plow of the Roman farmer Cincinnatus, indicating we are part of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The two crosses flanking the plow are symbols of our faith that brings us together. The red used indicates that Saint James was a martyr while the glory which is his in heaven is symbolized by the gold.