



St. Nicholas Catholic Church

Brief History – June 2021

- The railroad was completed between New Orleans and Houston in 1880
- Two Catholic Churches were erected in the city in 1880 – St. Joseph and St. Patrick. Annunciation Church at Crawford had been founded in 1869.
- By 1890 the population of Houston had reached 27,557 of which 10,479 were Blacks
- Blacks lived in each of the city's Wards, often at the edge of town. The largest number lived in the Third Ward, in Freedman town, and in Frost town area of the Second Ward.
- Before 1887, a small group of Black Catholics attended Annunciation Church at Crawford and Texas St.
- August 27, 1872, Bishop C. M. Dubois of Galveston had been willed land at the corner of Chenevert Street and Lamar Avenue on the condition that it be used for educational purposes.
- In October of 1887, the Rt. Rev. Nicholas A. Gallagher, Bishop of Galveston, dedicated a small primary school located at 1018 Chenevert Street at Lamar Avenue to the patronage of St. Nicholas and for the education of Black Children of Houston Third Ward.
- Mother M. Gabriel Dillon, Superioress of Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament staffed the new school with the condition that as soon as a teaching community of Black Nuns could be found to take over
- By September 1890 attendance at St. Nicholas School had reached 98 students. In that month a smallpox epidemic broke out in Houston; and all schools, including St. Nicholas, were closed until January, 1891
- In 1905, Father Reilly was able to build a small convent, and in September of that year, the sisters of the Holy Family took charge of St. Nicholas School
- In the early 1900s a large number of French descendants, moved to Houston from Louisiana in search of employment and better living conditions – the parish registers showed an ever-increasing number of French surnames.
- Mass was said at St. Nicholas, and then later in the day at Black Catholic Churches in Liberty and Ames, Texas
- Council 15 of the Knights of Peter Claver was organized at St. Nicholas in 1916 with Albert E. Woodley, who moved to Houston from New Orleans in 1913 and became a parishioner at St. Nicholas in 1913, as the first Grand Knight in Texas
- Council 15 of the Knights of Peter Claver was organized at St. Nicholas in 1916 and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of Peter Claver, St. Elizabeth Court 15, at St. Nicholas, was organized in 1926 with over 30 members.
- By 1919 thought was being given to moving the church plant to a location more convenient to the parishioners. Father Gilman used this opportunity to bring the church near the black community neighborhood. The change in location of St. Nicholas parish/school took place during the time of Father McKeever (1920-22).
- In 1920, a new site for St. Nicholas was purchased from Ben Riesner at the corner of Bell Avenue and St. Charles St. Two new buildings were erected at this time, both of stucco frame; one was a combination of school and church and the other a convent. The construction of the new building left Father McKeever without a rectory. He converted a classroom as his living quarters.
- Rev. Carl F. Schappert, S.S.J. was appointed pastor in August 1922 served as pastor until 1940. His first assignment from Bishop Byrne was to find a new site in which to build a rectory. Four and a half lots were purchased from Ben Riesner at the corner of Clay and St. Charles and in October 1922, construction was begun on the rectory.
- The two-story frame house (later bricked) was completed December 8, 1922.

- The need for a new church building had to be addressed, as the hall over the school used as a church was becoming too small for the numbers of parishioners attending Mass.
- Father Schappert wrote to the Commissioners of the Negro and Indian Collection and stated, “this parish is over thirty-seven years old, and these poor people have always used a school hall for church purposes.”
- Fr. Schappert secured an enormous loan, of \$25,000, from Rice Institute and ground was broken for the church on Sunday, August 3, 1924, at 5:00pm.
- Bishop Byrne dedicated the new church on Sunday, December 21, 1924, at 10 :00am in the new church building – the third and present structure of red brick, is designed in the Baroque style.
- By 1929 St Nicholas was a thriving parish of over 2000 souls.
- Meanwhile, the school continued to grow to the point that a new building was needed. Father Schappert secured another loan from Rice institute for \$50,000 dollars. Of this, \$14,000 was to pay the existing debt and the \$36,000 to be used for a new school building and a new convent. In May 12 of 1931 the old combination school/ church was demolished, and the construction of the new school began and completed on September 8, 1931. The new convent was completed on August 14, 1931 which is in the current location.
- Many of St. Nicholas’ parishioners lived in the Fifth Ward and the need for another parish was becoming evident.
- Father Schappert began organizing a parish of Black Catholics in the Fifth Ward saying Mass at the “Little Mission” of St. Nicholas Church.
- June 9, 1929, the Little Mission was dedicated to patronage of Our Mother of Mercy – our first daughter church
- Through the efforts of Father Schappert, a relic of the body of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus was obtained from Rome for the parish in 1936, and the Albert E. Woodly family presented a shrine in her honor to the parish.
- The Novena to St. Theresa has been held each Tuesday evening in the parish since 1936
- 1936 the men of the church worked for three weeks at nights to complete a Shrine of our Lady of Lourdes
- 1934 saw the establishment of the second daughter parish of St. Nicholas – Blessed Martin de Porres, Crosby, TX
- In 1984 the Josephites terminated their services to St. Nicholas since they could no longer provide a priest. The Diocese appointed Fr. Ramsey as the new pastor.
- 1987 the parish celebrated its 100th Anniversary and a new parish hall was built
- Diocesan Priests, Josephites Priest, Diocesan Priest, Missionary Society of St. Paul Priest
- In 2015 Fr. George established a Planning committee to evaluate the needs of the parish – especially since all of the buildings are old and in really poor conditions.
- Membership, approximately 150 plus families, are made up of members who have attended since they were born and Refugees from East Africa along with members from the Cameroon Community
- 31 Priests have served as Pastor: Diocesan – 3; Josephites – 22 and Missionary Society of St. Paul – 7
- Father Joseph is now leading the effort of upgrading the church and replacing the old buildings with a functional new building which will accommodate again the growing population of St. Nicholas.

This brief History was extracted from the blue book which was issued in 1987 for the centennial anniversary of St Nicholas Catholic Church. The writing of the blue book took almost a year. During this time, much material was gathered and collated into the parish archive.

Reola M. Bellard-Reed
Administrative Assistant