

This is the html version of the file [http://www.stjosephtheworkercluster.com/sp\\_history.pdf](http://www.stjosephtheworkercluster.com/sp_history.pdf).  
Google automatically generates html versions of documents as we crawl the web.

r

## Saint Peter's Parish History Clermont, Iowa

The history of St. Peter's Parish, Clermont, Iowa, starts with the first Catholic settlers to make this locality their home. Peter McGuire and his sister Bridget from County Kerry Ireland and Michael Fleming and his wife came to the area in 1842.

Under the direction of Bishop Loras, Father O'Byrne from Elkader traveled to Claremont to administer the sacraments and say mass. At first, St. Peter's Parish Masses were said in the homes of the first settlers, Peter McGuire and Michael Fleming. Father O'Byrne also said mass in all the surrounding territory.

Early in 1853 the Claremont Catholic community was severed from the Elkader Parish. Bishop Loras sent Father McCullough to Claremont to serve as the pastor. Father McCullough was instructed by the Bishop to secure sixty acres of land from the U.S. Government four miles northeast of Claremont. The church and rectory were erected with seven acres laid aside for cemetery plots.

Bishop Loras sent his nephew Father DeCailly. Father DeCailly oversaw the erection of the first Catholic Church. About this first church we know the following: it was built on a rolling bluff overlooking a rocky creek; it was built of logs, cut and donated by the early settlers. It was a rugged structure, measuring 20 x 30 feet, with earthen floor and without ornaments except for the altar, which was made of pine boards carried by oxcart from McGregor. An open fireplace in the back was replenished from the timberland that surrounded the church property. Mass was offered in this original church on the average of once a month. Meanwhile, any other religious services were taken care of from the new parish of Festina, where there was a growing community of Catholics. Father DeCailly served the parish for two years.

Father Nagle of McGregor took charge in 1856. It was while Father Nagle had charge of the parish that Bishop Loras suggested the church be moved into the newly chartered town of Clermont, where the Turkey River was furnishing power for a gristmill and clay for the brick industry. The log church was sold for school purposes and the parish moved into the village of Clermont. Father Nagle established himself in the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Macken, directly across from the present rectory. Here he offered the first Mass in the town of Clermont, now platted and recorded with its present spelling.

Bishop Smyth, who succeeded Bishop Loras, directed that land should be secured and a church structure erected in Clermont. Early in 1860 a half block of property was acquired from Peter Cummings. On this site Father Nagle built the third Catholic Church in Fayette County, Iowa. It was, however, the first substantial Catholic Church in the county. It was a frame structure, measuring 85 x 25 feet, with translucent window, homemade pews and a main altar, which also served as a vestment case. Yet, it was impressive and artistic enough to be dedicated by Bishop Smyth in the fall of 1860. It was named St. Peter's in gratitude to Peter Cummings, who had practically donated the property. It was at this time that the Sacrament of Confirmation was administered in the parish for the first time. Father

Nagle served the newly organized parish of St. Peter's for eight years; as well as the adjoining newly formed county seat at West Union.

By 1868 the Clermont parish was well established. Bishop Hennessey asked the community to move from McGregor and join with the Elkader Parish where Father J.I. Quigley presided. He made the circuit to Clermont and West Union once a month. While in the area Father Quigley stayed with Mr. and Mrs. John Crowe in Clermont and John Owens in West Union.

In 1870 the Clermont Mission was severed from Elkader and a resident priest, the Rev. John J. Smith, himself a recent emigrant from Ireland, was sent to care for the growing parish, along with Postville and West Union. By this time Clermont was a thriving pioneer town. Clermont consisted of a flour mill and stove factory, which, owing to the emergencies of war and the subsequent reconstruction period, were grinding over fifteen hundred barrels of flour a week, and supplying flour barrels to other

5

---

## Page 2

mills along the Turkey River. Besides producing pork barrels and butter tubs for the eastern market Clermont also had a brick plant that molded a superior quality of white brick; a public school of five grades, a commodious brick hotel, many fine brick and frame residences and a population of some five hundred souls, most of whom were Irish Catholics. It was during Father Smith's residency that records of baptisms and marriages were first kept. The first marriage recorded was in 1871 that of Patrick Hergen and Mary Garvey. The first baptism recorded was that of Elizabeth Leahy daughter of Timothy Leahy and Johann Malone in 1870.

Father Smith took up residence in the Hurley home and began plans for a new rectory. In 1871 a contract was awarded to John Rafferty, a young architect, stone cutter, and mason. The contract was for the sum of five thousand dollars. The money was borrowed at ten per cent interest.

