



NOJOSHING

Indian word for "straight tongue"

land protrudes out into Lake Michigan like a straight tongue

Newsletter published quarterly

Non-Profit Organization 501c3

March 2025

Gone But Not Forgotten

St. Francis Seminary Post Office and Brother House

by Anna Passante

Last month the city of St. Francis sadly lost two historic buildings that were located on the St. Francis de Sales Seminary grounds. The first building to be razed was the old post office established in 1867. The second building was one of two Brother Houses built around 1849.

Post office building

In the 1860s, the closest post office to the St. Francis de Sales Seminary was the Lake Centre Post Office, run by John P. Wechselberg, on the Old Chicago Road (present-day 4254 South Whitnall Avenue.) That was a distance from the seminary. After the Civil War ended in 1865, the enrollment at the St. Francis De Sales Seminary increased dramatically, necessitating a post office building nearer by. The seminary students petitioned the United States government to place a post office on the seminary grounds. The request was granted, and in 1867 the St. Francis Post Office opened.

The original site of the post office building was between the main seminary building and the present-day St. Ann's Center at East Morgan Avenue. The bricks for the post office may have been produced in kilns on the seminary grounds, the same kilns that produced "cream city brick" for the main seminary building. Mail from the seminary post office was taken in leather bags (bags were stamped St. Francis Seminary) to the St. Francis train station, located on East St. Francis Avenue west of Kinnickinnic. All the mail leaving the seminary post office was stamped "St. Francis Station." The train station had taken the name "St. Francis Station" because many of the St. Francis Seminary priests and staff frequently used this train station, and they exited the train at that station.

According to historian Carl Baehr, naming the station "St. Francis Station" and by stamping the



Above: This photo of the post office building was taken around 1929 long before the building was moved in 1956. There seems to be slight difference in brick color, which may indicate that the section on the right was an addition. Anton Palma, the night watchmen, stands in front of the building.

letters with the station's name, further identified the area with the seminary. The surrounding area became known as St. Francis, a neighborhood of Town of Lake. An early Milwaukee County Directory had a separate section for the St. Francis community. It listed people who lived within a mile of the St. Francis Train Station. So it wasn't surprising that residents identified with the name St. Francis rather than Town of Lake.

The first postmaster was John Gartner, a student of theology, who had come to this country about 1866. When Gartner was ordained a priest in April 1868, seminarian Augustine Zeininger took over as postmaster. Zeininger was ordained in December 1868 but continued to serve as postmaster. Reverend Zeininger became procurator of the seminary in 1876, so most likely due to this promotion, he had less time to devote to the post office.

A student newspaper, the *Salesianum*, had some things to say about the post office. The October 1877 issue records that a person named Leo (no last name given) took over the running of the post office. "Leo is postmaster general of St. Francis now. He is the only member of the family holding government office." (It appears that Reverend Zeininger remained the official postmaster during Leo's employment, since no government record states a change in postmaster.) According to the November 1877 issue, "Leo says that the express business never was so brisk at St. Francis as it is at present." The December 1878 issue stated, "Old Leo, our genial post office clerk hangs the official weather [probability] out at the post office every morning from which the snow [ballers] can learn whether there's fun ahead or not." Lastly, the March 1878 issue stated, "Old Leo wishes visitors to the branch post office would call at more convenient times."

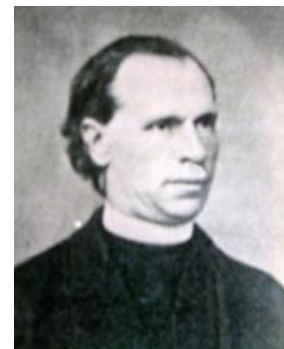
In 1879, the post office was no longer at the seminary. The vacated building was then used for various purposes. It housed a shoe shop, where shoes were made and repaired for the seminarians. Newly married Martin and Bridget Mahoney rented the building as their home from 1900 to 1905. Mahoney worked as a railroad engineer out of the St. Francis Station. When the Mahoneys left, it became a candy and fruit store for a few years.

