

"THEIR HOME WAS FLAMING": THE ST. PAUL'S CHURCH RIOT

BY JAMES W. PIEPER

On the night of March 27, 1895, Elia W. Peattie, one of the first female news reporters in Omaha, visited the diverse, distinctive neighborhood of Sheelytown to report on a fire. Located in what was then the southwest corner of the city, Sheelytown was home to many immigrants, including Germans, Irish, Italians, English and Poles; Peattie called it "a foreign country."

The Polish community brought Peattie to Sheelytown on that spring night. The first Polish church built in Omaha, St. Paul's, was ablaze. A group of onlookers gathered around the flaming structure, silent. "Not a cry went into the air," Peattie noted. "Hardly a word was spoken. A group of weeping and shivering little ones, in their night clothes, huddled together trembling on a mattress on the ground. Their home was flaming before their eyes, and the wild, fire-lit sky, the ominous, unnaturally silent gathering of people, the subdued tones in which all spoke, seemed to fill the night with a terrible menace."¹

The burning of St. Paul's Church was the result of a year-long struggle between Bishop Richard Scannell of Omaha and a rogue group of parishioners who sought to make St. Paul's an independent church. Violence within the Polish Catholic community in the 1890s was an unfortunately common occurrence in American major cities. The conflicts were the result of a mixture of politics, nationalism, religious fervor, the personal failings of clergy, and doctrinal disputes within the Catholic Church.

At the root of the controversy was the political oppression of the Polish state. In the late 1700s, the powerful empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria

partitioned the formerly large Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth so that, by 1795, Poles in Europe had no nation. An independent Poland would not return until after World War I. Despite their foreign domination, the Poles were strongly loyal to their ethnic identity, particularly their strong adherence to the Catholic faith.²

In the century from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the beginning of World War I, approximately 1.5 million Poles made the trek across the Atlantic to America. They largely settled in the major industrial centers of the East, where they found work in steel mills and factories. By 1900, Poles comprised the largest ethnic group in Chicago and had significant numbers in Cleveland, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh.³

Religion was the center of these new immigrants' lives. Like the Irish, native Poles were oppressed by non-Catholic nations, thus tying their national identity to their religious identity. Upon their arrival in America, however, they found a church dominated by Irish and German bishops. The sheer number of Irish bishops and priests made the Poles feel like outsiders in their own faith, and the glib response of the Irish hierarchy to the plight of the Polish people (a group of bishops said that the Poles suffered more than anyone "after the Irish") earned them little esteem. German bishops were even more offensive to the Poles, as the Germans in Europe were among the conquerors of Poland.⁴

The first Poles came to Nebraska in the late 1860s. Many of them settled in the rural regions of the state, but by the 1880s an increasing number came to Omaha to work in meatpacking

plants. The Poles of Omaha made their home in Sheelytown, a neighborhood named after the Joseph F. Sheely and Company meatpacking plant, and the nearby "Little Poland." Different accounts provide different definitions of the boundary of Sheelytown, but in general it was considered to be the area west of 24th and Vinton Streets. Little Poland, according to historian Fr. Henry Casper, was located between 25th and 29th Streets and F and L Streets.⁵

Early Polish immigrants isolated themselves from the larger city community, holding to their own language and traditions in their own neighborhoods. Peasants in their home country, the early Poles of Omaha were neither educated nor prosperous. They frequently fought with their Irish neighbors, though intermarriage with the Irish was not infrequent. Most Poles worked in meatpacking or smelting jobs for a dollar and a half or less a day.⁶ Their goals were "to own a modest home" and "to have a suitable house of worship."⁷ Both goals proved to be somewhat difficult.

