

# Catholic Church in Hancock County, KY

By Jerry Long  
c.2025



**“Chapter XXXVIII – The Mission of Daviess County”  
The Centenary of Catholicity In Kentucky, Ben. J. Webb,  
Louisville, KY, J. C. Webb & Company, 1884, pp.428-429:**

In connection with the missions of Daviess, are to be noticed those of Hancock and Hopkins counties, the scattered Catholic populations of which, till 1868, were served from Knottsville [St. Lawrence] and Owensboro. In 1871, the handsome stone structure, known as the church of the Immaculate Conception, was erected in the town of Hawesville, Hancock county; and, previous to that date, there had been built at Cloverport the small church of St. Malachy.



**The Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky,  
Diocese of Owensboro, Turner Publishing Company, Paducah, KY, 1995:**

**Chronology of Events (1785-1937):**

- 1828 – St. Lawrence Church, first Catholic church in Daviess Co., built by Rev. Elisha Durbin. (p.20)
- 1850 – St. Columba Church, Lewisport, Hancock Co., dedicated April 26. (p.22)
- 1857 – Permission granted by Bishop Spalding, June 7, to build church in Hawesville, Hancock Co., Immaculate Conception Church, Hawesville, built during the Civil War. [In 1857] St. Malachi Church, Cloverport, Breckinridge Co., built by Rev. Michael Power (1827-1879). (p.22)
- 1879 – St. Thomas Church, Roseville, Hancock Co., built by Rev. Patrick Rock (1850-1924), mission of St. Lawrence, Daviess Co.; area sometimes called Lyonina and/or Pellville; (p.26)
- 1937 – Diocese of Owensboro was created on 9 December 1937 [formerly part of the Diocese of Louisville] (p.33); Rev. William Allard at the time was pastor of the Immaculate Conception and St. Columba Churches (p.94).



**The Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky,**  
**Diocese of Owensboro, Turner Publishing Company, Paducah, KY, 1995:**

Past Parishes, Missions, Schools (p.97)

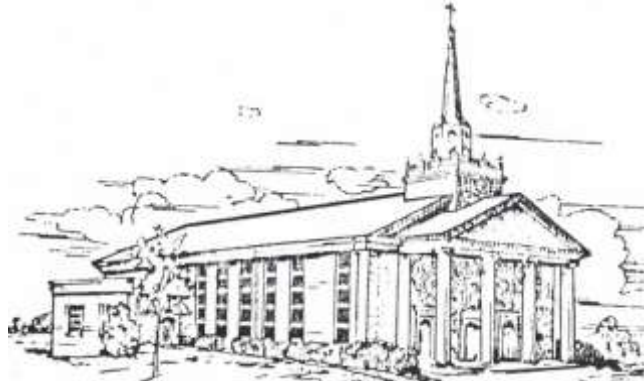
Our Lady of Perpetual Help , Patesville – opened 1848, closed 1983

[correction by J. Long – opened in 1948]

St. Thomas, Hawesville – opened 1879, closed 1964

[correction by J. Long – located at Roseville]

Immaculate Conception Parish – Hawesville (p.109)



Left: Original Immaculate Conception Church, Hawesville. Right: Immaculate Conception, Hawesville, 1958.

This history of the Catholic Church in Hawesville dates back to the earliest days of the county. The immigrants came by boat and ox-drawn wagons to the little village of Hawesville. In those early days a priest stationed many miles away traveled great distances to visit the community several times a year. For services, the Catholic families would gather at the homes of members before the church was built.

In 1854, at the request of Bishop Spalding of Louisville, Father Bede O'Connor who resided at Cannelton, Indiana, began preparations for the construction of a church at Hawesville. On August 17, 1858, Bishop Spalding purchased a lot from Mr. & Mrs. Stephen Powers and Mr. & Mrs. James E. Stone for \$400.00. On this lot was constructed the first church. The building was constructed of hand-hewn stone, a product of this area, by Mr. Bill Snowden. It was completed in 1871.

During most of these earlier years there was no resident pastor at Hawesville. For many years the pastor resided at Cloverport and, due to the large congregation there which required two Masses on Sunday, it was necessary for services to be held at Hawesville on Saturday.

When Fr. Rives became pastor, he was stationed at Reed, Kentucky and commuted by the L&N Railroad, coming to Hawesville on Saturday afternoon, offering Mass at 6:00 AM on Sunday, and returning to Reed on the 7:00 AM train, which enabled him to have Mass there later in the morning.

In 1937 flood did extensive damage to the altar and interior of the church, which necessitated much repair work. During Father Gerst's pastorate, the church was redecorated throughout.

In 1947 Bishop Francis Cotton of the Owensboro Diocese purchased a house and some land from John and Catherine Robbins. The house was repaired and used for a rectory. He appointed Father Anthony Higdon, pastor of Browns Valley, to come to Hawesville to oversee the building of a Catholic elementary school. Through the generosity of the parishioners, the money was obtained and the first Catholic school in Hancock County was dedicated on November 1, 1947, staffed by the Sisters of Loretto whose residence was built over the school. Hawesville received its first assistant priest at this time.

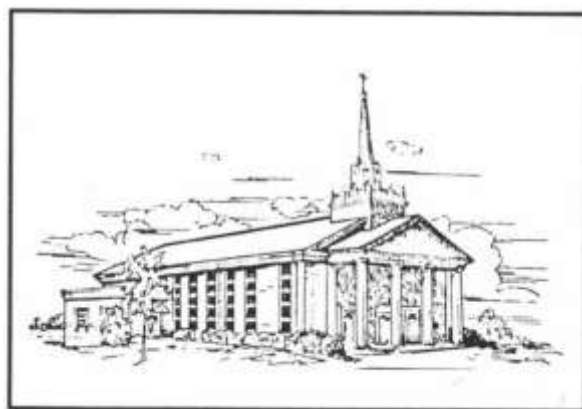
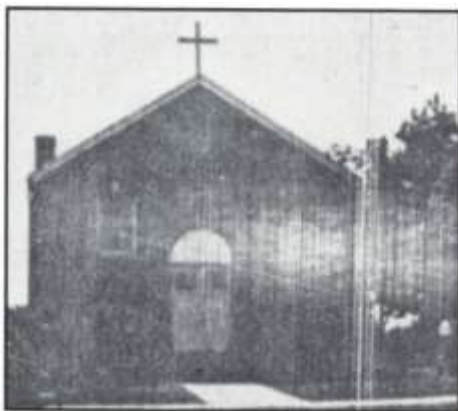
In 1949, under the pastorate of Fr. Anthony Thompkins, a high school was constructed which also included a cafeteria. The parish grew until it became necessary to make plans for the construction of a larger church.

