

History of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church

By Carolyn Cloyd

Since the dawning of America, churches have played an important role in American society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, churches provided more than just religious support, they were social centers and community hubs, they sometimes doubled as schoolhouses, and churches and congregations were often the center of family life. The History of Douglas County, compiled by Henry C. Niles in 1876, noted that of all of the communities in the county, Arcola took "the lead in numbers" with seven churches, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Christian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Catholic.

Presbyterians built what is thought to be the first church in the five-year-old community of Arcola in 1860, followed by a Christian church in 1863, Baptists and Methodist churches in 1864, an Episcopalian church in 1866, the first Episcopalian church was destroyed by a windstorm during construction and rebuilt, and a Lutheran church which was founded around 1868.

On January 18, 1871, a deed was signed in the name of The Most Reverend Peter Richard Kenrick, the Archbishop of St. Louis, for ownership of Lot 8 in Block 7 of Henry's Addition in Arcola. The lot was located on the northwest corner of what was then Pine and Second South Streets, now known as Pine and Washington Streets.

The original town of Okaw, which was renamed Arcola in 1858, had four streets running east and west and was bounded on the southern edge by a state road and stagecoach route stretching from Paris to Springfield. The four east-west streets starting with the northernmost street were named Second North, First North, First South, and Second South Streets. The city streets were renamed around 1893, respectively becoming known as Madison, Jefferson, Main, and Washington Streets. The old state road was given the name Adams Street but was, and is, more widely known as the Old Springfield Road, and now as IL 133/Ghere Brothers Memorial Highway.

The deed for Lot 8/Block 7 of Henry's Addition, was soon transferred to The Most Reverend Peter Joseph Baltes, the Bishop of Alton, and then to St. John's Roman Catholic Church of Arcola. In 1874, a wood frame church was built on

Lot 8 and eventually served local Catholics for about 28 years.

On Feb. 3, 1899, the Farmer City Journal carried a small blurb in its social column stating, "The Catholic Congregation at Arcola is about to build a new house of worship to cost about \$15,000, and the Methodists another to cost \$10,000."

There would be several articles over the next four years, with increasingly larger sums of money quoted, but the message conveyed would ultimately come to fruition. The Catholic congregation of Arcola was indeed on a path to building a new church and it would be on a much grander scale than the original.

On July 12, 1902, the Mattoon Weekly Journal reported that well-known contractor Nicolai Juhl of Rock Island had been hired by "Arcola Catholics" to build a new Catholic church. Also hired was renowned Rock Island architect George P. Stauduhar to design it. The Mattoon Weekly article also reported that the estimated cost of the new structure and contents was now estimated to be \$30,000. The Arcola Catholics hoped to hold the new service on Christmas Day 1902.

The Arcola parish priest, the Rev. Father W.A. Hefferman, having recently taken up work in Arcola after finishing an assignment to a parish in Shelbyville, took over the reins of the project to build a new church in February 1902.

The location for the new church was to be across the street to the south of the original structure, on the southwest corner of Pine and Washington Streets.

The hope that the new church would be open for services by the end of 1902 did not pan out. However, on Nov. 5, 1902, the Champaign County News reported that the work was well under way and that the "brick and stone work are nearing completion and frames for the roofing are mostly in place." The article went on to predict that the building would be an imposing structure when completed.

Arcola's new Catholic Church was completed in the summer of 1903, at a cost of \$30,000.

On Sunday, Aug. 2, 1903, mass was held in the new St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Arcola for the first time. Early masses, one at 7:30, one at 8:00, and one at 8:30 a.m., were held in the original church. At 10 a.m., The Most Reverend James Ryan, Bishop of Alton, delivered a dedicatory sermon for the new church, assisted by Father Loughney, formerly of Decatur, Father

