

# The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum, and the Hamilton Field History Museum



## Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

Contents ©2017 Novato Historical Guild, Inc.

July - September 2017

The Novato Historian

Volume 42 Number 3

## First Catholic Church 1889—1936

by Michael Read

Calls for a church in Novato were reported in the *Marin Journal* on June 2, 1873. "We want a church here. Novato supports three rum shops, two stores, two blacksmith shops, two shoemakers and two butcher shops. Now that is not bad. Only wait until the railroad comes through here, and we will have the liveliest little town in this County."

There had been church services at the old school house in the 1860's and 70's and then in the new school house built in 1875. But the Catholics had to go to St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum in Marinwood, or to Petaluma, which were both quite a distance away to go to church.

It would be another 14 years before more talk of a church started again. It was June 30, 1887 when the *Journal* reported; "A Catholic Church is to be built at Novato, on a lot opposite the Jones property, donated by Mrs. Scown." But still no church was built.

In 1888, considerably more activity was shown in Novato on church matters. It was learned that the Catholic residents had decided to build a church on the spacious lot donated by Mrs. Scown, or on a lot in the new town to be given by Mr. Chase, owner of the Black Point ranch. On the 1888 map of Novato it shows a Methodist Church to be built where the Presbyterian Church would be built, now Novato's City Hall.

June 1889, a meeting was held at Pacheco Hall to plan for the building of a Catholic Church. Mrs. Scown had donated four acres for the church site. There was a difference of opinion about the church location. Some thought it would be better to have the church nearer to the depot. Another meeting was held the next week at the same hall to make the final decision as to where would be best to build the church.

It was decided that the Catholic Church would be built on the lot that Mrs. Scown donated. "It is a very good location, being on the hill opposite the old Jones place, and nearly in the center of the parish." The church property described is located on the original San Jose Arroyo Vichi, Pacheco Grant, and is part of the Connell estate. Richard Connell bought land in 1868 from Ramon Pacheco. He died soon after moving to Novato. His widow, Mary Connell, married Adolph G. Scown in 1876.

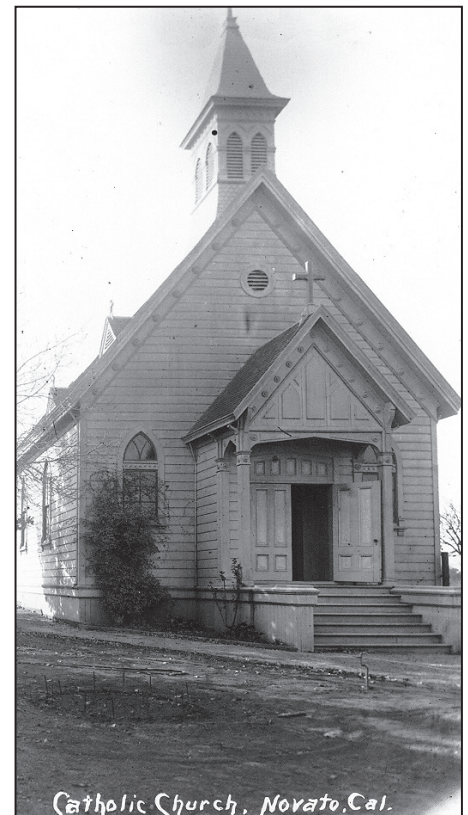
Finally, in October the work was started on the new Catholic Church and the location was on "Nob Hill opposite the Johnson (Jones) property." By November the foundation was in. The material construction was a frame building resting on a concrete foundation. The interior was a plaster finish.

In December, eight men started work on the new church and if the weather was favorable, it would be ready. The

next week the church frame was damaged in a storm. Work would not resume until February 1890.

### Dedication of the Church

On April 24, 1890, the *Journal* would report; "TOWN OF NOVATO, A glittering gem in the crown of Marin county villages. The first object attracting our attention being the new edifice, now nearly completed, we paused to inspect and note the features of the building.



The first Our Lady of Loretto Church.

## First Catholic Church 1889—1936

The Catholic community of the neighborhood having sufficiently increased to feel the necessity of a place for divine worship in their midst, wisely convened, at the invitation of Rev. Jas. Cleary, of Petaluma, and accepted a handsome donation of land from Mrs. A. Scown, a zealous Christian lady, who charitably started the good work that has progressed so well.

The church proper is 65 feet long, and 30 feet wide, with sacristies, room for side altars, etc., which neatly finish the interior since the pews have been placed, and richly varnished.

The pictures representing the Via Crucis and altar furniture have been generously donated by Senora M. L. Velasco, and several other ladies of the new parish have contributed articles much needed in the opening of the new church, and have reserved the evening of May 3d for a festival, with a view to raising funds for liquidating the remaining small indebtedness. Many in the vicinity have volunteered to assist. The parish for the present will be ministered over by the clergy of Petaluma and later is to be connected with Nicasio, with resident pastor in charge of both. The deification of this new edifice will be in June, Archbishop Riordan officiating."