A house and lot were purchased on the east end of Main Street from Mrs. Ella Givens Heavrin in November, 1957. The cornerstone for the new church was laid in September, 1958 and the church was dedicated on February 19, 1959. The stained glass windows from the original church were put into the church.

### St. Columba Parish – Lewisport (p.131)



St. Columba Catholic Church, 1868-1937



Left: St. Columba Catholic Church, 1937-1959. Right: St. Columba Catholic Church, 1959-1989

The first St. Columba Church was built in 1850, on an acre of land donated by Miley Johnson. The land is across from property known as the Claude Roberts Farm. On this site a small log frame church was built. A part of the acre was used as a final resting place for the faithful and is known as the "Old Catholic Cemetery".

The stones in the cemetery reveal that the first person to be buried there was Michael (Miley) Johnson, born October 21, 1820 died March 26, 1864. Other stones of interest are: William Gibbony, native of Ireland, County of Downs; born December 20, died August 5, 1867. Benedict Long, St. Mary's County, Maryland; born July 25, 1816, died August 25, 1877.

The log church served as a place of worship for the Catholics of the whole neighborhood. Because many of the parish were of Scotch-Irish descent and had migrated from St. Mary's County, Maryland and Ireland, may explain the selection of St. Columba, and Irish Saint, as the patron of their small church.

The first church, which at the time was in the Diocese of Louisville, Kentucky was served by Father Rock, who traveled from the St. Lawrence Parish [Knottsville, Daviess County, KY].

August 30, 1867, Bishop Spalding of Louisville, purchased a lot on Pell Street in Lewisport on which the second and third St. Columba Churches would be built. The first church built on Pell Street was a small framed building. This church was served by priests from the St. Rose Church in Cloverport, Kentucky.

Fr. Anthony J. Tompkins was appointed pastor of Immaculate Conception and St. Columba in 1949. Father Tompkins would build the fourth church on a track of land purchased from the Earl Simmons family in 1958. Father Tompkins died May, 1962 while serving as pastor of both churches.

Permission to build the church was granted by the Most Reverend Francis Cotton, Bishop of Owensboro in the spring of 1959. Construction began in April and the cornerstone laid June 29, 1959. The Parish Hall was added, adjacent to the church, by Father Philip Riney in 1968. This large colonial design church would serve the Catholic community of Lewisport until the morning of August 9, 1989 when it was destroyed by fire which started in the electrical wiring.

The parish is now in the process of rebuilding. In the summer of 1990 the Most Reverend John J. McRaith, Bishop of Owensboro, directed that planning for the new building should begin. July of 1990 the Parish Council appointed Denny Long and Doris Marsch to chair a core committee with Father Emil Schuway, C.P.P.S., Pastor for the planning of the new St. Columba Church which is to be constructed on the site where the fourth St. Columba Church stood.



**The Catholic Community of  
St. Columba, Lewisport, KY  
Immaculate Conception, Hawesville, KY**  
<https://icschurch.org/catholic-cemetery>

Immaculate Conception Church – Hawesville

In the days before the first Church was built, services for the Catholic families in Hawesville would be held at the homes of its members.

In 1854, at the request of Bishop Spalding of Louisville, Father Bede O'Connor, who resided in Cannelton, Indiana, began preparations for the construction of a church in Hawesville.

On August 17, 1858, Bishop Spalding purchased a lot from Mr. and Mrs. Steven Powers and Mr. and Mrs. James Stone at the price of \$400.00. The building was constructed of hand-hewn stone, a product of this area, by Mr. Bill Snowden. The church was completed in 1871.

During most of those earlier years, there was no resident pastor at Hawesville. For many years the pastor resided in Cloverport, and due to the large congregation there, which required two Masses on Sunday, it was necessary for services in Hawesville be held on Saturday.

Later when Fr. Rives became pastor, he was stationed in Reed, Kentucky and commuted by L & N Railroad. He would arrive in Hawesville on Saturday afternoon, offer Mass at 6:00 am Sunday, and then return home on the 7:00 am train, which enabled him to have Mass in Reed later in the morning.

In 1937, floodwaters did extensive damage to the altar and the interior of the church, which necessitated much repair work. During Fr. Gerst's pastorate, the church was redecorated throughout.

In 1947, Bishop Francis Cotton purchased a house and some land from John and Catherine Robbins. The home became the rectory. He appointed Fr. Higdon, pastor of Browns Valley, to come to Hawesville to oversee the building of the Catholic Elementary School. Through generosity of parishioners, the first Catholic School in Hancock County was dedicated on November 1, 1947, staffed by the Sisters of Loretto, whose residence was built over the school. Hawesville received its first assistant priest at this time, Fr. Walter Hancock.

In 1949, under the pastorate of Fr. Anthony Thompkins, a high school was constructed.

As the parish grew, a house and lot were purchased from Mrs. Ella Givens Heavern in November of 1957. The cornerstone for the new and larger church was laid in September 1958, and the church was dedicated in February 19, 1959. The stained glass windows from the original church were placed in the new church.

In May of 1969 the High School was closed and in 1992 so was the Elementary School. In 1995 the church offices were relocated to the High School building. A new rectory was purchased and the old one torn down. On that site next to the church a new Parish Hall was constructed in 1999.