The new parochial residence one of the show places of the town. Built of Clermont brick and native stone, it measured 34 x 27 feet, of two stories and mid-Victorian cupola, and contained eight rooms, heated by stoves and lighted by chandelier type oil lamps, something quite palatial in a frontier town of 1871. However, before the house was completed, Father Smith was transferred to Emmetsburg.

Bishop Hennessey then sent Father M. O'Carroll to care for St. Peter's as well as the parishes of West Union and Fayette. Father O'Carroll's first task was the completion of the rectory. Though the original structure was to cost five thousand dollars, the finished building cost close to ten thousand, because of high interest rates and cost of furnishings.

Upon the completion of the parish house, Father O'Carroll turned to the task of getting a road built to the old cemetery, five miles from Clermont, where the early settlers had been buried since the building of the first church in 1853. It was finally decided that since the burial grounds were so far from the church and town, a new cemetery should be established. In August 1874, a tract of land, 5.2 acres, adjoining Clermont was purchased from William Larrabee for \$312.00, and the deed was transferred to Bishop Hennessey. A Miss Rose McGarahan, a young lady of promise, was killed in a buggy accident on October 25, 1874. Rose was buried on October 28, the first interred in the new cemetery plot. In the following years most of the bodies were transferred from the old cemetery, and the old cemetery with its additional land, sixty acres in all, was sold in 1902 for \$1,322.00. All that is left today as a reminder of the church's pioneer past are a few remaining broken and obscured monuments and overgrown empty graves.

Due to the parish's steady growth, it was deemed necessary to build a larger and more substantial church to replace the building of 1860. Therefore in the fall of 1879, a committee was selected to solicit funds for a new church. By early spring the sum of \$18,000 in notes had been subscribed, and in spring of 1880 ground was broken and a foundation constructed. Father O'Sullivan left Clermont in 1880 for Sioux City, which was before the church was underway.

Father O'Carroll served until 1876 when he was transferred to Oskaloosa. Reverend E. O'Sullivan succeeded Father O'Carroll.

In 1881 Rev. John Hackett was appointed by Bishop Hennessey to serve the Clermont Parish. Rev. Hackett immediately set about the task of building a church. To make way for the new church the wood frame church was jacked up and put on logs. The structure was moved a block down the street to an empty lot, across the street from where the Larrabee School was later built. Mass was said there for nearly 4 years until the brick church was finished. After the dedication of the new church the old structure was sold and converted to a home. It is the right hand half of the house at 502 Larrabee Street.

On June 29, 1884, the feast day of St. Peter and Paul, was set for the dedication of the new brick church. The new church was a gem of pioneer Gothic art. Its length measured 90 feet and middle height of its nave was 32 feet. It was built of the same Clermont brick and native stone as the rectory. New pews were purchased, but the altars of the old church served until the parish could afford to replace them.

6

---

## Page 3

On June 29, 1884 Bishop Hennessey presided at the dedicatory services and Father P. A. R. Tierney of Ossian preached the sermon. The Bishop blessed the new bell, which was donated by State Senator Larrabee, a native son of Clermont, who later became Iowa's twelfth Governor. After the services Bishop Hennessey administered the Sacrament of Confirmation, probably the second confirmation in the parish of Clermont. The church was devoid of ornament save for the essentials. It was not until ten years later that new altars and statuary were purchased, but to the people of St. Peter's it was a thing of beauty. The years of 1882 to 1890 were hard and though the people gave notes, it was eight years before they were paid and the church debt cleared.

Father Hackett served Clermont Parish for 10 years. In 1891 he died of pneumonia. Father Regan was sent to take his place temporarily; however, he too became ill and died of pneumonia. Father B. W. Coyle was then appointed to Clermont. The parish had not been completely furnished so he took to the task. In May of 1892 three new altars and two statues were purchased for \$577.00, a very large sum of money at that time. In 1896 he organized a catholic library system which continued until 1902. In 1896 he left Clermont for Cedar Falls.

Clermont was served again by several priests, they included: Father C.M. McCabe 1896-1902, Rev. P. I. Smith 1902-1904, Rev. M.H. Farrelly 1904-1911, Rev. J.J. Hehir 1911-1931. While Rev. Smith was pastor, Governor Larrabee donated a magnificent pipe organ valued at \$3,000.00.

It was during Rev. Hehir's service at the Clermont Parish that on Sunday morning March 23, 1913, a tornado almost completely demolished the church; only the bell tower was left standing. The organ donated by Governor Larrabee was lost as well. Fortunately the rectory was undamaged. While the new church was under construction Sunday Mass was celebrated in the Clermont Opera House with weekday Mass in the Rectory.

