



Barquilla de la Santa Maria

BULLETIN of the Catholic Record Society -
Diocese of Columbus

Vol. XXXII, No. 6

June 16: St. John Francis Regis, S.J.

June, 2007

The Murder of Marion's Pastor, Father John Coveney

by J. Michael Finn

The life and dedicated work of Father John Coveney touched both the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the Diocese of Columbus. While piecing together the facts of Father Coveney's life and death it was discovered that several published histories of St. Mary Parish in Marion, Ohio are incorrect in relation to Father Coveney's service. This article will be an opportunity to correct the historical record, as well as to relate a little known incident in Ohio Catholic history.

Father John Coveney, S.J., Educator and Pastor

Father John Coveney was born in County Cork, Ireland on January 13, 1812. He arrived in America in 1844 and immediately went to Florissant, Missouri, where on March 7, 1844 he entered the Society of Jesus at St. Stanislaus Seminary. He completed his studies and was ordained a priest as a member of the Society of Jesus on August 29, 1852 at Bardstown, Kentucky by Bishop Martin John Spalding of Louisville.

After his ordination he was assigned to St. Xavier College in Cincinnati, Ohio where he spent a year. Between 1853 and 1856 he was an instructor at St. Joseph College in Bardstown, Kentucky. In 1857 he moved to St. Louis College in St. Louis, Missouri where he was assigned until 1858. In 1858 he joined the faculty of St. Aloysius Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. St.



Father John Coveney, 1812-1869

Aloysius Academy opened in 1857 and was a predecessor institution to Marquette University. While there he resided at St. Gall's parish in Milwaukee.

In 1859 Father Coveney took his final vows as member of the Society of Jesus. Leaving Wisconsin in 1860 Father Coveney was assigned to the Maryland Province. In 1861 he was back in the west at Holy Family Parish in Chicago. The beginning of 1862 found him again serving as an instructor at St. Xavier College in Cincinnati, Ohio.

At this time Father Coveney sought to be released from the Jesuit Order. This request was

granted on February 4, 1862. He immediately joined the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as a diocesan priest and was assigned by Archbishop Purcell as pastor of St. Patrick's Parish in Bellefontaine, Ohio including the station of Marion.

Bellefontaine St. Patrick and Marion St. Mary

Although Bellefontaine is currently a part of the Cincinnati Archdiocese, the parish and Father John Coveney are linked historically with St. Mary Parish in Marion, which is now part of the Diocese of Columbus. St. Patrick Parish in Bellefontaine began in 1852 as a mission of Urbana, although priests from Springfield had visited there as early as 1849. The Catholics in Bellefontaine were mostly Irish as it was a railroad town.

According to St. Patrick's parish centennial history a Father Maher was the first pastor. This was Father James Meagher, who later served as the first pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Columbus. Father Meagher began the construction of the first Catholic Church in Bellefontaine. Father Thomas Sheehan offered the first Mass in the new church, which was dedicated on Christmas Day, 1853.

The first recorded Mass in Marion was offered on January 13, 1844. Prior to that, priests had irregularly visited the area's Catholics. Regular services began in private homes and then moved to a building on Mill Street. Regular visits by the pastors of St. Patrick's were likely facilitated by the completion in 1854 of a direct railroad line connecting the 45 miles between Bellefontaine and Marion. Mentioned in the parish history of St. Mary's as regularly serving priests during this period are Father Grogan, Father John Francis McSweeney, and Father Thomas J. Coppinger, all of whom are recorded as pastors in Bellefontaine from 1853 until 1862.

Father John Coveney first appears incorrectly in the Marion St. Mary's history in 1860 as the first non-resident pastor succeeding

Father Thomas J. Coppinger. This information is published in a *Marion Star* article in 1889, in Jacoby's 1907 history of Marion County, and in Father Carmen Arcuri's 1957 history of the parish. Discovery of Father Coveney's prior service with the Jesuits has proven these histories to be incorrect. Father Coveney was serving with the Jesuits in 1860 through February 1862, making it impossible for him to have been serving in Marion in 1860. These published histories also state that Father Coveney built the first St. Mary's Church, dedicated in 1862. While he did build the first church in Marion, its dedication did not occur in 1862.

Father Coveney began as pastor of Bellefontaine St. Patrick in early 1862 after leaving the Jesuits. In this appointment he succeeded Father Thomas J. Coppinger who had become incapacitated due to a stroke suffered in December 1861. For a month in 1862 following Father Coppinger's stroke, Bellefontaine St. Patrick was under the care of Father Edward M. Fitzgerald of Columbus St. Patrick Parish. Although Father Coppinger made a good recovery, it was determined that his illness prevented him from continuing in his regular duties as pastor. Several notations in the calendar of Archbishop Purcell confirm this information, citing Father Fitzgerald as the source of the information.