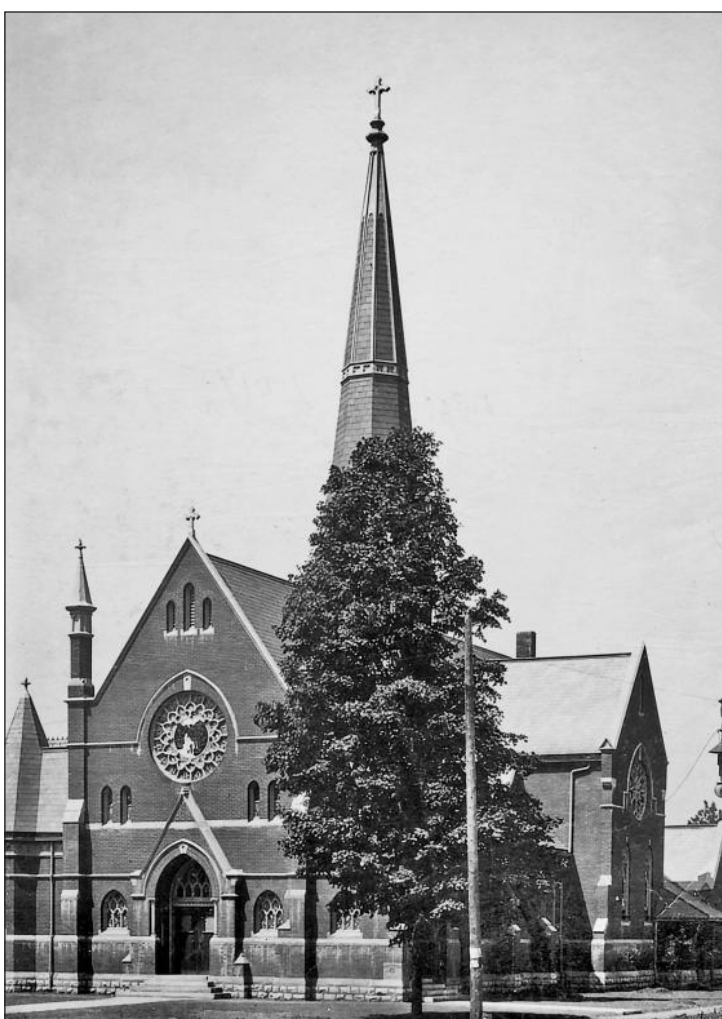


PHOTO OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST Catholic Church from the files of architect George P. Stauduhar, date unknown, photo courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives, George P. Stauduhar Collection.

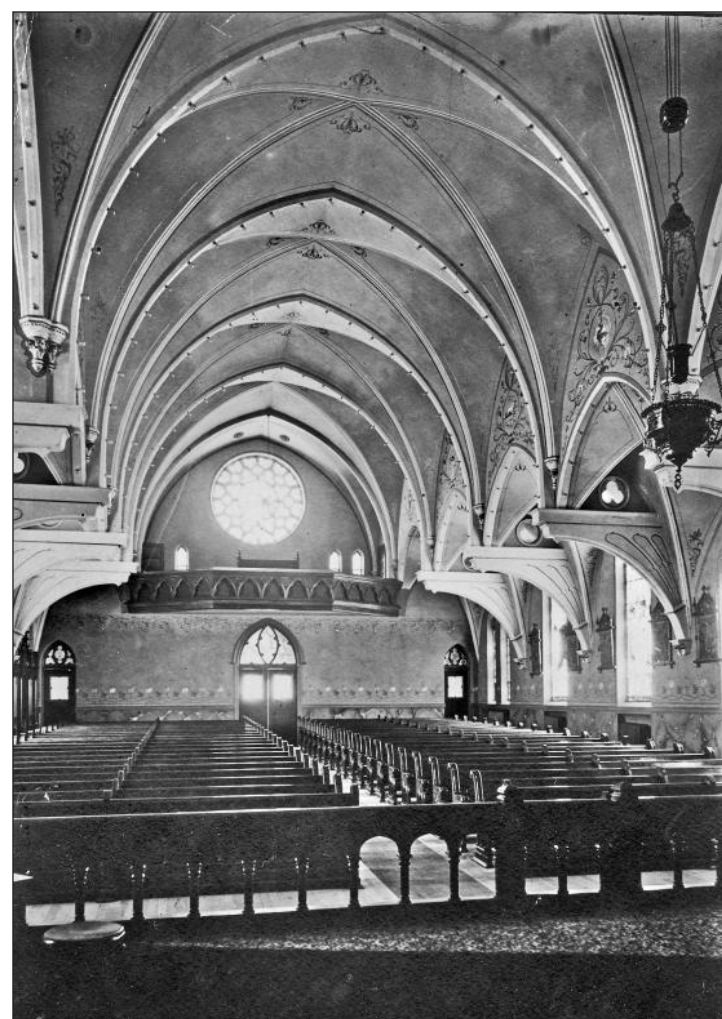


PHOTO OF INTERIOR St. John the Baptist Catholic Church from the files of architect George P. Stauduhar, date unknown, photo courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives, George P. Stauduhar Collection.

