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EXPLORING PARISH CHURCHES

St. Michael the Archangel experiences rebirths

Along the 14,044 square miles that comprises the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, traces of Catholic identity from as early as the 1500s reflect on the bright white beaches and hang in the moss-draped swamps of Northwest Florida.
But while the landscape may have first attracted explorers to our area, it was the churches they eventually built that have lent a tangible history to our faith. Over several issues, the Florida Catholic will explore this history of the diocesan churches, beginning with Pensacola's St. Michael the Archangel, the oldest parish in the Province of Miami.

Amy M. Ferrara, of the Florida Catholic staff

This is the first of a series on historic parishes.

PENSACOLA —For nearly 450 years, St. Michael the Archangel has held particular

significance for local Catholics. On Aug. 14, 1559, Don Tristan de Luna arrived on Santa Rosa Island with an army of 500 men and 1,000 colonists, including several Dominican priests. Grateful for their safety, they knelt in the sand and prayed the rosary. On Aug. 15, the feast day of the Assumption, the priests offered the first Mass in western Florida. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish erected a wooden chapel, which they dedicated to St. Michael, the Archangel.


COURTESY PHOTO

Tracing its roots back to the Spaniards' first exploration of what is now Pensacola, St. Michael the Archangel has held particular significance for local Catholics.

Neither the chapel nor the settlement, however, survived for long. With the same vulnerability to storms that the Gulf Coast experiences today, de Luna's colony and its provisions were destroyed by hurricanes. Though they persevered for two more years, the expedition was finally named a failure in 1561.
Defeated, the Spanish crown looked to Florida's east coast. There, in 1565, they established St. Augustine as the first permanent settlement in what is now the United States.

It took 130 years for the Spanish to attempt colonization again around Pensacola Bay. In 1693, Spain's continued interest in the area caused further exploration at a speed that would eliminate potential competition from France. Five years later, in 1698, Juan Jordan de Reina and Gov. Andres de Arriola arrived in Pensacola Bay, where they finally established for Spain a stable settlement in northwest Florida. They called it St. Michael mission, and again, constructed a small church to bear the same name.
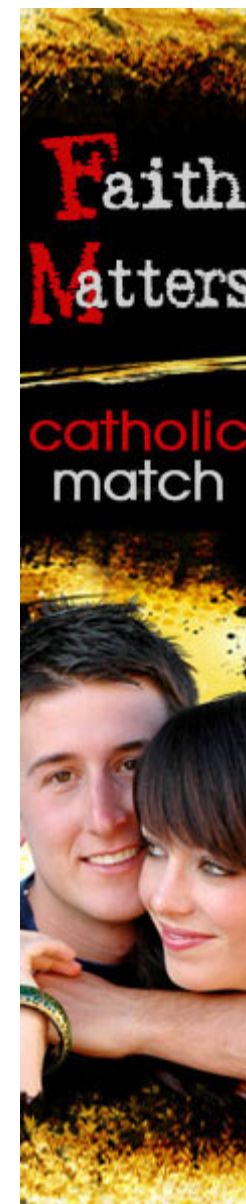
When the French did arrive several months later, they found an existing Spanish settlement. Without conflict, they sailed westward toward Mobile Bay and established their own colony. It wasn't until 1718 that the French captured Pensacola, an action fueled by one of the numerous ongoing European wars between the two nations. As a result of a peace treaty between Spain and France four years later, the French returned the colony to the Spanish. Yet, they didn't leave without vengeance. On their way out, they burned the village, including St. Michael mission.

The Spanish proved their determination by constructing an octagonal church on Santa Rosa Island, which a hurricane destroyed in 1752. Five years later, in 1757, they built St. Michael Chapel on the mainland at the location of the current Pensacola City Hall.

Six years later, England decided it was its turn to control Florida, including both the Pensacola and St. Augustine settlements. In the Treaty of Paris in 1763, England and Spain came to an agreement: Spain could have the captured port of Havana back in exchange for Florida. As a result of the shift in government, many Spaniards left Florida for Cuba, including most of Pensacola's Roman Catholic population. With no congregation to serve, St. Michael Chapel closed.

It took less than 20 years for Spain to recapture west Florida from the British in the famous Battle of Pensacola. The day following the conflict in 1781, Father Cyril de Barcelona, a Capuchin missionary, blessed an old two-story wooden waterfront warehouse. This building, which was near the present-day intersection of Jefferson and Zaragossa streets, permanently established St. Michael the Archangel Parish in downtown Pensacola.

In 1821, the territory of Florida became part of the United States. As a result, many Spaniards evacuated while numerous Americans settled in the area. The

LEARN MORE

Read more about Florida church history from these sources, which were used for this story:
• "Catholic Roots: Old Churches East of the Mississippi" by Walter H. Maloney, published in 1992 by Our Sunday Visitor

outcome of this shift left only a small population of 2,000 Catholics in west Florida during the 1830s.

Publishing Division.

• Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg Office of Vocations, "Our Heritage," www.spvocation.org/site/index.php?section=88

•

www.stmichael.ptdiocese.org/church.htm

St. Michael parish's pattern of disaster continued. In 1831, the old warehouse church collapsed. Though poor, the congregation built a new church, which a hurricane destroyed shortly before its completion. Perseverance, however, was one of the congregation's virtues. In 1833, parishioners completed a new church at the corner of Jefferson and Church streets. Although it was empty during the Civil War, St. Michael remained intact until another fire destroyed the 30-year-old building. Yet, rebuilding had become a common practice. On Dec. 22, 1867, a new St. Michael the Archangel Church opened its doors to Pensacola Catholics.

But the fires weren't over. In 1882, during a period of prosperity, St. Michael again burned. The result of subsequent building efforts is the current St. Michael the Archangel Church on the corner of Palafox and Chase streets, which was dedicated June 6, 1886. The church cost $27,000 to construct with a stable exterior of sturdy red brick and an interior of polished Florida pine.

From this one church, which experienced multiple rebirths, sprang more than 25 parish churches in the Pensacola-Gulf Breeze area of northwest Florida. Appropriately, St. Michael the Archangel is called "mater ecclesia" (mother church).

The church that stands today has housed generations of local Catholic families for more than a century, serving as a sanctuary for their baptisms, weddings and funerals. And although St. Michael experienced numerous natural disasters, it is believed that many of the original furnishings from 1886 are still in use, including the carved wooden altars, Stations of the Cross and church bells. The remarkable stained-glass windows, which were imported from Munich, Germany, replaced an older set sometime after 1906 because of an 1896 hurricane.

Father Peter McLaughlin is the current pastor of St. Michael, where parishioners and guests can attend Sunday Mass at either 9 or 11 a.m. The church also continues to serve the Pensacola business community with a daily noontime Mass.

To contact the St. Michael parish office, call 850-438-4985