

# Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 25: NAILS FROM OLD SACRED HEART CHURCH

31 MAY 2015

Almost all that remains of the first Sacred Heart Church are two “sixteen-penny” iron nails taken from the smoking ruins of the church after it was destroyed by arson fire in the early hours of March 19, 1899. They have been carefully preserved for more than a century.

Sacred Heart of Jesus parish was established in 1889. It is the oldest parish community in Seattle still in existence. For more than twenty years, Father Prefontaine’s Our Lady of Good Help Church had been the only parish in the city. But the population was growing rapidly, and Father Prefontaine suggested to Bishop Aegidius Junger that it was time for Seattle to have another church. But when the Bishop followed his advice, Father Prefontaine was not happy. The presence of another parish and another pastor relieved some of the burden on him, but it also cut out a portion of his parish community. His letter of complaint to Bishop Junger does not survive, but the Bishop’s reply—written in the imperfect English of a native German speaker—still exists: “It is not my intention to do anything that would injure something else.... In regard to the building of a new church in Seattle I have acted in accordance with your own saying.” In this instance, the mild-mannered Bishop Junger was determined. He instructed Father Prefontaine to assist Father Demanez in acquiring a property “between the hospital and Belltown on Unionlake.” The Bishop graciously invited Father Prefontaine to draw the boundaries for the new parish.

Construction soon began at Sixth Avenue and Bell Street. Bishop Junger laid the cornerstone in June of 1889, just days after the great Seattle fire of June 6, 1889. Many salvaged materials from Seattle’s destroyed buildings found their way into the new church, which opened in time for Christmas.

The new parish was saddled with an enormous debt of \$16,000, and Father Demanez, overwhelmed at the prospect of repaying it, resigned. The Redemptorist priests took the parish over in 1890. Through their regular missions, special devotions, and attention to fine liturgical music, the parish began to thrive. At Christmas, 1896, a 24-voice choir sang Haydn’s *Imperial Mass*, complete with orchestra and organ!

But the church building was to be short-lived. On Sunday, March 19, 1899, a policeman on his beat in the



Above: Two sixteen-penny nails are virtually all that remains from the first Sacred Heart Church, destroyed by fire on March 19, 1899. Below: Workers pose amidst the ruins of the church a few days after the fire. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.*

neighborhood saw flames leaping from the roof of the building at about 3:00am. The nearby Battery Street Engine House responded immediately, but it was already too late to save the church. The Seattle *P-I* described the scene in dramatic fashion: “After the church was abandoned to its fate, the conflagration became a grand sight and attracted a crowd of 1,000 or 1,500 from all over the city. After the roof fell in the dry wood work of the interior blazed up sending a column of smoke and fire hundreds of feet into the heavens, paling the stars and making it as light as day for a mile around on every side. The belfry on the front east end of the church was the last thing to go. It stood tall and black against a background of fire until 4:30 o’clock. Gradually the flames lapped away the interior of the tower. The smaller of the two bells, weighing about one half ton, was loosened from its support and fell with a loud crash upon the larger, which, swaying under the shock, tolled loudly its own funeral knell. Then it, too, plunged down into the ruins, a dead weight of 1,700 pounds.” The telegram Father Brown sent to Bishop O’Dea in Vancouver said much the same in far fewer words: “Church entirely and house partly burned 3 am.”

From the beginning, it was clear that the fire was the work of an arsonist. The fire department speculated that the fire had been started in the sanctuary, possibly several hours earlier. A reward of \$250 was offered. Witnesses reported seeing two men in a horse-drawn buggy parked near the church earlier in the night. In the end, the perpetrator was never identified.

While the ruins were still smoldering, the priests prepared for Sunday morning Masses in the adjacent school building. On Tuesday of the same week, the parish came together to plan the building of a new church. By summer, the cornerstone was laid, and Bishop O’Dea dedicated the new building on July 8, 1900.

The second Sacred Heart Church was destined for a dramatic end as well—but that is a story for our next issue.

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