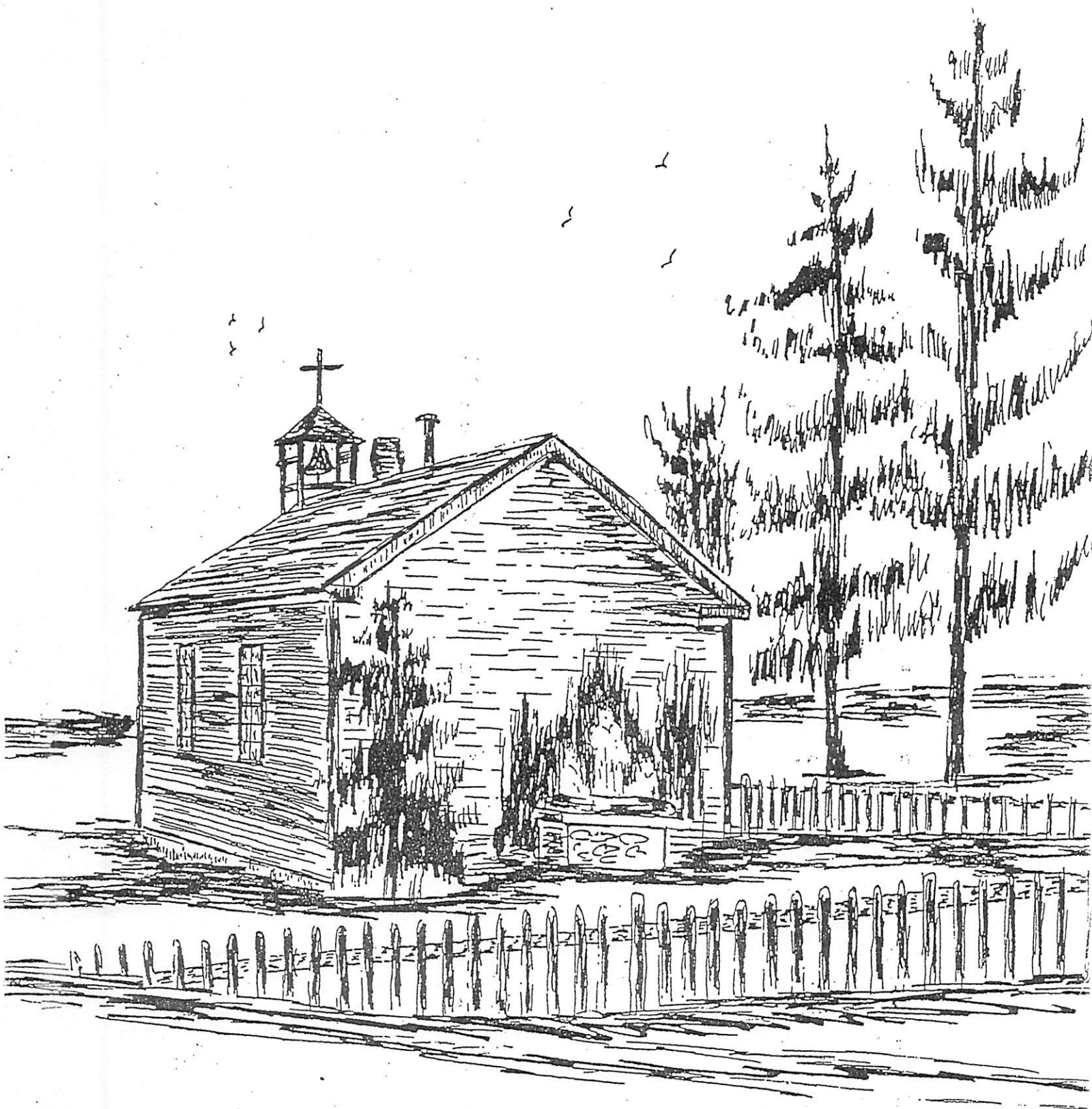




ST FRANCIS SOLANUS INDIAN MISSION
BUILT 1859
PETOSKEY, MICHIGAN

sessner

The Church of St. Francis Solanus

The oldest building now standing in Petoskey is the Church of St. Francis Solanus on West Lake St. It was completed in 1859, under the guidance of Fr. Louis Sefferath, missionary to the Indians from 1858 to 1862. Bishop Baraga engaged a carpenter named Trotochaud to build a church there. St. Francis Solanus is the oldest Indian Church still standing south of the Straits of Mackinaw.

