

The Building of the Catholic Faith in Scioto County 1840-1843 (Part 3)

Bishop J. B. Purcell's opinion in 1840 when he wrote a column for the Catholic Telegraph on the "Catholic Church in Ohio" was "there is a neat church in Marietta and there **ought**ⁱ to be one in Portsmouth."ⁱⁱ

Father H. D. Juncker stated, "A word of the progress of our Holy Religion in the Scioto Valley. When I arrived here [Chillicothe], in June 1837...my mission extended from Portsmouth to Marion, in Delaware County. In Portsmouth there were but a very few persons still retaining the name of Catholic..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Portsmouth subscribers to the Cincinnati Diocese paper *The Catholic Telegraph* in 1838 and 1839, were John A. Grimes and Louis A. Zimmer.^{iv}

About 1840, the Catholics of Portsmouth were meeting at a building called "The Wheeler Academy."^v



Wheeler Academy

The building had been built in 1810 by Joseph Wheeler and was used by several denominations for church services. "The first building in Portsmouth in which regular services of the Catholic Church were held was the 'Old Academy' at the southwest corner of Fourth and Market streets. It was a square [brick] building, one story with a hip roof, and quaint cupola in the center, surmounted by a wooden ball badly cracked open by years of exposure to the weather."^{vi}

The Catholic Telegraph on July 16, 1842, announced:

Pastoral Appointment – and Notice

Rev. Joseph O'Mealy, lately Superior of the Diocesan Seminary, has been appointed by the Bishop [Purcell of Cincinnati], Pastor of the Congregations at Portsmouth, Aberdeen, Ripley, and other stations on the Ohio River. We trust that under the care of this pious and devoted Clergyman religion will flourish in these missions which the want of priests has left destitute of spiritual Succor. Rev. Mr. Juncker will continue to visit the German Catholics of Portsmouth at stated intervals.^{vii}

Father Joseph O'Mealy was the first resident priest in Scioto County. He was in charge the counties of Gallia, Lawrence, Scioto, Adam, and the part of Brown bordering the Ohio River. Later his missions would extend into Highland, Jackson and Vinton Counties. His mission territory extended roughly fifty miles east and west of Portsmouth.

On September 27, 1814, Father John Joseph O'Mealy was born in Limerick City, Limerick, Ireland.^{viii} Patrick O'Mealy and his wife, Ellen Pratt, were the parents of a large family with at least ten children, seven of whom would eventually immigrate to America. Joseph and his older sister Ellen arrived in New York on June 10, 1833, aboard the Schooner Armenia. Ellen entered the Convent of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's at Emmitsburg, Maryland on September 10, 1833. In June of 1833, Joseph O'Mealy entered the Mount St. Mary's Seminary at Emmitsburg, Maryland.^{ix} The president of the seminary was Rev. John B. Purcell who was soon to be Bishop of Cincinnati. On November 7, 1833, Bishop Purcell with Joseph O'Mealy and two other seminarians left for Cincinnati, Ohio. To complete his studies, Joseph would leave Cincinnati and go to Rome. After completing his studies, he traveled to Limerick, Ireland to visit his family^x. In 1838, he was ordained in Limerick by Bishop John Ryan in November of 1838.^{xi} Father

Joseph O'Mealy returned to the United States on August 14, 1839, aboard the ship *Eutau*, accompanied by Rev. R. B. O'Brien, age 29, Rev. S. J. Deace, age 32, Richard Pullen, age 20 and [his brother] Patrick M. O'Mealy age 17^{xii}. For the next three years, he worked as the president of the seminary for Cincinnati which had moved to Brown County. His brother, Patrick, was one of the seminarians. In 1842, Father O'Mealy, was asked by his bishop to take on the mission territory of the diocese that bordered the Ohio River from Brown County to Gallia County.

