

THE BEGINNING – 1559



1559 - 1561

In 2009 when Pensacola celebrated the 450th anniversary of the first settlement, we at St. Michael's likewise celebrated the 450th anniversary of the Catholic presence in what would become the United States of America. It was on August 14, 1559 that a Spanish expedition, consisting of eleven ships under the command of Don Tristan de Luna y Arellano, landed on the shores of Pensacola Bay intending to establish a permanent settlement. In that expedition were 500 soldiers, 1000 settlers (among them, artisans, farmers, women, and children), five Dominican Friars, a lay Brother and 240 horses. Luna claimed possession of the territory for Spain. In honor of the Feast of the Assumption and of Philip II, King of Spain, Luna named the settlement *Mission Santa Maria Filipina*. Unfortunately, just over a month later on September 19th, a fierce hurricane struck the settlement, destroying many of the ships and nearly all of the supplies and provisions. In spite of resultant hardships, sickness, and lack of food, the group continued to labor for another year and a half to create a permanent settlement. Finally, after enduring further hurricanes, and after most of the members of the expedition had either moved inland, died, or gone back to Mexico, the settlement at *Mission Santa Maria Filipina* was abandoned.



1698

Spain rediscovered Pensacola Bay in 1693 and, in 1698, began construction on the fort and village of *Presidio Santa Maria de Galve* (aboard the present day Pensacola Naval Air Station). Archeological evidence uncovered during a recent excavation of the Chapel at the Presidio revealed many graves beneath the church floor. Rosary beads, a crucifix and Jesuit rings were among the many Catholic artifacts discovered.



1719

After France attacked Spain in Europe in January of 1719 during the War of the Quadruple Alliance, French troops from Mobile attacked *Presidio Santa Maria* in May, burning it to the ground. For the next two years French troops remained to occupy Pensacola.



1722

When Spain returned to Pensacola in 1722 at the end of the War, the new location selected for settlement was a militarily strategic site on Santa Rosa Island, lessening the threat of attack. Of the 50 buildings constructed at *Presidio Santa Rosa*, a 1743 drawing of the settlement shows three dominant structures – the commandant's house, the governor's house, and the octagonal shaped church. But, after enduring eight hurricanes over a thirty year period, *Presidio Santa Rosa* was abandoned in November, 1752 when a powerful storm effectively leveled the island.

In the years following the storm, residents began to congregate on the mainland in what is now downtown Pensacola. In 1757, construction of a wooden fort was begun, which was christened

Presidio San Miguel de Panzacola to commemorate St. Michael the Archangel. Inside its walls, along with the governor's house and military buildings, was the Chapel of San Miguel.



1763

The Treaty of Paris in 1763, after the French and Indian War, found Great Britain agreeing to trade the captured port of Havana back to Spain in exchange for Florida. That agreement also contained the pledge that Roman Catholic subjects in Florida, already under the auspices of the Diocese of Havana, would be allowed to practice their religion "so far as the laws of Great Britain permit." Word soon came, however, that Spain's King Charles III was offering homes in Mexico or Cuba to all his former subjects in Pensacola and St. Augustine. This news created a mass exodus of Catholics from both towns.

ESTABLISHMENT OF ST. MICHAEL'S PARISH – 1781



1781

In 1781, Spanish troops under the command of General Bernardo de Gálvez, along with an armada of sixty-four ships, began a sixty-one day siege to recapture Pensacola from the British. Accompanying the invading force was Father Cyril de Barcelona, a Capuchin missionary and Chaplain to the troops. On May 8, at the end of the successful and historic Battle of Pensacola, Father Cyril blessed an old two story wooden warehouse on the waterfront for a church, permanently establishing the parish of St. Michael the Archangel in downtown Pensacola.

Father Cyril was named auxiliary bishop for Louisiana and the Floridas in 1787, with residence in New Orleans. Bishop Cyril undertook an official visitation of East Florida where he conducted confirmations and other episcopal functions, interviewed the priests and residents, and conducted a census. He made a similar visitation to Pensacola in West Florida in 1791. Bishop Cyril reported finding a small frontier settlement in depressing poverty with only a few elegant houses, one tavern, and one trading company. His census recorded 572 souls, of whom 245 were Catholic. The year before his arrival, only seven Catholics had received Holy Communion during the Easter season. French speaking citizens had not had the opportunity of confession for nearly five years since the only priest, Father Estaban Valorio, did not speak French. Bishop Cyril saw to it personally that more than 70 parishioners of St. Michael received Holy Communion during his visit. Except for a failure to learn French, Bishop Cyril saw little need to criticize Father Valario, who was laboring with tremendous zeal under difficult circumstances.

Pope Pius VI, in 1793, created the Louisiana diocese with Luis Ignacio Peñalver y Cárdenas as its first bishop. In addition to East and West Florida, the new diocese extended over an area that stretched north and east to the Diocese of Baltimore, and south and west to Mexico. Bishop Peñalver had difficulty getting priests to agree to go to Pensacola, writing that he "could not even get angels to go to Pensacola." He visited Pensacola in 1798 where he found the church in "pitiful condition" and was unable to persuade parishioners to make the necessary sacrifices for a new church, even though the "temporary" warehouse/church was slowly falling into ruin. The only priest in town was Father James Coleman.

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, it was impossible for Spanish West Florida to remain under the now American New Orleans Diocese. In 1806 West Florida reverted to the Diocese of Havana.



