

Focus on Our History – 10-2008

St Agnes Church

By Dee Nelson

They arrived by railroad coach for the round trip excursion fee of \$.50 to \$1.50, from Decatur, Quincy, Jacksonville, Alton and St. Louis: an estimated 4,000 people in addition to thousands who arrived “by team” from various parts of the county. It was August 25, 1889 and the occasion was the laying of the cornerstone at St. Agnes Church on the corner of College Street and Capitol Avenue.

One hundred and two days later, on August 27, 1889 another cornerstone was laid in the new and existing St. Agnes Church at 245 North Amos.

In November, 1888, the Reverend Father James Howard initiated plans and realized an initial building fund of \$4,000 for the construction of a Catholic church, the fifth to be created in Springfield. The new church and parish would be St. Agnes. It would serve “Old Springfield” and 180 Catholic families. The building fund had followed the purchase of four city lots at the cost of \$7,000. A general contract for the church was let for \$16,900.

Following the blessing of the cornerstone in August, the first Mass was offered in May 1890 and the solemn dedication took place in September 1890. Reverend Howard had overseen the building of the church and remained pastor for forty two years. He died in June 1930 and was buried in Calvary Cemetery in Springfield. Each year on Memorial Day, the bishop of the diocese of Springfield offers a Mass on his tomb in remembrance of those who have died in our nation’s service.

A frame building on the northeast corner of Spring and Monroe Streets became the first St. Agnes School in 1897 and graduated its first class of five boys and one girl in 1902.

On September 22, 1912 the cornerstone was laid for a two story brick school, plus a full basement, on the corner of Pasfield Street and Capitol Avenue which would cost \$54,000. “The ventilation system which is to be used allows a complete change of air every eight minutes.”¹ The rectory (residence of the priests) was located between the church and the school.

A convent for the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, IL who comprised the faculty of the school, was constructed at 324 West Monroe Street (the corner of Pasfield and Monroe) in 1949 at a cost of \$120,000, and was dedicated in September, 1950. A new marble sanctuary was installed in the church in 1952 at the cost of \$40,000.

Despite rumors that periodically circulated throughout the ‘50s and ‘60s, it wasn’t until August of 1978 that the Illinois Legislative Space Needs Commission approved an offer of \$1.2 million for the church property. After

¹ IL State Journal/Register, Sept. 23, 1912

more than a year of negotiations, the final sale price was \$1.4 million on the condition that the church would pay rent of \$100,000 a year for two years. The State of Illinois would take possession on November 20, 1981.

On October 25, 1981 the church contents were auctioned and demolition occurred on June 2, 1984. The convent was converted into office space for the Secretary of State. The church and the rectory were replaced by a multi-level parking ramp.