TEN YEARS ON HISTORIC GROUND.
Early and Later Days at the Pittsburgh Point.

By
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Down at the corner of Third Avenue and Ferry Street, Pittsburgh, stands the Catholic Church of Saint Mary of Mercy. It is one of the few, if not to-day, the only down-town church in that part of the city. It has an interesting history, chiefly because within the limits of the parish the first religious service in Western Pennsylvania was held during the French occupation of Fort Duquesne, as will be noted later on in this paper. It is also interesting to note that the present site of this Catholic church was the original site of the leading Presbyterian Church of the city which was destroyed in the great fire of 1845, and afterwards the Ames Methodist Episcopal Church occupied the site. In May, 1876, it became the property of the Catholic congregation at "The Point." The present building was erected and dedicated on Trinity Sunday, May 28, 1893. One cannot fail to note the significance of these religious changes. Not only in Pittsburgh, but in all our large cities the down-town churches are abandoned, leaving those people who are forced to live there without any moral or spiritual ministration.

For ten years (1885-1895) the writer of this paper was Rector of the St. Mary of Mercy Church. He had, as we shall see, a strenuous time. He succeeded the late Dr. A. A. Lambing, the well-known local historian, sometime President of this Western Pennsylvania Historical Society and always deeply interested in its work.

Immediately after taking charge of the parish I discovered two important things: First, that I was on historic ground; that in the early days two great nations, France and England, fought here for supremacy; and secondly,

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that there was here an inviting field of labor for social and civic betterment. The First ward of Pittsburgh in those days had an unenviable reputation. It was the "red-light" district of the town; what is known as "the underworld" had its habitation there.

That I might know something of the early and stirring days I became a member of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society which met then in a room of the Carnegie Library, Allegheny City, now the North Side, Pittsburgh, and I read all the local history I could find. As a result this is what I found:

Both the French and the English laid claim to the territory embracing the Western part of Pennsylvania, the former by right of La Salle's discovery, and the latter as forming a part of her colonies; and about the middle of the eighteenth century both prepared to assert their claim by force of arms. The French had already built small fortifications at Presqu'Isle, on the headquarters of French Creek and at its mouth, but these principally with a view to further movements. Late in the fall of 1753, Major George Washington, whose illustrious name the reader will be pleased to find so early mentioned in the history of Pittsburgh, was appointed by Lieutenant-Governor Dinwiddie, of Virginia, the bearer of dispatches to the commander of the French at these posts; and on the strength of his report a small body of men was sent out under command of Captain William Trent, to throw up a fortification at "the Forks," as the land at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela was then called, a name which was soon after changed to that of "the Point," which it still bears. He arrived on the seventeenth of February, 1754, and with this date begins the permanent occupation of the site of Pittsburgh. Prior to that time it had been known among the Indians by the name De-un-da-ga. He commenced a small fortification, but before its completion the French and Indians suddenly appeared to the number of about one thousand, with eighteen cannon, in sixty batteaux and three hundred canoes, under the command of Captain Contrecoeur, having descended the Allegheny. Contrecoeur summoned Ensign Ward, who commanded in the absence of Captain Trent, to an immediate surrender. Having but
forty men in his command, nothing was left but to comply. The next day he was permitted to retire with his men up the Monongahela. The French then built a fort at the Point, to which they gave the name of Fort Duquesne, in honor of Marquis Du Quesne, Governor-General of New France. But only the garrison occupied the fort; the Indian allies and many of the French lived near it in cabins, and only retired within the enclosure when menaced by an enemy.

