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## EXPLORING PARISH CHURCHES

# Determination, ships and the military fuel growth of St. Dominic Parish

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In this article, the fifth in a series on historic parishes in the Diocese of Pensacola - Tallahassee, the *Florida Catholic* reviews the history of St. Dominic Church, 3308 E. 15th St, Panama City.

Courtesy Photo

 

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**PANAMA CITY** | Because of the vision and determination of one dedicated Catholic from Springfield, Mo., St. Dominic Catholic Church established its roots at the end of the 19th century about 100 miles from Pensacola, in what is now Panama City.

In 1880, Lt. Cmdr. [Francis Henry Sheppard](#), a lawyer and Civil War veteran, moved his wife and seven children to the small town of St. Andrew along the Gulf of Mexico coast. Because there was no Catholic church, Sheppard invited missionaries to travel by boat twice a year from St. Michael Church in Pensacola to his home, where they celebrated Mass.

Adamant that his family and the other few Catholics in town have a church, Sheppard donated four lots to [Bishop Edward P. Allen](#) of the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham, Ala. Ten years later, Sheppard witnessed the building of St. Andrew Catholic Church.

The missionaries continued to make the voyage across the Gulf to celebrate Mass a couple of times a year, but now when they arrived, they could preach within church walls.

For 26 years, the Catholic parishioners of St. Andrew's attended the small church on the land Sheppard had donated. In that time, the town of St. Andrew had undergone several name changes, eventually settling on Panama City. In 1916, Bishop Allen sent Father M. Hourican to oversee the building of a new church, which was constructed on Harrison and Sixth Street. One year later, Bishop Allen dedicated the church, renaming it to honor St. Dominic.

It wasn't until nine years later, in 1925, that the parish received its first resident pastor, Father Charles D. Meyer. Father Meyer also served the small mission of St. James in Lynn Haven.

In 1943, Father Andrew McGovern took over as pastor at St. Dominic. At the time he moved to Panama City, the population was booming as a result of increased orders at Wainright Shipyard to build vessels for World War II, as well as an increasing need for workers at Tyndall Field and the Mine Defense Laboratory.

By the end of the war, 200 Catholic families lived in Panama City, and the parish had outgrown the church. Amidst Father McGovern's personal papers was a memo describing the sudden growth in his parish.

"For a number of years the pastor was very happy if he could survey from the altar a congregation of 25 to 30 people. But God has prospered us, and we have grown to number nearly 200 souls. And if the growth continues



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in the future as it has in the past, we will some day be able to take our place with the larger parishes in the diocese.”

Father McGovern’s prediction was correct.

After selling the old church building on Sixth Street to the Standard Oil Co., he oversaw the building of a larger church on Harrison and 11th streets to hold his growing parish. Although Father McGovern retired in 1958, St. Dominic parishioners continued to worship in this building until 1979. It was then that parishioners built the current church on East 15th Street, which was completed in 1981 under the leadership of Msgr. William Crowe. By then, the parish had expanded to 2,400 members. In addition to the sanctuary, the church building grew to include a cry room, media room, daily Mass chapel, bridal dressing room and a shop selling religious articles.

Today, St. Dominic oversees Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission on Mexico Beach and Sts. Peter and Paul Mission in Panama City.

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