Describing Sheelytown in a "pen picture" in the *Omaha World-Herald*, Elia W. Peattie wrote: "Up the irregular and ungraded streets small cottages are perched precariously on the edges of bluffs, or on the slope of a hill. Unwholesome scents distress the nostrils. In some of the yards there lies the debris that indicates slovenly living." This squalor was balanced by the presence of several "attractive cottages, with pleasant windows, and an aspect of cleanliness and frugality." These houses were largely found "on the edge of the community toward the south, and appear to be homes erected by their owners, and representing that home-getting, self-respecting quality which is one of the best elements of this country." The neighborhood had several stores, bars, and dance halls to provide for life's necessities and luxuries.⁸

Peattie was largely complimentary of the people of Sheelytown. She wrote: "There are so many good, industrious and desirable citizens living at or near Sheely station that one hesitates to describe the worst features of the place." Many residents were "respectable men and women, who [fought] poverty honestly, and raising their children safely in pleasant little homes." However, there was also a "tribe of swarthy, angry, skulking men who spend their money in the saloons, who work all day and whose leisure is spent in almost any way except an innocent one." These "bandits" were responsible for the neighborhood's negative reputation for crime.⁹



Omaha Bee, March 13, 1895

If a safe, prosperous neighborhood were not found, a suitable house of worship was equally elusive. In those days, parishes were usually established along ethnic lines so that recent immigrants could worship and find community with people who spoke their language and knew their customs. The Poles, in their small numbers, had to find a home in a parish of another nationality. The earliest Poles worshipped at St. Mary Magdalene's, which ministered to the city's German population. Some began attending Mass at the Czech St. Wenceslaus Church in 1877 because it was closer to Sheelytown, and more began to attend St. Joseph's Church after its completion in 1887. St. Joseph's was also a German parish, but its assistant pastor, Fr. Charles Breitkopf, spoke Polish. The Poles gave him a gift of a fine saddle horse in exchange for the occasional Polish homily.¹⁰

By 1890, an estimated 200 Polish families lived in Omaha. The need for a Polish parish in the city was evident. In 1890, a group of Polish Catholics organized the Polish Parish Association and with approval of the diocese purchased three lots at

Omaha World-Herald,
March 28, 1895



Omaha World-Herald,
April 3, 1895



29th and Elm Streets upon which it planned to build a church, school, and residence. The Polish community was apparently overeager to start the parish right away. Fr. William Choka, then the administrator of the diocese while Bishop James O'Connor was ill, had to ensure that the Poles would do nothing "without the consent of the priest, or without [Fr. Choka's] permission." Starting a Polish parish was problematic because many Polish priests were former revolutionaries and had insufficient seminary formation. (The Polish people revolted against their Prussian and Russian rulers in 1831, 1846 and 1863. Many

participants in these revolts joined the priesthood, perhaps not with the purest intentions.) "The Poles would be alright, if only their priests were a better lot," Choka said.¹¹

The lots purchased were deeded to three lay trustees of the Polish Parish Association, in violation of both church and state policy.¹² The policy of American bishops was that all church property must be deeded to the bishop.¹³ A Nebraska state law passed in 1883 provided that the articles of incorporation for a church should be approved by the head of the religious organization, a member of the organization inferior to the head, the pastor of the church in question and at least two laypeople.¹⁴ In Catholic terms, this meant the bishop, a diocesan official (like the vicar general), the pastor, and two laypeople approved of the incorporation. The confusion related to the incorporation of St. Paul's was likely due to the illness and death of Bishop O'Connor in spring 1890 and the long interregnum before Richard Scannell took over in April 1891. Upon his arrival in the diocese, Scannell tried to regularize the situation at St. Paul's.¹⁵

Despite its irregular status, progress on the parish began in early 1891. On March 6, 1891, Fr. Tadeusz (Thaddeus) Jakimowicz was transferred from the town of Elba in rural central Nebraska to Omaha. According to Fr. Casper, Fr. Jakimowicz was known in Elba for his "zeal and good judgement."¹⁶ Fr. Wacław Kruszk, a Polish priest, activist and historian, had a much less complimentary view of Fr. Jakimowicz. According to Fr. Kruszk, Fr. Jakimowicz, a native of Lithuania, left a trail of mismanaged funds at monasteries across Poland and Italy. He came to America in the company of two Italian women and settled in New York, where his "immoral" behavior caused him to move to Nebraska in 1889.¹⁷

The cornerstone of the new church, dedicated to St. Paul, was laid in May 1891. On July 12, the 40-by-90-foot church, topped with an American flag and adorned with garlands and a banner carrying the Polish word for "welcome," was dedicated by Bishop Scannell following a lengthy procession featuring bands and members of Catholic societies. The *World-Herald* described the event as "unusually impressive" and called the church a "handsome structure."¹⁸

The church's auspicious beginnings, however, were soon clouded by schism and violence. The divisions that plagued St. Paul's, which reflected divisions among Polish-Americans nationwide, had political and religious causes. The First

JOHN M. SHEELY.