On April 14, 1913 a contract for a new church costing \$12,500.00 was let. The foundation of the original church was used, the bell tower was incorporated into the new church, and the tower was given a new round dome on top instead of the original pointed spire. The length of the church was extended by the addition of the sanctuary. The first Mass was offered in the incomplete church on Christmas Eve 1913. Early in the spring of 1914 the church was considered complete and on May 13, 1914 was solemnly dedicated by Archbishop James J. Keane.

Father Hehir was transferred in 1931 to Anamosa. Rev. John McCaffery was appointed in 1931 until he was transferred in 1934. Rev. William Holub then took charge of St. Peter's Parish. It was during his time that St. Peter's celebrated their 75th anniversary. In 1935 Rev. Holub was transferred. Again several priests served St. Peter's. They included: Rev. F. Leo O'Connell, Rev. Vernon I. Peters, and Rev. Francis M. Mulchahy. In June of 1944 Father Robert Cooney was appointed Pastor.

Shortly after Father Cooney's arrival he investigated the possibility of establishing a Catholic school in Clermont. Later that year the west half of the present block of church property was purchased from the August Becker estate for \$2,500.00. This house was built for a dentist, one of the first in the area.

The home on the northeast corner of the property was remodeled largely through the volunteer labor of the parishioners. When the work was completed the building housed a convent on the second floor and two classrooms, a chapel, and music room on the first floor. A lunchroom and sanitary facilities were provided in the basement. In September of 1945 classes were conducted for the first time under the direction of two Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Dubuque. School opened with an enrollment of 21 pupils. A school bus plan was organized and operated to transport the children to and from school.

In 1954 the church basement was enlarged a second time and completely remodeled and a new entrance built. Most of this work was also done by volunteer labor of the parishioners.

8

---

## Page 4

Owing the twelve years of Father Cooney's pastorate, a familiar, friendly face around St. Peter's was that of the Rev. J. Kenneth Downing, professor of Greek and Latin at Loras College. Among the many improvements which beautify the church property to this day, most bear the touch of his hand and decorating skill.

Father Downing supervised the installation of the walnut paneling in the sanctuary. The paneling is walnut lumber cut from trees donated by the members of the parish, and cut at a local sawmill. Father Downing handcrafted the carvings and the inlays, which are made from ivory piano keys that decorate the paneling. He built the beautiful Sedalia (presider's chair) in the sanctuary. The front of the chair features carvings of the four evangelists. He carved the figure of Christ on the large cross that hangs in the sanctuary. This was also made from walnut, but was bleached to lighten its color. The high altar was gold leafed under his direction. The parish grounds, too, testify to a debt of gratitude St. Peter's owes Father Downing, from the stone picnic tables and outdoor fireplace and pavilion to the steel step railings at the church entrance which he forged from buggy axles on his own homemade hearth.

Father Cooney moved on to serve another parish in 1956. Once again several priests served St. Peter's Parish which included Father Frost until 1957, Rev. Clair C. Drummy, Rev. Joseph A. Sullivan, Rev. Kenneth Ryan, and then again by Father Sullivan.

On September 18, 1960 St. Peter's parish celebrated the centennial of the construction of the first church in Clermont, with His Excellency Archbishop Leo Binz celebrant of the Pontifical Mass. All of the living priests who had served St. Peter's were present and participated in the Mass. Ladies of the parish served a one o'clock banquet to the clergy and guests.

In May 1963, the people of the parish were saddened by the permanent closing of their Catholic school, causing 26 pupils to attend public schools and some moved to neighboring parishes schools.

Over the next decade Clermont would be served for some of those years by Father Joseph Hsu, and Father Louis Zee. These two priests had to leave their native China when the Communists took power. They finished their college and seminary training here in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. Unable to return to China they were ordained, and began their ministry here. Today one serves in Taiwan and the other in Houston, Texas.

In 1968 Father Zee was succeeded by Msgr. Joseph Dunn. Msgr. Dunn in spite of his advanced years was a very active priest. He had the sidewalk in front of and on the side of the church replaced. He brought the cemetery records up to date. He discovered that one of the graves had not been moved to town. This was taken care of on a warm summer evening with the help of a few men of the parish. Msgr. Dunn and the people of the parish had a scare in 1971 when a tornado or a very violent windstorm passed over Clermont. This time St. Peter's Church escaped without even its shingles damaged.

Msgr. Dunn retired in 1973 and was succeeded by Father Schmitz. Father Schmitz worked in construction as a young man. He improved the Rectory with the help of a couple men of the parish. He also worked on the interior of the rectory.

