

PIONEER CATHOLIC CHURCH OF STEILACOOM. WASHINGTON

The enclosed photo shows the oldest Catholic Church building in the State of Washington at the present time. All other buildings have been burned or otherwise demolished, to give way for better and more modern structures.

It was originally built at the U.S. Fort Steilacoom by the soldiers in 1856 or 1857. After the Indian uprising which lasted during the years of 1855 and 1856 had quieted down and the troops were called into headquarters at the fort, the settlers families who had gone to the Fort for protection, returned to their farms on the prairies and the valleys, the Catholic soldiers at the Fort decided to erect a building that would be a real convenience for traveling up and down the Sound generally made their headquarters there and visited the Catholic families in the vicinity.

When the building was finished the priests would remain longer and the Catholic people at Steilacoom a mile and a half from the fort would be notified as also the families back on the prairie farms. In that way the pioneer catholics kept up their interest in their religion to some extent even the sometimes there would be several children to be baptized in one family when the missionary arrived.

On July 4th, 1848 Father Paschal Record, Superior of the Oblates established a provincial house on Puget Sound one mile north of Olympia and placed it under the patronage of "St. Joseph of New Market," and later changed to "St. Joseph d'Olympia". In June 1857 Father Ricard's health failed and he was recalled to France and Father d'Herbomez was appointed superior in his place. In the fall of 1857 the Oblate Fathers transferred all their holdings to Vancouver Island B.C. Of the Oblate Fathers mentioned by the early catholic families and who worked in the parts of the country marrying, baptizing, and attending to the sick and dead, we recall Fathers M. Domers, afterward first Bishop of Vancouver Island B.C. d'horbomez, Dariou and Chirouse and also his successor at Tulapip Reservation, Father Boulet.

After the Oblate Fathers left for B.C. the resident priest or priests from Cowlitz the then newly established Diocese of Nisqually with headquarters at Cowlitz attended to the spiritual needs of the scattered people in all the section between the Columbia River and British Columbia and the names found of pioneer priests are those having services at Fort Steilacoom in the late fifties and early sixties and for only short periods of time as follows:-Fathers L. Rossi, J. B. Brouillette, C. H. Richers, Chas. Vary and F. X. Prefontaine.

The Sisters of Providence from Montreal having established their headquarters at Vancouver, Wash. in the early fifties and had succeeded in promoting quite an interest in the field of education, especially for advanced pupils in language, music and religion they were advised to open a branch house on Puget Sound and after looking over the prospective places decided to locate in the then flourishing City of Steilacoom. The Sisters arrived in November 1863, after a long and perilous journey down the Columbia river in small boats or canoes to larger boats going from Portland to Victoria and thence to Puget Sound points by small steamers.

They bought a block of land on the Hillside, rented a small log house and settled down to have their land cleared and a home built for themselves and rooms large enough to accommodate a few boarders and day pupils. In a short time their house was finished and named St. Josephs convent. At that time there was no resident priest assigned to this part of the country and the Sisters were very much disheartened at the beginning having services only occasionally and having to walk to the Fort when the people were notified that a priest would be expected there. For ten years the school flourished but as other towns and cities on the Sound out rived Steilacoom the sisters transferred their school to Cowlitz in June 1874. The convent building was occupied by private parties for about 35 years. In 1907 the property changed hands and the buildings belonging to the sisters were torn down. ~~A to the sisters were torn down.~~ A part of the lumber, windows and doors used in building a smaller residence, farther back on the block and is occupied by the family of the present owner, F. H. Chelius.

After the sisters were located here the catholics asked Bishop Blanchet for a resident priest and Father Chas. Vary was sent from Vancouver, Wash. and he remained here a year and was replaced by Father F. X. Prefontaine and in 1865 Father Vary was returned to Steilacoom and Father Prefontaine was sent to take charge of Seattle and all that part of the country North to the British line and South in the White River district and Indian Reservations adjacent to Seattle. Father Vary remained in Steilacoom as resident priest until October 1867 when the Bishop sent Father J. B. Brondel, who just arrived for work among the Indians, from Belgium. Father Brondel remained in Steilacoom for 11 years and exchanged Walla Walla parish with Father Thos. Duffy for one year, 1878, returning in the fall of 1878 and in 1879 was appointed Bishop of Vancouver Island B. C. A short time later he was appointed 1st. Bishop of Montana with residence at Helena Montana.