JOS. F. SHEELY.

G. S. MEYERSON.

SHEELY BROS.

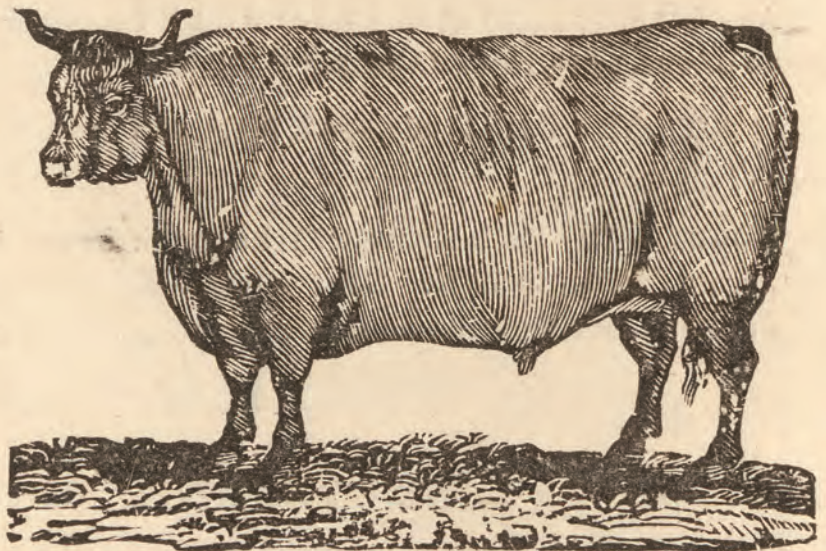
PACKING CO.,

(SUCCESSORS TO D. COOKE,)

Pork & Beef Packers

**Meat Market and Office,
1415 Douglas Street,**

OMAHA, - - - NEB.



Vatican Council in 1870 affirmed that the pope was infallible while making official (*ex cathedra*) statements on faith and morals. While the conditions of the pope's infallibility were in fact rather limited, the statement led to rebellion by a group of European bishops who, in response, founded an alternative church body in Utrecht, Netherlands, that they named the "Old Catholic Church." These bishops felt that papal infallibility gave too much power to the Pope and stripped the other bishops of their influence. The Old Catholic Church held to many Catholic traditions but allowed priests to say Mass in languages other than Latin. The practice of allowing priests to say Mass in the parishioners' native language made the Old Catholic Church popular among nationalists throughout Europe and, later, the United States.¹⁹

The Old Catholic Church emerged at a time when many Polish clergymen in America were upset with their Irish and German superiors. Polish clergy felt that the American episcopate did not treat Polish parishes fairly, instead favoring parishes of their own nationalities. At the same time, alleged financial misappropriations by priests in Polish parishes made many Poles cynical of the institutional church.

A rogue bishop named Rene Vilatte was the first to bring the Old Catholic vision of a

