History of Holy Trinity

(Part 1) by Beth Cody

Note: The roof of Holy Trinity was damaged in the May 2023 storm and must be replaced, along with the gutters. This work will start in fall. Also, the 150-year-old stained glass windows need restoration, which will require grants and funding.

Holy Trinity Catholic Church is the oldest church in our Parish, and may be the oldest actively serving church building in Washington County. Its history is surprisingly lively.

Settlers began moving to the Richmond area of the fertile English River township around 1840: Americans from other states, French, Germans, and then in the 1850s a large number of Bohemians from what is now the Czech Republic. The French, the Bohemians and many of the Germans were Catholic, and they needed a priest and a church.

In 1854, the first Mass was said in Richmond, by Bishop Loras first Bishop of Dubuque, in the log house of Joseph Baumgartner east of town, according to an 1954 book about the history of Holy Trinity Church by Sister Thelma. From 1855 to 1858 a Father Michels from Iowa City gave Mass in local houses, and in 1858, the Catholic residents built the first church: "small but well-built of hardwood sawed in the nearby timber," and "surmounted by a fine steeple, which harbored a good sized bell," according to Sister Thelma. It was called **Emmanuel mission**, a mission church from St. Mary of the Visitation church in Iowa City, and stood west of the present church.



A photograph of part of the first church building, after it was repurposed as a school. It was a simple frame building with slightly arched windows (the door would likely have been on the end of the building, not the side). ***(Sister Thelma history)***

In 1859 Father John Fendrick became the first resident pastor, shared with the St. Vincent (two miles east of Riverside) and St. Stanislaus (four miles north of Riverside) churches. (We should note that Holy Family Parish is a return to something very close to the original arrangement.) Richmond did not yet have a rectory, so the priests resided near the other two churches or boarded locally until the first rectory was built for Fr. Fendrick in 1867.

In 1867, an article in the *Washington County Press* described Richmond as a town of around eighty houses, more than fifty tradesmen and shops, four dry goods stores, *five* saloons, and 400 mostly German and Bohemian residents. It described the Bohemians as "an industrious folk, bound to get rich: men, women and children dig and delve, the females enjoy perfect women's rights to yoke the oxen, hoe the corn, milk the cow, and do everything the same as men. And like all convivial people they must have their fun and frolics. Marriage is with them an occasion of license—all go on a spree, following the wedded pair from church in a long procession, they get beer and music and have a general dance. An incredibly large number can shuffle and waltz in a small room… they waltz, jabber, laugh and guzzle away the hours."

Richmond had three churches then: small Baptist and M.E. churches, and the "Catholic, Father J. Fendrick, priest. We were assured that the membership of the latter is 825. The church will not accommodate one fourth of them, but they are preparing to put up a brick edifice. The Catholics go to church Sunday morning, and put in the rest of the day having a good, recreative social time."

In July 1868, the *Press* stated "the Catholic congregation at Richmond, after a year's preparation to build a new house of worship, have just begun in earnest the erection of a new church building… expecting to have it ready for occupancy before cold weather. The Hon. R.S. Finkbine, of Iowa City, is the architect." Robert S. Finkbine most notably supervised the construction of the Iowa State Capitol building, and his son donated the land for Finkbine Golf Course in Iowa City.

In August 1868, the *Press* stated that on the 5th, "The Cornerstone of their new church in Richmond was laid... among the many articles deposited was a copy of last week's Washington County Press and a history of our village." In September, the *Press* mentioned that "work on the new Catholic Church progresses rapidly, 15 to 20 hands being constantly engaged on it. The walls are up 20 ft from basement." The bricks for the new church were made of local clay, fired in a kiln on a farm about half a mile east of Richmond, according to Sister Thelma, and the stone from a quarry owned by the church north of Richmond, according to a 1937 *Kalona News* article. It *seemed* like the church would soon be completed.

However, a few weeks later, the *Press* reported that "A big row took place in Richmond on Sunday, the 6th." Apparently, Fr. Fendrick had promised donors that the new church would be deeded to the local trustees of the church and drew up a paper to that effect. But he then secretly destroyed that paper, deeded the church to the bishop, and had that deed legally recorded.

The residents filed a lawsuit against Father Fendrick and the Diocese. But two local men, angry over the "swindling," and perhaps some personal conflicts too, confronted him at the church site on September 6, and Fr. Fendrick fled "to Shillig's Tavern where he was kept from a maddened crowd that wanted to 'go through him.'" The Reverend had one of the men prosecuted for assault, but the man was acquitted.