Our faith has been strong, and we are thankful to God. We pray that our faith may continue to grow for generations to come.

#### St. Columba Church – Lewisport

Like many rural Catholic communities, the families of Lewisport met in each other's homes for services until 1850, when the first church was built. The land was donated by Miley Johnson located just outside Lewisport. Adjacent to the log church was a cemetery in which several of the earliest faithful are buried. This is still known as the "Old Catholic Cemetery." A majority of the parishioners were of Scots-Irish descent and had migrated from St. Mary's County in Maryland and from Ireland. This may explain why St. Columba, an Irish Saint, was chosen as patron of the church. Fr. Rock, who traveled from St. Lawrence Parish, served the church.

In August 1867, Bishop Spaulding of Louisville purchased a lot in Lewisport to relocate the church to town. It was then served by priests from the St. Rose Parish in Cloverport. In 1925, because of the scarcity of priests in the diocese, and the small number of Catholics in the community, the church was closed. Fr. Joseph Rives, who served Immaculate Conception in Hawesville, and St. Augustine in Reed, reopened the church in 1928.

In 1936, Fr. D. Thomas became pastor, traveling from St. Anthony's Parish in Browns Valley. It was his task to rebuild the church after the 1937 flood. The third church was a small

brick building served by priests from the Cathedral of St. Stephen from 1937 to 1940. Fr. Anthony Higdon then became pastor for both St. Columba and Immaculate Conception in Hawesville.

In 1949 Fr. Anthony Thompkins was appointed pastor and was instrumental in building the fourth church from land purchased from Earl Simmons. The cornerstone was laid on June 29, 1959. This church served the community until August 9, 1989 when it was destroyed by an electrical fire. The community then met in the Parish Hall that had been built in 1968 and fortunately had not been burned.

On August 9, 1992 the new church was dedicated. The pastor at the time was Fr. William Allard. In 2000, religious education classrooms were added to the church by Fr. Tony Bickett to serve the growing community. We are proud of our heritage, and grateful for the faith passed on to us. Together we walk forward to spread the Kingdom of God.



**The Record, Official Organ of the Diocese of Louisville,  
Louisville, KY, 31 October 1912:**

Knottsville, KY.

The Right Reverend Bishop Confirms Large Classes  
at St. William's and St. Thomas.

On Monday, October 21st, the church of St. William's Knottsville, was crowded with its members, many of whom were to receive Confirmation after low Mass, which was said by Rev. Lucian Clements, of St. Lawrence....

... In the afternoon of the same day, Monday October 21st. the Rev. Bishop, [Msgr. Denis O'Donaghue] went to St. Thomas – a mission church of St. Lawrence, Daviess County, where he administered Confirmation to a class of fifty. St. Thomas is in Hancock County, near the village formerly known as Roseville, but now usually called Lyonia.

If the writer is not mistaken, this was the first visit of a Bishop to the neat white frame church of St. Thomas. Words of exhortation were given to the Catholics in regard to the faithful practice of their holy Faith, by their pastor, Father Clements, and also by the Rt. Rev. Bishop. Many non-Catholics, who were deeply interested in the great and impressive ceremonies, were in attendance.

On the following Tuesday morning the Right Rev. Bishop administered Confirmation to a class of one hundred and fifty, at St. Lawrence. The Right Rev. Bishop addressed those to be confirmed in fatherly words.

St. Lawrence is a beautiful country brick church, nestled back in the hills of the Eastern part of Daviess County, with its natural forest hitching ground on the South and North, with its beautiful cemetery between the church on the West, and its lovely Calvary near the central part, in plain view, and which, in the last year or two, was remodeled by Father Clements. St. Lawrence is the pioneer church of Daviess County, the present edifice being the third building. It is now under a course of repair. The first church was built in 1828.

Knottsville, Ky., October 22, 1912.





**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 1 October 1939, p.10A:**



Dedication of St. Columba's church, Lewisport, will take place Wednesday morning, October 4, with the Most Reverend Francis R. Cotton, D. D., Bishop of Owensboro, officiating. The new building, a fine brick structure, replaces the church building that was badly damaged during the 1937 flood.

Ceremonies will start with the dedication at 10 a.m. by Bishop Cotton to be followed with a solemn high mass, the pastor, the Rev. D. R. Thomas of Browns Valley, celebrant. The sermon will be preached by the Rev. J. J. Egan, pastor of St. William's church, Knottsville. Music will be provided by the choir from St. Anthony's church, Browns Valley.

Following the ceremonies, dinner will be served to members of the clergy on the church grounds.

St. Columba's parish is a mission of St. Anthony's parish, Browns Valley, the same pastor serving both. There are from 25 to 30 families in the parish. The new building was erected on the site of the old church. A red brick structure, the new church is modern and fully equipped in every respect.

Clergy from throughout the diocese will attend the services. Mrs. C. S. Hayden, Jr., organist, Browns Valley, will accompany the choir.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 16 February 1959, p.14:**

HAWESVILLE - The Most Rev. Francis R. Cotton, Bishop of Owensboro, is to dedicate the new Church of the Immaculate Conception Thursday, February 19. Following the 10:30 a.m. blessing and dedication ceremony, the Rev. A. J. Tompkins will celebrate High Mass. The Right Rev. Paul Deery, of Vincennes, Ind., will make the dedicatory address.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 18 December 1959, p.12:**

ST. COLUMBA – This new Catholic church at Lewisport, Ky., was dedicated Thursday. It was named for a sainted Irish abbot, a brother of St. Brigid another Irish patron. The church is the fourth to be erected in the parish. It replaces another built during the depression years which has been outgrown. Pastor of the church is Father A. J. Tompkins. His assistant is Father Leonard

Reisz. Both live in Hawesville. Bishop Francis R. Cotton presided at the dedication. A dinner followed at the parish school in Hawesville.



