

A Brief History of St. Fidelis Catholic Church

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Over two hundred years ago, families of European ancestry began populating this little place by Indian Creek. Though isolated and widely scattered, these early settlers included persons who wished to practice their Catholic faith. As early as 1836, Bishop Joseph Rosati, then bishop of the Diocese of Saint Louis, received messages from Father Peter Paul Lefevere, a traveling priest, about the growing congregations of Catholics settling in west central Illinois.

In Beardstown, there was a population of a few hundred Irish Catholics, who founded St. Alexis in 1838, one of the oldest parishes in the Diocese of Springfield.

A year later, a Prussian immigrant named Francis Arenz – a Catholic – platted a village here beside Indian Creek. He saw the potential for developing a community because there was a mill here on the creek. At that time, there were already a few Catholic families living in the area.

Catholics in those days could not expect to see a priest but a few times a year. The region was served by traveling priests who covered vast territories. Even St. Alexis did not have a resident pastor until 1856.

- 1855 is perhaps the earliest evidence of the Catholic presence at Arenzville. Records show that Father Michael Prendergast, a traveling priest, performed a baptism on June 4th at “Arenz Mill.”
- In 1859, Father Roderick Heimerling from Beardstown began a schedule to serve 7 families in Arenzville a few times a year. This is the year that the diocese recognizes as the beginning of the Arenzville parish.

Between 1850 and 1880, many German Catholic immigrant families arrived in Arenzville. Families with names such as Herbert, Hahling, Baujan, Dober, Tritsch, Weber, Woerner, Sewalt, Heitz and Dreesbach populated the parish. By 1884, the parish grew to 18 German families. Descendants of several of these early families are still present today.

But the Arenzville Catholics had no church building in which to gather, and the first meetings were held in private homes. In 1872, the Catholic families took steps to build a home. In that year, articles of incorporation formally established the organization known as the St. Fidelis Roman Catholic Church. Nine years later, in 1881, the parish members raised funds to buy this piece of ground and a small two-room home (the home may have been donated). Valentine Hahling, a carpenter and parish member, built pieces to equip the small house for worship services – an altar, benches and kneelers, and a primitive – but not very private – confessional.

In just a few years, the congregation outgrew the two-room home. The little house was moved – today it sits directly behind our church. In its place, the parish began building the wood frame church of St. Fidelis, the building in which we now gather. The ground was dedicated on October 13, 1899, and the finished building was dedicated October 6, 1901.

The first few years, the parish struggled to find the funds to equip their church. Parish members and their friends in the Arenzville community raised money to add statues, an organ, stained glass windows, a bell. And when he died, Valentine Hahling bequeathed funds for the parish to buy a proper confessional.

St. Fidelis enjoys the stewardship of its parent parish and the diocese. From its founding until 1902, the parish was a mission of St. Alexius in Beardstown. Then from 1902 to 1976, it was aligned with St. Luke's in Virginia. For a short time after 1976, the parish was once again a mission of St. Alexius, and today, all three churches are a shared community.

St. Fidelis has always been a small place with limited resources. Perhaps that is why its founding families chose St. Fidelis of Sigmaringen as their patron. Though born into privilege and status, St. Fidelis of Sigmaringen elected to leave his home in Germany and serve the poor in a foreign land. He prayed to remain faithful and not give in to apathy. His example offers inspiration to us yet today.