The Indian Village on the north side of the bay was L'Arbre Croche founded in about 1827 by a Fr. Badin. It was moved south from its original location at Middle Village. About the same time, 1825, the Indians from the Muheuh Ne-Sing (Bear Lake later Walloon Lake), the source of the Bear River, moved to the Mouth of the Bear River and started a village. It never was a very large village, as most of the Indian population was located in or near L'Arbre Croche. The missionaries from L'Arbre Croche would visit this side of the bay four or five times a year to teach and preach.

The present church, completed in 1859, was built to replace the small birch bark church built in July 1833 by the Ottawas and blessed on August 1, 1833 by Fr. Frederic Baraga.

In April 1856, Fr. Lawrence Lauthishar requested and was given permission by then Bishop Baraga to construct an Indian Church at Agaming (Petoskey), and a deed to the site was registered on December 5, 1857. The completed framework was torn down in the spring of 1857 by a differing faction and Bishop Baraga instructed Fr. Lauthishar to cease work on the "Aging Church".

On June 28, 1858, Bishop Baraga went to Petoskey to inspect the work being done on the mission church. According to his diary he promised some boards and nails to the carpenter, Trotochaud. There must have been a considerable number of Catholic Indians there because he mentions in his diary that in the evening he heard confessions till half past eleven. But the church was not to be build on the site where the construction first began.

The maliciousness of the differing factions made the building of the church impossible. Bishop Baraga went to Agaming on June 8, 1859 and learned first hand from the carpenter, Trotochaud, of the vandalism at the building site. Trotochaud offered an acre lot further removed from the Protestant Mission. The Bishop accepted the suggestion and the offer and engaged him to build a small church there, 30 feet long, 20 feet wide and 12 feet high. Despite the trouble, the church was constructed and on July 23, 1860 Bishop Baraga said mass there, blessed the church and the cemetery around it. It is the only building still standing that was build in Baraga's time in the Old L'Arbre

Croche District. It is one of the oldest buildings in Northern Lower Michigan. Unfortunately, neither the birch bark church nor the present church were officially named until 1884. Yet in Bishop Baraga's diary is an entry dated August 26, 1861, "At 7 O'clock in the morning we rode to Agaming to St. Francis Church where I said mass and preached".

