The Many Pilgrimages of Father Cox

Father James Renshaw Cox is perhaps best known for leading the 1932 jobless march to Washington, D.C., during the Great Depression and his short-lived candidacy for President under the Jobless Party. In the *Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation* exhibition, there are several artifacts on display that document the famous march and Father Cox’s very public role during the 1930s. Other artifacts that are not currently on display provide a window into Father Cox’s relationship with the members of his parish and his importance as a priest to his Strip District congregation, a role often overshadowed by his public image as a champion for the rights of the working class during the Great Depression.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, Father Cox led many religious pilgrimages to holy sites throughout Europe, seeking both spiritual inspiration and healing for the participants. A few tours even included an audience with the Pope. Catherine Stillson Ruda, a 1937 tour participant, saved many items from her trip and her daughter generously donated them to the History Center in 2004. The fact that she kept so many mementos from her 45-day trip shows that it meant a great deal to Catherine. Among the items she saved were a dress, suitcase, souvenirs, photographs, travel documents, and the tour pamphlet. Although nothing in the collection indicates Ruda’s personal reason for joining the tour, we do know that she was a member of St. Patrick’s Church, Father Cox’s Strip District parish, and...
her religious keepsakes indicate she was most likely participating for more than just travel.

Besides the travel and spiritual benefits for the participants, Father Cox had other more personal reasons for his frequent pilgrimages. It was on this trip that Father Cox presented the Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine in France with a jeweled monstrance (a decorative vessel for sacred objects). Father Cox had a lifelong devotion to the Lourdes Shrine after being healed from a childhood eye disease by water from the shrine. He raised the money for the gift through his popular radio sermons and the monstrance was created by Terheyden Company on Smithfield Street, one of the oldest jewelers in the city. His enduring devotion included as many as 20 pilgrimages to the site, as well as a shrine erected on the grounds of St. Patrick’s Church and the honor of being named a chaplain at Lourdes shortly before his death in 1951.

This collection documents both the public human rights aspect of Father Cox’s ministry as well as his personal life story and
spiritualism. Though he is most remembered for his work during the Great Depression, Father Cox also developed strong connections to religious sites around the world, inspiring parishioners and the faithful to journey along with him on their own pilgrimages.

1 “Pilgrims Receive Pope’s Blessing For Families” Wilkes-Barre Times Leader, August 1, 1929, p. 3.

Patent model for lining vessels constructed of iron, 1842.

Pittsburgh’s skilled iron workers made the city a center of production to test new ideas about boat building. Some believed that iron hulls could help avoid the fate suffered by thousands of wooden steamboats that hit snags in rivers and sank. James Kerr, William Grant, and John Potter of Pittsburgh created this model out of sheet copper to demonstrate their idea for a way to build iron ship hulls with watertight chambers. They argued that using iron ribs to create individual chambers would keep the boat “more buoyant” in the event that one section of the hull was damaged.