St. Columba Catholic Church



**Hancock 29: Pictorial Heritage of Hancock County, Kentucky,**  
**Robert A. Powell, ed. (Lexington, KY: Kentucky Images, 1978) p.22:**



Old Immaculate Conception Church

Artist - Charles Spaulding

Original Painting sponsored by Hawesville Woman's Club

On August 17, 1858, Bishop Martin J. Spalding of Louisville purchased a lot from Mr. & Mrs. Stephen Powers and Mr. & Mrs. James E. Stone for \$400. The lot was 80 by 212 feet.



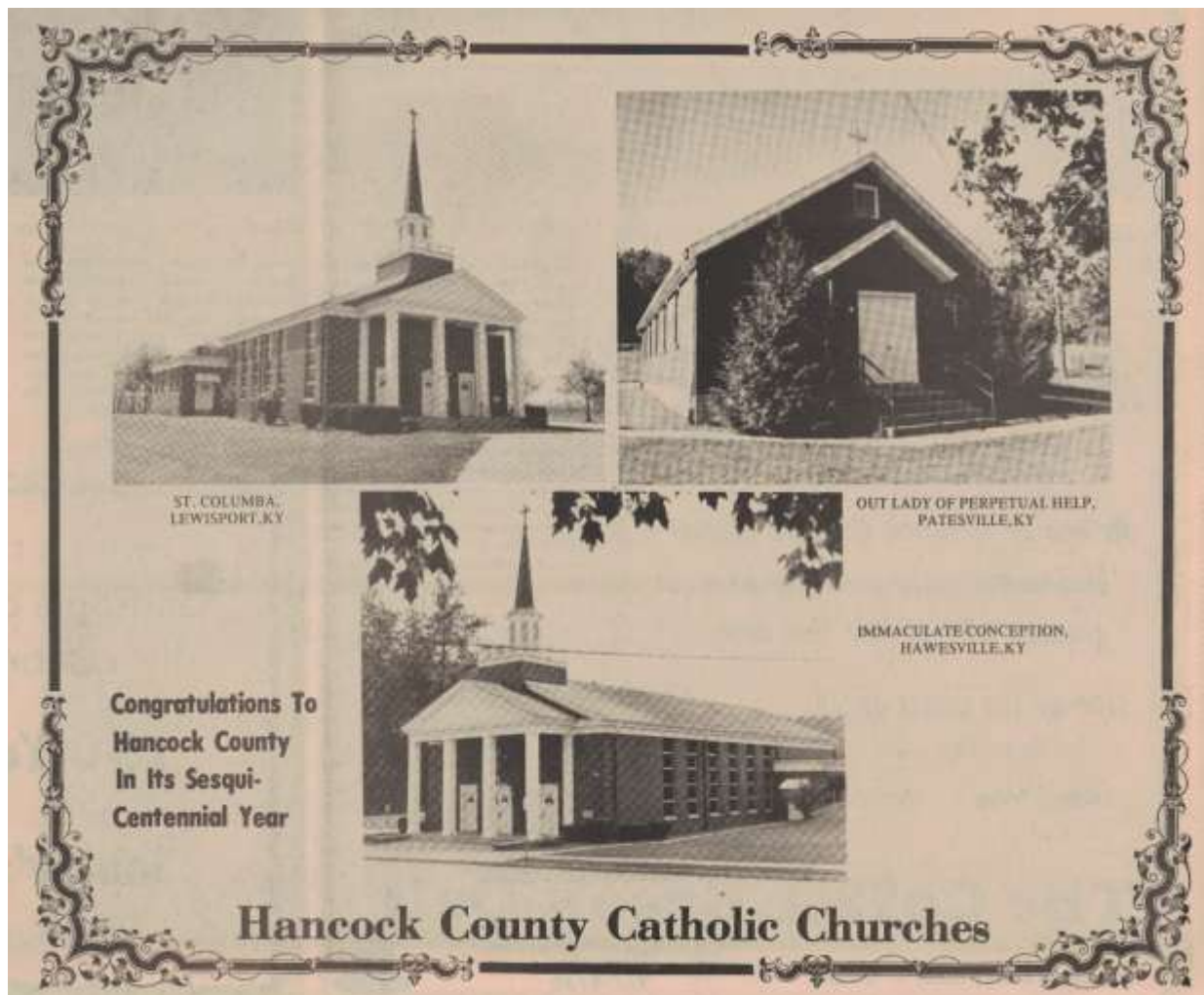
On this lot, located in the west end of Hawesville overlooking the Ohio River, was constructed the first Immaculate Conception Church of Hawesville. The building was constructed of hand-hewn rock, a product of this area. It was hewed and hollowed by Bill Snowden.

The original Church was completed in 1871. The 1937 flood did extensive damage to the altar and the interior of the Church.

The new Immaculate Conception Church was built in 1958-59. The stained glass windows from the original Church were placed in the new building. These windows were given in memory of Patrick and Margaret Kelly, J. P. Elder, the Minnett family, the Frank Herzog family, Ike C. Adair, Mary Elizabeth and Pope McAdams, the Hagman family, and Lawrence and Frances Walz.



**Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, 6 September 1979, Sesqui-Centennial Edition:**



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 30 May 1983, p.1C:**

## Last church service 'sadder than I thought it would be'



The Rev. Steve Dunn proceeds up the center aisle of Our Lady of Perpetual Church Sunday morning.

By Mary Ann Roser, Messenger-Inquirer

PATESVILLE - For one last time, they sang and prayed with people they called their family at a place many of them called home.

Members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in this rural Hancock County community bid each other farewell Sunday with gentle hugs, quiet words and an occasional tear as they celebrated their last Mass together.

The red brick church that had been serving the faithful in rural Hancock and Daviess counties was being closed after 35 years because of declining attendance and a shortage of priests to staff it.