1821

The year 1821 saw Spain relinquish control of the Floridas to the United States and remove government control from the church. With no church official willing to assume responsibility for the poverty-stricken territory, a solution was not found until June, 1825. At that time, Florida and Alabama were erected into a vicariate-apostolic with Father Michael Portier of New Orleans as Bishop. With this transfer of the territory from Spain to the United States, many Spanish subjects chose to leave while, at the same time, Americans began to arrive in increasing numbers. Catholics in all of West Florida in the 1830's numbered only about 2,000. A Mexican priest, Canon Matías Monteagudo, ministered to the parishioners, while Father Andrew Poujade, newly ordained from France, briefly assisted in 1831. Bishop Portier, who had arrived in Mobile in 1826, had discovered that, although his territory seemed huge, the only three churches were in St. Augustine, Pensacola and Mobile.

The original warehouse/church on Zaragossa Street in Pensacola finally collapsed at the beginning of 1831. Though hindered by poverty, the congregation resolved to build a new church. Bishop Portier gave what assistance he could and presided at the laying of the cornerstone on February 6th, 1831. Just as the new structure neared completion, it was destroyed by a hurricane. A new start was made; new and serious debt was incurred. By 1833, the building at the corner of Jefferson and Church streets was successfully completed. Pensacola Catholics, for the first time in their history, had a suitable place of worship. Father John Symphorian Guinand, another newly ordained priest from France, was assigned to St. Michael as permanent pastor.

By 1850, there were churches and congregations in Mobile, Spring Hill, Summerville, Mount Vernon, Fish River, Pensacola, Tuscaloosa, and Montgomery. Bishop Portier was probably relieved by the detachment of the eastern portion of Florida (East of the Apalachicola River) and its annexation to the established Diocese of Savannah. The ten western counties of North Florida, including Pensacola, remained in the Diocese of Mobile until 1968.



1861

The Civil War, which began in 1861, brought even more hardship to the area. Father Patrick Coyle of St. Michael's was commissioned a Confederate chaplain to care for the Southern troops, and Bishop Quinlin of Mobile sent six Daughters of Charity to staff the military hospital. In May of 1862, the Confederate troops abandoned Pensacola. Ninety percent of the population left, the sisters returned to Mobile and the local government evacuated to Greenville, Alabama. During this absence, an empty St. Michael Church was destroyed in a fire.



1865 - PRESENT

After the War, Bishop Quinlin immediately went about securing funds to rebuild St. Michael, and a new church was dedicated in 1867. This wooden church building on New Street (now Government Street) was near present-day Jefferson Street.

Although Pensacola possessed one of the finest deep-water harbors in the South, it lacked the one feature necessary for commerce: a navigable river to the interior. With the completion of a rail connection north to Montgomery in 1870, followed by an east-west rail line in 1883, Pensacola became a true boomtown! Ships from all over the world came into Pensacola Bay to load lumber from the logging operations of the great Southern Pine forests of Alabama and Northwest Florida.

In addition, millions of tons of Pensacola Red Snapper were being shipped north in refrigerated rail cars.

In 1882, Father John Baasen was named Pastor of St. Michael's. Born in Prussia, this zealous missionary had traveled throughout Alabama and West Florida by horseback and train, prior to assuming his new post. But no sooner had he arrived, then St. Michael Church was again destroyed by fire during a raging Yellow Fever epidemic. Fr. Baasen had also contracted the disease while attending sick parishioners and, according to accounts of the time, was carried out of the burning rectory on a cot.

ST. MICHAEL CHURCH – 1886

Father Baasen had the foresight to purchase property on the corner of Palafox and Chase Streets for a new church. The price was \$3,500, with the seller donating the \$500. The location was in an area where much construction was going on, including a new courthouse on the opposite corner. The Methodist Church was at the other end of the block on the corner of Palafox and Garden, and the Lutheran Church was just another block away on the corner of Baylen and Garden Streets. In spite of this, some members of the congregation objected to the new location being "so far from town"!

After the fire, Father Baasen recovered from Yellow Fever. While his congregation met in temporary quarters, construction began in 1883 on the new (and current) St. Michael Church. It was formally dedicated on June 6, 1886 by Bishop Jeremiah O'Sullivan of Mobile. The exterior walls were of the very best red brick made in Kehoe's brickyard (later covered with stucco). The interior woodwork was all Florida pine, stained and polished. The vaulted pine ceiling is formed by rows of arches set atop support columns. Total cost was \$27,000.

In 1897, pews were installed in the church. As was the custom of the time, families were charged a "pew rent", which was a major source of financial support for the parish. A card with the family's name was inserted in a metal holder on the end of the family's pew. While pew rents are no longer in use, the card holders serve as a reminder of this by-gone custom.

During the pastorate of Father J. P. McCafferty (1900-1903), a number of additional improvements were made to the church. A new organ was installed and large, life-like Stations of the Cross, all memorials bearing the names of pioneer Catholic families of Pensacola, were added.

Art glass windows with ecclesiastical symbols were installed when the church was built. During the pastorate of Father Robert Fullerton (1904-1926), they were replaced by magnificent new stained glass windows, which today form one of the artistic treasures of Pensacola.

The unique bowed altar rail, certainly a fine example of the cabinet maker's art, was fortunately preserved during mandated changes to the sanctuary after Vatican II.