

# DECKER'S CHAPEL AND MONSIGNOR MICHAEL J. DECKER

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A remarkable treasure of western Pennsylvania frontier Catholicism is found in St. Marys, Elk County, about 100 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Decker's Chapel, built in 1856 is known as "one of the smallest churches in the world"<sup>1</sup> and "the smallest chapel in the United States."<sup>2</sup>

Sacraments celebrated at the chapel over its long history include many Masses, baptisms and weddings. Decker's chapel remains open daily year-round and receives pilgrims from many states and countries as noted by the registrations found in the guest book.

The 216 square foot white clapboard building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998,<sup>3</sup> but the story of the diminutive structure is developed in the particulars of a nineteenth-century German Catholic immigrant family: Michael Joseph Decker, Sr. (1809-1877); his wife, Barbara Hierl Decker (1804-1879); and sons George Decker (1836-1885) and Michael Joseph Decker, Jr. (1839-1913). Michael Jr. — the future Monsignor Decker—would become widely recognized in Western Pennsylvania and in the collective history of the St. Marys religious community where he was always closely linked with the chapel.<sup>4</sup>

## 1846: From Bavaria to America

Michael Decker and Barbara Hierl married in 1835 — "a union of most exemplary Christian lives."<sup>5</sup> The Deckers were a farming family in Parsberg, Bavaria, Germany. Five children were born of this marriage; of these, three died in infancy. The family came to America in 1846 when their sons were ten and seven years of age, arriving in Baltimore, Maryland, where "immediately after their arrival they trudged to the nearest Catholic church"<sup>6</sup> and in "the true Christian spirit of that family manifested its gratitude to God for a successful voyage across the Atlantic at the Redemptorist Church of St. Alphonsus."<sup>7</sup>

Soon the family moved from Maryland to Pennsylvania where they joined other German Catholic families and settled in the Kersey area. Later, they crossed the hills to a settlement in Elk County that had been founded as a place for the German Catholic people. This settlement was named St. Marys<sup>8</sup> in honor of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>9</sup> Redemptorist Fathers had established a Catholic colony in St. Marys, but a few years after the arrival of the Deckers, the Redemptorists relinquished their possessions to the Benedictine Fathers of St. Vincent Monastery, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup>



**Msgr. Michael Decker**

Source: St. John the Baptist Parish Archives, Erie, Pennsylvania

The settlement, founded on December 8, 1842, began as a Bavarian Catholic farming commune comprised of German Catholic immigrants, including fifteen families from Baltimore, and four families from Philadelphia. They settled on a 30,000-acre tract of wilderness that had been purchased from the Fox Land Company by the German Catholic Brotherhood of Philadelphia and Baltimore. The purchase price was seventy-five cents an acre. St. Marys historians Charles Schaut and A.C. Brehm speculate that the families came to the area in an effort to escape the religious persecution that was emerging in the Eastern cities and sought a communal experience where they were free to practice their German heritage and their Roman Catholic religion.<sup>11</sup>

At St. Marys, young Michael was known to have:

... obtained what schooling the labors of a farmer's home permitted him to enjoy until, in 1850, feeling a vocation to the priesthood, he began his studies under the Benedictines at St. Vincent where a college course had just been established. With what desire he must have longed for the accomplishment of

God's plans on his behalf can be judged from the fact Joseph with a few companions annually traveled the distance of 125 miles on foot to and from St. Vincent's. These ambitious boys bore upon their backs the luggage containing the supply for the year's schooling, sometimes finding no other shelter for the night's rest than the firmament of heaven.<sup>12</sup>

### 1856: The Little Chapel Is Built

Young Michael continued these annual treks for nine years until his education at St. Vincent was nearly complete. During this time, in 1856, his father suffered an accident while working in an orchard, injuring his back in a fall from a tree. Following the accident, his father vowed that if the injury healed he would build and maintain a chapel in thanksgiving. The injury did heal and he built the chapel that has become a landmark of Elk County.<sup>13</sup>

Building a wayside chapel was a traditional practice in Germany continued by the Bavarian Catholics who settled in the area. Crosses, shrines and other chapels once peppered the countryside, but only Decker's Chapel survived from this period.

