

Detroit archdiocese says missing church found under Lake St. Clair

DETROIT (AP) — The cemetery of a Catholic mission church that was swallowed up about 140 years ago by the advancing Lake St. Clair has been found under 10 feet of water, the Archdiocese of Detroit said Thursday.

The archdiocese is confident future underwater explorations will locate the mission building itself near the two-acre cemetery, found about 2,000 feet offshore near the border of St. Clair Shores and Macomb County's Harrison Township.

"Just like everyone else, I thought the church was lost for good," said Cardinal Adam Maida. "This is a great, wonderful find."

The whereabouts of St. Felicity Church, which was built by a French missionary in 1826, has been the subject of much speculation and had inspired local myths and legends.

The church was last noted in historical documents in 1855, said the Rev. Michael Ruthenberg, associate pastor of St. Gertrude Church in St. Clair Shores, the successor to St. Felicity. Sometime that summer or next, there was catastrophic flooding throughout the entire Great Lakes region.

Lake St. Clair swelled, burying over 2,000 feet of shoreline.

An intense search for St. Felicity began about 15 years ago with the Rev. Stanley Ulman. But when Ulman sent scuba divers into Lake St. Clair in 1976 to look for the church, he missed the right area by just a few hundred feet.

"I thought they stopped using the church when the flooding hit in '36," said Ulman, now pastor of St. Ladislaus Church in Hamtramck. "I thought they moved inland. That was my mistake."

Ruthenberg began his own research eight years ago. A Dominican priest, he became interested because St. Felicity was dedicated in 1829 by a bishop he said was

credited with bringing the Dominican order to the United States.

The breakthrough came when Ruthenberg found the will of a farmer who had donated his property to the church. He got the deed from the county, which enabled him to plot the estimated location of the church.

On Oct. 12, he saw one zebra mussel-covered tombstone from a boat.

Ruthenberg took his findings to the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, which confirmed he seemed to be on the right track, and the archdiocese hired a team of divers.

When they went to the area on Sunday, the divers spotted five tombstones and a pile of stones believed used to mark the northeast boundary of the property.

The water is too cold for more dives before next spring. Ruthenberg hopes to be certified to dive by then so he can join the team.

"It's been underwater for 150 years. Another six months isn't going to make a difference," he said. "This will be a real time capsule."

But though he can hardly wait to look for the church building, Ruthenberg said he is overjoyed at what has been found.

"I'm so excited for our parish," he said. "This confirms our parish is 170 years old. My people were telling the truth. Now we can reclaim our stories. I'm like a kid at Christmas right now."

The state has just begun to work with the archdiocese and federal authorities to establish a historical preserve at the site, Ruthenberg said.

"If true, this is an interesting find and any future development would have to be mindful of that," said Tom Graf of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

"That is still holy ground," stressed Ruthenberg.