

History of St. Gabriel's Cemetery

"Settlement began at Prairie du Chien in the 1770's. Most of the early residents of the prairie were French-speaking people from the Illinois Country and Lower Canada (Quebec). They were Roman Catholics and continued to practice their faith in this remote region. Periodically a family would travel to St. Louis or Michilimackinac and have their marriage blessed and children baptized. In the early 1800's Prairie du Chien became part of the Diocese of Bardstown, and the bishop saw the need to send missionaries to the "four French congregations settled in the midst of the Indians." In 1817 the first Catholic missionary arrived at Prairie du Chien and for the next twenty-four years other missionaries came to the prairie to minister to the needs of the congregation. These included Father Samuel Mazzuchelli.

Father Mazzuchelli established the parish of St. Gabriel's and in 1836 began the construction of a stone church for the parish. Father Mazzuchelli must have made an impression upon the residents of Prairie du Chien, Catholic and those of other faiths. This included Strange Powers, a Protestant. In February 1836 Powers gave to the Bishop of Detroit a gift of land. The property was part of Farm Lot No. 28, which Powers owned, and measured 360 feet by 360 feet square. Mazzuchelli chose a site on the western edge of the property for the location of the church. No plan was made for a cemetery, and the cemetery on the road between the Village of St. Friole and the Upper Village [Frenchtown Cemetery] continued to be used for burials. Prairie du Chien had been made part of the Diocese of Dubuque.

In 1840 Bishop Loras assigned the first pastor to the parish of St. Gabriel's. This was Father Augustin Ravoux. Upon arrival, Ravoux established a record book. In this he recorded baptisms, marriages, and deaths and burials. St. Gabriel's was now an organized parish. It seems that it was Ravoux who drew a plan of the cemetery and included in his sketch an entrance flanked by spires. This drawing and the location of the earliest burials indicate that the cemetery stood some ways back behind the church to the northeast, with the entrance facing north. Once thru the entrance, gravesites were located on each side of the path that ran to the north. Plots were purchased by Joseph Brisbois, Mr. Powers, P & L Barrette, O Cherrier, Labathe, Chenevert, Lariviere, and other French-speaking people. Those early graves are unmarked today but are located to the north of the prie dieu that stands in front of the memorial to Rev. Peter Becker."

Source: May Elise Antoine, 2008 for the Prairie du Chien Historical Society