By December 1868, the *Press* reported that "The Catholic church, the largest and perhaps the best church building in the county, is enclosed." The new church began being used for Mass in its unfinished state—but attendance was not good.

The following September (1869), the *Press* reported that "Great excitement was caused here about one o'clock Thursday morning the 19th by the firing of two loads of shot through the front window of the sleeping room of Father Fendrick the Catholic priest… this is the second time that his assassination has been attempted at night. It seems that the new church has made a bitter division in the congregation. The disaffected faction stay away from services and curse the priest."

The same issue published an angry letter, which denied that any attempts had actually been made "against the life of a man whom they don't consider worth the 25 grains of powder wasted in disturbing the slumbers of the people of the north-east corner of Richmond," and hinted that the priest himself had fired the shots. Fr. Fendrick filed charges against one of the church lawsuit plaintiffs for the attempt, but the magistrate dismissed the case after a hearing as "malicious and without probable cause, and made him pay the costs," and privately wondering why no one had heard any shots that night.

The Bishop issued an order of interdict over the matter, *chaining* closed the church in November 1869 for more than a year. The Rev. Fendrick left Richmond and later served parishes in Carroll County.

Father Peter Maly arrived in December 1870, immediately after the interdict was lifted. According to a 2002 *Washington Evening Journal* article by Mary Zielinski (author of a book on Richmond history), Maly "faced the horrendous task of re-unifying the congregation." His journal entries show that the church "had been stripped. There was no chalice, no altar stone, no missal, no candleholders," and the building was still unfinished. The parishioners believed that the interdict was retaliation for the lawsuit (which was settled out of court) and insisted that the missing items had been taken to safeguard them (and they were returned). Maly installed the church's stained glass windows and purchased a statue of the Immaculate Conception from Germany, but he left in Fall 1873 after another disagreement with "the Bohemians" over the heating system.

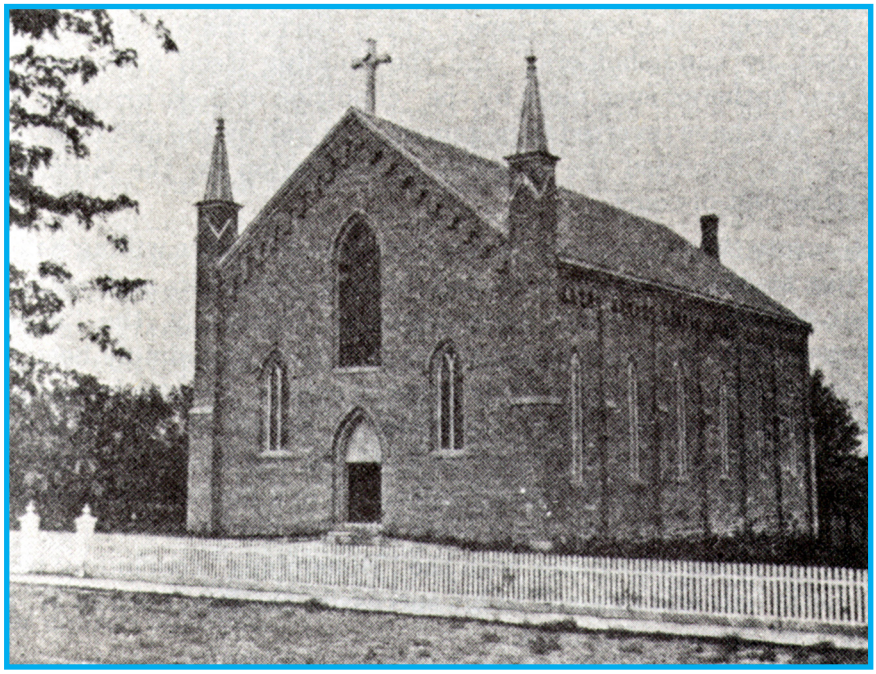
Father Maly, a Bohemian himself, may have decided on the twin steeples and no bell tower on the church, with a free-standing wooden belfry in front of the church. Wooden belfry structures are common in Bohemia, but not so much in Germany. It's possible there was disagreement over the steeples too, with the Germans perceiving them as too costly, and the Bohemians insisting on them. The bell was left in the steeple tower of the old church until at least 1877 and rung from there.