For the past year there had been talk about closing the small church. So when the Most Rev. John McRaith, bishop of Owensboro, announced May 17 in a special service at the church that it would close Sunday after the regular 7:30 a.m. Mass, no one was surprised.

But everyone was sorry.

"This really seems like my family here," said Virginia Newton, 67, of Patesville. She had been a member of the church since it opened. "It's like a home to me," she said.

"The spirit of oneness here you can't beat anywhere," agreed the Rev. Steve Dunn, who celebrated the final Mass. "I'll miss it."

The plan is to sell the church after a year elapses, unless a priest is found to staff it regularly. But that isn't likely to happen, Dunn said, and by then, most of the congregation will be settled into new parishes.

On Sunday, the church was full with 40 in the congregation – about 15 more than usual. Many of them came to say goodbye and to share their feelings as they had done so many times before.

"I wish I had some specific words to make what I'm saying a little easier," Dunn said as he opened his sermon. He stood beside the front pew, talking and looking at the people who had become his special friends in his 1 ½ years at the church. The 38-year-old priest knew all of their names and seemed to know what was on their minds.

"I hope everyone is reconciled to the church's closing," he went on. "I'd like to thank you all for your witness of faith. ... Your faithful ness is one reason why the church has stayed open as long as it has."

He then asked church members to share their feelings. But the congregation was silent, reflective. Outside, a rooster crowed and a lone bird chirped.

And then, one by one, members told how they had enjoyed the warmth of a small church and how they would miss that.

"I think it's a sad morning for all of us," one woman said.

"I was thinking that, too." Dunn said softly. "It's sadder than I thought it would be."

Wally Harris, 42, of Dukes sat with his family and said he would miss the "closeness" of attending a church "where everybody knows everyone else."

Before Mass, Harris talked about the times he and his wife had come to the church on Saturday nights to turn on the heat in the winter and how he had helped with the maintenance work. He had been a member of the church for 15 years, he said.

One woman said she had come from a larger parish before joining the congregation at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. "I found out I liked the small church better," she said.

Charlotte Payne, 32, of Knottsville said earlier that she made her first communion at the church and hated to see it close. "I don't know where I'm going to go now," she said. "I've always liked it here so much."

Most of the congregation will begin attending churches in Hawesville, Lewisport, Knottsville and Whitesville. Dunn is leaving Hancock County to join the staff at St. Mary's in Whitesville. A second priest who celebrated Mass at the church, the Rev. Jerry Riney of Owensboro, is being transferred to Fancy Farm.

"I hope you all have enriched each other's lives and that we can get back together again," Dunn said. He ended the sermon and offered a prayer "for each one of us as we move on."

[Note: Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church, in Patesville, KY was blessed and dedicated during 1948-1949.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 17 November 1983, p.9C:**

ABSOLUTE SALE

AUCTION

Saturday, Nov. 19

11:00 A.M.

Location: Patesville, Ky. 10 miles from Hawesville on Highway 144.

This sale is to liquidate surplus property in our parrish.

The property is Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church and grounds.

Father McCabe, pastor

Brick Structure + 4.435 Acres



The building has 1,560 square feet of floor space plus entry and back porch. There is a partial basement for storage and the heating plant (gas), Blacktop drive services the church from Highway 144. New survey provides for 4.435 acres of land. No water on property.

Realtors Note: This property is in good condition and offers unlimited utility. This is an absolute sale, the highest bidder sets the price.

Charles M. King

TERMS: 10% down, balance with deed or within 30 days from sale date.

INSPECTION: Call The Office For Assistance

Announcements Made Day Of Sale Take Precedence Over Printed Matter

Century 21.

KING REAL ESTATE & UCTION CO.

CHARLES M. KING, Realtor – GRI, 927-8997 or 9227-6693

DELBERT L. BASHAM – Auctioneer, 295-6500 or 295-3855



### **Diocese of Owensboro Archives**

The Diocese of Owensboro Archives is located in the McRaith Catholic Center, (next to Saint Stephen Cathedral) 600 Locust Street, Owensboro, KY 42301, phone 270-683-1545, [archives@pastoral.org](mailto:archives@pastoral.org)

The Archives currently holds registers that contain sacramental records for several parishes that are now closed or merged with other parishes. For Hancock County they house the following parish records:

#### **Hancock County**

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patesville: Baptisms, 1949-1983  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patesville: Marriages, 1950-1969  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patesville: First Communion, 1949-1958  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patesville: Confirmations, 1950-1978, 1996  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Patesville: Deaths, 1952-1979



### **Catholic Cemeteries in Hancock County**

- Mt. / Mount Calvary Cemetery, Hawesville – Cemetery is 2 miles southwest of Hawesville on the Park Road (Hwy 1847). The Hawesville Catholic Cemetery was originally known as the Walz family cemetery – oldest engraved monument is 1870. Obituaries and death certificates for those buried here prior to 1962 list the name of the cemetery as the Walz Cemetery. See listing of gravestones in the “Walz” Cemetery in the book, Hancock County, Kentucky Cemeteries Volume 1 (Owensboro, KY: West-Central Kentucky Family Research Association, 1974, pp.72-73). The obituary of Nikki LeeAnn Roberts in the Messenger-Inquirer (Owensboro, KY, 28 November 1962, p.12A), reports that graveside

services for her were to be in the “Mount Calvary Catholic Cemetery.” The obituary of Elijah F. Wheatley (Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 8 September 1963, p.16A) gave the place of burial was in the “Calvary (Walz) Cemetery.”



- St. Columba Cemetery, Lewisport – About 2 miles east of Lewisport turn north from Highway 60 onto Roberts Lane; cemetery is about one-half mile. The oldest engraved tombstone in cemetery is for Nathaniel Blandford, who died on 25 July 1853 at age of 74.



