

Building the Parishes of Scioto County and Southern Ohio 1842-45 (Part 4)

The Church of Nativity was under roof, the first Mass and the first five baptisms in the new church were performed on Christmas Day in 1842.ⁱ About fifty Catholic families were part of the new parish at Portsmouth but the struggle to finance the completion of the church continued. Father O'Mealy and Bishop Purcell were working on ways to meet the needs of the many Catholics in the missions of southern Ohio.



Church of Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ and parsonage/school at Third and Madison

On New Year Day 1843, Father Daniel M. Hallinan passed through Portsmouth “on his way to the woods of Gallia County. He celebrated Mass on New Year’s Day and preached a pretty good sermon.”ⁱⁱ Father Joseph O’Mealy now the pastor of the new Catholic Church of Portsmouth, was battling a lingering cold and gladly welcomed his visitor.ⁱⁱⁱ Father Daniel M. Hallinan, ordained in the Cincinnati Diocese on May 9, 1842, had been in the seminary in Brown County when Father O’Mealy was in charge of the seminary for three years. Father Hallinan spent a few months in Gallia County, but the isolation and poverty of the area created concerns for his health and had him returning to Cincinnati after only a few months.^{iv} In March of 1843, there is one baptism recorded at the Church of Nativity by Father Hallinan.^v

In January 1843, Father Joseph requested permission from Bishop Purcell to go to the Cincinnati German Catholic congregation to beg for “pips, dimes and quarters” to complete the church in Portsmouth. “If you do not approve of it or suggest a better plan for raising the wind, I shall endeavor to live on what will be equivalent to bread and water until the church will have a lofty steeple and be finished on the inside.” Father O’Mealy continues by telling Bishop Purcell about what has been accomplished for the church through the “zeal of the people of Portsmouth.” He finishes by saying that he expects to have a number of young people prepared for their first communion by Easter. “If we could only have our church finished and out of debt by that time what a loud, Alleluia, we would sing!”^{vi} Apparently, this permission for the begging trip to Cincinnati was granted as Father O’Mealy later thanks the Germans of Cincinnati for their help in financing the completion of the church.^{vii}

In late January 1843, Father Joseph O’Mealy welcomed another visitor. “Rev. William Schonat, from Silesia, who at the request of the Bishop [Purcell], and with the permission of his ordinary, has generously devoted himself to the Missions, in this diocese, [Fr. Schonat] will visit the German Catholics of Portsmouth on Sunday, 22nd, of January. The same Clergyman will also attend, God willing, during this and the ensuing month, to the spiritual wants of the German Catholics at Hanging Rock, Ripley, Fayetteville, Georgetown, Brown County, and St. Philomena’s, Clermont County.”^{viii} Father Schonat in 1844 built Holy Cross Church in Columbus and eventually returned to Germany where he died in 1879.^{ix}

The majority of Catholics in the mission territory assigned to Father O'Mealy were Germans. Father Juncker, working from Chillicothe since 1837, had established most of the missions in the southern counties. He and Father O'Mealy had an agreement to trade places every three months for a week to serve the German-speaking faithful in the southern counties while Father O'Mealy visited the English-speaking Catholics in central Ohio. In his letters to Bishop Purcell, Father O'Mealy often requested a German speaking priest to assist in the Southern Ohio missions.

To the Editor of the Catholic Telegraph, March 23rd, 1843

Rev. and Dear Sir: At the request of our Rt. Rev. Bishop [Purcell], I send these few hasty notices of the Missions entrusted to my care.

Portsmouth, where I reside, is a very flourishing and I think the prettiest town on the Ohio River. It contains at present about three thousand inhabitants and will, it is expected, soon double that number, as it is well situated both for Commerce and Manufactories. The Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians have each a Church or Meetinghouse, and on last Christmas day we had Service for the first time in our yet unfinished, but handsome Church. This little Church, to be dedicated under the name of *Jesu Nascenti*, was commenced on October last. It is 62 feet in length by 38 feet wide of the Tuscan^x order, and is not only the finest Church, but will when finished, be the handsomest building in the city. We contemplate as soon as our present debts are paid, to erect a high Steeple and Spire so that the Cross may be reflected on the glossy bosom of the Ohio. The Catholics here are not numerous and, with few exceptions, the very poorest, but their united and zealous efforts in the erection of their Church speak very loudly in praise of their fervor for the Glory of God. I cannot conclude this notice without thanking those who have contributed in Cincinnati so liberally towards the Church of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in Portsmouth.