Corcoran of Neoga, Father Healy of Alton, and Father Hefferman, followed by a solemn high mass, the first mass in the beautiful new church, at 10:30 a.m.

Three solos were sung in celebration, one by Stewart Campbell of Mattoon. The Sacrament of Confirmation was held in the afternoon and about 50 boys and girls received their first communions. The celebration of services ended with vespers (evening prayer) at 7:00 p.m. Father Thomas Sherman, a Jesuit priest from Chicago, and son of Union Army General William Tecumseh Sherman preached.

The old church was soon torn down.

George P. Stauduhar, architect

George P. Stauduhar may have been uniquely qualified to design a church for the Arcola congregation because although he had a diverse catalog of work, including homes, commercial buildings, and even steamboat interiors, Neo-Gothic Revival Roman Catholic churches were his specialty. Stauduhar designed more than 200 churches in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Along with St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Arcola, he built a number of other churches in central Illinois including St. James Church

and St. Patrick Church, both located in Decatur, St. Patrick Catholic Church in Urbana, St. Boniface Catholic Church in Champaign, and churches in Rantoul, Ivesdale, Philo, and Penfield.

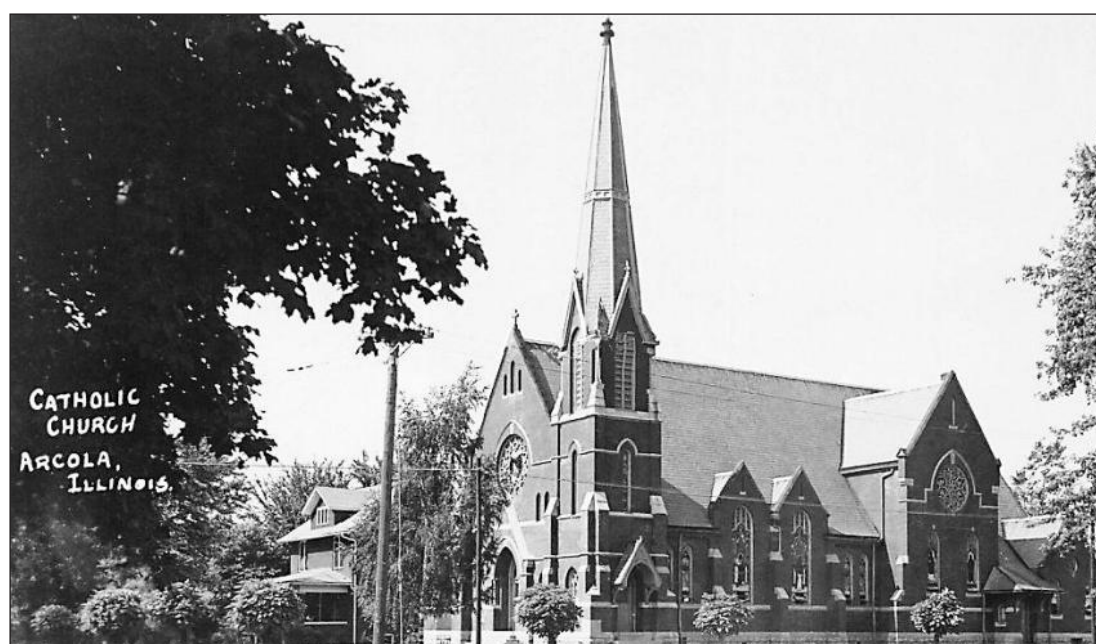
Stauduhar was also well acquainted with the area having been born in Decatur on Dec. 25, 1863, and raised in Mahomet. Stauduhar graduated from the University of Illinois with an architecture degree in 1888 and established his own

architecture firm in Rock Island in 1890.