St. Columba Cemetery

- St. Thomas Cemetery, Roseville – The full name of the cemetery is St. Thomas Aquinas Cemetery. Cemetery is located 2 miles west of Roseville, KY. Take Highway 69 south from Hawesville to Roseville, turn west on Pellville Road and go 2 miles. Charles Louis Payne (1838-1900) in 1882 donated the land for a new Catholic church, St. Thomas, near Roseville. The oldest marked grave in the cemetery is for his wife, Rachel Priscilla (Beavin) Payne (1844-1883). St. Thomas was a mission church of the St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Daviess County, KY. The early records of St. Thomas were recorded at its parent church, St. Lawrence. The St. Thomas Church was closed in 1964.



St. Thomas Cemetery





**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 10 August 1989, pp.1A & 8A:**



Lewisport firefighters spray water on the burned shell of St. Columba Catholic Church in Lewisport at about 10 a.m. Wednesday. The cause of the fire is unknown.

### **Parish mourns Lewisport church destroyed by fire**

By Dana Albrecht, Messenger-Inquirer

LEWISPORT – Zita Johnson, 79, took one look at the black shell that used to be her church and cried. "It meant everything to me," she said between sobs. "I had my First Communion there."

Other members fought back tears as they watched smoke curl upward from the soggy rubble of the St. Columba Catholic Church after it was destroyed by fire Wednesday morning.

The Lewisport Fire Department responded to the fire call at about 9:55 a.m., but Chief P.J. Froelich said the church "was fully engulfed by flames coming out the roof and windows" by the time firefighters arrived. Only the outside walls, porch and steeple survived.

The cause of the fire is unknown, Froelich said. A fire investigator from Frankfort will arrive this morning to search through the remains, he said.

The fire burned from the inside out and "had probably been smoldering for a few hours," Froelich said. Fire departments from Hawesville, Yelvington and Maceo also helped battle the blaze.

No one was in the church at the time of the fire, and there were no injuries. The mission church, attended by about 170 families, is open every day, but no one lives there.

The church "is a total loss," said Froelich, also a St. Columba member. "It's going to have to be built from the ground up."

St. Columba's priest, the Rev. Emil Schuwey, has his office in Hawesville, where he is also pastor of Immaculate Conception Church. He is on his way back from a retreat near Columbus, Ohio, and should arrive this morning, said Shirley Hagman, parish secretary for Hancock County Catholic churches.



Firefighters were extinguishing small fires on the steeple and back wall around 12:15 p.m., and were keeping an eye on walls weakened by the fire.

The church was built in 1959 to replace a smaller one. It housed a cornerstone and statues from the old church, a fairly new organ and refinished oak pews.

Those things are irreplaceable, members at the site said. They now lie in black heaps, contrasting sharply with the white cross above the gaping doorway.

"You can't express in words what it means to the Catholics in the community to lose St. Columba," said Mary Emmick, also a member.

Another church probably will be built, some members said. But nothing will be decided until Schuway returns. The meeting hall behind the church wasn't damaged and may be used for services, they said.

Services are held Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and sometimes in evenings during the week. On Monday, Johnson said, she "had just dropped by to pray," but no one else was there.

After hearing about the fire, church member Jennifer Payne, 20, "felt scared," she said. She and her 22-year-old fiancé, Russell Duty of Owensboro, were set to be married at 1 p.m. Saturday at St. Columba.

"I was really worried we wouldn't be able to have the wedding," said Payne, of Lewisport. This weekend is the couple's last chance because they must pack and move to Lexington, Va., by Aug. 21, when Duty starts college there.

But Payne said her mother got the wedding moved to St. Pius X Catholic Church on U.S. 60 east of Owensboro. Schuway will perform the ceremony.

David Vance, 23, lives near the church and arrived at the fire scene after seeing the smoke. He was a server for the church until age 16 and played the organ and sang in the choir.

St. Columba "means a lot to everybody," Vance said. His eyes grew misty as he gazed at the ruined church. "My childhood's gone."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 11 August 1989, p.1C:**

Caption to picture: Fire investigation – Inspectors study the area around the altar at St. Columba Church Thursday morning. The fire that destroyed the Lewisport church Wednesday was caused by a malfunction in an electrical box behind the altar, said the city's fire chief, P.J. Froelich. The box powered overhead spotlights. Church services will be held in the meeting hall behind St. Columba. No decision on rebuilding has been made.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 19 April 1992, p.1C:**

**Memories will linger  
even if Hancock's only  
Catholic school closes**

By Laura Skillman, Messenger-Inquirer

Scrapbooks on Jack Allard's dining table represent the past eight years of life at Immaculate Conception School. He only wishes they contained more. "

It's just a hobby, not a job or anything," said the Hancock County farmer, who took many of the pictures and wrote articles in the books. "Someday, they'll probably be important to somebody."

Now that Hancock County's only Catholic school seems destined to close at the end of this year, the papers saved by Allard could become valuable pieces of history.

"Most people that know much about it – helped construct it – are gone," he said.

The Catholic school at Hawesville first opened in 1947 as an elementary, with the high school opening in 1952. The high school operated for 17 years and the original two buildings are still there.

When school opened in September 1947, the building wasn't complete and the door was blocked by construction debris.

"Kids had to crawl through the windows to get into the classrooms," Allard said. "A lot, a lot, of local labor went into it. It shows how times have changed. People now would rather give money and say 'don't bother me.'"

"I think it's a crying shame," he said of the school's closing. Allard's eight children all attended school there.

"Times have changed. We used to have all these kids, a high school, an elementary school and our own bus," he said.

The elementary hit its peak around 1980 with 122 students, he said. For about a three- or four year stretch, the numbers didn't change much. But after 1985, enrollment started to drop.

"I wonder sometimes what happened," said Allard, a member of St. Columba Catholic Church in Lewisport.

To get in enough class time for the school to be accredited by the state, daily Mass was stopped, Allard said. "I think it started going downhill then."

For a time, the school provided its own transportation for students by running a bus from Hawesville to Maceo. Later, students rode buses operated by the county school system.

