

The “Real” Painting

In the story of “The Stibich Family of Johnstown, Pennsylvania,” which can be found online at (www.stibich.cjsquare.com - p 9), I discussed the painting donated by Joseph Stibich to St. Mary's Church in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I believed the painting had been found (The Last Supper) at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Only recently has the real story come to light.

Save Our Steeples, a volunteer, non-profit group of concerned citizens of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is dedicated to preserving the ethnic, cultural and religious heritage of Cambria City, a national historic district located in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

In response to the announcement from the Catholic Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown that three of the five Roman Catholic Churches in Cambria City would be closed in July 2009, the group undertook the task of preserving the closed church buildings and contents for their historic and cultural value.

Recently Barbara Zaborowski, Ph.D.,¹ Associate Dean for Learning Resources at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, who is also involved with Save Our Steeples, was contacted by members of the Benedictine Sisters of Pittsburgh regarding a painting and its history and connection with the Stibich family.

We met with Dr. Zaborowski and Steve Biter, event manager for the Grand Halle in August 2014, and learned the story of the “real” painting and its place in Stibich history.

History

Joseph Stibich (b. 29 Mar 1827 in Texeddern, Bavaria, Germany; d. 05 May 1905 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania), was drafted into the Union Army, 67th P.V.I. Company C on November 18, 1864, and was involved in several battles and skirmishes and was present at Appomatox for Lee's surrender.

Joseph could have paid a bounty to avoid service in the army, but felt responsible if anything happened to his replacement. He made a vow that if he survived the Civil War, he would donate all his money to the Catholic Church. The church refused his money, but accepted a large painting for St. Mary's Church in Cambria City. This church built in 1859 was destroyed in the Johnstown Flood of 1889.

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association, in going through old lantern slides, found a photo of St. Mary's German Church that clearly shows the painting of the Virgin Mary above the

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high altar. You can also see the high water mark at the base of the statutes, showing how the painting escaped damage in the flood.



St. Mary's Catholic Church, Cambria City, Pennsylvania
after 1889 flood. Painting hung above main altar.

Cambria City Churches

Cambria City, located at Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is a national historic district consisting of ten square blocks. Each distinct immigrant group that settled in the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s founded its own church, totaling five different churches. (In this document we refer to three churches—the original St. Mary's Church destroyed by the flood, the replacement church also named St. Mary's, and finally the Church of the Immaculate Conception.)

St. Mary's Church was dedicated on December 8, 1859, in honor of the Immaculate

Conception of the Blessed Virgin. After the church was destroyed on May 31, 1889, a new two-story building was erected in 1891. On the first floor were classrooms, while the second floor was the new St. Mary's Church.

“According to the 125th anniversary book of Immaculate Conception Church (formerly St. Mary's), ‘The main altar was the original one from the old church but it had been remodeled and painted.’ *It was during the remodel that Mary, one of Joseph Stibich's daughters gets the painting of the Blessed Virgin and gives it to her sister Elizabeth, also known as Sr. Benedicta, for her convent in Pittsburgh. This is how the Benedictine order acquires the painting.*”²

Then in 1906, the cornerstone was laid for the magnificent Church of the Immaculate Conception. One of the large transept windows, *The Adoration of the Magi and the Shepherds*, was donated by John Stibich, as well as a side window.

The stained glass window, titled *Apparation of the Sacred Heart*, was donated by Mrs. Catherine Saly (sister to William Stibich), in memory of Joseph and Margaret Stibich (her parents).



The Adoration of the Magi
and the Shepherds



Apparition of the
Sacred Heart

²From pamphlet titled “The Story of the Painting of St. Mary” used at exhibit commemorating 125th anniversary of the 1889 Johnstown Flood.

Immaculate Conception Closes

In the process of closing the church, the altar, pews and other items of Catholic worship were removed from the building. The former Immaculate Conception Church building is now known as the The Grand Halle on Broad Street, and is used for banquets, receptions and other activities. The magnificent organ remains intact along with the beautiful windows. The facility is indeed an ideal location for weddings (none of which are Catholic).

In July 2013 the Save our Steeples group was contacted by the Benedictine Sisters in Pittsburgh, explaining that they were downsizing and moving to more modern facilities. They offered the painting of St. Mary to the group. With two maintenance men and a rented van, Dr. Zaborowski traveled to Pittsburgh and retrieved the painting.



The Grand Halle
Broad Street, Cambria City, PA



Grand Halle

The Save Our Steeples group hopes to obtain a grant to restore the painting of St. Mary. It was stored for many years on a back porch of the convent in Pittsburgh. It has suffered some damage, and perhaps the name of the painter will be revealed when the back is removed for repairs. After restoration, plans are to hang the painting, with the story of its history, in an alcove to be constructed just outside the main hall.



Dr. Barbara Zaborowski and Eleanor Blumenschein

My grateful thanks are extended to Dr. Zaborowski, without whose help the painting would have remained hidden for even longer than 125 years.

Eleanor Blumenschein, August 2014