According to the 1920 and 1930 United States Census, Anton Palma was employed as the night watchman at St. Francis Seminary. He and his wife, Mary, lived in the old post office building until the 1930s. Mary's brother was Reverend Joseph Rainer who was a rector of the seminary.

In 1956, to make room for Heiss Hall, later known as Clare Hall when it was leased to the St. Francis of Assisi Convent, the old post office building needed to be moved. It was placed not far away along a drive that leads to South Illinois Avenue.

In the 1970s, the old post office was used as a residence for seminary staff, but several decades later the building was empty. The elements took a toll on the building, so it needed to be razed.

Author note: I had lived near the seminary for nearly 35 years and often entered the grounds through the Illinois Avenue entrance, before that entrance was closed to the public. I remember when a seminary staff member lived in the old post office and had a large garden to the east, with a tall fence to keep out the deer. That may have been in the 1980s.



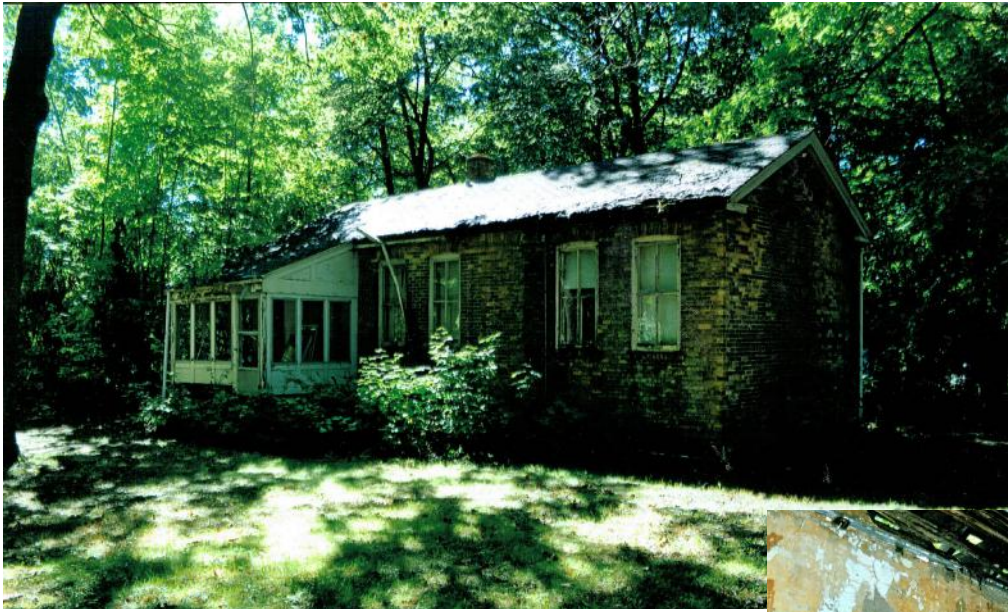
Left: Father John Gartner, first postmaster of the seminary post office
Above: Father August Zeininger, second postmaster of the seminary post office



Top: In 1929, Anton and Mary celebrated their 50th anniversary at the old post office building.

Above: A photo of the Palma clan taken during the 50th anniversary celebration. The Palmas had three children, 19 grandchildren, and 18 great-grandchildren. (Special thanks to St. Francis resident Mary McGinnis for the two above photos. She is a descendant of the Ranier family.)