The school's enrollment is about 26 students in grades one through eight and the parish council at Immaculate Conception has recommended it be closed. The Most Rev. John J. McRaith, bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro, must approve the closure. McRaith said he has received the recommendation but has not acted on it yet.

The bishop said small schools sometimes find it hard financially to keep operating, he said.

"I certainly hate to see schools close," McRaith said. "Financially it is very costly when you consider they are paying taxes" and paying for the operation of the Catholic school.

Allard said some think little schools aren't good, but that can't be said about Immaculate Conception. As any proud father, he points to his own children as examples. There's a dentist, nurse and pharmacist in the family, among other occupations. The youngest is still in high school.

"I wish they could hang on," Allard said. "I think eventually, the pendulum will swing back."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 22 June 1992, pp.1C & 4C:**

## Push to keep school open falls short

By Laura Skillman, Messenger-Inquirer

Last-ditch efforts to save Hancock County's only Catholic school have fallen short, and after 45 years, it will not reopen this fall.

That means the parish counsel of Immaculate Conception in Hawesville has to make plans for what it will do with the building.

"Right now, we will maintain it," said Alan Murphy, council president. "We're going to keep it up just in case something happens down the road."

The cafeteria in the elementary school will continue to be used for meals for the day-care center operated in an adjacent building. That building was once a part of the Catholic school program in Hawesville when both a high school and elementary were open there.

The elementary school building, built in 1947, must be maintained or it will soon be run down, Murphy said.

"All the books will be put in one room and kept," Murphy said. "We'll use the other rooms for CCD (religion) classes."

Rumors about the impending closure of the small school have circulated for years. Earlier this year, the decision was made to close the facility that has taught children in grades one through eight.

Declining enrollment played a major role in the decision to close. Last year only 26 children attended the school.

After announcements were made of the closing, some members of the church mounted an effort to try to increase enrollment. Enrolling 40 students would have kept it open again this year.

"They worked really hard," said Joe O'Bryan, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Owensboro. "It was a tremendous effort, but they didn't make the goal."

O'Bryan said the enrollment goal of 40 was set by the parish counsel in conjunction with the Most Rev. John J. McRaith, Bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro.

John McCarty of Hawesville was one of the parents trying to keep the school open. He said he tried to get the diocese to keep it open as an alternative.

"The basic problem is numbers," he said.

O'Bryan said he hates to see a school close - especially in a case like Immaculate Conception's. It is the only Catholic school in the county.

"We hope to work something out where they can attend another Catholic school," he said.

That would mean either going to Daviess or Breckinridge counties, where the nearest Catholic schools are available.

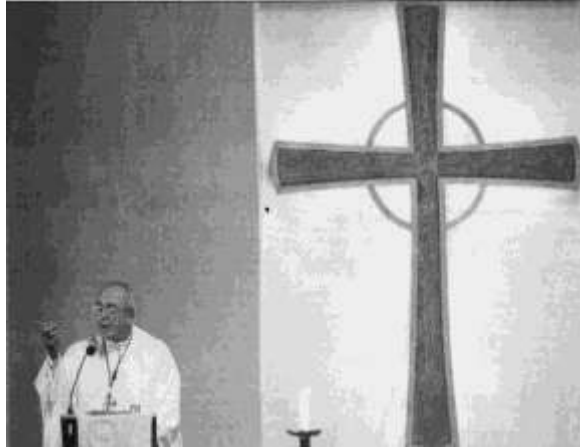
For some people that may be an option, but Murphy said he will be sending his children to public school.

"Religion comes first at home," he said. "If you don't get it there, all the Catholic schools in the world aren't going to help."



## **Church opens with prayer, incense**

By Lori Eckenberger, Messenger-Inquirer



The Most Rev. John J. McRaith, bishop of the diocese of Owensboro, speaks to members of St. Columba Catholic Church in Lewisport Sunday during dedication ceremonies at the new church, which replaces a building destroyed by fire.

Catherine and Joe Taylor of Lewisport have been attending St. Columba Catholic Church for more than 59 years. They watched the church burn down three years ago, and on the anniversary of the fire they saw a new church dedicated.

"We really worked hard together. That's what it takes, and that's what we had," said Catherine Taylor.

"Our old (church) was beautiful, this one is beautiful too," she said. "I knew we'd work it out, I just knew it."

Since 1989, Taylor said all she kept thinking was "hurry, hurry." The Taylors were joined by about 200 others Sunday afternoon as the Most Rev. John McRaith, bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro, blessed the church. The Mass lasted about an hour and a half, and included the anointing of the walls of the church and filling the building with incense.

Denny Long, a member of the church, spoke during the service. He said the new church was built to achieve simple functional beauty.

Both the steeple and bell of the new building were saved from the 30-year-old structure that burned. The steeple has been covered with white vinyl to match the new building.

This is the third building in which the bell has been housed.

Long said, "We hope the church outlasts this bell."

During the dedication of the building McRaith reminded those attending that a building does not make a church, but the people do. "I praise you here at St. Columba that you knew the church was not destroyed when burned," he said.

"The real church is not finished, it cries out to be continued to be built," McRaith said.

It was the second Sunday that the \$500,000 church had been used for services.

Doris Marsch, co-chairman of the building committee, also addressed the crowd Sunday.

Pleased the building was finally completed, Marsch said, "God was on our side. We thank God and everyone who prayed that this would happen."