In 1975, Rev. Karl Klein became pastor. Father Klein made some improvements on the house among them a new furnace, and improvements to the church hall. In 1986 Father Klein hired a local contractor to put a new roof on the church; he in turn hired three young men from the parish fresh out of high school looking for college money to work for him. They would begin work early in the morning, take a break at nine o'clock, and serve Mass for Father Klein and then return to work on the roof. He also installed a new organ.

In 1986 Father Klein left for retirement, and was succeeded by Father Paul Otting. Father Otting was also the pastor of St. Bridget's at Postville and the two parishes were fO!D1aUylinked together. Father Otting set up the first parish council, and recruited lay ministers (lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, etc.). Father Otting began the discussion of making the church handicap accessible. He left in 1990 and was succeeded by Father David Ambrosy.

10

---

## Page 5

Father Ambrosy began the extensive remodeling of the church. In March 1992 work began on digging out the last quarter of the basement. Over the course of months the men and students from the parish began digging out under the floor of the church going all the way to the foundation of the back wall and bell tower. Soil was all carried out in buckets and wheelbarrows. This allowed the installation of an interior stairway, with chair lift. To make room upstairs two rows of pews were removed. The space allowed the installation of men and ladies restrooms in place of the original single restroom. A local concrete contractor was hired to supervise, and two carpenters were also hired, all the rest of the work was done by the people of the parish. Upstairs a new confessional was built, and outside even more change was done. A wheelchair ramp was installed down to the new sidewalk and a parking lot was laid out on the side of the church. A new-lighted sign was installed as a gift from a parishioner. The old sign was moved out to the highway. Landscaping was done in the front of the church. The interior of the church was repainted and new carpet installed. Father Ambrosy left in the fall of 1993 and he was replaced by Father Rodger Katz.

In July of 1994 Father Leo P. Riley became pastor. He had the church tuck pointed and all the stained glass windows redone and new storm windows installed.

Because of the large number of children in the parish it was decided to begin using the rectory as an additional classroom space. An auction was held for the contents of the home, including the beautiful table and chairs and other furniture made by Father Downing. Two bedrooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs were combined to make two large classrooms as well as two small classrooms, an office for the Director of Religious Education and storage space.

Father Paul Ouderkirk succeeded Father Riley in 1999. Father Ouderkirk was sent to Postville and Clermont because of the growing Hispanic population in both cities. He began his Hispanic ministry by saying Mass in Spanish on Saturday nights in Postville. Through Father Paul, St. Peter's has hosted joint Lenten services, and invited a Rabbi from the Postville Jewish community to come and explain the Jewish faith. The Rabbi could not enter the church itself so the lecture was held in the church hall. It was a full house, people from many local area churches attended. Father Ouderkirk hosted the first Byzantine Catholic liturgy said at St. Peter's. Postville has a small Russian, Ukrainian community. So at Father Ouderkirk's request a Ukrainian Catholic Priest came to Postville to minister to the people for one week.

During Father Paul Ouderkirk's stay at St. Peter's he oversaw the installation of central air conditioning and a new finch in the church.

The church celebrated the Great Jubilee of the Catholic Church in the year 2000. As part of St. Peter's celebration a time capsule was buried under the floor of the sacristy. The time capsule contained newspapers, books, parish documents from the year 2000, a complete set of coins for the year 2000 including the new state quarters, letters, pictures from the children in our CCO classes, and pictures of each CCD class, lay ministers, and parish activities.

In June of 2003 the City of Clermont celebrated the Grand Reunion Centennial honoring the Twelfth Iowa Infantry Regiment, all Civil War soldiers and their descendants. Under Father Ouderkirk's direction the parish re-landscaped the church grounds as our contribution to the Grand Reunion Centennial,

and our Sesquicentennial Celebration. On Sunday July 20, 2003 Archbishop Hanus, O.S.B., offered the Sesquicentennial Mass. Father Ouderkirk retired in July 2003.

With Father Paul's retirement the Rev. Dale Rausch, became the pastor of St Peter's Parish. With this change St. Peter's relationship with St. Bridget's Parish in Postville was severed, and clustered with Holy Name Parish in West Union.

Thus reads the history of St Peter's Parish, to date. It is a story of time, talent, and treasure given by the priests and laity who have worked so hard to develop St. Peter's. Some priests worked only briefly, others gave a good number of years, some began their ministries here, and others finished their life of ministry to the church here. To all God's laborers, past and present, secular and laity, St Peter's Parish wishes to ...

...Thankyou.