Michael Decker, Sr. died on October 16, 1877 and Barbara on August 21, 1879. Their remains are buried in the Decker plot in St. Mary's Cemetery. Care of the little chapel then rested with George Decker, who remained in the St. Marys area. Young Michael, when home from St. Vincent, often prayed in the little chapel<sup>14</sup> and local history records that the priest-to-be practiced for his first Mass in his father's chapel.<sup>15</sup>

### 1859-1868: From St. Vincent to Brooklyn and Back

In 1859, Michael left St. Vincent early to accept a teaching position at the parochial school attached to Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn, New York where he also served as organist. Within two years, his desire for the priesthood rekindled and in 1861, he returned to St. Vincent to continue his studies.

While completing his studies at Saint Vincent he was a



**Decker Chapel, smallest church in the U.S. on Rte. 255, St. Marys, PA**

Source: James K. Hanna

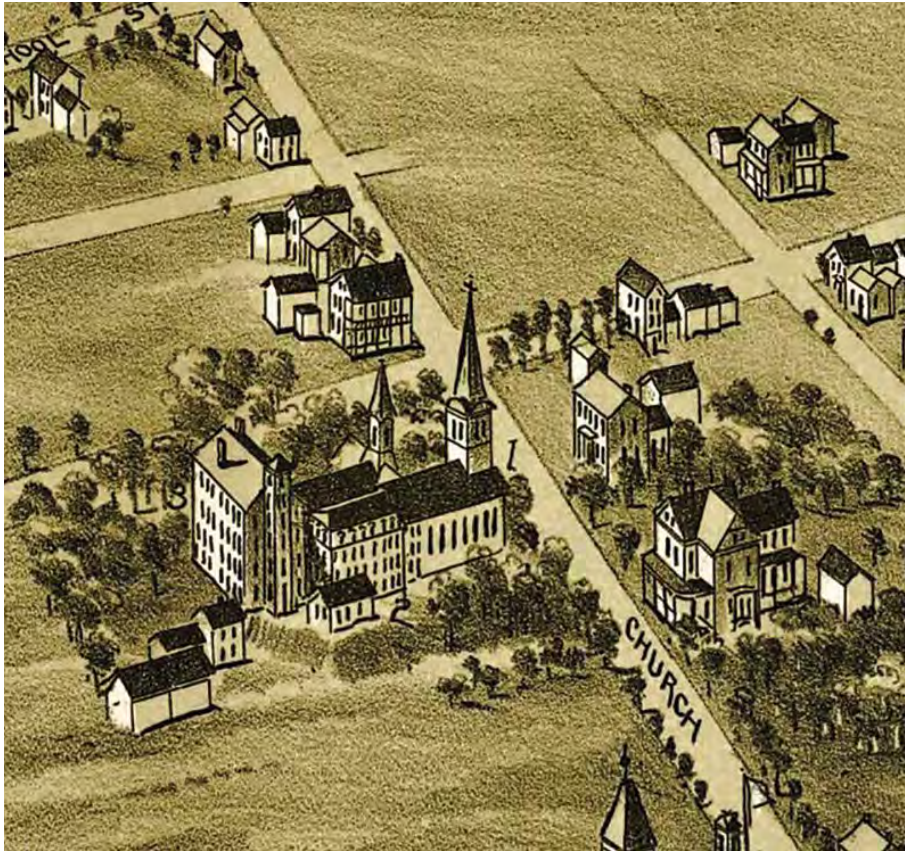
consultor in the Saint Boniface Maria Society. According to the Saint Vincent catalogue of that era, the object of the society was "to aid in the defense and propagation of the Catholic religion in America by demanding of its members an exemplary life and frequentation of the sacraments on the festivals of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and by assisting them, through means of religious and scientific discourses, to attain their eloquence and learning necessary for the promotion of this object."<sup>16</sup>

Michael Joseph Decker, Jr., was ordained on September 20, 1862 by Bishop John Loughlin<sup>17</sup> in Brooklyn's St. James Cathedral. Father Decker returned home briefly to celebrate his first Solemn High Mass on October 5, 1862 in St. Mary Church in St. Marys.<sup>18</sup> Returning to Brooklyn, he was assigned the curacy of St. James Cathedral.