About eleven miles from Portsmouth there is a prosperous settlement of Germans on the Little Scioto^{xi}, whom I visit once a month, and who with the other German Catholics in this and surrounding Counties are visited by the Rev. Mr. Junker every three months, when I attend Chillicothe. During the fine weather many from this settlement attend Church in Portsmouth, and we are not without hopes of being enabled before long of erecting a modest little Church on some elevated and central place in the neighborhood.

Five miles distant on Licking Run and two miles from Wheelersburg on the French Grant is another smaller settlement of Germans from near Osnabruck, who, like the generality of the Catholics from that place are very attentive to their religious duties.^{xii} There are I believe a few eighty-acre farms around belonging to Congress to be disposed of, but for some time at least our Congregation there will not be very numerous.

Pine Grove and the surrounding Furnaces to Hanging Rock form stations which I also visit once a month. The Catholics are primarily Germans who work at the Furnaces, and who keep up the spirit of that pure faith which they imbibed in their fatherland. About thirty-six families attend the second Sunday of the month at Pine Grove, and never let slip an opportunity, when visited by a German Clergyman, of going to Confession and Communion. Before my appointment to these Missions, they generally visited Cincinnati (150 miles^{xiii}) at least once a year to comply with their Easter duties. Besides contributing very largely towards the Church in Portsmouth, which

is twenty-five miles distant, they have during my last visit subscribed funds sufficient to erect a log Chapel for themselves, and only wait to obtain a central lot, which has been refused at Pine Grove, to commence operations.

Ripley (visited the third Sunday of the month) is about sixty miles below Portsmouth on the Ohio, where a handsome little frame Church dedicated in honor of St. John the Baptist has been erected by the exertions of Mr. Michael Waters, an old revolutionary Soldier, and a few others of the zealous Catholics around, with some contributions also from our dissenting brethren. The small congregation in this place is composed of Americans, Irish and Germans---to whom I trust in God we shall soon add a few from old Kentucky. Besides doing their utmost to pay off a few remaining debts on the Church, & c., they have lately formed a Catholic circulating library, and will soon be able to contribute their mite toward the Church building Society, and a Seminary fund should any such be formed in these hard times.

Aberdeen, which is ten miles further up the river is only visited occasionally, as but two Catholic families reside there, who have an opportunity every six weeks of attending at Maysville on the opposite shore.

Straight-Creek is about twenty miles from Ripley and six miles from Georgetown, Brown County. This settlement is composed principally of Germans who have about three years since erected a very good, hewed log Church. There are twenty-two Catholic families who are very desirous, whenever it can be arranged of having a resident Pastor.^{xiv}

West Union and Sinking Spring form another station which in consequence of being so far distant from Fayetteville and Portsmouth is only visited occasionally from both places. There are in the neighborhood about ten or twelve Catholic families, besides many stragglers, who no doubt would rejoice at any opportunity of practicing the duties of their religion---but we have not time to seek them out---“The harvest is great, but the laborers are few.”

As I have not with me any notes of the number of deaths, baptisms, and marriages, I cannot be very accurate in stating as well as I can remember that in the whole of these missions about six persons have died within the last seven months. The marriages were four, and about twenty-five were baptized. After Easter I shall be able to give a return of the number who made their first Communion (a pious little band are now preparing in Portsmouth) as also of those who have complied with their Paschal duties.

Yours very Sincerely in God, J. O’Mealy^{xv}

In the six to eight months that Father O’Mealy had traveled through his mission territory, he had traveled about 500-1000 miles each month by horseback, by foot and on occasion swimming a creek. End to end his mission territory covered 150 miles east to west and about 40 miles north to south.