The fact that Father Coveney was responsible for building the first St. Mary's Church in Marion is correct; however, the dates require some adjustment. In Marion, construction plans for the first red-brick church were prepared in 1864. This was done under the direction of Father Coveney. The first St. Mary's church was built on the Prospect Street property in Marion that had been purchased in 1853 and donated to the church by parishioner Timothy Fahey. Bishop Sylvester Rosecrans, as Auxiliary Bishop of Cincinnati, dedicated this church on October 22, 1865, not 1862 as presented in the many histories.

Father Coveney served the Marion congregation as confirmed by the record of

marriages in the county probate court from his first marriage in April 1862 until his last marriage on March 17, 1868. In 1867 Father John M. Mackey was appointed the first resident pastor of St. Mary's.

Of course, Father Coveney never neglected his parishioners in Bellefontaine. Upon his assignment as the new pastor of Bellefontaine, Father Coveney had promptly recognized the need for establishing Catholic education. He began the first Catholic school in Bellefontaine in 1862. As parish funds for teachers were non-existent, Father Coveney taught the school himself, utilizing the teaching skills he had acquired as an educator with the Jesuits. Classes were conducted in the parish rectory. In 1868 he reported to Archbishop Purcell that a total of 50 students had received their First Holy Communion but had not yet been confirmed.

Murder in Bellefontaine

The tragic story of Father Coveney's death began on a typically cold November Monday evening in 1869 in the community of Bellefontaine. It was shortly before 8:00 p.m. Most of the townspeople had retired for the evening. In a house on East Patterson Street the respected Catholic pastor had been murdered. His killer, having just committed the first murder in the history of Bellefontaine, was running toward the town jail to confess.

John Powers arrived in Bellefontaine on Friday, November 5, 1869. He attracted some attention by his unusual manner and erratic behavior. He purchased a U.S. flag at a local store and wore it underneath his shirt. He asked someone on the street if a good fire was kept in the Bellefontaine city jail as he intended to be staying there for the winter.

Federal census records list John Powers' birthplace as Ohio and the year about 1843. He had lived in Bellefontaine as a boy and had worked there as a blacksmith. He reportedly had been a Catholic.¹ Powers left the city about 1856 after joining the Methodist church. He lived in

Chicago and Texas. He also reportedly served either in the U.S. Navy or he was a merchant sailor for a period of time. In November 1869 he returned to Bellefontaine to visit his married sister, Mary McMahan, who lived on Patterson Street near St. Patrick Church. Both Mrs. McMahan and her husband were members of St. Patrick Parish. Powers was about 26 years old at this time and the Bellefontaine *Republican* newspaper described him as a man of rather good appearance but having "a downcast and treacherous look."

On the evening of Monday, November 8, 1869 Father John Coveney was alone in the small brick home next to St. Patrick Church that served as the parish rectory. His housekeeper, Kate Hanrahan, had left the rectory in order to return a borrowed washtub to a neighbor. When she left Father Coveney he was sitting at his desk reading his breviary. As she was leaving she noticed John Powers coming in the rectory gate.

It is unknown if Powers gained entry to the rectory at the invitation of Father Coveney or if he walked in uninvited. The *Logan County Gazette* reported that Powers had attempted to contact Father Coveney on Sunday; however, "the priest distrusted his motives and was apprehensive that he meant mischief." If that report is correct, it seems unlikely that Father Coveney would have invited the man into the rectory. Nevertheless, only a short time after entering the rectory, Powers pulled a six-shot revolver from his belt and shot Father Coveney once in the head, probably killing him instantly.

Leaving Father Coveney dead on the floor, Powers returned the gun to his belt and ran from the rectory. Kate Hanrahan, having been gone from the rectory only about 15 minutes, returned from the neighbor's house. She saw Powers running from the rectory and jumping over the front fence. When she entered the rectory she found Father Coveney's lifeless body lying on the floor beside a table and immediately began raising the alarm, which soon spread throughout the town.

From the rectory, Powers proceed uptown to the jail. Marshal Sherman and Constable Beatty were both out. Powers requested that the jailer be summoned. Constable Beatty was sent for and, when he arrived, Powers confessed that he had killed the priest and asked to be put in jail. Power's demeanor was described as wild and incoherent. Powers stated that he had been prepared to use all six shots in his gun, but the first shot was the only one necessary to kill the priest. The constable disarmed Powers and locked him in a cell. Beatty then left the jail and headed out to investigate the strange confession. On his way he met several residents who were already spreading the alarm that Father Coveney had indeed been shot and killed.

