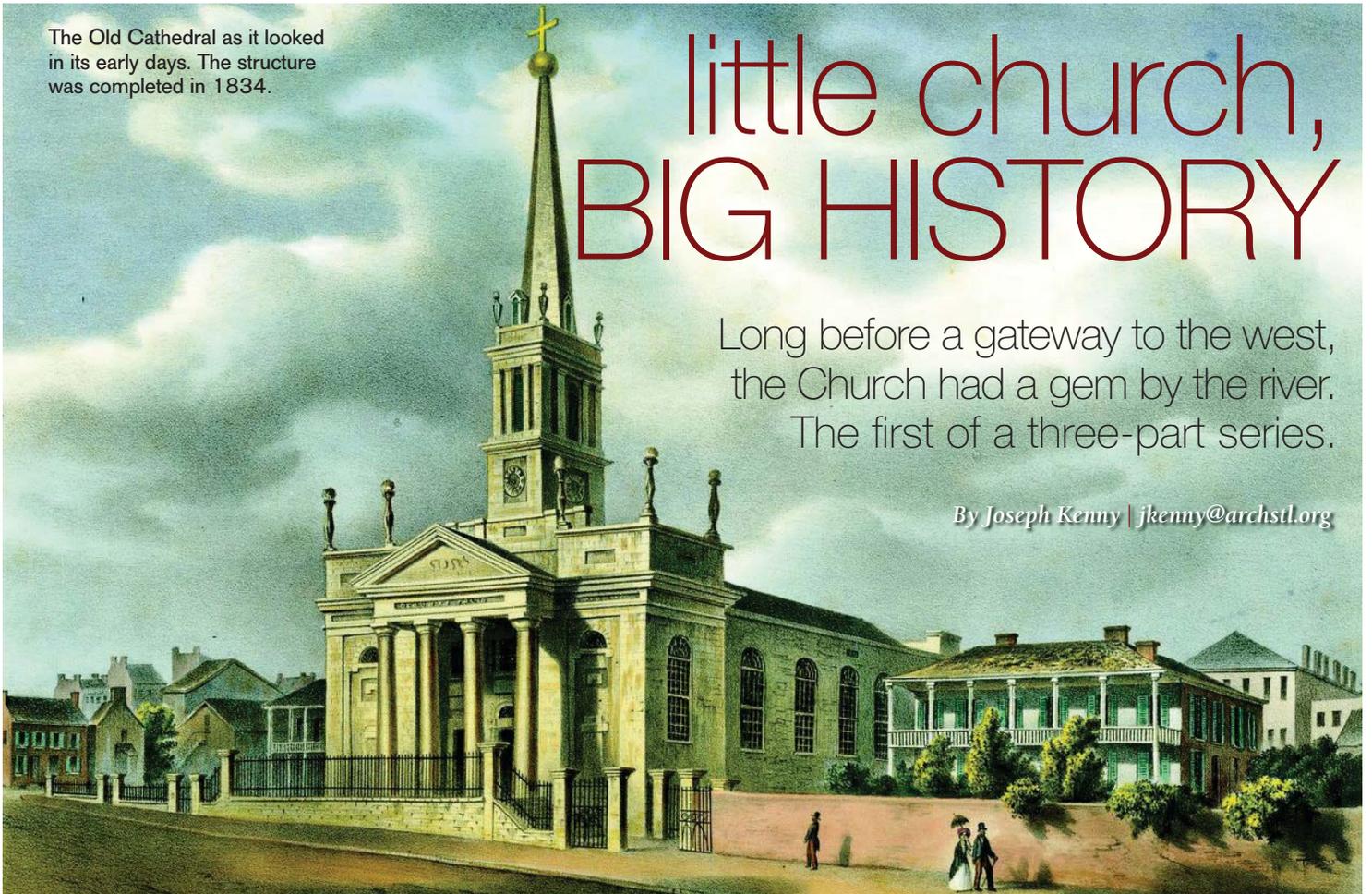


The Old Cathedral as it looked in its early days. The structure was completed in 1834.

little church, BIG HISTORY

Long before a gateway to the west, the Church had a gem by the river. The first of a three-part series.

