

The chapel 175 years ago that led to St. Paul

By Curt Brown

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FRESCO BY MARK BALMA

The first log chapel can be seen on the hillside in this fresco showing the Rev. Augustin Ravoux welcoming Bishop Joseph Cretin to St. Paul in 1851.

As a judicial referee in Hennepin County's family court, Mark Labine sifts through stories in hopes of determining which are most plausible and true. Those skills have proved valuable in his off hours, too, as he researches one of St. Paul's oldest families: his own. Labine's third and fourth great-grandfathers — Isaac Labissoniere and his father, Joseph — arrived in St. Paul in the 1830s when the riverboat landing was still known as Pig's Eye Marsh after the area's squinty-eyed liquor dealer, Pig's Eye Parrant.

The Labissonieres were among eight French Canadian settlers who built the area's first log chapel 175 years ago — the precursor of the grand stone Cathedral of St. Paul. The city's first Catholic church cost about \$65 and took only a few days to construct in 1841 on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River between what became Minnesota and Cedar streets.

The area "was thinly covered with groves of red and white oak," Isaac Labissoniere said in a 1907 interview, when he was in his 80s. "The logs for the chapel were cut on the spot ... rough and undressed, prepared

merely by the ax, were made secure by wooden pins. The roof was made of steeply slanting bark-covered slabs, donated by a mill owner in Stillwater."

A model of that simple wooden house of worship, along with a collection of historic images, highlight a 175th anniversary parish history exhibit, opening Sunday in the lower level of the cathedral. The exhibit is free and open to the public on the first and third Sundays of the month, following morning mass.

Marking the parish's 175th year

The Cathedral of St. Paul is celebrating the 175th anniversary of its first log chapel. Here are some events:

Starting Aug. 21: A parish history exhibit of early images will be on display in the church's lower level. Free and open to the public after the first and third Sunday masses each month.

Oct. 19, 7 p.m.: Readings and photos from the Cathedral parish archives. Free theatrical event.

Nov. 1: Archbishop Bernard Hebda will celebrate the 175th anniversary and the French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota — www.fahfminn.org — will host a dinner and lecture at the History Center, featuring St. Cloud historian Mary Wingerd.

Finding "Pig's Eye" a rather crude name, young French-born priest Lucien Galtier first used the name "St. Paul" on a marriage certificate in January 1841 to describe the fledgling settlement downriver from Fort Snelling. White immigrants, including such French Canadian traders as the Labissonieres from the Red River Valley, began flocking to the region long populated by the Dakota and Ojibwe tribes as treaties were hammered out.

By Nov. 1, 1841, on the Feast of All Saints Day, the chapel was complete and Galtier dedicated it to the Apostle Paul. Galtier said: "Pig's Eye, converted thou shalt be, like Saul; Arise, and be, henceforth, Saint Paul!" in his dedicating remarks. "If it were not for Father Galtier naming the log cabin chapel — The Chapel of Saint Paul, we would all be living in Pig's Eye, Minnesota," said Celeste Raspanti, the cathedral's archivist, who organized the exhibit. And if it were not for the Labissonieres, the chapel would not have been built. "My grandfather, father and cousins would tell vague stories — but for a while they were just stories," said Labine, 64, who grew up on a farm near Argyle in northwestern Minnesota and now lives in Arden Hills. His extensive family research prompted Labine to create the French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota. The group's website — fahfminn.org — includes links for people researching their French Canadian ancestors.

Labine has collected hundreds of pages of documents and historical accounts that tell his family's story, including Isaac's founding of Osseo in the mid-1850s. While much of the cathedral's early history has been meticulously detailed over the years, some angles are lesser known. One of the tasty research morsels that Labine helped unearth centers on a Hungarian named Agoston Haraszthy, who emigrated to Wisconsin and is credited with planting the region's first hops — triggering the state's beer industry. But wine making, a skill Haraszthy learned in the Old Country, proved difficult in the harsh climate of the Upper Midwest. Around 1840, Labine says, the Hungarian ran a steamboat in Stillwater and helped deliver the wood slabs for the chapel. "They were carried to St. Paul by a steamboat," Isaac Labissoniere said in 1907. "These slabs were landed at Jackson Street, and drawn up the hill by hand with ropes. The slabs were likewise put to good use in the construction of the floor and the benches."

By 1849, the helpful Hungarian steamboat operator had joined the hordes heading west to the California Gold Rush. Instead of mining gold, Haraszthy became the first sheriff of San Diego. He eventually moved

north and started one of California's first wineries in Sonoma in 1857, according to the Buena Vista - Winery's website.

Back in Minnesota, the log chapel was soon too cramped. An addition went up, doubling its size. By 1851, the area's first bishop, Joseph Cretin, formally named the log church "the Cathedral of Saint Paul" and decided it had outlived its usefulness.

With the population booming and many of the area's 3,000 Catholics forced to worship outside the chapel, Cretin oversaw a second cathedral on a second floor of a downtown building. That one lasted two years. The third cathedral went up in the 1850s at St. Peter and Sixth streets.

By the 1880s, Catholic leaders began dreaming of a cathedral that reflected parishioners' prestige and prosperity. In the early 1900s, hilltop land was secured where Summit, Selby and Dayton avenues meet near the newly built State Capitol.

When the cathedral's cornerstone was laid in 1907, Isaac Labissoniere was 83, using a cane and sporting a long gray beard. He posed for photos with Henri Lauer, the stone contractor on the cathedral project.

Isaac, who later became a stone mason, was 18 when he helped build the first log chapel. His father, Joseph, was considered the project's superintendent. By 1842, Joseph staked a claim near what became Jackson and 12th streets, later selling that plot for a horse and moving near Lake Phalen. Isaac married Theresa Therou in 1848 and moved near Lake Como. They couple had five children.

They moved in the 1850s to Osseo, where Isaac helped lay out the village. Joseph died there in the 1860s. Isaac moved back to St. Paul to live with one of his daughters until his death on June 20, 1910, just weeks shy of his 87th birthday.

His obituary noted the passing of "the last survivor of the original band of eight" who built the "first house of worship in what is now St. Paul, which gave to the city its Apostolic eponym."

Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com. A collection of his columns is available as the e-book "Frozen in History" at startribune.com/ebooks.