After Father Maly, the Rev. George Heer arrived in 1874 and *finally* finished the church, with pews, frescoes, heating, and an altar. A July 1875 *Press* stated that "The Catholic Cathedral in Richmond was dedicated Sunday *(the 25th)*; 14 priests and students assisted in the ceremonies; sermons in German and English, altogether a huge day of it." Incredibly, Fr. Fendrick officiated, according to Sister Thelma, so the legal settlement must have been acceptable to residents.

Interestingly, although the church was listed in Catholic directories as simply "Richmond" through 1873, from 1874 to 1895 it was named **Immaculate Conception** church, likely named by Father Maly, who ordered that statue for it and probably wanted a new name to distance it from the old church under Fr. Fendrick. It wasn't until 1896 that the Richmond church was listed in directories as **Holy Trinity** under Father Grothe, and it's unclear why the name was changed then.

Father Peter Brommenschenkel arrived in 1876 to serve the three churches (he defended St. Vincent from being replaced by the new Riverside church until the Bishop required it, and was transferred in 1881 to St. Mary's).

In 1877, the old church was moved east of the new church and remodeled into a two-story schoolhouse. The steeple was removed and a wooden belfry was built for the same bell in front of the church; it was replaced by the current steel belfry in 1931. *(To be continued....)*



The finally finished church building, in a photo taken soon after the 1875 dedication, and before the first wooden belfry was constructed *(Zielinski)*

History of Holy Trinity

(Conclusion) *by Beth Cody*

Recapping Part 1 (in the Fall 2024 issue), the Catholic church in Richmond was organized in 1855. The first modest wood church was built in 1858, and the current fine brick church was constructed (between delays caused by *disagreements*) between 1868 and 1875. From 1874 to 1895 the Richmond church was named Immaculate Conception, and it wasn't until 1896 that it was listed in directories as Holy Trinity Church.

The first Catholic school was established in Richmond in 1860, conducted mostly in private houses and in the first church until 1877, when the old church was remodeled into a two-story schoolhouse and sisters' dwelling. In 1879, a school opened there under the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from LaCrosse, WI, according to a 1954 book about the history of Holy Trinity Church by Sister Thelma.

In 1882, Father J. Bassler became the first pastor of Richmond alone (not shared with St. Vincent and St. Stanislaus). He was replaced in 1884 by Frather B.J. Sheridan, who served only a few months, followed by Father F.W. Hoppman, who built a new rectory during the late 1880s. Father Henry Grothe served as pastor from 1891 to 1896, and was replaced by Father J.H. Fedler. Father Edward F. Weil served from 1899 to 1905, and again from 1908 until his sudden death at only age 45 in 1910. In the interim 1905-1908 Father H.J. Albers was pastor.



A photograph of the beautiful brick school building, which stood west of the church. It was built in 1911, and included classrooms, a chapel, and convent quarters for the Sisters on the west (right) side. ***(Sister Thelma history)***



The Casino church hall, which stood from 1921 to 2008 across the road from the church. ***(Sister Thelma history)***

Around this time, the side altars were installed for statues of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph.

In 1910, the Rev. Peter Stahl arrived; he served until 1919, and then returned from 1927 to 1930.

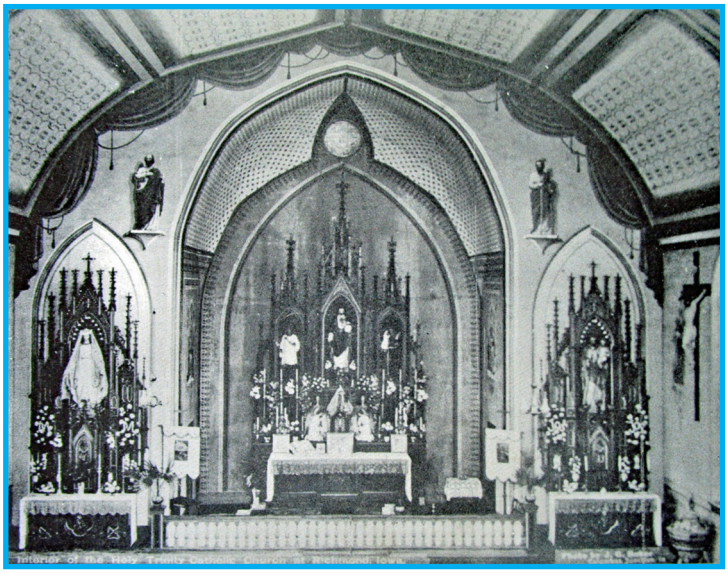
It was under Father Stahl's direction in 1911 that a beautiful new brick school building and sisters' residence was constructed west of the church. The school was named Holy Trinity School, and graduated hundreds of students before its closure in 1968.

