

# St. John's Catholic Church

## V. History & Significance

St. John's Catholic Church was built in 1877 and is believed to be one of the oldest extant frame churches in the state. It is the oldest frame church in Southeast Nebraska. The St. Benedict's Catholic Church in Nebraska City was erected in 1861 but is of brick construction.

According to available writings and accounts, credit for founding the church is given to Peter Muller, John Dufek and Joseph Reuter. Some other family names penned in the early church records are Duder, Mertes, Blacklaw, Grof, Goodenkauf and Huffman.

The Rev. A. Rausch was appointed pastor of the mission in 1881 and kept records from 1881 to 1888.

He wrote:

"There was in my mission only one church, that at Table Rock, and that was indebted to the amount of \$143.54. I went from house to house, sometimes on foot to collect money to pay this debt. On September 27, 1883, the last balance was paid off."

At that time there was no ceiling in the Church. Though it was built in 1877, it was not completed until 1890. A vestibule was added in 1935, and about the same time stained glass windows were donated. An organ and new Stations of the Cross were donated in 1952.

Visitors to the historic St. John's Catholic Church are first awed by the mural and marble. The marble, however, is painted on the walls and is not the real thing.

The mural and the marble painting was done by an unnamed displaced person who came to Table Rock when the Rev. Edward Valasek served the church in the 1950s.

As a young priest, Father Valasek's first appointment was Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Burchard, Nebraska, and St. John's Catholic Church in Table Rock, Nebraska. Both Churches were in need of some repairs and remodeling. Hence, the outcome in the Table Rock church is what you behold.

The painted marble columns are part of continuous paintings along the sides of the interior. The large mural of John the Baptist when he first sees Jesus is at the focal point of the Church sanctuary.

Father Valasek, when asked how the mural got into the Church, says that he was remodeling the Church, and thought it would be good to have wall and ceiling paintings, like many churches in Europe. At the time, he had been getting displaced persons to work for him. One of these was a

Russian immigrant who was a professional painter, a genius, who would paint whatever you asked him to do. The subject was chosen by Father Valasek: St. John the Baptist with his followers, as Christ appeared and St. John acknowledges him as greater than himself. [John 2]

He chose the beautiful scene from the Bible to bring out the Patron Saint of the Church (St. John). However, primarily, so that any person entering the Church would immediately be struck by the figure of Christ. To magnify this is the figure of St. John, The Baptist surrounded by his hearers, sees Jesus coming towards him, points his finger toward Christ and says to the crowd: "There is the lamb of God." (Taken from the Bible: Chapter 1, Verse 29.)

The original baptismal fount and a picture of the Last Supper were saved from destruction from St. Anthony's Church in Steinauer when being remodeled in 1965. There is a statue of Mary with Jesus, an elaborate priest's robe and other items significant to faith.

The town of Table Rock was named for the large stone that was located near the settlement, but no record can be found of when it was given this name. The town was surveyed by R. V. Muir in June of 1858, and incorporated in July of 1858.

The first settlers who came to this vicinity met many reverses which culminated with the flood during the summer of 1858. Out of the one hundred fifty families who had lived in the area, only fifteen remained at the end of the year 1858.

From that year until November 10, 1871, when the A and L Railroad Company completed its tracks to Table Rock, the town increased very little in population. The advantages of railroad communication soon induced many settlers to migrate to the area including a large number of Catholics who were of Czech origin. One of the cherished hopes of these Catholics was that they might have their own church.

In 1877, Peter Muller donated land to be used as a site for the proposed church. With the contributions of sixty-nine Catholic families in the vicinity, a building 45x30 feet was erected in 1877. Two men who assumed much of the responsibility for the construction were Peter Muller and Joseph Reuter. Because of a lack of funds, some of the furnishings, sidewalks, and other less essential items were not completed until 1890.

St. John's Catholic Church had the distinction of being the first Catholic church in Pawnee County. The parishioners were justly proud of their achievement, but they had no priest to minister to them.

By 1968 only twenty-five families remained in the parish. Therefore, on July 7, 1968, Holy Mass was celebrated for the last time in St. John's Church. The parishioners were assigned to St. Anthony's Parish in Steinauer.

On August 30, 1970, St. John's Church, the oldest Catholic Church in Pawnee County and the Falls City Deanery, was given to the Table Rock Historical Society.

Fr. A. C. Rausch was the first pastor, (Official Record). He served the parish from March 5th, 1881 to May 1st, 1888. He wrote down a general historical report of the mission in Table Rock from the day he took over until the day he left.

"There was in all my missions only one church" he wrote, "that at Table Rock, and that was indebted to the amount of \$143.54. I went from house to house, sometimes on foot, to collect money to pay this debt. On September 27, 1883 the last balance was paid off.

When the old debt was paid off, the church was not plastered or ceiled yet. Pate Miller bought the lumber to have the church ceiled without my knowledge. The building was ceiled inside, painted outside and a chimney built. He also had the church insured and a sidewalk ~~built~~ made, for which he collected all the necessary money. The expense for ceiling the church is \$90. He wrote, -

On March 5, 1881 there were 6 brass candle sticks, 6 bouquets and vases, 1 Altar picture (St. John Bapt.) a curtain drawn from wall to wall to be used as a confessional, one chair and an old clock above the Confessional with a wooden figure representing the Blessed Virgin. Besides this, there were two benches and an old stove in the church. I got lumber for \$5.00 and made 10 single benches myself. They are my donation.

(See historic scrapbook "St. John's Catholic Church" which contains clippings from Pawnee Republican and Table Rock Argus.

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Two men who assumed much of the responsibility for the construction were Peter Miller and Joseph Reuter. But, because of lack of funds, some of the furnishings, sidewalks, and other less essential items were not completed until 1890.

In 1935, the vestibule was added, and during the mid 30's, parishioners donated the stained glass windows for the church. In 1952 a new organ was donated and Guy Cooper Jr. of Humboldt, Ne. donated new "Stations of the Cross."

The interior of the church was also painted at this time. An artist of exceptional talent painted the inside of the sanctuary to give it the illusion of having marble walls and pillars. He also painted a beautiful mural behind the altar of the church.

The artist of the painting was a man of Russian descent.

Emil Biro, of Slovak descent from Czechoslovakia, enlarged the small choir loft and put down asphalt blocks on the floor of the sanctuary.

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