In 1863, he was advanced to pastor of St. Margaret's Church in Milledgeville, Long Island and in May of 1864, he became pastor of St. Boniface in Brooklyn, where he remained until his unexpected return to St. Marys in 1868. He would be remembered by the following:

Tireless in his labors, especially during the cholera epidemic, the health of this ambitious young priest was soon on the wane. With the loss of his health in 1868 he relinquished his pastoral duties. With the permission of his bishop he returned to his parental home at St. Marys, there to recoup his energy and his health, spent in the service of the Lord.<sup>19</sup>

At home, aided by his family, Father Decker enjoyed a swift return to good health. He soon recovered and during his



**St. Marys Church, St. Marys, PA, 1895**

Source: Fowler, T. M., and James B Moyer. *St. Mary's, Elk County, Pennsylvania.*  
[Morrisville, Pa., T. M. Fowler & James B. Moyer, 1895] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/75696529>

leave from Brooklyn, the Bishop Tobias Mullen<sup>20</sup> of Erie adopted him for a period of five years. At the expiration of this term, Bishop Mullen, “impressed with the zeal of his protégé, permanently adopted Father Decker as a priest of his diocese.”<sup>21</sup>

### 1869-1873: The Frontier Years

In 1869, Bishop Mullen assigned Father Decker as temporary pastor of St. Agatha in Meadville.<sup>22</sup> During his tenure there, Father Decker undertook the construction of a new church to replace the original wooden structure built in 1850. Building went slowly as funding permitted, and at one point was halted for two years. The building was dedicated on August 10, 1873 and still serves the Catholic community of Meadville.<sup>23</sup>

On December 20, 1871, Father Decker was assigned the pastorship of those Catholics remaining in the post-oil boom rural areas of Venango County. Residing in Shamburg,<sup>24</sup> he traveled by horseback to attend to the missions in Pithole<sup>25</sup> and Pleasantville. On May 4, 1873, after nearly two years of rustic ministry, Father Decker was appointed pastor of St. John Church in Erie; he would spend the next forty years there.

### 1873-1913: Builder, Preacher, Musician, Composer, Monsignor

When he arrived in Erie, St. John Church had been in existence for four years. A rural parish of fifty-five predominantly German families, the church building was a 1,800 square foot frame structure and a one-room schoolhouse stood nearby.<sup>26</sup> For Father Decker, his first major project was the building of a new school, which was completed in 1883. While it was later replaced in 1951, the cornerstone is still preserved in the yard behind the rectory.<sup>27</sup>

The congregation grew<sup>28</sup> as Erie grew and Father Decker soon realized the need for larger accommodations. He undertook the construction of the church that stands today:

While fearful of the burden that he knew must be imposed upon his people, yet relying upon God’s help, he determined upon the erection of the present large edifice, episcopal authority having been readily obtained.

The cornerstone of this beautiful edifice was laid in 1899 by Rt. Rev. Bishop John E. Fitzmaurice.<sup>29</sup> The construction of the church is of the Romanesque style of architecture, massive in its proportions, yet simple in decoration; a real place of worship, where the devout adorer must feel in its grandeur the presence of the Divine Majesty.<sup>30</sup>

It should be noted in this period in northwestern Pennsylvania that the Catholic Church imposed a rule on pastors that only so much building be undertaken as immediate funds on hand could support. In fact, there was an instance when only the prompt financial assistance of Father Decker’s brother saved the church property from the hands of the sheriff, when George Decker mortgaged his Elk County farmland in order to aid his brother’s efforts.<sup>31</sup> In due time, the debt was paid.<sup>32</sup>

During these years, Father Decker became widely known as a remarkable bilingual orator:

As one of the most eloquent speakers in northwestern Pennsylvania, Father Decker has filled on various solemn occasions the pulpits of the larger parishes within the diocese of Erie. Yes, his fame as

a preacher, in both English and German languages, has forced him to appear as the preacher on the occasions of most important celebrations in different parishes throughout the country. His ardent piety, his interesting delivery, his eloquent address, made him an orator that both Catholics and non-Catholics were anxious to hear.<sup>33</sup>

His bilingual fluency and rhetorical skill led to what was likely a nostalgic moment for him, when in 1900 he was invited to preach twice at St. Alphonsus in Baltimore at the same altar where he knelt and prayed in gratitude a half-century earlier as a seven year old boy newly arrived from Bavaria. The occasion was a Solemn Triduum in celebration of the Centennial of the establishment of Baltimore's first German parish.<sup>34</sup> Father Decker delivered two sermons, in German and English, at the opening and closing Mass<sup>35</sup> celebrated by Cardinal James Gibbons.<sup>36</sup>