A year later, Stauduhar married Anna Farrell and the couple had eight children. All of the Stauduhar children found work in their father's firm, but it was George's eldest son, Charles, who became the firm's principal contractor and planned to take over the practice one day.

George Stauduhar died of heart failure on Sept. 23, 1928, while supervising the construction of a church in Valley City,

North Dakota. His son, Charles, was run over and killed on Sept. 24, 1928, while changing a flat tire on his car on his way home from Valley City, where he had gone to make arrangements to have his father's body returned to Rock Island. The loss of the two Stauduhar principals brought an unexpected end to the Stauduhar architectural firm. In 1976, George Stauduhar's records were donated to the University of Illinois by the Stauduhar family.



St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Arcola in the 1930s, the parsonage can be seen to the left of the church.

DEDICATION

FIRST SERVICES IN NEW ARCOLA CHURCH HELD SUNDAY.

Edifice Cost \$30,000—One of the Most Conveniently Arranged in This Section of the State.

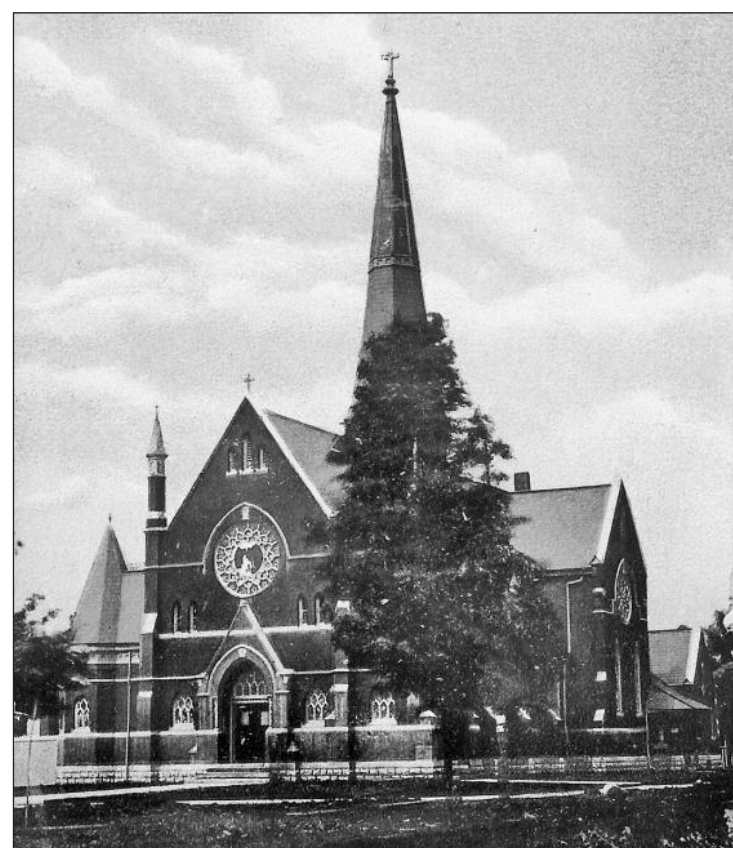
The new \$30,000 Catholic church at Arcola was dedicated Sunday. The work of erecting an edifice, that is said to be one of the handsomest and most conveniently arranged in this part of the state, began a year ago.

Rev. Father Hefferman is the pastor, he having accepted the charge eighteen months ago. He was located at Shelbyville prior to going to Arcola. Soon after accepting his present charge he took up the work of erecting a new house of worship and saw the fruition of his efforts in the dedicatory services.

