

Notes on the Historic District of Old St. Thomas Parish at Ivy Mills
for the
Delaware County Historical Society "Passport to History" Program

The parish of St. Thomas the Apostle can trace its roots to the 1720s when a few Catholics gathered for Mass in the nearby home of Thomas Willcox. At that time, Jesuit priests from Maryland, traveling by water and riding horseback on old Indian trails, established mission stations in areas where Catholics lived. The Willcox home, or "Ivy Mills," as it was called, became a regular stop for these priests on their way to Philadelphia. In the 1840s, the number of parishioners began to outgrow the chapel in the Willcox home. In 1852, James Willcox donated the land for St. Thomas the Apostle Church, and construction of the church was begun that year.

St. Thomas Cemetery is located directly in front of the church. Several former pastors are buried here: Father William F. Cook, Father Sylvester M. McCarthy, and Father Francis X. Griffin. Many members of the Willcox family are also buried here, along with parishioners from the 1850s to the present day. We know that four Civil War veterans are buried here, but we have not yet located their gravesites.

The **old church** is the oldest original Catholic Church in continuous use in Delaware County.

- ❖ St. Thomas was the only parish church in Delaware County to have its cornerstone blessed by Bishop John Neumann.
- ❖ In 1856, when the church was completed, it was smaller and simpler than it is now. It had plain glass windows, a wooden altar, and smaller pews. The outside was stucco rather than stone.
- ❖ Changes were made to the church building in 1898, 1937, and the early 1970s.
- ❖ The confessionals that used to be on both sides of the entrance were removed in the early 1970s so that there would be more space for Sunday Mass participants. At that time, a confessional was built in the altar boys' sacristy.

Outside of the church

- ❖ There are **two inscriptions** on the front of the church. The inscription on the right front wall shows that remodeling and repairs to the church were completed in 1938. The brass plaque on the left celebrates the 250th anniversary of the parish's founding. On the foundation wall on the north side of the church is another marker, which reads "Ivy Mills, 1729."
- ❖ The **front doors** (that face west) are made from chestnut wood that at one time was plentiful in this area. The three-sided steps were built in May 2002.
- ❖ On the front door, notice the interesting design around the outside **doorknob** and of the doorknob itself on the inside of the door.
- ❖ Toward the east end of the church, the **1898 sacristies' addition** can be easily seen because the walls of this addition are stucco rather than stone. When the church was still used for Sunday Mass, the parishioners used the sacristy doorways as well as the front doorway to enter and leave the building.

Inside of the church

- ❖ The walls were painted the present color in 1994.
- ❖ The **pews** are from 1898. Some pews from 1856 are still in the choir loft. (Please do not go to the choir loft, because it is open only for special occasions now.)
- ❖ The **stations of the cross and main lights** were installed in 1937-1938.
- ❖ The **marble altars** were installed in 1937.
- ❖ The **stained glass windows** were installed in 1898. They include the Saint Thomas the Apostle window (facing west) and the eight main side windows showing scenes from the life of the Blessed Mother (north side) and Jesus (south side).
- ❖ The **bell** (installed in 1860) looks much like the Liberty Bell. It was rung each Sunday before each Mass until 1991 when Sunday Mass was transferred to the new church.
- ❖ **Plaques** on the west paneled wall contain the names of donors who have made generous contributions to the Friends of Old Saint Thomas for the maintenance and repairs to the old church and the historic complex. The Friends have been responsible for repairing and maintaining the old church since 1991.

The **rectory**, built in 1874, is an example of Victorian architecture. The first rectory was built in 1858, but it burned down in 1874. Through the years many changes and additions were made to the rectory. Priests no longer live in this rectory, but the Friends are working on repairing it so that it can be used by parishioners for meetings and special occasions.

The **ice house** used to stand between the rectory and the new school, but it was taken apart during school construction. The original stones were saved, and some were used in building the church steps in 2002.

The **horse shed** was repaired in 2000. At one time there was a long row of horse sheds that stretched the full length of the parking lot. Individuals or families could own a horse shed, and most sheds had the names of the owners on them. The sheds were taken down in the early 1950s to make room for a more modern kind of horsepower.

The **old barn or carriage house** to the south was at one time probably used for animals. In later years it was used as a garage. It is now used for storage.

The cemetery at the east end of the church is called **St. Mary's Cemetery**. Part of it, just to the east of the horse shed, is a section for infants and children. Years ago, it was not uncommon to bury all the small children in the same area. Some of the headstones in this section are very unusual.