

ST. PROCOPIUS HISTORY

1904 - 2001

In the 1980's New Salem, Pennsylvania, also known as "Muttontown," served as a marketplace for many people in the area including local farmers. In 1877, New Salem was named after the famous town of Salem, Massachusetts. New Salem, a small community off a secondary road from Uniontown, sits upon a small hill. There are several small surrounding communities including Buffington, Newboro, Fairbank, Footedale and Republic. By the turn of the century, many Slovaks were settling in the area of New Salem. There was a strong bond between the ethnic immigrants. Most immigrants preferred to settle with people that had the same ethnic background. Slovaks, Italians and Polish immigrants who spoke the same language and had similar customs tended to live together.

The closest Roman Catholic Church for the people to worship in was in Uniontown. This was a very long walk for the people of New Salem and its surrounding communities. Realizing the need for a Roman Catholic Church, the diocese gave permission for a church to be built in the area of New Salem. The town of Footedale was chosen because it was thought to have been a central area for all of the Catholics in the area.

This church, St. Thomas, a Polish Church, served as a church for all the ethnic backgrounds in the area. Fighting between the different nationalities arose within St. Thomas. The different ethnic groups wanted the practices of the church to be in accordance with their traditional customs. Turmoil amongst the parishioners was becoming an increasing problem. Many Slovaks stayed away from the church because the disputes among the different ethnic groups had become so bad.

The Slovaks wanted to preserve their heritage by establishing their own church. They wanted to organize a Slovak church in New Salem. Andrew Gallick, a young Slovak who moved from the Village of Oliver (near Uniontown) to New Salem to set up a store, would lend his efforts to helping the Slovaks reach their goals of having their own church. Gallick was friends with Father Erwin Gelhoff. Father Gelhoff, who was from New Haven (near Connellsville), urged Gallick to work towards establishing a Slovak church in the community. Soon thereafter, Gallick petitioned the bishop for a Slovak church. Not surprisingly, the bishop refused the request on the grounds that St. Thomas parish was a new brick church that was built as a place of worship for all Catholics regardless of ethnicity. The bishop's word was final, so the hope of getting a new Slovak church looked dim for the residents of New Salem.

Then Gallick came up with a new idea that he thought might just work. Every Catholic is required to fulfill their Easter duty, which meant a person had to go to partake in the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist during the Easter season. Gallick knew of many

members of the Slovak community that came from a part of the county Kosice and spoke in an Abaujsky and Hungarian dialect. If the Polish priest at St. Thomas, Father Lembick, could not understand the confessions of these people then they would not be able to fulfill their Easter duty by not having their confessions heard. Gallick went to Father Lembick and asked him if he was able to speak Hungarian. Father Lembick could not and agreed with Gallick that a Slovak parish was needed to solve that problem.

A petition with signatures for a Slovak church was circulated throughout the community and sent to the bishop. The petition to organize a Slovak church in New Salem was granted.

When the Slovaks heard the good news they organized various committees to take care of the numerous aspects of the huge project at hand. One committee was responsible for finding a spot to build the church. The committee considered many possibilities before choosing a piece of land on the top of a hill in the center of town. Five acres of land was purchased from a man named Charles Hempstead, the founder of the First National Bank in New Salem. Another committee was appointed to meet the bishop and ask about a priest. Father Charles Janda, a newly ordained priest, was assigned to the parish.

Father Janda arrived in New Salem on a Sunday afternoon in July 1904. When he arrived, a problem arose that no one had even considered – where was Father Janda going to stay while the church and parish house was being built? Father Janda walked to the H.C. Frick Coal Company in Buffington to see the superintendent, James Hart. Hart then made arrangements for Father Janda. He boarded with the Dorsey family who took in single working men in Buffington. Father Janda was starting anew in Fayette County much in the same way as hundreds of coal and coke immigrants did.

James Hart was a big help in the building of the new church. Hart emptied an eight-room company owned house and invited Father Janda to use it. The priest lived on one side of the duplex and the other side was used as a temporary church where Mass could be held. The first Mass was said in Buffington in House #142 on September 5, 1905. Eventually, services were being celebrated in the villages of Orient, Brier Hill and Republic. All were held at company houses until the church in New Salem was completed.

One day while the church was still under construction, a strange priest walked up to Father Janda and said that the bishop had sent him to take over the congregation. Father Janda, without questioning the man, packed his belongings in his suitcase and headed for the train depot. Gallick, who happened to pass the depot, saw Father Janda on the train platform ready to leave. Father Janda explained what had happened to Gallick. Gallick took Father Janda's suitcase and told him to get into the wagon. The two rushed up the hill towards the parish house. They found the other man still sitting there. Gallick was very angry and demanded to see

the proper credentials from the bishop or his authorization papers. The strange man replied that he was just trying to “play a trick on Father Janda.” Then sensing the tense mood, the stranger picked up his small bag and left in a hurry.

As the church began rising higher and higher, the founders had yet another decision to make. What name should they choose for their church? Father Janda suggested the name of a Bohemian patron saint. The parishioners liked the idea of naming the church after St. Procopius.