Making Portsmouth his headquarters, Father Joseph O'Mealy's first tasks were to find a place to live, visit the numerous mission stations already established in the various counties and to build a church at Portsmouth. Father O'Mealy rented a house on Second Street, for himself, his parents and his sister, Eliza and his brother, Michael. The house had a large room that he could use for saying Mass.^{xiii}

Masses were said "...in the first Catholic school house. This house was a small one-story structure on the order of a cottage, and occupied a site on the south side of Second street or what was at the time known as Back street, below Madison, now No. 220."^{xiv}

September 5, 1842

My dear Bishop,

As I have visited nearly all the Catholic stations within my district it may be time to give some account of them...of Portsmouth where there are about 50 families chiefly Germans, I don't know what account to give. They have subscribed and given me their promissory notes at three, six and nine months to the amount of nearly \$1000 towards the purchase of a lot and the erection of a church and are all very eager to make a commencement but nothing has been done as yet in consequence of not having the *cumquibus* [the money]. Unless the church be built, we will lose more of our lukewarm English Catholics who are ashamed to meet with the German crowd at the building we have rented. According to your suggestion I have celebrated two Masses every Sunday at each of which I address the congregation and this together with hearing confessions all the morning until 11:00 o'clock, teaching catechism in the evening before I have scarcely time to take a little coffee, assisting at vespers and lecturing afterwards with all the good health that God has given me.... I do think it is labor in vain unless we get a church. And how to get one I don't know. My determination now is to erect a cheap building suitable to our present wants that may afterwards be converted to a schoolhouse or a residence for the pastor but even this I am afraid I shall not be able to effect this winter without contracting debts which I am fully resolved not to do unless I have the money to pay them in my own hands...I am persuaded a word from you would open many purse strings.

I have been highly pleased with the good Germans working at the [Pine Grove] furnaces. No Catholic priest ever visited them until my arrival which they hailed with true German cordiality. I preached at the meeting house there and promised to visit them during the week every month or six weeks. They have promised me \$150 a year. This week I am to meet Rev. Mr. Juncker at Portsmouth and accompany him on another visit [to the furnaces].

I remain your child [in God], Joseph O'Mealy^{xv}

Father O'Mealy refers to visiting nearly all the stations in his district. Stations were set places where known Catholic families gathered to meet for services by the visiting priest. This could be a home or a

public building. This was sometimes the beginning of congregations and later many would become locations where churches were built. The Church of the Nativity (replaced in 1871 by St. Mary Portsmouth) records for 1842-43 show that Father O'Mealy performed baptisms at fifteen stations. They were: Pine Grove-Lawrence County, Wheelersburg-Scioto County, Haverhill/French Grant-Scioto County, Ripley-Brown County, Scioto Settlement/Little Scioto-Scioto County, Union Furnace-Lawrence County, Lick Run-Scioto County, Portsmouth-Scioto County, Quinn Settlement-Gallia County, Greenup-Kentucky, Gallipolis-Gallia County, West Union-Adams County, Waverly-Pike County, Clinton Furnace-Scioto County and Wolfert's Mill-Scioto County.^{xvi} He also visited: Straight Creek-Brown County, Wilkesville-Gallia County, Aberdeen-Adams County, Hillsboro-Highland County, Buena Vista-Scioto County, Coalport-Gallia County and stations in Jackson County. In 1842, there were only two church structures in the mission territory assigned to Father O'Mealy and both were in Brown County. They were St. Michael at Ripley and a log church [St. Wendelin] at Straight Creek which later became St. Mary's at Arnheim.^{xvii}

On September 16, 1842, S. Sterrett Ban agreed to donate a lot for ten dollars and to sell a second lot for \$360.00 to Bishop Purcell and the Catholic congregation of Portsmouth.^{xviii} The corner lot at Madison and 3rd St was 34 feet 6 inches along Madison and 72 feet and six inches along 3rd St. the Church of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ was built on this lot. The second lot was L shaped with 34 feet 6 inches along Madison and extended 82 feet 6 inches West from Madison. the L shape section was an additional 10 feet West of the first lot. The two lots combined created almost a square measuring 71 feet north along Madison and 82 feet 6 inches West on 3rd.^{xix} This property would contain the church, the rectory/school and the first Catholic graveyard of the city of Portsmouth.