The Rev. Francis Schaeffers served from 1919 to 1927. He had the old school torn down, and some of the materials from it were used to build a church hall called the "Casino" in 1921. The Casino was located across the street from the church and two lots west, and stood until 2008.

The Casino was used to host an annual Thanksgiving "dinner, supper and bazaar" by at least 1935, and again in the 1950s, and that event eventually turned into the annual Fall Dinner.

1930 saw the arrival of Father C.A.B. Van Waus. He was a fine carpenter and redecorated the church, had the new steel bell tower built in front of the church to replace the old wooden one, installed a new fireproof church roof, a front vestibule on the church, and a boys' sacristy, and he beautified the grounds.

In 1941 Father Walter F. Boeckmann became pastor; he remodeled the rectory and hall, and installed the first sound system to amplify the priest.



The interior of Holy Trinity after its 1930s redecoration with intricate murals and complex painted decorative patterns, quite different from its clean, modern appearance today. ***(Sister Thelma history)***

1954 was a big year for Holy Trinity: celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first Mass in Richmond; Father Boeckmann's Silver Jubilee; and the Marian Year decreed by Pope Pius XII. The church interior was redecorated again, and new Immaculate Conception and St. Joseph statues and a gold tabernacle were donated.

From 1955 to 1967 Father William Snell, a very strict and holy priest, presided at Holy Trinity. He was succeeded from 1967 to 1981 by Father Leroy J. Bergthold, remembered as always carrying Chiclets gum in his cassock to share with children.

A larger front vestibule was built on the front of the church during this period; this was remodeled in 2002.

By the 1970s, the women of Holy Trinity began baking traditional Bohemian *kolache* fruit-filled pastries for church fundraising and for Fall Dinners.

During the 1980s, the priests were: "Father Jack" (John) Gallagher, an especially caring, approachable man (and the first priest to encourage being addressed by his given name); in 1984, Father Nick Adam added Holy Trinity to the two churches he served, St. Joseph in Wellman and Sacred Heart in Kinross; Father Nick was succeeded in 1988 by Father Richard Okumu, who had narrowly escaped Uganda's murderous civil war.

Father Scott Lemaster arrived in 1990, and is remembered as a particularly reverent and personable priest who gave somewhat lengthy sermons. He was replaced in 1998 by the Rev. Mark Swanson, a kind and generous man. As the Kinross church had closed in 1996, Father Swanson in 1999 also took on the pastorship of St. Mary's Church in Riverside, forming the cluster of our three churches of today. After Father Swanson's tragic death in 2001, the Rev. Rich Adam (Father Nick's brother) became the priest for the three churches.

In 2006 after much fundraising, a beautiful new Parish Life Center was built on the east side of the church, with a large hall for parish dinners, a spacious kitchen, and basement classrooms for religious education. Holy Trinity's annual Thanksgiving dinners restarted in 2011 in the facility. The Casino hall and brick school building were torn down in 2008, and the rectory house was sold and now stands on the east edge of Kalona.

In 2011, Father Marty Goetz arrived, an exceptionally kind, considerate pastor. The Rev. David Brownfield, a highly learned man with degrees in computer science, theology, and a PhD in economics, served our three churches from 2012 to 2018, the year Father Bill Roush arrived.

The church roof was damaged in a May 2023 storm, and was replaced along with the gutters in Fall 2024.

The 150-year-old stained glass windows still need restoration, as the last major window repairs were done 75 years ago. The Washington County Riverboat Foundation has generously granted Holy Family Parish $121,000 to cover half of this cost, and work will begin shortly while further fundraising is undertaken.

Mass has now been said for parishioners in Richmond for more than 170 years, and Holy Trinity Church is now likely the oldest serving church building in Washington County.



The beautiful Parish Life Center at Holy Trinity, added in 2006, hosts the church's annual Community Thanksgiving Dinners, receptions, diocesan meetings, and retreats.