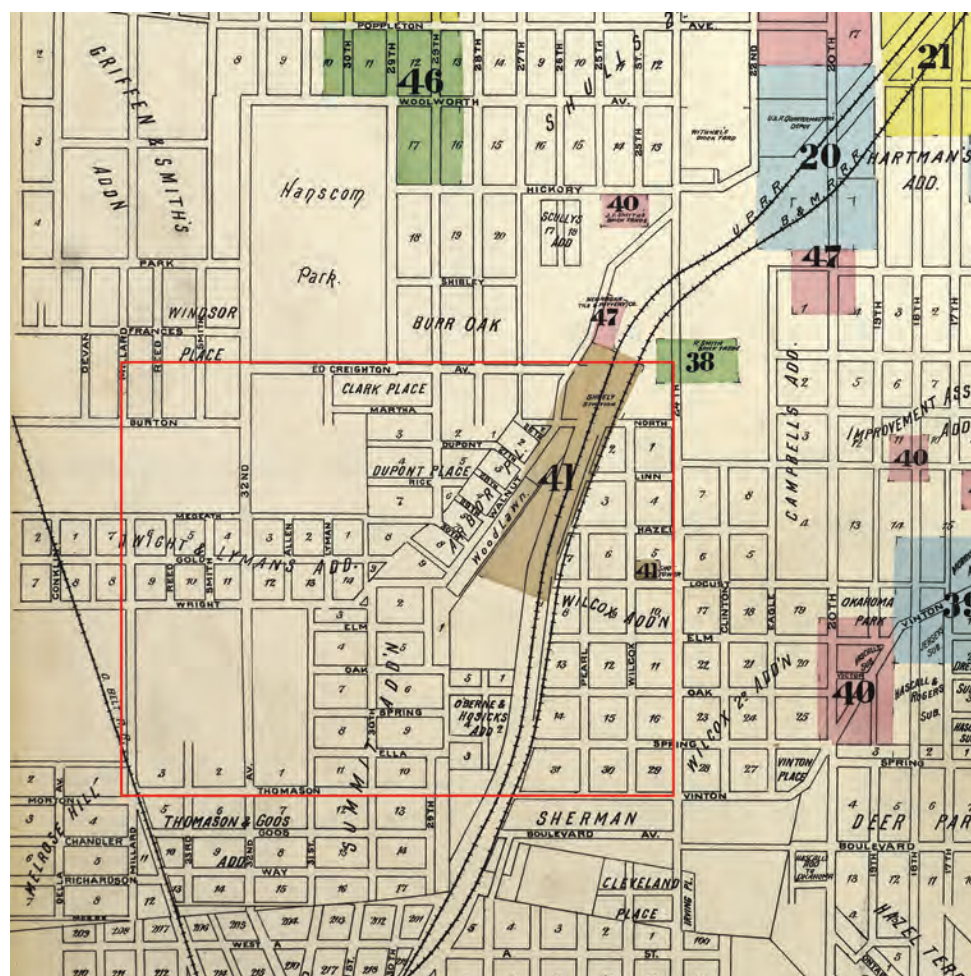
church independent from Rome to America.

Vilatte began his career as a seminarian in France but was convinced to leave the Catholic Church by Charles Chiniquy, an infamous former priest from America who spread anti-Catholic conspiracy theories throughout the world.²⁰

Vilatte traveled to America and served several different Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church of Wisconsin (in an effort to convert French-speaking Belgians from their native Catholicism), but ultimately found none of them valid. Instead, he felt attracted to the Old Catholic Church. He was ordained in 1885 by an Old Catholic bishop and soon came into conflict with his Episcopalian allies.

In 1890, he proclaimed the founding of the American Old Catholic Church and sought to have himself consecrated as a bishop. The Roman Catholic Church stresses the importance of apostolic succession, meaning that a bishop's ordination is valid only if he were ordained by a bishop whose ordination history could be traced back to one of the original Twelve Apostles of Jesus. The Old Catholic Church (as well as the Anglican, Orthodox, and related churches) also believe that apostolic succession is necessary for a bishop's authority to be legitimate. Vilatte could find no European bishop who would consecrate him, so he traveled

From J. M. Wolfe, *Wolfe's Omaha City Directory*, 1880-81. Omaha: Daily Republican Printing House, 1880, p. 22.



Omaha's "Sheelytown" neighborhood is marked in red. The property labeled "41" is the Sheely Brothers meatpacking plant. Detail of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Omaha, Douglas and Sarpy County, Nebraska. Sanborn Map Company, 1890, Vol. 2. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division

to Syria, where the Patriarch of the Syrian Jacobite Church, a church that claimed apostolic succession, consecrated him as bishop in 1892. Vilatte returned to America as the self-styled Old Catholic Archbishop of America. The Old Catholic Church, however, did not approve of his consecration and had no formal ties to his ministry. He found few allies in other established churches. His former superior, Bishop Charles C. Grafton of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, said that he belonged to "the low class of criminals governed by inordinate ambition and insatiate greed for money and power." He did find support, however, in the growing number of Polish clergy rebelling against the American Catholic episcopate.²¹