What little is known about the motivation behind the murder of Father Coveney comes from the rather confused and rambling confession of his murderer. According to Powers' initial version of the crime he had gone to see the parish priest "with a heavy load on his mind" to make a confession and seek redemption. Allegedly, during their conversation Father Coveney made a disparaging remark about the Protestant religion that had angered Powers. He stated that while conversing about religion, Father Coveney said to him that his (Power's) religion was no better than a dog's, at the same time pointing to one on the floor. Powers also claimed that Father Coveney had spoken ill of sailors. In a later interview with reporters, Powers claimed that in Texas he had been struck by a revelation from God that told him to kill the priest, as he said "For the sake of the flag and old Ireland." He also told reporters, "General Grant knows the whole of it." His confessions were consistent on one point – he went to the rectory with the intention of killing the priest. A reporter who interviewed Powers on Tuesday said of the many versions of the crime: "The whole affair seemed to be wrapped in incomprehensible mystery."

The beloved pastor's murder greatly upset the parishioners of St. Patrick's. There was serious talk around Bellefontaine about breaking

into the jail and lynching the murderer, but "better counsels prevailed" and a lynching was averted. Local Protestant leaders (who hadn't always been on the best of terms with their Catholic neighbors) publicly expressed shock and dismay at the killing.

That evening, Bellefontaine Coroner Jones quickly empanelled a jury to conduct an inquest regarding the death of Father Coveney. Doctor S. W. Fuller examined the priest's wound. Constable Beatty and Marshal Sherman were examined about Powers' confession. The coroner's jury returned the verdict that Father John Coveney came to his death as a result of a single pistol shot inflicted by John Powers.

It was clear to everyone who spoke with Powers that he was insane, including several doctors who examined him in jail after the murder. His rambling confused manner, his unusual behavior and the many incoherent versions of why he had murdered the priest left all to reach the same conclusion regarding the state of his mental health.

Funeral of Father Coveney

By 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday November 9, 1869 parishioners were gathered in the church mourning their fallen pastor. Father Coveney's body, which had been lying on a platform in front of the altar was removed to the sacristy, dressed in his vestments, and placed in a very elegant casket. By daylight Father Coveney was lying in state in front of the sanctuary.

At 9:00 a.m. Tuesday, Father John M. Mackey, assisted by Father Nicholas R. Young, sang a High Mass. In his sermon, Father Young reminded the parishioners that now they were truly orphans, sheep without a shepherd, having lost their good Father who had so often ministered to their needs. The *Catholic Telegraph* reported, "During the delivery of this warm-hearted discourse there was not a dry eye in the house; men wept like children." Following the sermon the mourners filed passed the casket. Many more tears were shed (Father Young was later assigned

to replace Father Coveney as pastor of Bellefontaine).

At 1:00 p.m. Tuesday, Father John M. Mackey performed the funeral service. Father Mackey preached the sermon on the moral lessons to be derived from the sudden and terrible visitation of Providence that was represented by Father Coveney's death. He noted that Father Convey, who had so often eased the suffering of others, was taken so suddenly that he did not have time to ease his own suffering. Following the funeral Mass, as Father Coveney's casket was being placed in the hearse to be taken to the cemetery, a dispatch arrived stating that Father Charles Driscoll, S.J., a respected pastor and educator from St. Xavier's College in Cincinnati would attend the funeral. It was decided to postpone the burial until Wednesday, giving Father Driscoll time to arrive.

At 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday morning another High Mass was celebrated for Father Coveney. The Logan County court was adjourned so that the judges and the members of the bar could attend the services. A large number of Protestant citizens of Bellefontaine attended at the service and participated in the procession that followed. The assembled crowd filled the church to capacity and spilled out onto the street. Father Driscoll provided the sermon. He urged the crowd to pray for their departed pastor and to teach their children to pray for him.

After the Mass, Father Convey's casket was again removed from the church to be taken to Calvary Cemetery. The procession was led by 150 school children that Father Coveney had taught in the parish school. Next in line came the clergy singing the Office for the Dead followed by the pallbearers and the hearse. Following the hearse was a large crowd of parishioners and Protestant citizens. According to the *Catholic Telegraph*, "It was the most imposing, the largest, and the most solemn funeral ever witnessed in Bellefontaine." At the cemetery, Father John Mackey addressed the crowd with a sermon on Purgatory. The crowd

then dispersed, according to the *Telegraph*, "With the Protestants regretting the sad occurrence and the Catholics saying, 'May the Lord have mercy on the soul of Father John Coveney.'"

