

Quincy's Irish Church: St. Lawrence becomes St. Peter

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St. Peter Church at Eighth and Maine was severely damaged by a tornado on April 12, 1945.
(Photos//Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County)

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St. Peter Catholic Church has served parishioners for more than a century. Located at 25th and Maine, St. Peter now includes more than 1,500 families. An integral part of the Catholic community and the city of Quincy, St. Peter's has a long and storied history.

As Catholics began migrating to Quincy, their churches began to dot the city's landscape. In 1839, a new parish, St. Lawrence O'Toole, was created to serve English-speaking Catholics in Quincy. A great number of the growing population was Irish, drawn to the area as builders of the Northern Cross Railroad. Father Hilarius Tucker, the church's first resident priest, wrung enough money from the railroad workers to begin erecting a brick church at Eighth and Maine Streets on property donated by J.W. Whitney, a lawyer better known for politics than religion. When bankruptcy ended the railroad, and the jobless Irish were unable to pay their pledges, the building was sold. The new owner, however, permitted the parish to continue using the building.

Over the next several decades, the parish swelled in membership. During the 1860s, the parish started a school. Augustine Tolton, who would become the first African-American priest in the United States, attended the school and members of his family were parishioners. Though the family sat in a segregated area of the parish church, they did not encounter problems. The rector, the Rev. Peter McGirr, in particular treated them with warmth.

Father McGirr became the pastor in 1862 and would serve in that position until 1893. Dedicated to the parish, Father McGirr believed that St. Lawrence was foundering. His pastorate brought stability to the parish. The creation of a school was the first major change he made. Father McGirr invited the School Sisters of Notre Dame to Quincy to teach the children. The beginnings of the school were less than auspicious, as the school was nothing more than a one-room building. In 1863, however, a new school opened with larger facilities, and 250 children were enrolled.

While starting a school was not particularly controversial, Father McGirr's next major move did generate debate. McGirr decided to build a new church, though many in the parish at the time did not see a need for a new edifice. In his "History of the Catholic Church in Quincy," Father Theodore Bruener notes that McGirr "had the old church torn down in a rush on Easter Monday 1868." During construction of the new church, Mass was said at St. Boniface and its mission church St. Joseph. And on Jan. 1, 1870, Mass was said in the new church built at Eighth and Maine. Father McGirr renamed the church St. Peter for his own patron saint, and the church would stay at that location for 75 years.

In 1919, Father John Driscoll, rector of St. Peter Church, purchased property between Eleventh and Twelfth on the north side of State. The buildings on these grounds had been used by the Quincy German and English College and then Johnson College, later named Chaddock College. The octagonal stone mansion that had been built by Gov. John Wood was used as a parish activity center, and the nearby four-story building became St. Peter School and Convent in 1921. A new order of nuns, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, was engaged to manage and teach at the school.

On April 12, 1945, a tornado swept through Quincy. The damage was devastating, particularly in the city's downtown area. Buildings were destroyed, and the dome of Quincy's courthouse was blown off. Losses were estimated at more than \$2 million, an enormous sum at the time. St. Peter did not escape unscathed. The tornado ripped apart the back of the church, leaving a gaping hole in the building. Though the church still stood, it was impractical to rebuild, so a decision was made to move.

Because much of Quincy's population was migrating away from the downtown area, it made sense to build a new church on the city's east side. The parish picked the 2500 block of Maine Street for the site, and a combination church-school building made of native stone was completed in 1949. Ground was broken for a new church in 1960, and the first Mass was held at the church's current site on Christmas 1961. The parish also has a school on the grounds, which has expanded from the lower level of the church to additional buildings, with children from preschool to eighth grade attending.

St. Peter celebrated its sesquicentennial in 1989 with an open air mass at Eighth and Maine, the site of the original church. During its history, St. Peter has had 22 pastors, the longest serving being Father McGirr. Two priests, John Kerr and J.J. Driscoll, each served as pastor for more than 20 years. Today, St. Peter remains a vibrant church. It is the seventh largest parish in the Diocese of Springfield and continues to serve its many parishioners.

The Historical Society preserves a copy of "A History of the Catholic Church in Quincy" by the Rev. Theodore Bruener. The book was published in 1887 in German by Father Bruener in celebration of the 50th anniversary of St. Boniface Parish. The book since has been translated by Lester Holtschlag, a Quincy native. For photos of the 1945 tornado, visit the website of the Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County at adamscohistory.org.

For those interested in learning more about the life and times of Father Augustine Tolton, the Historical Society will hold a symposium at 2 p.m. Sunday, July 8, at St. Boniface Church, 117 N. Seventh.

Dr. David Costigan, professor emeritus of history at [Quincy University](#), will moderate a panel. Joining Dr. Costigan will be Father Roy Bauer, retired pastor of St. Peter and local church history author, Father Joe Zimmerman, O.F.M. of [Quincy University](#), and Father Pete C. Harman, pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield and member of the Father Augustine Tolton Guild, the Official Organization for the Promotion of the Cause of Canonization of Father Augustus Tolton. The public is welcome to attend this event free of charge.

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