The following description of the fort as given by a prisoner detained there in the fall of 1756, will convey an idea of the appearance and strength of this, perhaps the most important French post at that time in the country: "It is four square, has bastions at each corner; it is about fifty yards long and about forty yards wide. About half the fort is made of square logs, and the other half, next the water, of stockades; there are entrenchments cast up all around the fort, about seven feet high, which consist of stockades driven into the ground near to each other and wattled with poles like basket-work, against which the earth is thrown up, in a gradual ascent; the steep part is next the fort, and has three steps all along the entrenchment, for the men to go up and down, to fire at an enemy; these entrenchments are about four rods from the fort and go all around, as well on the side next the water as the land; the outside of the entrenchment next to the water joins to the water. The fort has two gates, one of which opens to the land side, and the other to the water side, where the magazine is built; that to the land side is, in fact, a drawbridge which in day-time serves as a bridge for the people, and in the night is drawn up by iron chains and levers. The water sometimes rises so high as that the whole fort is surrounded with it, so that the canoes may go around it. The stockades are round logs, better than a foot over, and about eleven or twelve feet high; the joints are secured by split logs; in the stockades are loop-holes made, so as to fire slanting toward the ground. The bastions are filled with earth, solid, about eight feet high; each bastion has four carriage guns, about four pound; no swivels, nor any mortars. They have no cannon but at the bastions. The back of the barracks and buildings are
of logs about three feet distance from the logs of the fort; between the buildings and the logs of the fort it is filled with earth about eight feet high, and the logs of the fort extend about four feet higher, so that the whole height of the fort is about twelve feet. There are no pickets nor palisades on the top of the fort to defend it against scaling. There are no bogs nor morasses near the fort, but good dry ground, which is cleared for some distance from the fort, and the stumps cut closely to the ground. There are about twenty or thirty ordinary Indian cabins about the fort.” (“The Olden Time,” vol. I., pp. 39, 40.)

To return to the early history, the English immediately adopted measures for retaking the place, in which General Braddock was met by the French and Indians and defeated at what is now Braddock on the Monongahela, ten miles from the fort, on July 9, 1775. Major Grant met a similar fate within the present city limits on September 15, 1758. But the French seeing it impossible to resist the army advancing under General Forbes, set fire to the fort and adjacent buildings, November 24, of the same year, and withdrew to Lake Erie. The English took possession of the ruins the following day, and soon after commenced the erection of Fort Pitt from which the city was in time to take its name. The French posts in the Northwest of Pennsylvania were soon after abandoned, and the French power was destroyed in Western Pennsylvania.

I shall now turn to the religious history of these early times. It is well known to every student of American history that the French soldiers and generally their Indian allies also were Catholics; and that on all their expeditions they were attended by an army chaplain, who said Mass daily in the camp, not only when there was no danger of surprise, but also in the face or in pursuit of the enemy, when haste and vigilance were necessary. We have a striking illustration of this religious custom in our own locality and at the precise period of which we are now treating. When M. De Villiers was marching against the English, who were encamped at a place within the limits of the pres-
ent Fayette County, he kept a journal of the expedition, in which we read: "The 29 (June, 1754) Mass was said in the camp, after which we marched," etc. ("The Olden Time," vol. II., p 211.) There can be no doubt that a chaplain attended the important expedition that descended the Allegheny to take possession of "the Forks," and that Mass was celebrated the morning after the arrival; for now the French were undisputed masters, and no enemy was near to menace them. It was Friday in Easter week, April 17, 1754.

During the French occupation at Fort Duquesne religious services were regularly held. The Reverend Charles Baron, a native of France and a member of the Franciscan order, who in religion had taken the name of Denys, was chaplain to the French forces. He was ordained September 23, 1741. After serving several different parishes in Canada, he was appointed chaplain of this expedition, and took up his residence at Fort Duquesne. Sometime before the abandonment of the fort another chaplain succeeded him, and Father Denys was transferred to the chaplaincy of Fort St. Frederic at Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, where he died November 6, 1758, a few days before the fall of Fort Duquesne.