Portsmouth April 17, 1843

Very dear Bishop,

...I must tell you how happy I feel, never more so I think in all my life. Yesterday the piety and appearance of our 16 young communicants, who were on a retreat the week previously, made an impression in the town that will not be soon forgotten and has brought tears from many a cold and hardened heart. This morning and yesterday evening I have had some with me seeking to be reconciled to their neglected God. From the house where I reside at the upper end of the town, to the church at the other extremity, the children dressed in white with veils on their heads and candles in their hands walked in procession having had to pass by the three meeting houses and attracting from them many of their less rigid votaries, so that our little church was crowded. Our altar glittered with those splendid candlesticks^{xvi} which you gave us and above it the transparency, surrounded by green boughs to hide the nakedness of our un-plastered walls appeared more beautiful than you could suspect. Four handsome boys dressed for the first time in their new cassocks and surplices added not a little. Then 43 Easter communicants rough to be seen in appearance but many of them with hearts that felt, deeply felt, what God in his love had bestowed on them for tears glittered in their eyes. Made me feel so happy that I now feel pretty certain that the hopes I had formed of this place will be fully realized and sooner than I expected if I myself be not an obstacle.

In a few weeks, I shall be removing to a smaller house more convenient to the church and at a less rent than the one I now occupy...If such a man as Rev. Mr. Shonat were here, we would sweep the Country before us.

I remain your child in God, Joseph O'Mealy^{xvii}

In the 1840's, First Communion was received by persons who were usually about ages ten to fourteen. The young people who were part of the First Communion class in 1843 included two adults, two boys, three girls from the Little Scioto settlement (LS), one girl from Wheelersburg and nine girls from Portsmouth.^{xviii} They were Fred Lipker, Daniel Sullivan, Mrs. Bannon, Mrs. Ellen Briggs, Catherine Daniel (LS), Mary Hock (LS), Sarah Sheppard (LS), Margaret D'Eutremont (Wheelersburg), Catherine Sharer^{xix}, Elizabeth Sharer, Barbara Sharer, Elizabeth Baker, Margaret Brown, Mary Smith, Maria Hobart^{xx}, Margaret Myers, and Mary Baum.

The pastoral residence was built sometime before the end of 1843.^{xxi}

For the year ending 1843, after one complete year as a resident priest and missionary, Father Joseph O'Mealy reported that the Portsmouth "church (not yet completed) is a handsome brick edifice 62 by 38 feet with a high steeple, to be dedicate under the title of the Nativity."^{xxii} Portsmouth had 35 baptisms, 4 marriages, 4 deaths, 89 Easter Communions, and 17 [20] First Communions with a Catholic population of 200. Little Scioto Settlement and three stations near it had 19 baptisms, 2 marriages, 18 Easter Communions, and a Catholic population of 100. Pine Grove and other neighboring furnaces had 25 baptisms, 65 Easter Communions and the church or chapel at Pine Grove built in 1843 is Saint Mary's with about 175 Catholics. At St. John's Church in Ripley there are 30 Catholics and the stations of Aberdeen, Straight Creek, and West Union with about 120 Catholics, there were 17 baptisms, 1 marriage, 1 death, and 11 Easter Communions. At Straight Creek, the church was of logs, dedicated to St Wendelin, a Scotch or Irish saint in great veneration on the Rhine. At Quinn's Settlement there were 2 baptisms, 1 death, and 14 Easter communions with only 20 resident Catholics. A neat frame church was built here during the summer of 1843. Father O'Mealy summed up by saying in all the counties of Gallia,

Jackson, Scioto, Brown, Adams, Highland, and Lawrence there are 600 Catholics and five church structures.^{xxiii}

Reverend Michael Heiss^{xxiv} had been pastor of the German Catholic congregation in Covington, Kentucky. In late January of 1844, he visited many of the German missions in southern Ohio including St. Wendelin's at Straight Creek, St. John's at Ripley, and the Church of the Nativity at Portsmouth.^{xxv}



Bp. M. Heiss

In late January of 1844, on the Feast of Thomas Aquinas, Father O'Mealy appeals to Bishop Purcell because the final debt of \$240 on the church is quickly coming due and he has contracted the final finishing details for the church, and he does not have the money. He asks the bishop for any recommendations of a possible solution and for prayers.^{xxvi}