By Joseph Kenny | jkenny@archstl.org



The old church cemetery was a key to the building of the stone cathedral – the first Catholic cathedral west of the Mississippi River.

The Basilica of St. Louis King of France, affectionately known as the Old Cathedral, sits just west of the Gateway Arch and is surrounded by the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial grounds. It is the oldest building still standing in the city of St. Louis that remains in the hands of its original owner.

The parish, founded in 1770, was the only Catholic church in the city of St. Louis until 1845. The grounds of the parish included a frame church and a cemetery.

In 1826, St. Louis became a diocese, and, the following year, Bishop Joseph Rosati became the first bishop of the Diocese of St. Louis. According to *The Catholic Heritage of St. Louis: A History of the Old Cathedral Parish* by Paul C. Schulte, funds were needed for a new stone cathedral, and, as a result, a decision was made to

lease the half of the church block containing the cemetery. The cemetery was closed and the remains were reburied with care in consecrated ground in a cemetery on Market Street.

Church records show that parishioners met and resolved to build the new structure in 1830, using funds from the lease. The former brick cathedral church eventually was leased as a warehouse, before it was destroyed in a fire in 1835.

Sources of funding included the Society of the Propagation of the Faith and the Leopoldine Institution, established by the emperor of Austria, as well as St. Louis residents.

The first stone of the cathedral still in use today was blessed and set in place on Aug. 1, 1831, by Bishop Rosati. The cathedral was designed to be 136 feet long, 84 feet wide and 40 feet high. The facade and 27 feet of sides near the facade were to be of polished stone, much like marble. The portico would be sustained in front by four columns of the same material – carved from Joliet stone, mined near Joliet, Ill., 27 feet high and 4 feet in diameter. The design is after the ruins of *Paestum* (Doric

style of architecture in the Campania region of Italy).

The facade includes the inscription: “*In honorem S. Ludovici. Deo Uni et Trino* (In honor of St. Louis. One God in Three).”

The cathedral was built with 14 windows, 16 by 8 feet, semi-circular, oval and rectangular, and included 200 pews. A major feature was the two coal furnaces in the basement of the latest design technology.

An alley 18 feet wide separated the cathedral from the bishop’s residence. It was necessary to preach in three languages: English, French and German.

The day chosen for the consecration of the cathedral was Oct. 26, 1834. The cost of the structure, estimated originally as \$30,000, was \$63,360.85. Funds available came to \$21,000, leaving an initial debt of some \$42,000.

The Old Cathedral underwent major restoration in the late 1880s to early 1890s and again in 1959, when time the ground was being cleared and plans developed for the Gateway Arch and Museum of Westward Expansion. The current renovation seeks to return it to as close to the original as possible.



Timeless treasure

>> The Old Cathedral is the only building that can be traced directly to the founding of St. Louis.

Today it is not only a welcoming place for tourists who come downtown and to the riverfront and for downtown workers, but it also is an active parish with several organizations and varied liturgical and spiritual offerings.

Over the years weather has damaged the exterior stonework, columns and windows. A \$15 million effort is underway to restore the structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to the exterior:

- The interior infrastructure will be updated, restored and repaired, including the church pews, the wood floor, the mosaic floor, side altars' marble work and mechanical, electrical and HVAC systems.
- Updates to the museum will support an active education center and allow the archdiocese to fully display an extensive collection of artifacts that date to 1818.
- An endowment fund for ongoing maintenance and preservation will be established.

>> To make an online donation to the campaign to restore the Old Cathedral, log on to the Old Cathedral's website (www.oldcathedralstl.org) and click on the giving tab for electronic gifts.

You may also send a check, made payable to "Restoring a St. Louis Treasure," to: Archbishop Robert J. Carlson, 20 Archbishop May Drive, St. Louis, MO 63119



The Old Cathedral has survived 180 years of city development.

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