Shortly after acquiring the property, Father Joseph O'Malley hired Cornelius C. Hyatt^{xx} to begin the building of the new church in October 1842. C. C. Hyatt was a brick mason who had built several of the early churches^{xxi} and other buildings in Portsmouth. He was born in 1804 in New York City, was apprenticed as a brick mason, and came to Portsmouth in 1830. After working almost 40 years as a builder, he became a grocer in his later years and was very successful at it. He was of the Methodist faith and died in 1901.^{xxii}



November 17, 1842,

My dear Bishop,

I send you two deeds of small lots on which our new church is built and a mortgage which you are required to sign and send back to Samuel Tracy^{xxiii}, Esquire. I have no doubt if we shall get our church finished but we shall redeem this mortgage in two or three years. With the very material assistance of Mr. Damarin whom I have made treasurer of our church building finances. I hope to have the church enclosed so as to have services in it on Christmas Day. It is 52 feet long with a recess of 10 feet for the altar, 38 feet wide and 24 feet high on the outside. The front of the church even in its unfinished state presents a handsomer appearance than any other building in Portsmouth and will when finished with a steeple and spire 70 feet high, be seen from all the approaches of the town. The style though not gothic is in my eyes at least as handsome, the windows being on the plan of your new cathedral and all the work built square to correspond. Even the recess for the altar is square with a flat ceiling. My object in this was to save the great expense of circular gothic work. The foundation [is] of a very fine stone obtained

gratuitously from the neighboring quarries of Mr. Moss and the brickwork will cost about \$750. What our present contract with the Carpenter will be I cannot exactly say, but I think it cannot far exceed at the utmost \$500. Our subscription list among the Germans alone amounts to nearly \$1300. Some few Protestants have subscribed, and others will do something besides the English Catholics around here. So that from all, I think I may expect \$1600 which will cover all our present expenses for lumber and such. Already many have been engaging pews when I shall be able to put them up. Mr. Damarin and his family seeming very anxious and also a few of our renegade Catholics. Pews would also enable me to get some support which as yet has amounted only to \$2 independent of a few baptisms and such... After Christmas I have no doubt but that we may be enabled to have pews made, an altar, rails, stairs and such. Put up, perhaps the steeple and a loud sounding bell and when the weather permits the plastering, so that next April or May that is--sometime before your expected visit to Europe, the Church may be dedicated by you under the invocation of the Virgin Mother of our God or any other saint you may think fit.

My father and mother live with me in a house which I was compelled to hire at \$6 per month because of the large room in which I say Mass at present. My father has got very little work since he came here, and my mother acts as housekeeper, cook and such. My sister [Eliza] supports herself by dressmaking and my brother [Michael] is on his way to New Orleans [to join the Jesuits]. Send me [from the seminary in Brown County] ...a pair of wrought [iron] hinges for the door of the sanctuary which I left in a drawer among other things saved after the finishing of the Fayetteville church. These hinges are of no use to Rev. Cheymal and would save me the price of similar ones.

Pray for your obedient child in God, Joseph O'Mealy^{xxiv}

The priests who were building churches all over the state struggled for money for every church they built. Many of the parishioners were poor and the others seem to be poorer. Protestants came to hear the talks and sermons of the priest and were often very willing to contribute to the building of churches. Priests often traveled with the permission of their bishops to big cities to beg money from the bigger



parishes there. At the same time that the Church of Nativity was being built, Bishop Purcell was building what is now the current Cathedral in Cincinnati. The exterior columns at the Cathedral were constructed from Buena Vista freestone quarried in Scioto County.^{xxv} The priests' salaries at this time came from three primary sources: pew rent, offerings given to the priest for baptisms, marriages and funerals and stipends for Mass intentions. The Pine Grove pledge of \$150 yearly was to cover the travel cost of the priest and to insure regular visits.