Bishop Purcell visited Portsmouth on May 19, 1844 and confirmed 30 persons in the yet unfinished Church of the Nativity which included persons from various missions in the area. One of the persons confirmed was Father O'Mealy's sister, Eliza Agnes O'Mealy. Others who were confirmed in the first Confirmation class recorded in Portsmouth were: Margaret Tiney, Mary Anne Sharer, Barbara Anne Sharer, Elizabeth Sharer, Catherine Sharer, Catherine Frances Daniel, Mary Ann Hock, Mary Hobart, Margaret Myers, Catherine Hobart, Eva Hobart, Margaret Cecilia D'Eutremont, Helen Briggs, Mary Baum, Rachel Kramer, Mary Anne Brown, Henry Ultholland, Henry Frederick Lipker, John Fecker, Joseph Bish, Nicholas Ackerman, John Krouser, Erhard Rolfs, Nicholas Hobart, John Martin Becksmith, and John Kenton.^{xxvii}



Archbishop J. F. Wood

The Church of the Nativity, Portsmouth, is now handsomely finished. It will be dedicated, God willing, on New Year's Day. Rev. Mr. Butler and Rev. Mr. Wood will preach in English in the forenoon and afternoon and Rev. Mr. Emig, S. J., in German.^{xxviii}

...on last Wednesday (Jan. 1 [1845])—the Feast of the Circumcision, the benediction of the beautiful Church of the Nativity, in Portsmouth, erected during the past year by the worthy Pastor, Rev. Joseph O'Mealy.

The day was unusually fine. The heavens were bright and serene...At the early hour, crowds of rejoicing Catholics repaired to the church, and numbers of respectable Protestants hastened to witness what to them, was truly a novel spectacle. About 9 1/2 o'clock, the Rev. Clergy, in their appropriate robes and preceded by acolytes and cross-bearer, went in procession to the front of the church, from the steps of which Rev. J. F. Wood^{xxix}, who officiated, made some brief and impressive remarks, explanatory of the ceremony, no doubt, to procure the perfect order and decorum as strictly observed by all present.

...[The]Rev. gentleman proceeded to bless the walls of the edifice, while the accompanying Clergy, joined by a number of the congregation sang the solemn and sublime *Miserere*. Having made the circuit of the church, the procession entered and proceeding to the front of the altar, finished the ceremony by the usual blessings and singing of the Litanies.

At 11 o'clock a solemn high mass as sung by Rev. J. Emig, S.J. attended by Rev. Mr. Wood as Deacon and Rev. Joseph O'Mealy as sub-Deacon. At the Gospel, Rev. Mr. Wood preached on the Nativity of Christ, in honor of which the church was consecrated.

...The day...was terminated by the singing of Vespers and the benediction of the blessed Sacrament, at 3 o'clock, when an animated and energized discourse...was delivered in the German language by Rev. Father Emig^{xxx}.

The Church of the Nativity is certainly an ornament to the improving city of Portsmouth and may be regarded as a just commentary on the devoted zeal of its Pastor, by whose untiring exertions it has been erected and *paid for* within the past year. It is, if I mistake not, 67 feet in length and 39^{xxxi} in breadth and is surmounted by an elegantly finished spire of 97 feet in height, from the top of which a handsome, gilt cross commands a view of the city and river. The altar is exceedingly neat; and over it is placed in a recess in the wall a stained-glass painting of the Savior—a beautiful relic of the olden time—whose bright and mellow colors, which doubtless have seen centuries, seem as fresh as if they had been stained but yesterday. The church is finished in the most minute details; it has a large and sweet-toned bell, and possesses what I much admire, a handsome cut stone holy water vase, resting upon a neatly rounded pedestal of the same material. On the lot with the church is a commodious parsonage-house, containing six large rooms, and finished in a style corresponding to the church. Both buildings are enclosed by a snow-white paling [wooden fence], which gives an air of neatness and simplicity to the whole.