There is in existence a record of the baptisms and interments that took place at the fort from the arrival of the French till October, 1756. This record was rescued from oblivion in the archives of Canada and one hundred copies were printed by Mr. John Gilmary Shea in 1859. It is an octavo volume of fifty-two pages, in old French, of which the translation of the title is: "The Register of the Baptisms and interments which took place at Fort Duquesne during the years 1753, 1754, 1755 and 1756." The Register is divided into three parts, each duly authenticated by M. Contrecoeur, commander of the fort, and contains fifteen baptisms, of which two only are French, eight Irish, two English and three Indians, one being that of Jean Baptiste Christiguay, "great chief of the Iroquois," who was then in the ninety-fifth year of his age. The number of interments were forty-two—thirty-four from Fort Duquesne and eight from the posts on and near Lake Erie—all of which were French, except two English and four Indians. The first entry from Fort Duquesne is dated
June 5, 1754, and the last October 10, 1756. What became of the register of the last two years is not known. The entries from Fort Duquesne are all signed “fr. Denys Baron, chaplain,” except one which has in connection with his name that of “fr. Luc Collet, chaplain of Presqu’isle and French Creek.” The title in the entries till August 6, 1754, is merely “Fort Duquesne of the Beautiful River.”

So much for the early history, military and religious, that centres at “the Point” when it was known as Fort Duquesne. When the English got possession the name was changed to Fort Pitt which in time gave us the name of Pittsburgh. Passing over the intervening years during which the city began to grow, year by year, to larger proportions until it became the great industrial and commercial centre it is today, I come to the decade to which reference was made in the early part of this paper; the period from 1885 to 1895—a most interesting period in the local history of “the Point” as well as in the general history of the city.

As stated already the writer was Pastor of St. Mary’s church during those years. The position was not an enviable one. The First ward, which comprised the historic places that clustered round “the Forks” or “the Point,” did not bear the best reputation for good order and the highest type of citizenship. It was a battle ground in which was a warfare between the forces of good and evil for higher and better social and civic ideals. And this fight went on unceasingly during the decade from 1885 to 1895.

I shall be pardoned, I trust, if in dealing with this part of the subject, I am somewhat personal. This cannot well be avoided. The evil forces at work in the down-town district may be grouped under three heads: the abuses of the liquor traffic, the social evil, and corrupt politics. Before the enactment of the Brooks’ high license law (May 18, 1887) almost any one who had the price could secure a license to sell liquor, with the result that in this district the lowest saloons were found in great abundance. These places were the haunts of criminals and were known all over the city. Within a few months of the first year I had charge of St. Mary’s church three murders were committed
Ten Years On Historic Ground

in these low “dives,” scarcely a stone’s throw apart. When the high license law went into effect a large number of these places were weeded out. The late Judge White presided over the first session of the High License Court. He was a stern opponent of the liquor traffic. When he handed down the license list of that year it was found that less than a hundred licenses were granted for the whole city. There was a great outcry from the supporters of the liquor traffic and the judge was roundly denounced by those who were refused license and their friends. Just as at the present time, especially in our large cities, an attempt is made to set at naught the Volstead law, so was it sought in this state, and especially in this down-town district of Pittsburgh to evade the high license law by running what was known as “speakeasys.” Heavy fines and imprisonments, however, by the Courts soon put an end to the “speakeasys.” We had a large temperance society in the parish that was doing effective work in saving especially the young people from the evils of intemperance. It was a not unusual thing to find a Catholic clergyman, the Rector of St. Mary’s, present every year at the opening of the license court to protest against the granting of a liquor license to unworthy applicants from the First ward. And it is worthy of note that for ten years not a single applicant received a license against whom he had protested. And thus the number of saloons was greatly lessened and the liquor traffic brought under restraint in the down-town district. This obviously made for civic betterment.

With the social evil and low politics I must deal lightly. The subject is an unpleasant one. This much, however, may be said: It was the policy then, perhaps it is so still, of the public safety department of the city to confine the inmates of “the underworld” to a certain district. Unfortunately for those forced to live there, that was the down-town district, from Market Street to Penn Avenue and from First to Fourth Avenue; this was the “red-light” quarter of the town, turned over largely to these unfortunate people. It was said to be controlled by a certain disreputable character, who shared the profits of the vile trade with certain “higher ups” of the police department for the protection given him. From time to
time there was carried on a crusade, led by some clergyman, against the social evil which made a great stir for awhile, but little or nothing came of it. One of these notable crusades took place during Mayor Gourley’s administration. The “red-light” houses were closed and the inmates driven to the streets or to other parts of the city. But when the storm blew over, they found their way back to the old haunts and things went on pretty much as before. It was a hard and constant fight to save the young people from the immoral contagion that prevailed in this part of the town.