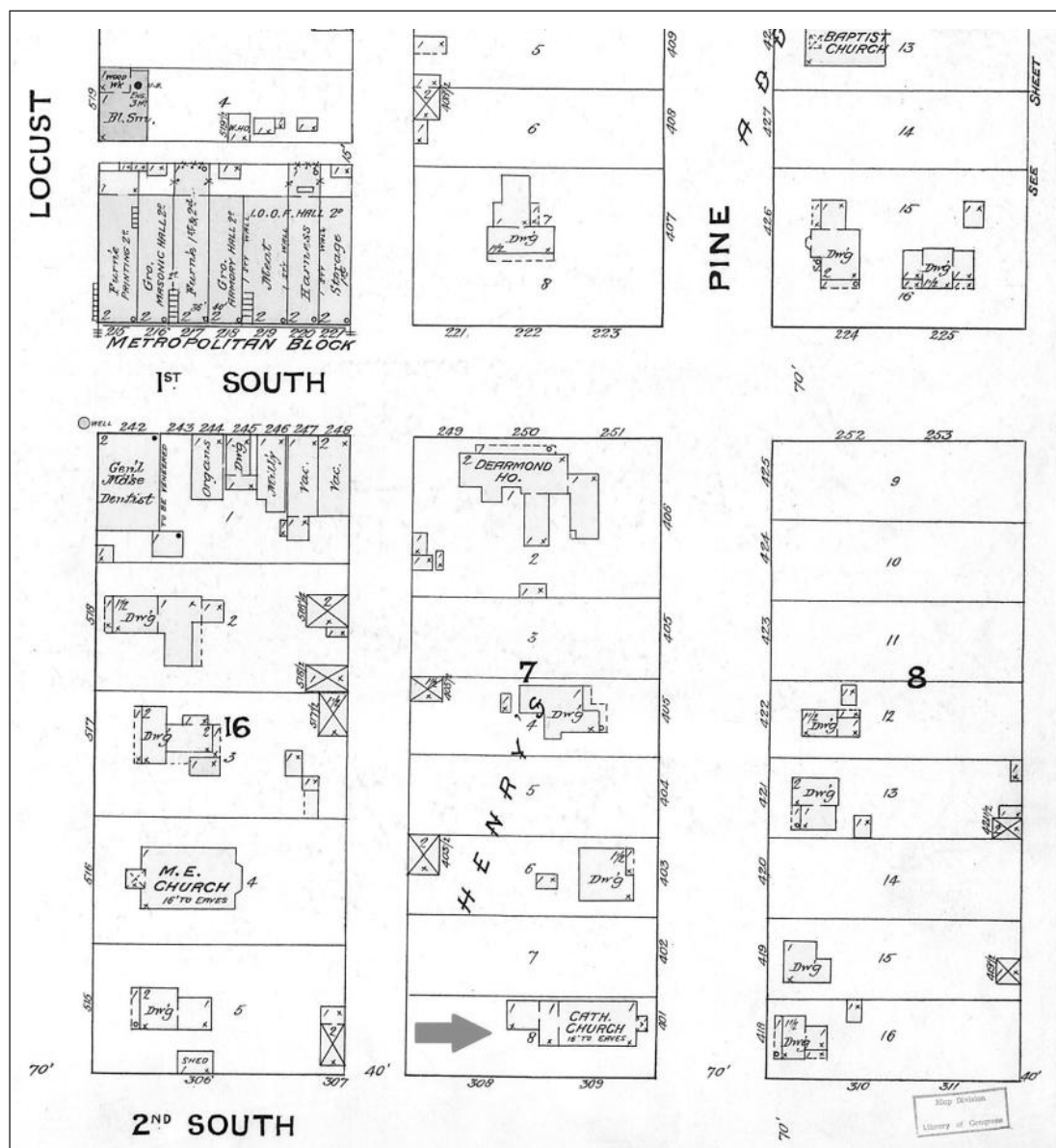
The church has a seating capacity of about 500 and is supplied with three hundred electric lights and other improvements.

There were masses in the morning in the old church. The first mass in the new church was at 10:30, at which there were three solos, one of them being sung by Stewart Campbell of Mattoon.

Bishop Ryan of Alton delivered the dedicatory sermon. It was highly spoken of. There were confirmation exercises in the afternoon. There were forty boys and girls ready for their first communion. The services of the day closed with vespers in the evening.



POSTCARD SHOWING St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, 1907.



PORTION OF THE 1887 Sanborn map of Arcola showing the location of Arcola's first Catholic Church on the northwest corner of Pine and East Washington Streets. In 1902-03, a new Catholic Church was built on the Southwest corner of that intersection, where it is still located today.

Article in the Mattoon Daily Journal reporting on the dedication of the new Arcola Catholic Church, August 3, 1903.