A man of many talents, Father Decker was an accomplished master of the violin, the viola bass, the French horn, and the flute. He held a deep interest in sacred music, promoting its practice and use, as well as composing his own:<sup>37</sup>

Of his compositions which have been published, we have two Masses—“*Missa Sanctae Mariae*” and “*Missa Sanctae Elizabethae*”, also a “*Veni Creator*.” His “*Missa Sancta Michaelis*” and “*Missa Santa Clementis*”, an “*Ave*

*Mariae*” and a hymn in honor of St. John the Baptist have never been given out for publication by him.<sup>38</sup>

In 1903, in consideration of Father Decker's pastoral contributions to the diocese, Bishop Fitzmaurice requested recognition of the long-standing pastor of St. John by the Vatican. On December 18, 1903, Father Decker was raised to the dignity of Domestic Prelate in the household of Pope Pius X. On February 14, 1904, he was solemnly vested in the purple robe of a Monsignor in the midst of a large gathering of admiring and jubilant friends.<sup>39</sup>

### Failing Health, Golden Jubilee, and Passing

In his 74th year, the Monsignor's health began to fail. In 1911, he was advised to travel to Baltimore where he underwent an operation at Johns Hopkins University. While the operation “saved the Monsignor from an untimely death,” he never fully recovered “to comply with his duties.”<sup>40</sup>

As his health declined, the parishioners of St. John Church planned a two-day celebration for now-Monsignor Decker's Golden Jubilee. In honor of the jubilee, a Pontifical High Mass with Bishop Fitzmaurice as celebrant was held:

The great day, September 24, 1912 was marked by a celebration that demonstrated in glorious manner the affection in which he was held by the people of this community. It was on this occasion that the



Monsignor Michael Decker is buried in the family plot at St. Mary's Cemetery.

Source: James K. Hanna

Monsignor addressed his parishioners for the last time. Those who were present at the Jubilee Mass will never forget the pitiable effort he made to show his gratitude for their faithfulness and the honors they had paid him. With tears trickling down his emaciated but still noble countenance, he spoke his valedictory to his parishioners. They had a presentiment that those words would be the last that he, as their pastor, would ever speak to them.<sup>41</sup>



**Plaque at Decker's Chapel**

Source: James K. Hanna

Monsignor Decker died in Erie on April 10, 1913. His remains were brought to St. Marys where on April 17 a requiem Mass was celebrated in St. Mary Church by Father Marinus Ferg, O.S.B. and the sermon preached by Father John Heibel.<sup>42</sup> There were 2,000 in attendance, a number which included 600 school children, and members of the Catholic Mutual Benefit Association<sup>43</sup> acted as a guard of honor. After the liturgy concluded, the coffin was opened and those present filed by for a last look at the remains before interment in the Decker plot in St. Mary's Cemetery.<sup>44</sup>

### Decker's Chapel and Monsignor Decker's Legacy

At the time of Father Monsignor Decker's death, the little chapel his father had built had stood for more than a half-century and was flourishing as a destination of numerous pilgrimages. Often pilgrims came in great numbers with umbrellas in their hands to pray for rain and abundant



**Decker's Chapel Exterior**

Source: James K. Hanna

crops.<sup>45</sup> On June 8, 1918, pilgrims came to pray for peace during the First World War, with nearly 300 people carrying lighted candles to pray for the safe return of American soldiers. This was one of many such peace pilgrimages.<sup>46</sup>

In 1928, while the Chapel remained in the ownership of Decker descendants, the Knights of Columbus Council No. 567 began to share in the sponsorship, care and custodianship of the Chapel.<sup>47</sup> In 1989, the family transferred the title to the Elk County Historical Society. In recent years, the chapel

has undergone significant improvements including a major renovation that was completed in 2016, when the original stacked stone foundation was repaired and the floor reinforced to accommodate visitors in wheelchairs.<sup>48</sup>

On September 23, 1928, the Knights of Columbus erected a monument on the property dedicating it to the memory of Monsignor Decker. Father John Heibel, successor to Monsignor Decker at St. John Church in Erie, recalled the moment and the sentiment seems a fitting closing tribute to Monsignor Decker, his family, and his father's little wayside shrine:

Life on earth for this great man was ended. It was a life so filled with action, so forgetful of self, so ambitious for the salvation of souls, that it is most fitting to say of him, of his sleep in the grave, 'May he rest in peace. May he at last know the sweetness and blessedness of those who die in the Lord.'