Unhappy with the lack of Polish bishops and other perceived slights of the Polish people by the American hierarchy, priests in Detroit and Cleveland moved to create new parishes that maintained Catholic practice but were independent of Catholic leadership. In order to have theological legitimacy, these independent churches required

the blessing of a bishop with apostolic succession. Vilatte was an ideal candidate as he claimed apostolic succession but had no ties to any other church. In 1893, he consecrated an independent parish in Detroit and a similar parish in Cleveland the following year.²²

The Cleveland parish was led by Fr. Anton Franciszek Kolaszewski, a priest with a record of financial mismanagement and abuse. A dispute with his local bishop led him to create an independent Polish parish dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He invited Vilatte to consecrate the church on August 19, 1894. Supporters of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cleveland protested the celebratory procession following the consecration by Vilatte, which led to a riot among the Polish community leaving two injured. Two days later, Vilatte and Kolaszewski announced the creation of yet another breakaway church body called the American Catholic Church with Vilatte as its head. The American Catholic Church was not a success and seemingly disappeared from the historical record.²³

Events in Omaha reflected growing tensions in the East. In November 1893, a group of parishioners accused Fr. Jakimowicz, the pastor of St. Paul's, of mismanaging the parish funds, which supposedly had a shortage of some \$900. Fr. Jakimowicz denied any wrongdoing, and Bishop Scannell cleared him of any guilt.²⁴ Many parishioners were not convinced and demanded a public viewing of the church account book. When Fr. Jakimowicz refused, a group of parishioners threatened to interrupt church services until it could see the parish accounts. Fearing a demonstration during Christmas, Fr. Jakimowicz requested police protection during the Christmas Mass. With the police present, Mass carried on without incident, but the *World-Herald* warned ominously that "trouble is predicted for the future."²⁵

In January, Fr. Jakimowicz was transferred to Columbus, Nebraska, despite a petition from 126 parishioners asking the Bishop to retain him as pastor.²⁶ After the brief leadership of Fr. Daxacher, a German priest, Bishop Scannell appointed Fr. Apolinary (Apolonius) Tyszk, a native of Warsaw, to lead the parish in May.²⁷ Described as "a young man of promise and ability," Fr. Tyszk was tasked with reorganizing the church "on a more extensive and satisfactory basis."²⁸ Despite the hope that he could fix the situation, Fr. Tyszk proved ineffective.