July 3, 1890 *Journal* would report: "The new Catholic church at Novato was dedicated on Sunday last (June 27) with appropriate ceremonies. Archbishop Riordan of San Francisco officiated, assisted by Fathers Cleary of Petaluma, Lagan of San Rafael and Riordan of San Francisco. There was a large attendance of people of all denominations. The church was beautifully decorated with evergreens and flowers. The altar ornaments were the gift of Mrs. Velasco.

The exercises, which were of highly interesting character, were listened to with great attention. The interior of the church, decorated by the Misses Miller, presented a beautiful sight. The walls were handsomely adorned with palms, and the sanctuary was a wealth of rare exotics and artistic floral arrangements. Immediately after the dedication mass was celebrated by Rev. Father Riordan. Farmer's mass, in B flat, was effectively rendered by a full choir, with the following voices: Sopranos, Misses Marie and Emma Gambert. Kate Lucas and Bertha Redmond; contraltos. Mme. Leonie Sauffrignon, Misses Adele Gambert and Dottie Lucas; tenor. Mr. P.J. Linehan; bass, Mr. T.B. Jackson; organist, Miss Mary Redmond.

After the mass Archbishop Riordan, in the name of Father Cleary, pastor of the church, cordially thanked all who were instrumental in aiding the building of the church, particularly those from other parishes, and Protestants who liberally subscribed. His grace then delivered an eloquent and instructive discourse upon the Catholic church and earnestly exhorted the faithful to the practice of their religious duties.

Services will hereafter be held at the church on alternate Sundays by Rev. Father Cleary."

### First Wedding

Dec 4, 1890 *Journal* would report: "The all-absorbing topic of conversation in Novato for the past week has been the wedding of Mr. Richard Connell (Mrs. Scown's son) and Miss Amelia Faggiano, which took place at the Catholic Church on Thanksgiving. Rev. Father Cleary tying the hymeneal knot."

A new organ would be purchased in February 1891 and by March, two beautiful statues of St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary, on either side of the chancel, which was imported from France was in place was donated by Mrs. Zecovich. A rare painting of the immaculate Conception was donated to the church when it was dedicated by Rev. Father McGinty, then pastor of San Rafael. A beautiful painting of Our Lady of Loretto was donated to the parish by one of the first Catholic residents, Mrs. Catalina Valencia. Of the original indebtedness of the parish amounting to \$3,700, \$2,200 has already been wiped out, Mrs. Velasco and her daughter, Mrs. Valencia, were the chief donors.

### Parish Established

The parish of Our Lady of Loretto was established in March 1892. *Marin Tocsin* would report: "A Catholic parish has been created at Novato and Rev. Father Charles E. O'Neile, Father Lagan's efficient assistant, has been selected to preside over



Taken at the St. Anthony celebration on Sept. 8, 1935

Provided by Marin History Museum

## First Catholic Church 1889—1936

its spiritual interests.” The Novato parish was originally formed from part of the Petaluma parish.

The first resident pastor of Novato parish, the Rev. Charles O’Neile. He was transferred from Novato in the year 1893. Father O’Neile was succeeded by the Rev. J.J. McCue as pastor at the beginning of the year 1894. He remained until the later part of the year 1895. In December 1895 Father C. O’Neile was again appointed pastor in which capacity he remained until the middle of the year 1898.

In July 1898 Father Joseph Bryne was appointed pastor of Novato, and remained until April 1904. In April, the Rev. James Kiely was appointed pastor. In March 1906, the Rev. Father McGuire took over the parish and remained in charge until December 1906.

In December 1906 Father Kiely again returned to Novato. In September of 1908 Father Kiely was assigned to establish a new parish at Eltuhurst.

In September 1908, the Rev. Michael J. Clifford took over the pastorate of Novato where he remained until 1912.

In June 1912, the Rev Father Battiest succeeded to the pastorate until the end of 1912.

In January 1913 Father Clifford again returned as pastor and remained until July 1914. In August 1914 Father Battest again returned as pastor and remained until he passed to his eternal reward at the end of 1926.

In the beginning of 1927, the Rev. Henry B. Ratters assumed the office of pastor. He remained until September 1930. In September 1930, the Rev. Peter Weber was appointed pastor. At the end of 1930 the Rev. Patrick Keating was appointed pastor, and remained until he was called to his eternal reward on August 3, 1931.

In September 1931, the Rev. James Lennon was appointed pastor. He remained until November 1931. In November 1931, the Rev. Lawrence Power was appointed pastor. He remained pastor until August 12, 1932. On October 12, 1933, the Rev Martin J. O’Fahey was appointed pastor.