**Decker's Chapel Interior**

Source: James K. Hanna

Many have breathed that pious request, and many will continue to pray it, because the influence of Father Decker is still known and felt. He leaves a glorious record of Christian fortitude, priestly zeal, and Catholic fervor, which will long do him honor. When generations still unborn have forgotten about the deeds of this man, when no living person remains to sing his praise, then will his record written on granite and marble speak for him. In the hills of St. Marys there is a monument and there is a chapel which will perpetuate the name of Decker.<sup>49</sup>

#### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> "Decker's Chapel," The Elk County Historical Society, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.elkcountyhistoricalsociety.org/deckerschapel.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> Katie Weidenboerner, "Decker's Chapel Reopened to the Public," *Courier Express*, September 26, 2016, [http://www.thecourierexpress.com/news/local/deckers-chapel-reopened-to-the-public/article\\_cfb99f2-28dd-56a3-9227-49951e44d365.html](http://www.thecourierexpress.com/news/local/deckers-chapel-reopened-to-the-public/article_cfb99f2-28dd-56a3-9227-49951e44d365.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> "Decker's Chapel."
- <sup>5</sup> *Program for the Golden Jubilee of the Priesthood of Rt. Rev. Michael J. Decker at St. John's Church, Erie, Pa., September 24, 1912.* Diocese of Erie Archives. Hereafter referred to as Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>6</sup> Eugene V. Danielson, *The History of St. John's R.C. Church: Presented on the Joyous Occasion of the Ruby Anniversary in the Priesthood of the Reverend John H. Heibel, Ordained Son Curate and Pastor of St. John's Church* (Erie: Journal Pub. Co., 1935), 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>8</sup> "Members of The German Catholic Brotherhood of Philadelphia and Baltimore arrived on the banks of Elk Creek on 8 Dec 1842 and due to it being the day of the aforementioned feast (Immaculate Conception) so named the area." See: Elk County Genealogy Project, Benzinger Township, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.pa-roots.com/elk/townships/benzinger/ben.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> "Decker's Chapel on National Register," *The Elk Horn, Official Publication of the Elk County Historical Society* 35, no. 1 (1999) :1.
- <sup>10</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>11</sup> "History," City of St. Marys, Pennsylvania, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.stmaryspa.gov/founding-of-st-marys.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>13</sup> "Decker's Chapel."
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Department of the Interior. National Park Service. (3/2/1934). Pennsylvania SP Decker's Chapel. 2013-01-01/2017-12-31. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/71998254>.
- <sup>16</sup> Guy J. Davis, Saint Vincent Archabbey and College Archivist, email message to author, December 1, 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> On June 19, 1853, Loughlin was appointed the first Bishop of the newly erected Diocese of Brooklyn by Pope Pius IX.
- <sup>18</sup> Jeanne Fritz Dostal, "Decker's Chapel, Benzinger Township, One of the World's Smallest Churches," *Elk County Historical Society Newsletter* (1990), 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Danielson, *History of St. John's*, 12.
- <sup>20</sup> Bishop Tobias Mullen, D.D. (1818-1900). "Consecrated on 2 August 1868 at Saint Paul's Cathedral in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; arrived in Erie as a bishop (having been previously consecrated in Pittsburgh) in 1868; served as third bishop of Erie from March 3, 1868 (following a nearly two-year interregnum when Vicar-General John Coady served as apostolic administrator) until he resigned on September 15, 1899." Source: The Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie, Pa., accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.eriecd.org/bishop/pastbishopoverview.html>.
- <sup>21</sup> Davis, email message.