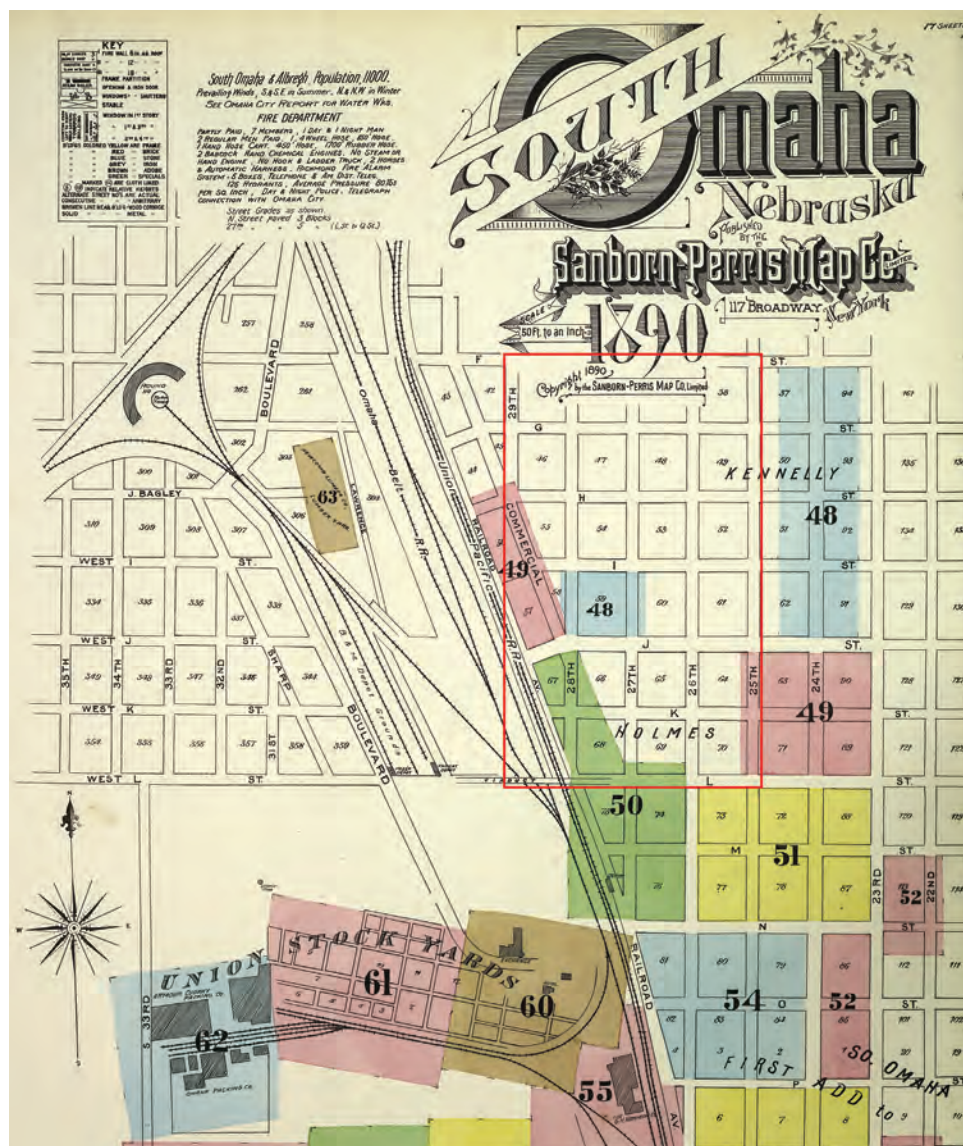
On August 4, a group of parishioners led by John Kowalewski, the former parish treasurer, and August Krakowski filed a lawsuit against Scannell,

Tyszka, Jakimowicz, vicar general Fr. Choka, and the Nebraska Savings Bank protesting the mortgage on the church and demanding a new pastor.²⁹ The central issue of the upcoming trial was a mortgage taken out to pay for the church. According to an unnamed ally of the bishop who spoke to the *World-Herald*, the title for the church passed from the Polish Parish Association to the corporation of St. Paul's Polish Church, which, in accordance with Nebraska law, was led by the bishop. However, on May 2, 1892, three members of the parish obtained a loan for \$5,000 without the bishop's permission. (This would be over \$130,000 in 2017 money.) Since the loan was not taken out by the parish corporation, the parish was not liable for returning the money. The bank contacted Bishop Scannell, who offered to take out a new loan in the name of St. Paul's. This was approved by the parish leadership except the treasurer, John Kowalewski. Kowalewski claimed that the money the church received was misused and that the parish should not be required to return it. Scannell then removed Kowalewski from his position as treasurer.³⁰

Kowalewski argued that the corporation formed by Scannell, Jakimowicz, and Choka was a fraudulent usurpation of the parish's property from the parishioners. He denied that there was any meeting on May 2 to approve the loan.³¹ At the heart of his argument was one of the central questions facing the Catholic Church in America: Who controlled the parish, the bishop or the parishioners? American society was inclined to favor a bottom-up power structure, where "the people" made decisions. In religious terms, American churches were managed by the congregation rather than an outside power. For Catholics, the authority and leadership of the bishops was necessary for theological and practical reasons. This tension between American society and Catholic tradition characterized much of the St. Paul's dispute.