St. Procopius

Procopius was born in Bohemia. Procopius is a Greek name meaning “one who makes progress in work.” As a child he was very talented. His parents decided to give him the opportunity to get an advanced education. Procopius chose to prepare himself for the priesthood in the Slovakian rite. He was most likely ordained a priest in Moravia. In his priesthood he excelled in humility and in self-denial; because of this he was often regarded as a monk. He was said to be a saintly hermit who lived in solitude. He prayed often for his trouble homeland.

In 1032 Procopius created a monastery. The monastery was located near the Sazava River. After he had built the church he dedicated it to the honor of the Divine Savior of the world, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John the Baptist. His monastery served as a haven for the poor and sick. Procopius was an extraordinary man. He loved God and his neighbor. It is said that he exorcised demons by vigils, prayers, and fasting. Legend says that Procopius expelled a thousand demons from the Sazava Region. He governed his monastery for twenty years.

Procopius died in 1053. Two miracles marked the occasion of Procopius’ burial that took place on March 25, 1053. The first was about a sick man who Procopius had given his cloak to. The instant the man put the cloak on, he was cured. Within that same hour, in the presence of everyone at the funeral, a blind man was praying that God would restore his sight through the merits of Procopius and he was suddenly able to see. Pope Innocent III canonized Procopius in the year 1204 on July 4th. Procopius was the first Saint of Czech nationality. Saint Procopius is still honored on his feast day, July 4th.

Saint Procopius School

In the early days, Saint Procopius Church was under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. The bishop insisted that Saint Procopius Church establish a Catholic school. A church committee decided that it would be best to convert the current church into a school and build a new church and parish house.

During the year of 1913, the men of Saint Procopius parish after working all day to provide for their families, would haul large stones from the stone quarry in Buffington for a foundation to the new church. The H.C. Frick Coal Company donated ground to Saint Procopius Church in 1905 and this ground was now going to be used for the new church.

The old church was then turned into a schoolhouse that was run by nuns. The Vincentian Sisters of Charity stayed in the back rooms of the church. The balcony was converted into a small chapel and the former parish house was now a convent.

The school stayed open until the building could no longer meet fire safety requirements. The nuns left Saint Procopius in 1969. The convent was then torn down. The students of Saint Procopius School were transferred to Holy Rosary School in Republic. Soon after the school building was torn down. In its place stands a parish social hall. The convent was replaced with the present parish house.

Priests

In 1922, Father Charles Trefeny succeeded Father Janda. Seven years later Father Trefeny was killed in a tragic automobile accident. Following Father Trefeny's death, Father Joseph Hochberg became pastor and served Saint Procopius until 1931. Father John Skrak came to Saint Procopius in 1931. He served as pastor for 37 years. In 1969 following Father Skrak, Father John Burke arrived in New Salem. Father Burke left Saint Procopius in 1975. Father Stephen Drab succeeded him. In 1985 Father Ed McCullough left and Father Richard Mackiewicz came to Saint Procopius. Then in 1986 Father James Popochock became the pastor of Saint Procopius until July 5, 2007, when Fr. Peter Peretti was appointed pastor until June 25, 2013.

Fire Devastation

May 1971 marked an unforgettable fire that tore through Saint Procopius Church. The fire was believed to be electrical. Much of the inside had to be replaced. There was an estimated damage of over \$50,000. A part of the original altar that was not damaged by the fire still remains on the balcony ledge in the back of the church.

St. Procopius Today

Over the past century since Saint Procopius Church was established, the lines between nationalities have faded. Although many parishioners of Saint Procopius are descendants of the church's founders, the current church family consists of Slovak, Italian, Irish, Polish and many other nationalities. Saint Procopius Roman Catholic Church was built by and for the working man. The founders, many Eastern European immigrants, offered the same strength and

determination in founding Saint Procopius Church that they brought to their jobs in Fayette County's booming coal fields. They never allowed their faith and religion to slip away from them.

In the mid 1990's St. Thomas Church and Saint Procopius Church were merged as partner parishes.

Today Saint Procopius has nearly 1,000 members. The church has various ministries within. There is a youth ministry, lectors, Eucharistic ministers, Eucharistic ministers to the homebound, an adult choir, greeters, ushers, altar servers, RCIA team, Rosary Altar Society, Christian Mothers, religious education program, parish nurse program and many other programs.

Within Saint Procopius the greatest percent of members are between the ages of 40-65, then 20-39, next people over age 65. The fourth largest group consists of people under the age of 13 and lastly, people between the ages of 13-19.

Saint Procopius Roman Catholic Church is still standing just as strong as ever before. In 2005, the church celebrated its 100th Jubilee. Truly this church has lived up to its name. It certainly has "made progress!"

Prayer for the celebration of Saint Procopius on July 4th

Heal us, O Lord, in your great power, so that as we honor the outstanding merits of the blessed abbot Procopius, we might be aided by his prayers and freed from every illness of soul. Through Jesus Christ...

Pastors

1905 – 1922 Reverend Charles Jonda
1922 – 1929 Reverend Charles L. Trefny
1929 – 1967 Reverend John J. Skrak
1967 – 1973 Reverend John H. Burke
1973 – 1978 Reverend Stephen J. Drab
1978 – 1984 Reverend Monsignor J. Edward McCullough
1984 – 1985 Reverend Richard Mackiewicz
1985 – 2007 Reverend James L. Popochock
2007 – June 25, 2013 Reverend Peter L. Peretti