Of the character of the fight, let me recall here the saying of the late Reverend Dr. Allison, then editor of the Presbyterian Banner, which summed up the situation: “The fight down there in the First ward is between Father Sheedy and the Devil; in such a fight I am, heart and soul, with the good Father.” And so he was. So, too, was the Reverend E. R. Donehoo, a broad-minded, liberal clergyman, pastor for thirty years of the West End or Eighth Presbyterian Church, whose splendid public service in every good cause was felt in the community. He was known as the “reporters’ friend,” for no newspaper man in need of a “story” was ever known to go to him and fail to get one.

But the strongest influence was that of the late Reverend Dr. George Hodges, the Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, East End. One day, when things were at the worst, Dr. Hodges said to me: “Let us build a bridge (he meant a social and civic bridge) between the East End and the ‘Point.’” That was the invitation this good man gave me more than thirty years ago. It was an urgent call to duty and I was glad to have the co-operation and active support of this efficient social worker. We at once set to work. He looked after the building of the bridge at one end and I at the other. The bridge was soon built. Dr. Hodges brought the people of the East End in great numbers down to the “Point.” The recent opening of the Exposition building was an attraction—and I urged very strongly the people of the Point to move out to the wide spaces beyond Schenley Park and mingle with those more happily situated there.
This joint work for social and civic betterment went on for ten years, Dr. Hodges by voice and pen and practical organization doing a very large share of the work. Here I may state that I have met few men more resourceful in social welfare ideas and the practical means in carrying them out than Dr. Hodges. He was a great Christian social democrat and he loved the common people. In those days there was no stronger and far-reaching influence for good in Pittsburgh than his. Today social service is accepted everywhere. Thirty years ago it was a new idea but it soon took hold of the public mind, the practical results of which are felt today in the congested parts of all our large cities.

Putting the idea into practical shape we established down'town a social settlement, known as the Kingsley House. I should have wished that the name of Newman was coupled with that of Kingsley, calling it the Newman-Kingsley House, thus linking the two famous English clergymen, who, whilst they differed widely in doctrine, were in perfect accord in social work. In this way I thought the admirers of both would be made to forget the bitter controversy carried on by Cardinal Newman (then Dr. Newman) and Rev. Charles Kingsley. We interested the best people of Pittsburgh in the work of the settlement house, and I trust, that its work goes on to the present day.

Another project of those days that met with popular favor and had the best results was the Sunday afternoon concerts that we inaugurated in the Exposition building down at the "Point." This, too, was the outcome of the civic bridge-building. The concerts were a tremendous success. The strict "Sabbatarians" were violently opposed to them. The press and public, however, applauded, and the Sunday afternoon concerts were a great success. Today when Sunday golf and Sunday motoring are the fashion, one wonders at the opposition to Sunday sacred concerts a little over a quarter of a century ago.

Thus does time work its changes. We had to explain how the Lord's Day, called by some "the Sabbath," was to be properly observed. Today Americans very generally have come to accept, I believe, the view of the proper observance of the Lord's day or Sunday then set forth.
I have here set down rather hurriedly and imperfectly an outline of the social and civic conditions that prevailed in and near the historic ground where old Fort Duquesne, afterwards Fort Pitt, stood during the decade from 1885 to 1895. I have also noted the fight that went on during those years for the social and civic betterment of the downtown community. Today things are very different. The pressure of business has crowded out many of the residents of this part of the city, and of those who still remain the writer learns that they are honest, upright, model citizens of Pittsburgh.

Perhaps the fight for higher and better civic ideals on this historic ground, like the struggle between the two great nations, France and England, for supremacy, was not in vain. At any rate the period covered by this paper (1885-1895) makes an interesting chapter in the history of Pittsburgh, to which the future historian may turn in dealing with his subject. If so what is here set down may prove to be worth while.