The 1953 centennial history of St. Patrick Parish relates that 20 years after Father Coveney's burial, the original Calvary Cemetery in Bellefontaine was moved. This necessitated the relocation of the grave of Father Coveney. As his casket was being transferred it was opened. Father Coveney's body looked the same as it did on the day he was buried. It had not decayed. His burial vestments also appeared to be in their original condition. To quote the author of the centennial history, "We think he is a saint, guiding St. Patrick's Parish."

Father Convey's grave and headstone are now in the new Calvary Cemetery in Bellefontaine. Father Coveney's epitaph reads as follows: *Coveney, Joannes, d. 8 Nov 1869 (Corkonaie in Hibernia pio genere orti borne, morte subitar in opido Bellefontatin die Novembis anno 1869 sua tatis anno 56, R.I.P.)*

The Fate of John Powers

The Logan County Grand Jury indicted John Powers for the murder of Father Coveney. The jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity and the judge ordered that he be confined in a state mental facility. Since Powers was not then a resident of Ohio, it was not a simple task to have him committed. It was necessary for State Representative John A. Price of Bellefontaine to introduce a Joint Resolution into the Ohio State General Assembly to order Powers' committal. The Joint Resolution was passed on April 12, 1870 and it read as follows:

WHEREAS, An indictment for murder in the first degree was found in Logan county, Ohio, against one John Powers; and
WHEREAS, Said John Powers was acquitted of the crime charged in said indictment solely on the ground that he was insane at the time he committed the act charged therein; and
WHEREAS, Said John Powers is not a citizen

of the state of Ohio, and is still insane; therefore, be it

RESOLVED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF OHIO, That the sheriff of Logan county is hereby required to conduct said John Powers to the Southern Ohio Lunatic Asylum at Dayton, and the superintendent of said Asylum is required to receive said John Powers and keep him in the same manner that other patients are kept in said Asylum.

Signed by J. R. Cockerill, pro-tem, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Samuel F. Hunt, President pro-tem of the Senate.

The resolution permitted the committal of John Powers to what was then known as the Southern Ohio Lunatic Asylum at Dayton and later known as the Dayton State Hospital. General Robert P. Kennedy's 1903 history of Logan County notes that John Powers died at the Dayton State Hospital sometime between 1891 and 1893. Current research of the Montgomery County probate death records and the Federal census records has proven that history to be incorrect. John Powers is listed in the 1880, 1900 and 1910 Federal census records as a resident at the Dayton State Hospital; he died there on March 15, 1917 at the age of 74. It is assumed that he is buried on the hospital grounds.

Conclusion

The death of Father John Coveney is one of the sad stories of the diocese. He was taken from his parishioners without warning, ending a life dedicated to education and service. His many accomplishments and contributions as Pastor to both Bellefontaine and Marion should be honored and remembered. After his death, Father Charles Driscoll, S.J. wrote of Father Coveney, "Nothing need be said in his praise as all with whom he was connected admired him."

Note

1) The report that John Powers was a Catholic would need some verification to be accepted.

Although his father's name implies an Irish Catholic ancestry, the immediate family did not function to pass the faith along. In 1850 John and his younger sister Mary J. Powers were living with a McNett family in Liberty Township, Logan County. The parents seem to have been Patrick Powers and Dorothy Knox, who were married before a justice of the peace in 1842. Patrick apparently had died and in 1851 Dorothy Powers married Michael Quinn, again before a justice. -ed.

Sources

Arcuri, Carmen, *An Historical Sketch of the Development and Organization of the Catholic Church in Marion County, Ohio*; thesis, College of St. Charles Borromeo, 1957

Garraghan, Gilbert J., *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, 1938, Reprint, Loyola University Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1983

Kennedy, Gen. Robert P., *Historical Preview of Logan County, Ohio*, S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1903

Lamott, S.T.D., Rev. John H., *History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821-1921*, Frederick Pustet Co., Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio 1921

Jacoby, Wilber J., Editor and compiler, *History of Marion County, Ohio and Representative Citizens*, Marion, Ohio, 1907

Webb, Ben J. Hon., *The Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*, Charles A. Rogers Publisher, Louisville, Ky., 1884

Logan County, Ohio 1982 Volume I, A collection of Historical Sketches and Family Histories Compiled by Members and Friends of the Logan County Genealogical Society, Bellefontaine, Ohio, 1983

Centennial History of St. Patrick Church 1852-1952, Published by St. Patrick Parish, Bellefontaine, Ohio 1952 (includes photograph of Fr. Coveney).