Photos of the Old Post Office Building



The 1849 Brothers' House Has Been Razed
The St. Francis de Sales Seminary was dedicated

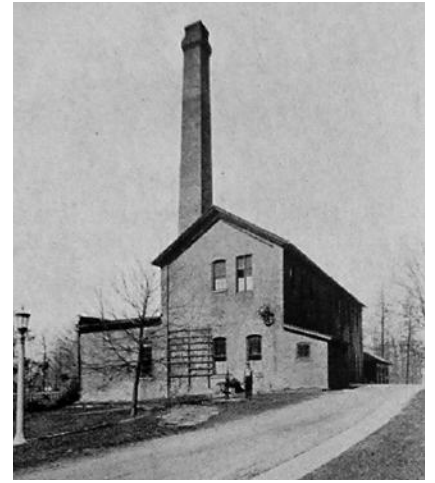


Above left: a contemporary photo of the old post office building

Above right: a photo of the interior

Bottom: demolition of the old post office

January 29, 1856, on South Lake Drive. However, the first religious group to occupy this site was the Tertiary Brothers and Sisters who immigrated from Germany in 1849. This religious group intended to settle in the Milwaukee diocese to promote Catholicity in the newly created State of Wisconsin. The group took up residence in some old log cabins and hastily built board huts on the site. The Brothers constructed a chapel and convent, as well as two brick buildings not far from the convent, for the Brothers and the two priests who came with the group from Germany. One of the Brothers' Houses was razed this past February. According to the seminary's *Diamond Jubilee* book (c. 1931), this Brothers' House had been used as a laundry, powerhouse, workmen's building, and a warehouse. According to a recent newspaper report, the Brothers' House was razed to make room for an addition to the main seminary building for an expanded dining room. As a child, seventy years ago, St. Francis resident Bill Drehfal peeked into the building on his way to the convent to serve at mass. He saw an "old world" workshop. (continued page 5)



Above: Built in 1849, this Brother House was razed in February.

Below: Photos of the building being razed.



Thank you to all who made a donation on the renewal form

- Lloyd & Chris Buttke
- Christine Cavallaro
- Mary and Bill Drehfal
- Diana Duffey
- Debbie Fliss
- Karen Gersonde
- Glenn Gierzycki
- Paula Grosenick
- Robert & Mary Hallfeld
- James N Hempel
- David Hetzel
- Susan Herzfeld
- Ann Howell
- Julie Hughes

- John Janiszewski
- Tom Javorek
- Deb Kreuser & Dave Knight
- Kathy & Jim Matthew
- Jennifer & John Mertz
- Margaret Raclaw
- George Ramponi
- Bev Rhoe
- Barb Perszyk
- Susan Staats
- Ed Thompson
- Ed Travis
- Jay Wesner
- Richard J. & Joan Wier
- Dennis J. & Carol L. Wojtecki
- John Zajackowski

What's New?

James Heinz

James Heinz will present "Famous People Who Lived In Milwaukee" on Saturday, April 19 after the historical society's monthly board meeting. (See page 7 for details.)

Historical signs for St. John's School for the Deaf

The St. John's School for the Deaf information panels will soon be installed at Deer Creek Intermediate School at 3680 South Kinnickinnic Avenue. Date and time is yet to be determined, but an email will be sent regarding this event.

New gravestone for Jared Thompson in the Lake Protestant Cemetery

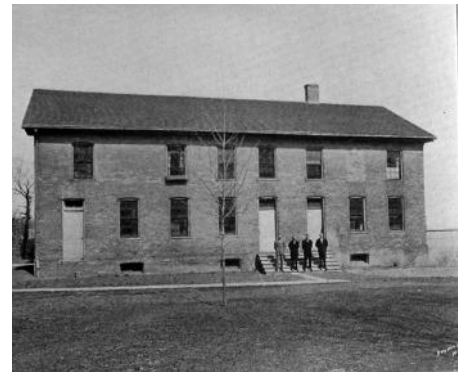
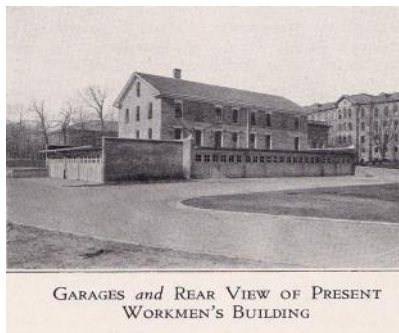
Jared Thompson's original gravestone had broken apart decades ago, so the historical society decided to have a new one made that would compliment the old stone. Board member Randy Borland is a direct descendant of Thompson and has designed the new stone. There will be a dedication of the new stone at the cemetery, so watch for the date in a forthcoming issue of the newsletter. You will also be sent any email.