The Catholics of Portsmouth have reason to bless God for thus affording them the means to meet in adoration before the altars of their faith; and their Protestant fellow-citizens may well congratulate themselves on being enabled to learn the true teaching of that divine Church whose faith is the faith of three-fourths of the Christian world.^{xxxii}

ⁱ St. Mary's Portsmouth, church records baptisms 1842

ⁱⁱ Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, January 11, 1843, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, April 5, 1843, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^v Father Daniel Hallinan was later assigned to Piqua and then to Hamilton, Ohio where he built churches in both places. He died unexpectedly in 1850 from a short bout of the "flux" on a trip to Dayton, Ohio. His younger brother, Michael, was a priest and came to the Cincinnati Diocese in 1851. Information from *The Catholic Telegraph* 1842-1851.

^{vi} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, January 11, 1843, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{vii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, March 25, 1843, p. 7

^{viii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, January 14, 1843, p. 6

^{ix} Rev. John H. Lamott, S.T.D., *History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: The Mountel Press, 1921), p. 365 appendix

^x This is a reference to the design of the doorway with the Doric style columns.

^{xi} This area later became the parish known as St. John at Lilly. The first church burnt and the second church at Lilly was removed because of poor construction in the 1920's. The cemetery that adjoined the church is still there and maintained by Scioto County Parishes.

^{xii} This area became the parish of St. Peter in Chains at Wheelersburg. The first church was dedicated December 4, 1851.

^{xiii} John B. Wuest, O.F.M., *Materials for a History of St. John the Baptist Province*, Letter from Rev. Louis Huber, O.F.M. to Joseph Mary Maniscalco, July 2 1840, "It also happened often at this time [Easter at Holy Trinity, Cincinnati] ... That faithful from a distance, even up to 150 English miles, receive the sacraments of the church."

^{xiv} This parish is now St. Mary's at Arnheim, Ohio. Originally it was St. Wendelin and Father Joseph O'Mealy while head of the seminary had worked with this parish in 1839 when the church was built.

^{xv} *The Catholic Telegraph*, March 25, 1843, p. 7

^{xvi} These candlesticks may have come from Europe. Bishop Purcell gave them to the Church of Nativity. The transparency that was referred to also probably came from Bishop Purcell and was a stained-glass picture of Our Savior that was centuries old.

Bishop Purcell received several trunks of items donated from churches in Europe to the Cincinnati Diocese. [I have yet to discover if either of these items still exist. MTB]

^{xvii} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, April 17, 1843, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xviii} St. Mary Portsmouth church records

^{xix} Last name current spelling is probably Scherer or Sherer.

^{xx} Last name spelling may be Haubert.

^{xxi} Mentioned by Fr. Juncker, *The Catholic Telegraph*, February 17, 1844

^{xxii} Letter to the Catholic Telegraph from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, January 11, 1844, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xxiii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, February 3, 1844, p. 6

^{xxiv} Most Rev. Michael Heiss, D.D. He was born at Phahldorf, Bavaria, April 12, 1818; ordained October 18, 1840, Bishop of LaCrosse, Wisconsin 1868, Archbishop of Milwaukee 1881-1890; in 1844 became secretary to Bishop Henni

^{xxv} *The Catholic Telegraph*, January 6, 1844

^{xxvi} Letter to Bishop Purcell from Fr. Joseph O'Mealy, January 28, 1844, Box 2, RG 1.2, Archbishop John B. Purcell Records, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Archives

^{xxvii} St. Mary's Portsmouth parish records, May 19, 1844, p. 222

^{xxviii} *The Catholic Telegraph*, December 14, 1844, p. 7

^{xxix} The Most Rev. Mr. James Frederick Wood, Archbishop of Philadelphia 1860-1883, convert in Cincinnati baptized by Bishop Purcell in 1836, ordained a priest in 1844 in Rome, returned to Cincinnati in October 1844

^{xxx} Rev. John B. Emig, S. J. born in Germany on July 26, 1808, ordained March 11, 1839, came to the Cincinnati Diocese 1842, died in Conewago, Pennsylvania on December 10, 1889

^{xxxi} In March 1843, Father O'Mealy gave the dimensions as 62 by 38 feet.

^{xxxii} Catholicus, "Progress of Catholicity," *The Catholic Telegraph*, January 9, 1845, p. 7