**Hancock County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History**  
**(Hudson, KY: Tawana Publishing Company, 2004) pp.8 & 218:**



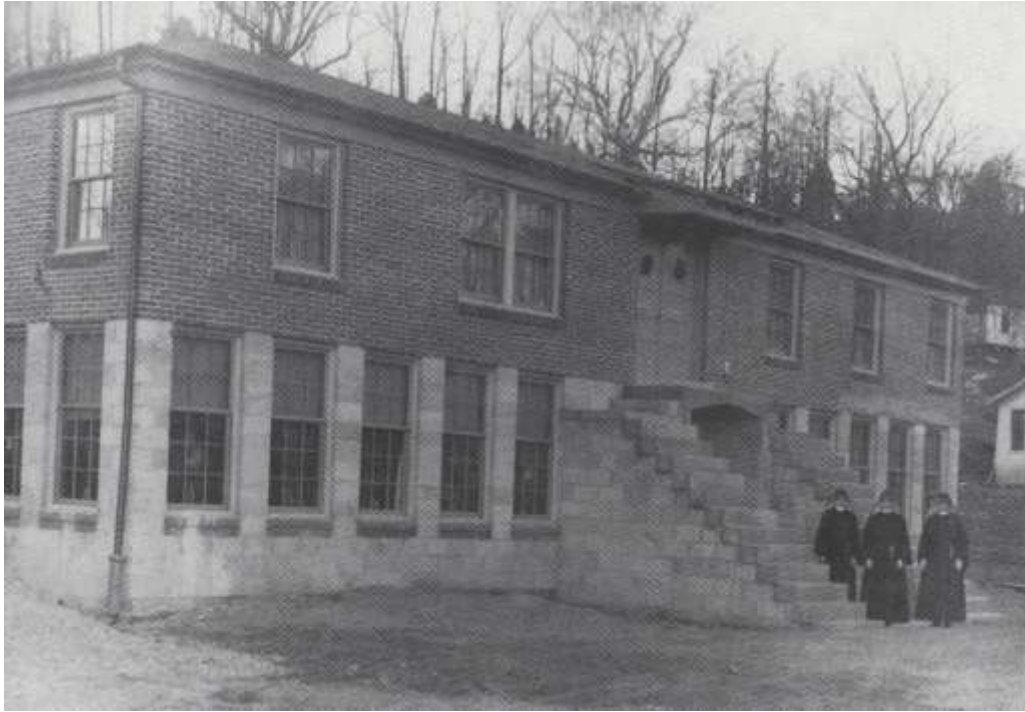
Old Immaculate Conception Church in Hawesville



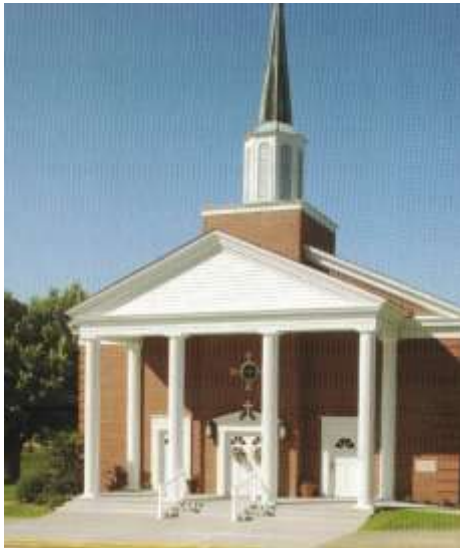
Catholic Grade School, District #17; water, cistern, 1 dinner pail cabinet, Guenter #2 stove.



**The Diocese of Owensboro, Freely You Have Received, Freely Give:**  
**75 Years of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky**  
**Sarah L. Patterson, 2012, pp.11, 85 & 107:**



Sisters of Loretto stand outside Immaculate Conception School in Hawesville



Immaculate Conception Church, Hawesville

At the request of Bishop Spalding of Louisville, Father Bede O'Connor began preparations for the construction of a church in Hawesville. In 1858 a lot was purchased and the church was completed in 1871 constructed of hand-hewn stone. For many years the pastor resided in Cloverport and services in Hawesville were held on Saturday. Later when Father Rives became pastor, he was stationed in Reed and commuted by L&N Railroad. He would arrive in Hawesville on Saturday afternoon, offer Mass at 6:00 a.m. Sunday, and then return home on the 7:00 a.m. train.

In 1937, floodwaters did extensive damage to the altar and the interior of the church. In 1947, a house and some land were purchased for the rectory. Father Higdon, pastor of Browns



Valley, came to Hawesville to oversee the building of the Catholic elementary school. Through generosity of parishioners, the first Catholic school in Hancock County was dedicated on November 1, 1947, staffed by the Sisters of Loretto. In 1949, a high school was constructed.

The new church was dedicated on February 19, 1959. The stained glass windows from the original church were placed in the new church, In May of 1969 the high school was closed and in 1992 so was the elementary school. A new parish hall was constructed in 1999.



St. Columba, Lewisport

A majority of the first St. Columba parishioners were of Scotch-Irish descent. The families of Lewisport met in each other's homes for services until 1850, when the first log church was built. In August 1867, Bishop Spalding of Louisville purchased a lot in Lewisport to relocate the church, which was then served by priests from St. Rose in Cloverport. In 1925, because of the scarcity of priests in the diocese and the small number of Catholics in the community, the church was closed. It reopened in 1928.

In 1936, St. Columba was served by the pastor from St. Anthony's Parish in Browns Valley and had to be rebuilt after the 1937 flood. The church's small brick building was served by priests from St. Stephen from 1937 to 1940. St. Columba and Immaculate Conception in Hawesville shared a pastor for a time. The cornerstone for the fourth church was laid on June 29, 1959. This church served the community until August 9, 1989 when it was destroyed by an electrical fire. The community then met in the Parish Hall for Mass. On August 9, 1992 the new church was dedicated.

In 2000 religious education classrooms were added to the church to serve the growing community. In 2011, the church was blessed with donated beautiful stained glass windows. We are proud of our heritage, and grateful for the faith passed on to us. Together we walk forward to spread the Kingdom of God.

Columba (c. 521-597) was born at Gartan, Donegal, Ireland. As a priest, he spent time preaching and founding monasteries all over Ireland. With relatives he went to Iona and built a monastery. St. Columba's holiness and reputation attracted visitors to the monastery, where he died on June 9.



Immaculate Catholic Church on left; on right is the Hancock County Administration Building and in center is the (old) Hancock County Courthouse



Immaculate Catholic Church, Hawesville, KY