Laws of Ohio, Acts passed at the session of the General Assembly of the State of Ohio 1863-1885, published by the Office of the Secretary of State, State of Ohio

Society of Jesus, *Missouri Province Catalogue* for various years, courtesy of the Midwest Jesuit Archives, St. Louis, Missouri, David P. Miros, Ph.D., Archivist

Marion, Ohio Marriages 1824-1902, From the

Probate Court Record, Volumes IV, V, VI, and VII, Marion County Historical Society, Extracted by Alan L. Potts, 1998

Catholic Telegraph: November 11, 1869; November 18, 1869, October 18, 1940, October 24, 1952

Ohio State Journal: November 15, 1869

Bellefontaine Republican: November 12, 1869

Bellefontaine Press: December 16, 1869

Logan County Gazette: November 12, 1869

Marion Democratic Mirror: October 19, 1865; October 26, 1865

Marion Independent: October 19, 1865

Marion Star: October 22, 1898

Toledo Blade: November 18, 1869

Zanesville St. Nicholas Parish, Deaths, 1844-1867

(Concluded, from Vol. XXXII, No. 4)

1867

13 Jan. Jacob, son of Jacob Durand and his wife Catharina, two weeks old, was buried in the cemetery in Taylorsville; he died on 12 Jan.

Feb. 8 Agatha Rudy, wife of Rudolph Rudy, died Feb. 6, was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas.

16 Feb. Maria, daughter of Patrick Dolan, residing at Cambridge, 18 years old, today was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. She died the 14th, taken away by consumption.

22 Feb. Manfred Peter Henry, 5 months old, and Rosa Margaretha Maria, 1 year 4 months old, children of Mathias Faller and his wife Maria born Frisch, were buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. They died 20 Feb.

12 March Barbara Siegrist, 72 years old, widow of Wendelin, died the 11th, was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of

St. Thomas.

15 March Francis Albert, son of August and Katharina Francisca Brandcoker, 10 days old, was buried in our cemetery, died 14 March.

19 March John, son of Peter Durand and his wife Elisabetha born Brucker, 23 years old, was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. He died 16 March. (He earned a pension in defending the Union.)

19 March John, son of Joseph Kihner? widower and his wife Catharina born Schramm, aged 23 years, was buried in our cemetery. He died on 16 March.

May 22 Catharina Fix, wife of Bernard Fix (in Wayne Township), 56 years old, was buried. she died on May 20.

[A note in German regarding the probate court is written here.]

13 June Daniel Dickes, 52 years old, living in Deaverstown, was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Morgan County.

- July 22 Salomon, son of Joseph Greter and his wife Maria Anna, baptized in necessity, died after one hour.
- Aug. 4 Cecilia Catharina, daughter of Peter Keck and Josephina his wife, was buried in our cemetery, 2 1/2 months old. She died Aug. 3.
- Aug. 15 Andreas Oscar, son of Francis Weigand, D.M. and his wife Ernestina born Frischer, ten years old, was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. He died on the 14th.
- Aug. 21 Francis Joseph, son of Edmund Merkle and his wife Maria born Goebel, was buried today in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. He died the same day, aged 6 months.
- Aug. 25 Margaret Christ, respected and pious widow of Wendelin Christ, was buried today, aged 76 years. She died the previous day.
- Sept. 2 Josepha, daughter of Joseph Michael and his wife Josepha Mohr, 19 years old, was buried in our cemetery. She died on 31 August.
- 9 Sept. Gertrude, daughter of George and Magdalen Dixon, 6 weeks old, was buried in our cemetery.
- 28 Sept. Clara Catharine, daughter of Christopher Wagner and his wife Maria born Frederich, 10 months old, was buried in our cemetery; she died on 26 Sept.
- Oct. 2 Mathias Graetzer, 49 years old, husband of Anna Maria Gratzner, was buried in Taylorsville; he died Oct. 1 of infirmity of the lungs.
- Nov. 23 Fabian Körner died, provided with the holy sacraments, in the house of [blank] Ganter in [blank] and was buried. Aged [blank]
[marriage record, crossed out:]
- 4 Nov. Jacob Wiebel? and Maria Winter were united in matrimony.
- Nov. 29 Maria Margaretha, daughter of Ernest and Margretha Grossmann, was buried in the cemetery of the congregation of St. Thomas. She died the day before, aged 2 years. The cause of death was a fall into a vessel full of hot water
- Dec. 23 Catharina, wife of Jacob Durand, was buried in Taylorsville. She resided in Putnam. She died in childbirth on 21 December. She was 37 years old.
- [This ends the year 1867. The records continue, unbroken, down to the present time.]