Sketches of the Church of the Nativity in the 1860's shows it with a large steeple topped by a cross which was added in 1843^{xxvi}. Interestingly in 1842, Father Joseph wanted this new church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Portsmouth December 29, 1842

My dear Bishop,

On Christmas Day [December 25, 1842], as announced in the Portsmouth Tribune our new church was opened for divine service... I think were you to see our handsome church you would

think nothing of your new cathedral! Especially since the beautiful transparency fits in so handy and looks so very beautiful.

Wishing you many happy New Years, I remain your child in God, Joseph O'Mealy^{xxvii}



On Christmas Day 1842 the church was under roof and usable but very bare on the inside with much work still to be done in Portsmouth and the mission territory of southern Ohio. The transparency mentioned in Father Joseph's letter appears to be a stain glass painting of the Savior that was mounted in a recess on the wall behind the altar. It was described as being very old and probably brought from Europe.^{xxviii} By March of 1843, the name of

the church had become *Jesu Nascenti* in Latin or *Church of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ* in English.^{xxix}

ⁱ Emphasis added.

ⁱⁱ Bishop J. B. Purcell, editor, *The Catholic Telegraph*, October 10, 1840, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Catholic Telegraph*, February 17, 1844, p. 6

^{iv} *The Catholic Telegraph*, May 10, 1838, and May 23, 1839

^v Henry A. Lorberg, *Scrapbooks: Brew House and Office; Wheeler Academy, Local History Digital Collection*, <https://www.yourppl.org/history/items/show/21163>.

^{vi} Sketches: Rev. Father Nonnen, *Portsmouth Times*, March 6, 1886, p. 1

^{vii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, July 16, 1842, p. 7

^{viii} Rev. John H. Lamott, S.T.D., *History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: The Mountel Press, 1921), p. 364 appendix

^{ix} Mount St. Mary's Seminary Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland

^x After Father Joseph O'Mealy was ordained, he baptized twins, James and Stephen Fitzgerald on Dec. 25, 1838 at St. Michael's in Limerick. The twins were his first cousins through their mother, Johanna Pratt. Brothers of the Fitzgerald twins, Edward born 1833 and Joseph born 1836 became priests in the Cincinnati Diocese. Edward became the Bishop of Arkansas in 1867.

^{xi} *The Catholic Telegraph*, November 29, 1838, p. 6

^{xii} Eutau boat record, Ancestry.com

^{xiii} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy. November 17, 1842, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xiv} Henry A. Lorberg, *Local History Digital Collection*, Portsmouth Public Library, p. 363 [note: This location is now the empty lot next to where the flood wall crosses second street.]

^{xv} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, September 5, 1842, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xvi} St. Mary Portsmouth Baptismal records 1842-1843

^{xvii} *History of Brown County*, W. H. Beers & Co, 1883, pp. 331-332

^{xviii} Record of Deeds Scioto County, Ohio, Courthouse, two deeds recorded November 4, 1842, Volume S, pp. 692-4

^{xix} Deed information details from deeds in St. Mary Portsmouth archives

^{xx} Henry A. Lorberg, *Local History Digital Collection*, Portsmouth Public Library

^{xxi} Samuel Gunn Parish Hall at All Saints Episcopal Church at 610 4th Street, Portsmouth, Ohio was the original All Saints Episcopal Church built by C. C. Hyatt

^{xxii} Sketches No. 21: C. C. Hyatt, *Portsmouth Times*, April 17, 1886, p. 1

^{xxiii} Tracy Park in 1853, was given to Portsmouth by Francis Campbell in honor of his attorney, Samuel M Tracy.

^{xxiv} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy. November 17, 1842, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xxv} John Mangels, *The Stone that Helped Build America*, Cleveland Museum of Natural History website, August 2017

^{xxvi} Portsmouth Library History Room, 1860 pictorial framed map of Portsmouth, Ohio

^{xxvii} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy. December 29, 1842, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xxviii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, January 9, 1845, p. 10

^{xxix} *The Catholic Telegraph*, March 25, 1843, p. 6