- <sup>22</sup> "Roman Catholic immigrants from southern Germany began arriving in the early 1830's, settling in Meadville and the 'German Colony' in neighboring Vernon Township. They were first served by missionary priests, sometimes from Frenchtown, sometimes from Erie. They were here in sufficient numbers by the mid 1840's to warrant a Catholic congregation in the city. Permission to establish a parish was granted by the Bishop of the Pittsburgh Diocese, and St. Agatha's was organized in 1849-50, with 25 to 30 families. The first church, a wooden facility on the corner of Pine and Liberty Streets, was dedicated on Aug. 10, 1850. The parish was served by a series of primarily German pastors, and as late as 1900, St. Agatha's was still known as the congregation 'for German Catholics,' with sermons and sacraments delivered in German." Source: "Saint Agatha Church," Catholic Community of Meadville, last modified May 14, 2019, <https://catholic-meadville.com/saint-agatha-church/>.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> An oil boom town. "The Titusville Morning Herald covered the development of the town of Shamburg in 1867. The town was the dream of Dr. G. S. Shamburg and lay 1.5 miles by stagecoach from the nearest railroad connection. It consisted of one church, two schools, one post office and three telegraph offices. The paper's description of the town sought to enlist new investors and inhabitants. Those in the Pennsylvania oil fields, otherwise known as 'Petrolia', speculated about the next frontier. New towns, like Shamburg, seemed to spring up overnight, only to be abandoned during the 1870s when the supply of oil dwindled." Source: "Striking Oil: Chapter 2 Boom and Bust," *Explorepahistory.com—stories from pa history*, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-C&chapter=2>.
- <sup>25</sup> An oil boom-bust town near Titusville. "Pithole City, the prototype boomtown community, rose from non-existence in 1860 to over 10,000 in 1865 then fell to 237 in 1870, and ceased to exist by 1880." Source: Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> "St. John the Baptist School Alumni," St. John the Baptist School Alumni, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.stjohnthebaptistschoolalumni.com/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Erie's population in 1870 was 19,646 increasing to 66,525 by 1910. Source: "Erie, Pennsylvania," Wikipedia, last modified November 24, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erie,\\_Pennsylvania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erie,_Pennsylvania).
- <sup>29</sup> Bishop John Edmund Fitzmaurice, D.D. (1837-1920). "Consecrated on 24 February 1898 at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; arrived in Erie as a bishop, named coadjutor which meant he came to the diocese while Bishop Mullen was still serving, publicly knowing he would be the successor. Succeeded as ordinary in 1899 and served as fourth bishop of Erie from September 15, 1899 until his death on June 18, 1920." Source: The Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie, Pa., accessed December 5, 2020, [www.eriecd.org/bishop/pastbishopoverview](https://www.eriecd.org/bishop/pastbishopoverview).
- <sup>30</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Danielson, *History of St. John's*, 13.
- <sup>33</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>34</sup> "Designed by early Baltimore architect Robert Cary Long in 1845, the St. Alphonsus Church has been called 'the German cathedral' for its Southern German neo-Gothic style. The church was originally established with a large German congregation and the attached rectory functioned as provincial headquarters for the Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers." Source: Eli Pousson, "Saint Alphonsus Church," *Explore Baltimore Heritage*, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://explore.baltimoreheritage.org/items/show/165>.
- <sup>35</sup> "St. Alphonsus Jubilee: Centennial Celebration of a Large Congregation," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 9, 1900, 7.
- <sup>36</sup> "James Gibbons (July 23, 1834 – March 24, 1921) was an American prelate of the Catholic Church. He served as Apostolic Vicar of North Carolina from 1868 to 1872, Bishop of Richmond from 1872 to 1877, and as ninth Archbishop of Baltimore from 1877 until his death in 1921. Gibbons was elevated to the rank of cardinal in 1886." Source: "James Gibbon," Wikipedia, last modified December 5, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Gibbons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Gibbons).
- <sup>37</sup> Danielson, *History of St. John's*, 13.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Golden Jubilee Program.
- <sup>41</sup> Danielson, *History of St. John's*, 14.
- <sup>42</sup> Father John Heibel was Father Decker's successor at St. John's in Erie.
- <sup>43</sup> The C.M.B.A. was a fraternal society organized at Niagara Falls, NY in 1876. It ceased operations in 1933. Source: "Catholic Mutual Benefit Association," Jerome: The Mystery Man of Baie Sainte-Marie, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/jerome/contextes/protagonistes/4241en.html>.
- <sup>44</sup> "Obituary: Miss Rose Anne Brislin," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 18, 1913, 12.
- <sup>45</sup> Father Decker's brother George died in 1885, after which George's descendants cared for the chapel.
- <sup>46</sup> "Decker's Chapel."
- <sup>47</sup> Danielson, *History of St. John's*, 14.