

History of St. Joseph Parish, continued.

1925-2003

The First Catholic Comes to Polk County

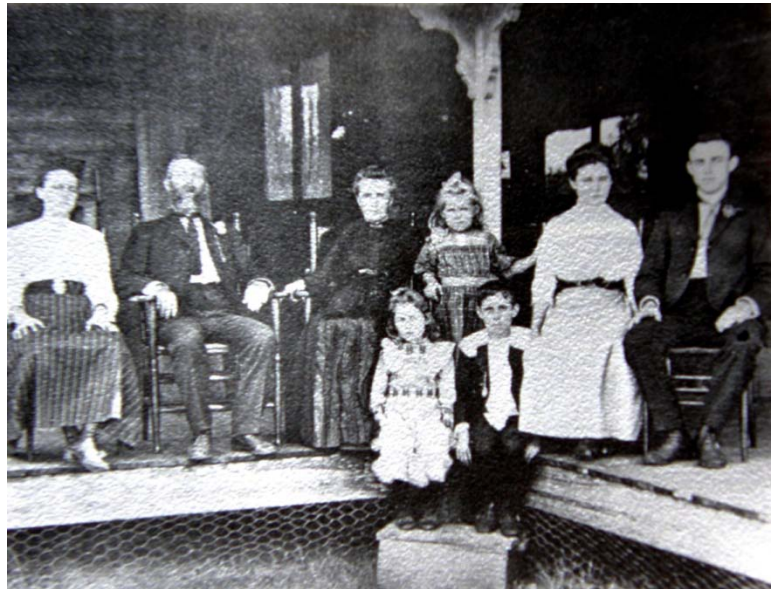
In the ensuing years, Florida would be successively the property of Spain, England, and finally Spain. It was finally ceded to the United States in 1819 and was recognized as a state in 1845. The Catholic Church was early established in the Tampa Bay area; however, at that time, there were few Catholics in the interior of the state. The arrival of the railroad changed that. An Irishman, Patrick Bannon, was the first Catholic in this section of Polk County. A doctor in New York advised him for his health to seek a warmer climate, and he acted on that advice. He arrived in 1881 traveling from New York City to Jacksonville or Orlando by train and then by boat to Sanford. In Sanford, he purchased supplies, a wagon, and horses for his trip to Polk County, where he planned to establish a homestead on an island in Lake Marion close to the Grenelefe area. To reach the island, Bannon had to cross Reedy Creek.



The creek was deeper and more treacherous than he had anticipated, and in the crossing, he lost all his supplies. Today, the island is largely uninhabited, and a boat is still needed to reach the island.

Nevertheless, the land was rich, beautiful and free, or almost free since it could be homesteaded or purchased for \$1.25 an acre. Game was plentiful. Deer abounded, as did bears, wild turkey, quail and squirrels. Blackberries and huckleberries grew wild. Bannon was friendly with an Indian Chief, Chipco, who had a camp on what later became known as Bannon's Island. Chipco, with his tribe of about 75, lived first on an island in Lake Hamilton and later on the shores of Lake Pierce.

Bannon cleared his land and built a log home, which would eventually have the shape of a cross. The first year, he planted the whole island in string beans, but the freeze of 1881 wiped out his crop. In 1889, he traveled again to New York City and returned with his wife, Annie Mary Ryan. By this time, Bannon had also purchased the land and built a small house on the site of the Palm Crest Hotel, which is now Landmark College in the center of Haines City.



Since the island was accessible only by boat, when Annie Bannon was to deliver a child, they would move to this small house where she could receive the help of a midwife.

Bannon knew Fr. John Quinlan, SJ because he had been traveling with cart and horse to Tampa for Mass since there was no Catholic Church in the area. So shortly after Bannon returned from New York, he wrote Fr. Quinlan to say that he would be in Tampa for Christmas, bringing Bannon's six week old baby for baptism. This 60 mile, almost two-week trip by horse and wagon also allowed Bannon to purchase supplies in perishables, as no refrigeration was available in those stores. About 1850, ice from Boston was shipped to Tampa and then stored in icehouses. A Tampa ice factory, which manufactured ice, was built in 1885, but icehouses or factories did not yet exist in the interior.