In 1879 Father P. F. Hylebos of Cowlitz was appointed to the Steilacoom parish that included Grays Harbor, Olympia, Tacoma and the Indian Reservation. Father Hylebos preferred Olympia as a residence and as more central, for his work. Then Steilacoom was given only one Sunday in the month for services. The parish was again divided in 1881 and Father Hylebos was given Tacoma, the Indian Reservation and the small towns in the valley and the mountain district and Father Chas. Classen at Olympia took charge of Steilacoom until the catholic population dwindled to a mere handful of people who could not move away had they wished to do. Services few and far between and priests sent from different places with no interest in the church or the people until the Benedictine Fathers located their school at Lacy and in 1893 Holy Rosary Church in Tacoma was assigned to the Benedictines and services given from there once a month for several years.

From 1915 for some reason or other services at Steilacoom was discontinued and otherwise the poor little church was left to go the way to destruction.

In the early sixties and after the Sisters had located their school on the Sound, rumors that Fort Steilacoom might soon or later be abandoned as a military post, the soldiers and the Catholic people of the parish decided to move the chapel from the Fort to the City of Steilacoom. The soldiers dismantled the building and the farmers from far and near arrived with their teams and wagons and with plenty of help had the material placed on a lot next to the Sisters Convent and the re-building was commenced. It was dedicated by Rt. Rev. A. M. A. Blanchet, Bishop of Nisqually as the Church of the Immaculate Convent in 1865.

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For several years the Washington State Historical Society was trying to get some data about the Steilacoom Church from the church records in order to place a marker on the lot, but for some reason or other never could get anything from those in charge of the records and finally had to fall back on the hear say of the oldest pioneers then living. The committee from the society decided to take what they could get from the pioneers and on Sept. 21st, 1918 placed a granite boulder on the lot in front of the church, the inscription on the bronze tablet attached to the boulder reads as follows: This Catholic Church was erected near Fort Steilacoom, by soldiers in the early Fifties, afterwards moved to City of Steilacoom and dedicated "Church of Immaculate Conception". In commemoration This Tablet is placed by Washington Historical Society 1918. W. P. Bonney, Secy. of the Washington Historical Society presented the marker to our late beloved Bishop E. J. O'Dea who accepted and assisted by Rev. Father Mark Weischmann of Holy Rosary Church, Tacoma dedicated it with appropriate ceremony and in accepting it as a tribute to the pioneer priests and catholics of the now Great Northwest. The Bishop then gave a splendid address appropriate to the occasion followed ~~by~~ by the Mayor of Steilacoom Jas. W. Slayden, W. P. Bonney for the Washington State Historical Society, Stephen Judson for the Pioneers, Rev. P. F. Hylebes for the pioneer Fathers and Bishop Elect for Baker, Oregon, Father Joseph McGrath spoke for the present generation and progress of the church. Unveiling of the monument was by two young ladies grand daughters of pioneer families, songs by pupils of Aquinas Academy, Tacoma, public school children of Steilacoom, music by a Soldiers' Band from Camp Lewis, Pierce County Pioneer and State Associations represented by a large delegation.

At the present writing none of the first generation of pioneers remain to tell the story of the early happenings and only a few of the youngest of the second remember very much because they were never interested enough or their parents did not instill into their minds that events great or small, in a few years would be history. It is indeed sad to have to acknowledge the fact that we neglected some very important facts. Now we are trying in a feeble way to make up for the neglected opportunity by getting the present, the third generation interested enough to take up where the pioneers left off.

The few pioneer daughters living in Steilacoom organized with the help of the Catholics in the Town. The Catholic Womens Improvement Club of Steilacoom, on April 20th, 1923. The object of the club was to create a fund (repair the little church, so long left to decay, preserve the relics and again have regular services. They gave entertainments and so on and soon had enough money on hand to remodel the rooms attached to the church proper and held meetings in the new club rooms. Steilacoom people, pioneers near and far and friends everywhere also business men from Tacoma and Seattle helped to make it a successful venture. On June the 15th, 1923 Father Joseph Sullivan, Pastor of St. Leos, Tacoma conducted the first services. Then Father Sullivan interviewed the Bishop in regard to continuing the services and Steilacoom was again placed under the contro 1 of the Benediction Order at Lacey, Wash. We have services the 2nd, and 4th Sundays, the assistant Father from the Visitation Church. So Tacoma, officiating. The people are perfectly satisfied with the present arrangements and when in need any extra funds for the up-keep of the church we send out a call for a benefit entertainment of some kind and the friends and pioneers respond very generously.

We are very proud to say we have a nice little historic church some of the old furnishings of the early days to show to the visitors who call to take notes, including some things are the old wooden candlesticks used at the Fort, the chalice Father Prefontaine brought from Montreal and left at Steilacoom for his successor when he went on to his new parish, Seattle in 1864, the vestments brought from Belgium in 1867 by Father Brondel are still in use and well preserved and a few smaller things too numerous to mention.

Pres. Regina O'Donnell
 Steilacoom Wash

June 20, 1935

Regina O'Donnell - Steilacoom