(continued from page 4)

Built around 1850, it housed the Brothers and the two priests who accompanied the Sisters from Germany. Anton Zahler, the director of the Brothers and a carpenter, occupied the first floor of the building and took great care that orders were observed in the house. Father Michael Heiss opened a theological school in the Brothers' House in 1854, two years before the seminary was completed. In 1906, the Brothers' House was moved a bit south to make room for the Salzmann Library.

The *Milwaukee Sentinel* published an article about the second Brothers' House on Feb. 23, 1991, when plans were being made for a \$500,000 renovation of the building. Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland was to move with his secretary to the renovated residence. It was expected to be costly to bring the house up to livable quality, said the article. But due to its historical significance, Weakland wanted the building preserved. The building was described by the *Sentinel* as "an austere, box-style structure built of bricks from the clay of Deer Creek, which ran through the seminary grounds." It was the first building constructed at the seminary and is the oldest owned by the archdiocese. In the 1960s, the building was used as a storage shed. The former Friends of the Seminary Woods organization did some cleaning and used a part of it as a nature club office. The group had an educational display of feathers and owl pellets. The building fell into disrepair and needed to be gutted. "Among the major projects were replacing the roof and second-floor joists, excavating the basement, and installing plumbing and electricity," said the article. Sewer and electrical lines had to be installed. The house has three levels, including an elevator, and is equipped for the handicapped. Funds from the sale of archdiocesan-owned homes, used by the late Archbishop William E. Cousins, paid for the cost of the Brothers' House renovation.

The Second Brothers' House still stands.



Above and left: Both photos scanned from the Diamond Jubilee anniversary book of the seminary 1856-1931



Present-day Brothers' House

By George...I think he's got it!!!

by St. Francis Historical Society board member George Ramponi



On Tuesday July 24, 1951, the future citizens of what would become the City of Saint Francis gathered to vote for or against incorporation. Being a year and four months old, I didn't have an opinion one way or another, but Pa and Ma certainly did. They were both decidedly FOR!

Not that they didn't love their neighborhood. Just west of the old C&NW railroad, the East LeRoy and Rutland Avenue intersection where my parents resided, was still somewhat rural. It was just south of what was the Koniar farm (the city garage is there today). Jan and Eva were good neighbors. Periodically, Jan would stop by and drop off a dozen eggs or a plucked chicken. And just as periodically, Ma would help Eva fetch a cow that had wandered off, usually to munch on the Sharkowicz's garden. I accompanied Ma on those excursions---tethered to a rope. Most of the rest of the immediate neighbors were welcoming and became good friends. Mrs. Skarkowicz made me my first present, a stuffed giraffe.

But there were problems. The hard water from the well, the unpaved dirt road that was Rutland "Avenue" (dusty in the summer, muddy the rest of the year), and the chicken coops, which were starting to attract rats. Incorporation might address those problems.

The polling place was at the Town of Lake American Legion Post #129, now long gone, at 3877 S. Kinnickinnic Avenue, very close to the former St. Francis Brewery building. My parents wouldn't have a car until 1955 so they trekked it. They were used to walking to the transit station--Pa to get to his second shift job at Ladish and Ma if she needed to get to "downtown" Bay View. Of course, my 10-day-old sister and I had to come along, plopped in the baby carriage. Of course, I remember none of this but Ma told me years later.

The day was hot and a little "sticky" (i.e. humid) but better than being inside with no AC. The Rutland Avenue dust was pretty settled. Once at the top of the rickety old LeRoy Avenue railroad bridge, they could see to the east, past Pennsylvania Avenue and the Tamarack swamp that would be the site of the future Willow Glen School. Ma had heard about plans for that school, and that influenced their choice of a home to buy. I doubt that she envisioned herself as president of the local PTA and Cub Scout den mother to a pack of local boys, myself among them.