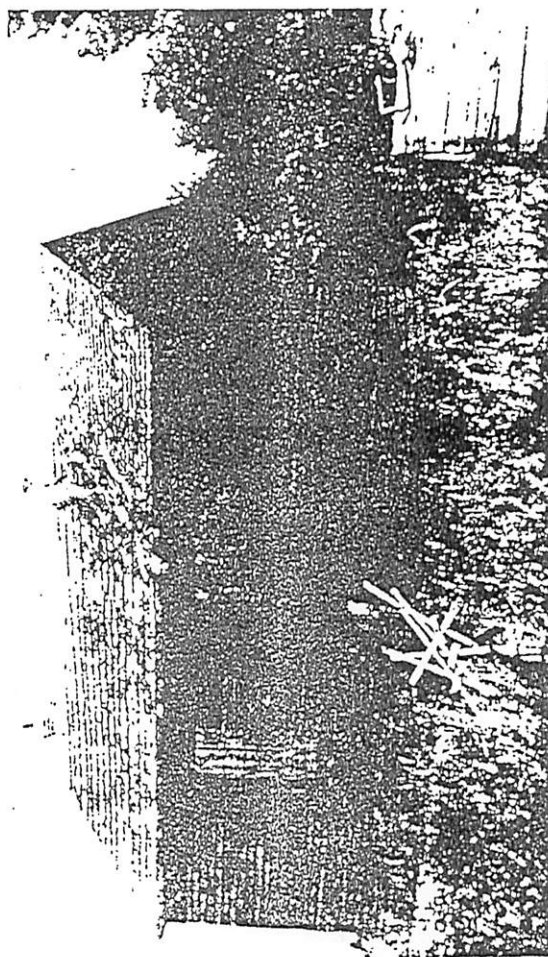
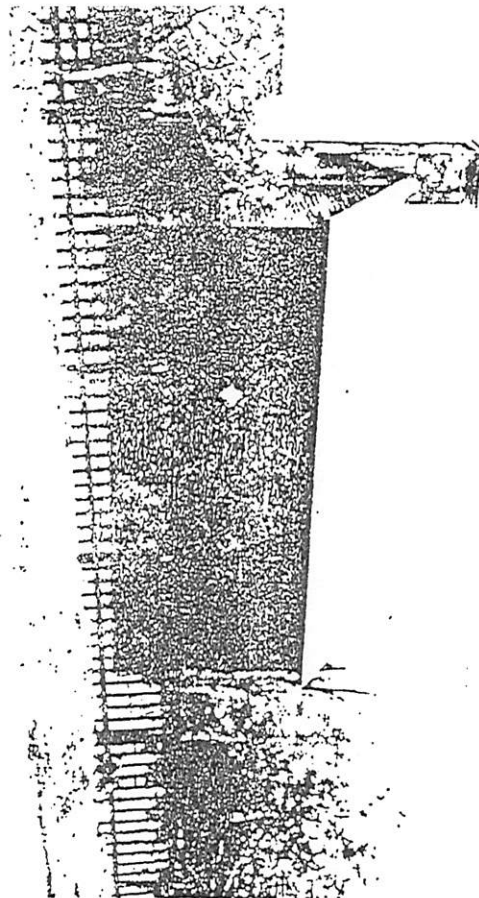
Prior to the arrival of the Franciscans in 1881, the Indian Church had been abandoned for about four years. On October 26, 1884, Fr. Pius Niermann had the church restored "within and without". The church was then named St. Francis Solanus after the great Indian Missionary. The Motherhouse of the Notre Dame Sisters of Milwaukee furnished vestments, linens, mass cards etc. The property lines were set up and a title deed was attained by Fr. Pius.

In 1931, Fr. Aubert Keuter, missionary to the Ottawas from 1929 to 1936, had the church restored. The church was rededicated on August 27, 1931 and completed on October 30, 1931 and the blessing of the cross was November 2, 1931. The church was restored to commemorate fifty years of the Franciscan Fathers in this area. The work on the church was done by an Ottawa Indian Organization, "Ma-Wandji-Di-Win-Te-Kak-Wi-Tha", a society that put things in order. These are, I believe, the names of the men who worked on the church: John Cogeyewan, Frank Ashhyepagash-Green Leaf, James Carey, John Kewaygoshkam, Charles Green, Steven Mundson, Titus Kosequot, Peter Nam--os. Since 1931 the mass has been offered every year on or about the fourteenth of July, the feast day of St. Francis Solanus.

In 1959, the Little Indian Church celebrated its 100th anniversary. In honor of this occasion, a new roof was added, a fresh coat of paint put on, the picket fence repaired and even the white crosses marking the graves of the early Christian Indians were restored. From Italy, a marble statue of a Franciscan Missionary blessing two Indians was donated by Mrs Lucille Parker. It was placed on the newly erected altar.

Since 1959, the church again is showing signs of decay due to its age. Several groups have donated their time and materials in order to keep the little church standing.

The most recent group is Boy Scout Troop 7 of Petoskey. Due to the expense of keeping the Indian Church repaired, they welcome any and all donations. They hope to keep the church standing to be able to celebrate its bicentennial in 2059.



