

TRAVEL

Churches distinguish Ohio towns

By Kathy Schwartz
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Here is the church, here is the steeple ... And another steeple, and another. As soon as one spire fades in the rearview mirror, another is visible 2½ miles away.

This is the Land of the Cross-Tipped Churches, an Ohio Scenic Byway near Maria Stein. In a 22-mile radius of this Mercer County village, there are 34 Catholic sites attributed to the work of one man, the Rev. Francis de Sales Brunner, and the Missionaries of the Precious Blood.

The landscape in the northern reaches of the Cincinnati Archdiocese is flat and rural. Towns are tiny. But the tall steeples and the history behind them are inspiring, to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. All the sites – including the nation's second-largest collection of holy relics – are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The oldest church, and the most distinctive for its twin towers, is St. Augustine in Minster.

"St. Augie" began as a log church in 1835. The existing building was dedicated in 1849, but not before a cholera epidemic that summer killed more than 300 parishioners. Construction cost \$18,500. The 190-foot Gothic towers were added in 1874-76 for an additional \$18,000, replacing the original single spire. A 1900-01 renovation added a distinctive half-barrel ceiling with seven paintings by Austrian artist Josef Vittur.

It would cost \$22 million to build his church now, the Rev. Rick Nieberding says. But could a price be put on the memories? This Mother Church for the German Catholics who came to the region in the mid-1800s is like a great-great-grandmother for their descendants.

"My husband's great-great-grandfather had a store. He was a carpenter, and they provided items in the church" as it was built, says Rita Hoying, St. Augustine historian. "They also made the altar for the log church."

The history of these villages and their churches is part of Cincinnati history as well.

As these Germans came to America, their routes took them along the Ohio River to Cincinnati. From the city, they followed the Miami-Erie Canal north to Minster, known as Stallstown from 1832 to 1836. The Stallstown Mission served people in a 25-mile radius,



Photos by Kathy Schwartz for The Enquirer

Known for its 135-year-old gothic spires, St. Augustine Church in Minster, Ohio, is part of the Land of the Cross-Tipped Churches.

Hoying says.

A drive today past cleared land is far removed from the treks the faithful made through swamp and forest to Minster. "My mother told me one of her relatives walked from Philothea (more than 15 miles away) to work on the canal," Hoying says.

In those days, visiting priests crisscrossed northern Ohio. It was the death of the traveling German-speaking priest that brought Father Brunner to the region, via Cincinnati. A French priest who was asked to serve Mercer and Auglaize counties begged Cincinnati Bishop John Baptist Purcell to appoint a permanent German-speaking priest instead.

In October 1843, Brunner left his native Switzerland for America with 15 priests and brothers. Accompanying them across the rough Atlantic was Purcell. Unsure they would

make it, the men prayed before a painting of the Virgin Mary. Purcell promised that when he returned to Cincinnati, he would build a church in Mary's honor. Cincinnatians know that church as Holy Cross-Immaculata.

Brunner's Missionaries of the Precious Blood arrived in Minster in 1845, "and they've been here ever since," Hoying says. Brunner wanted parishes within easier walking distance, and, though he died in 1859, his followers carried out his wishes.

Brunner also bought land not far from Minster, built a convent and named it Maria Stein (Mary of the Rock). He then called upon the Sisters of the Precious Blood, the order founded by his late mother, to come farm as the men ministered.

And since 1846, the sisters have been in Maria Stein, where that storied painting of Mary hangs in the



The Maria Stein altar, which was carved in Cincinnati, stores religious relics such as a piece of wood believed to be from the True Cross.

If you go

Getting there: Take Exit 99 off I-75 north, and continue west on Ohio 119. The Land of the Cross-Tipped Churches byway is 38.4 miles. It continues along 119 to Fort Recovery, then north along Ohio 49, ending at Ohio 29 near Wabash. At least eight churches and the Shrine of the Holy Relics (www.mariasteincenter.org) are right along the route. Maps, descriptions at www.grandlake.net/lctc and www.ohiobyways.com.

Photo exhibit

This month, Sidney's Amos Memorial Public Library, 230 E. North St., is hosting a photo exhibit of the Land of the Cross-Tipped Churches by Russ Martin. Martin, a photography student at Edison Community College in Piqua, has been taking pictures of the churches since 2008. His blog is www.CrossTippedChurches.blogspot.com.

National Shrine of Holy Relics.

One thousand relics – bone chips, splinters, cloth associated with a saint – are on display, many in an impressive carved altar aglow with candles. Among the treasures is a piece of wood said to be from the True Cross and a case containing a wax figure with the bones of St. Victoria, who died in the fourth century.

"People feel a lot of peace here," says Sister Mary Ellen Andrisin, one of four nuns at Maria Stein. "They feel the power of others' prayers, and pray for others represented by the candles."

Some relics were Father Brunner's and were brought to Maria Stein in 1850. But the shrine wasn't established until 1875, when a Milwaukee priest, the Rev. J.M. Gartner, returned from war-torn Italy with another collection. Rather than divide the relics for display across

the country, Cincinnati Archbishop William Henry Elder recommended the collection stay intact and be displayed at Maria Stein, where the nuns could provide safekeeping.

The sisters estimate that there are 15,000 visits a year to the shrine. Many of the pilgrims are repeat visitors. Most are from west-central Ohio, but a look at the register finds travelers from Arkansas, California, Canada and Santiago, Chile, where the order does mission work.

Even the nonreligious, some arriving on "mystery trips," marvel. "Carpenters go ga-ga" over the altars created by Schroeder Co. of Cincinnati, Sister Andrisin says.

Also worth a visit upstairs is the Maria Stein Heritage Museum, with more information about Father Brunner, the sisterhood, the canal and the Land of the Cross-Tipped Churches.