Walking along the Denton Avenue stretch was a bit of a relief. It was "suburbanized" and thankfully, well shaded. From there it was north on "K.K." to the Legion Post. Pa voted and left to catch the bus for work. Ma voted and chatted a while with other young mothers about their babies. There were more children than just my sister and me at the voting station. Ma didn't remember a bake sale.

At any rate the final tally: 1,069 pro incorporation to 329 against. The State chartered the new polity the next day. And a month later Wisconsin Secretary of the State Fred Zimmerman presented said charter to the town clerk Henry Rajchel at the Legion Post. The event featured "free beer and door prizes" and was held on Sunday, so it was fairly well attended. I don't know if my folks attended, but eventually the chicken coops disappeared and city water was hooked up. Rutland Avenue was slightly tended to by "oiling"---the spreading of a thin layer of asphalt over the dirt. A local school was built, so the folks were satisfied.



Top: Eva and John Koniar tending to the cattle. Home in background belonged to John Eichstadt (looking west of Koniar farm) at 4530 S. Whitnall Avenue. Photo courtesy of Carol Wagner



Willow Glen School

James Heinz is returning with a new story!!

You may remember James Heinz's presentation in June 2023 about Lake Michigan shipwrecks? If you attended, you most likely really enjoyed the presentation.

If you didn't make that presentation, you have another chance to hear James speak about a totally different, very interesting topic.

Saturday, April 19, James will present "**Famous People Who Lived In Milwaukee.**"

This presentation will be at 10:15 am after our board meeting. Location is in the council chambers at the St. Francis Civic Center, 3400 E. Howard Avenue. Free to the public. Delicious homemade refreshments will be served.

Hope to see you there!!!

James Heinz is a retired police officer, scuba diver, pilot, and amateur historian who says he is fascinated by how the world came to be what it is, and the people who made it that way.



Photos of the John and Eva Koniar Family Farm mentioned in George's article

by Anna Passante

John and Eva Koniar were born in a small village in Czechoslovakia. It was common to divide the family land among the children, but with four siblings, John's share was quite small. Subsequently, he decided to immigrate to America, the land of opportunity. His wife, Eva, and two children remained back in the old country, while John made his way to America around 1914. He purchased 10 acres of farmland in the Town of Lake at present-day 4554 West Whitnall Avenue. By 1920, John was able to send for his family. The Koniar family raised chickens, pigs, and cows. The farm, now reduced to four acres, has stayed in the Koniar family. Granddaughter Carol Wagner now resides there. She has great memories of her grandparent's farm, especially the strawberry patch that yielded enough fruit to set up a fruit stand on Whitnall Avenue.



Top left : children by the Koniar barn smelling the flowers
Bottom left: hay time
Bottom right: the Koniar girls
All three photos are courtesy of Carol Wagner.





St. Francis Historical Society
3400 E. Howard Ave.
St. Francis, WI 53235

2025 Officers

President..... Anna Passante
Vice-President..... George Ramponi
Secretary.....Bill Drehfal
Treasurer.....Stephanie Maxwell

Board of Directors

Jan Pientok
Mary Drehfal
Jay Wesner
Randy Borland
Julliet Hills

Honorary

Ralph Voltner
Kathy Matthew
Carol Wojtecki

Newsletter

Anna Passante

Mark Your Calendar

Meetings at the St. Francis Civic Center at 3400 E. Howard Ave.:

The monthly board meetings are the 3rd Saturday of the month at 9:30 a.m. Visitors welcomed.

March 15, 2025

April 19, 2025

May 17, 2025

Upcoming events (see "What's New" column for details)

Facebook: St. Francis Historical Society

Email: st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Address: 3400 E. Howard Ave.

Website: stfranciswihistoricalsociety.org

Phone: 414-316-4391