### Church Fire

On Dec. 5, 1936, the *Novato Advance* would report: “Catholic Church Destroyed by Fire. December 1, 1936 about 1:30 o’clock Tuesday afternoon Our Lady of Loretto church was burned to the ground. Rev, Father Martin J. O’Fahey, the resident pastor, was cleaning up around the buildings when his attention was called by a passer-by that the church roof was on fire. A quick

investigation revealed the fact that the fire started on the inside of the roof and had burned through. In a very short time the interior of the church was all ablaze. On the arrival of the Novato fire department the building was doomed to destruction, and the fire fighters turned their attention to saving the residence close by, which was done after a stubborn fight and efficient work. Father O’Fahey only succeeded in saving a few vessels and some vestments, the latter damaged by falling sparks.”

May 1, 1937 *Petaluma Argus-Courier* – “The Catholic Church property, located in Old Town, has been placed on the market for immediate sale, the money realized to be added to the fund now being raised for the new church of Our Lady of Loretto. The beloved pastor of the Novato parish, Rev. Father Martin O’Fahey, with the assistance and help of his parishioners is working hard to secure sufficient funds to clear the debt for the beautiful church which will soon adorn an attractive site at the northwest corner of Grant Avenue and Second Street, in New Novato.

The land and buildings offered for sale consist of a lot, the site of the old church, the eight-room parochial home, with a social hall included in the building, large garages, private water pressure system, orchard and every convenience. There are four



This photograph , taken sometime in the early 1930’s shows the altar of the church

## First Catholic Church 1889—1936

acres in the church property which borders on the old highway, an ideal location.”

Aug 1939 - The Catholic Church property at Old Town was sold to William Sweet, of Ingleside, San Francisco, a retired naval officer.

July 1941, Rev. Martin J. O’Fahey, was transferred to St. Anthony’s Church, Manteca, California. Father O’Fahey had worked hard for his people during the eight years of his pastorate in Novato. He was born in Ireland in 1894; he studied for the priesthood in Ireland and finished his course at St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park. He was ordained a priest on July 6, 1919. He served as assistant priest in several churches of the Archdiocese of San Francisco before being stationed in Santa Rosa, San Francisco, Oakland and Modesto. He was made a pastor in 1932, his first parish being Cloverdale. From there he was transferred to Novato in 1933, where he had served faithfully and zealously.

In 1955 the Methodists would buy 3.8 acres from Dominic Ferrero for \$22,000 and build their Methodist Church next door to the old Catholic Church. In 1977 the Methodist would sell the north end of the property (where the Catholic Church was) for the retirement of all indebtedness.

### The Name of the Church

In March of 1891, \$1,000 was donated to the church by Mrs. Velasco and her daughter, Mrs. Valencia. Mrs. Valencia was Mrs. Maria Catalina Carmen Pacheco Valencia and her daughter was Henrietta Pacheco, who married Fred W. Sweetser. Mrs. Velasco was Maria Antonia Expectacion Loreto (Loreta, Loretta) Duarte Pacheco Black Velasco (She was the Mrs. Black in famous “Black Will” lawsuit against James Black daughter Maria Augustina Black Burdell.)

The story in the December 5, 1936 *Novato Advance* read “The church was given its name – Our Lady of Loretto – in honor of Mrs. Fred W. Sweetser’s grandmother, who, with Mrs. Sweetser’s mother, was an ardent church worker.”

Well, it is unusual that church would be named after a living person, but with a generous donation of \$1,000 (worth \$17,495.07 today) and Mrs. Sweetser’s active support of the church, it appears the church was named for her grandmother.

It was the next month (April of 1891), that the newspapers would call the new church “the Church of Loretto. In May it was the “Loretto Chapel.” Mrs. Velasco would die on December 26, 1891. The parish of Novato was



**Our Lady of Loretto Church on South Novato Boulevard.  
Photo taken by Hellen Hatch around 1903.**

created on March of 1892. In June 1893, the church was called “The Church of Our Lady of Lourdes.” In August it was called “The Church of Our Lady of Loretto,” and would use that name from then on in the newspapers.

News writer and historian Alice Yarish handed in the following interesting speculation regarding the general subject in 1957: “In regard to your query as to why Nicasio and Novato churches both have the name of Loretto a possible theory evolved in my mind is that they may have been named after Maria Loreta Duarte Pacheco Black Velasco, the grande dame of the Pacheco estate which was called the San Jose Rancho. She was noted for her philanthropies and donated considerable funds toward the building of the Novato Catholic Church and also owned 12,000 acres at Nicasio which she inherited from her second husband, Black. She presumably gave money to that church, too.”

Pastor Father Charles J. Farrell, said that the parish name comes from an Italian shrine to the Blessed Virgin he has seen spelled three different ways. He said a church could be named on the suggestion of a parishioner who may have lived in a certain holy place or had visited there.

Spelling in the Encyclopedia Britannica is “Loreto.” According to the legend, the Holy House that is the focal point for thousands of pilgrims yearly in the little Italian village is the home in which Mary had been born in Nazareth, and in which she had received the annunciation and had lived during the childhood of Jesus. The story says the house was carried to Italy by angels.