History

- 1825 A group of Odawa moved to the mouth of the Bear River. Missionaries from the Good Hart and Cross Village areas minister to the natives four or five times a year.
- 1833 A small birch bark church was built at the site and blessed by the missionary Fr. Fredric Baraga, 'The Snow Shoe Priest'. It is during this period that the Odawa begin to settle and stay in one place year round.
- 1853 Fr. Baraga is made Bishop Baraga.
- 1857 Bishop Baraga ordered that a new and more permanent church be built for the Native Americans near the mouth of the Bear River. Unfortunately there were complications with building at that site and the project was suspended.
- 1858 Jean Baptiste and Sophia Trotochaud offer Bishop Baraga a one acre parcel further along the south shore of Little Traverse Bay to build a new church and burial ground. Trotochaud a carpenter by trade, sets to work to build a structure 30 ft. by 20 ft., by 12 ft. in height.
- 1859 Fr. Sifferath, a missionary from Harbor Springs, helps the church take shape and sees it finished.
- 1860 The church is dedicated by Bishop Baraga.
- Mass is said four times a year by missionary priests who are traveling on foot, horseback, or by water from places as far away as Marquette and Detroit. The Natives come by water in their jilmaan. The Mass and hymns are offered in part in English and in part in Anishnaabemowin. The native culture is incorporated in the Mass. The whites attending would have been fishermen or fur traders as there were no white settlers to speak of at this time.
- 1873 The railroad comes to the area to support the lumber trade.
- 1877 There were now 10 white families living in a settlement where present day Petoskey is and they decided to have a parish of their own.
- 1879 A small church was built in Petoskey named for St. Francis Xavier.
- 1881 The Little Church came under the care of St. Francis Xavier.
- 1884 The Franciscan priests arrived in the area. At this time the Little Church had been abandoned for several years. Fr. Pius Nierman then pastor of St. Francis Xavier, ordered the restoration of the Little Church. Fr. Nierman offered Mass on Oct. 24, 1884. He dedicated the church and named it for St. Francis Solanus. St. Solanus (Solino) 1549-1610; was a Spanish missionary who worked throughout South America. St. Solanus' ability with languages, his work defending the indigenous tribes from oppression, and his skill playing the violin endeared him to the tribes.
- 1896 Due to development the Native Americans who attended St. Solanus Church had dispersed, and were attending other churches. Again the church was abandoned and left to the elements.
- 1931 The church was lovingly restored once again by Fr. Auber Keuter, the pastor at St. Francis Xavier. The handiwork was completed by Odawa. Because it was not possible to staff St. Solanus, it was decided that Mass would be said once a year on the feast day of not only St. Francis Solanus but also of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha - July 14. Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha 1656-1680; is the first Native American to be beatified and considered for Sainthood. She was badly scarred as a child by a small pox epidemic that killed her mother (a Christian Iroquois). Kateri was baptized and followed her faith at great cost. She finally found sanctuary with a small Christian settlement and devoted herself to a life of celibacy, prayer, and good works. She died at 24, and on her death bed her scarred body was restored to its natural beauty.

1959 Hard times during the intervening years left the church abandoned yet again. In honor of the centennial, a third renovation took place. The church has been cared for by members of the parish and various Boy Scouts have used the church as their Eagle Scout project.

2004 The church was closed to the public and Mass was not offered because of concerns about the soundness of the structure.

2005 A committee of St. Francis Xavier parishioners including Native Americans, was formed not only to restore St. Francis Solanus, but to preserve it for future generations so that they will understand the importance of the church to the first Native American Christians and the settlers who came later.

2008 Hard and diligent work by the Restoration Committee has professionally restored the church. Great care was taken by the Committee to consult with historical preservationists. The integrity of the original building and its furnishings were preserved not replaced, allowing history to show through. The altar, benches, walls, and stations of the cross were cleaned and refurbished by hand. The outdoor crosses and fence were rebuilt. The Committee worked hard to make their decisions together and the friendships that have been formed during the work will be long lasting. The process helped the Committee to grow in their knowledge of the church and local history, as well as the importance of the Native American culture, Caring for the church has been a family legacy, Committee members' Grandparents, parents, and children have been involved over the years. The Committee hopes that this will continue.

An archeological study was made to locate graves. Because there are so many, the area around the church has been declared sacred ground. Work is ongoing to identify the graves.