The conflict between the two factions within the parish was fought not only in the courts but also on the streets. The *World-Herald* reported that assault and battery charges had been filed against "divers" members of the parish.³² In the midst of this turmoil, Bishop Scannell removed Fr. Tyszka but refused to appoint a new priest in his stead until the financial matters of the church could be resolved.³³

Kowalewski's faction, which included his friends Anton Inda and August Krakowski, won the first round of legal warfare as the courts ordered Bishop Scannell to cease interfering in the affairs of St. Paul's. When Scannell refused to



hand over the keys of the church (and \$400 that Kowalewski claimed he took from the parish), Kowalewski's legal team tried to have the bishop cited for contempt of court. Scannell later said that he had never been served with a court order to stop interfering with the parish and that he never had the keys to the church to begin with.³⁴ Kowalewski's attorney said that the parishioners at St. Paul's only "wanted the opportunity to worship God under their own vine and fig tree." In order to do so, they risked violence from the opposition. The bishop's attorney told the judge that the Poles were "hot-blooded and always having trouble." Kowalewski's attorney responded, "Yes, sir, and breaking away from the pope."³⁵

At this point the struggle for St. Paul's became not only a legal battle but a spiritual

South Omaha's "Little Poland" neighborhood, marked on a detail of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Omaha, Douglas and Sarpy County, Nebraska. Sanborn Map Company, 1890, Vol. 2. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division

one as well. To fill the hole left by Fr. Tyszka, Kowalewski's faction hired Stephen Kaminski to become the parish's new pastor. Kaminski, whose real name was Frydryk Rother, was born in West Prussia. According to Fr. Kruszka, he did not attend college but learned to play organ from a local organist. He pretended for a time to be a cleric but was jailed for two years for falsifying documents. After his release, he came to America and joined the Reformed Fathers, a religious order living in Pulaski, Wisconsin. Soon thereafter, he was exiled from the order and then was exiled from another monastery in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Finding no home in religious life, he milked cows for a living while playing organ for an independent Polish church in Detroit. It was likely there that he became attached to the Polish independent movement. In 1894, he was ordained a priest by Vilatte.³⁶

When Kaminski arrived in Omaha, he told the *World-Herald* that his only complaint with the Catholic Church was the bishops' attempt to control the finances of parishes. "This age cannot be governed by the same laws which were in vogue in the fourteenth century," he said, arguing that parish property should be controlled by a board of trustees, not the bishops. He elaborated: "We cannot allow ourselves to be led about by a bishop with the idea that he carries heaven and hell around in his pocket, prepared to bestow fear or favor according to his conception of right and wrong." Otherwise, he said that he would conduct the parish in accord with the Catholic faith. He was prepared to stay at the parish for as long as needed to protect the parish from the actions of the bishop, which reeked of "paganism" and were not in accord with "modern modes of thought."³⁷

On the morning of September 2, 1894, Kowalewski picked the lock on the church doors and Kaminski said Mass for about 150 parishioners. Two police officers guarded the front door. After Mass, Kaminski took up residence in the adjoining rectory.³⁸

Nicholas Cherek, a friend of the bishop's, reported to Scannell that there were 46 families who attended Mass regularly with Kaminski.³⁹ An unnamed supporter of the bishop bemoaned in the *World-Herald* that this constituted only a fifth of the congregation, the majority of which was deprived of its right to attend Catholic services in the church that rightfully belonged to the Catholic bishop. Scannell, confident that the courts would eventually make things right, urged his loyal parishioners to stay home and avoid entanglements with the rebellious sect.⁴⁰

Scannell's first victory came on December 8, when a judge ordered that Kaminski leave the rectory.⁴¹ After collecting depositions from many witnesses, including Fr. Jakimowicz, who had since moved to Mt. Carmel, Pennsylvania, the trial proceeded in earnest on February 4, 1895.⁴² The courtroom was packed with spectators, many of them parishioners eagerly awaiting the fate of their church. Many witnesses were called to the stand, some of whom had to be examined through an interpreter.⁴³

The case finally came to end on February 23 in a victory for the bishop. The court ruled that the church property was owned by the Bishop and the St. Paul's Polish Church corporation. As such, the building could be used only for Roman Catholic services with Roman Catholic priests. Any parishioners unhappy with that arrangement could attend services elsewhere. Kowalewski and his followers immediately appealed the decision.⁴⁴

The court gave Kaminski until March 9 to vacate that church. When his followers filed for an appeal, they were given an extra twenty days before the order went into effect. His opponents were not so patient.

After celebrating Mass on the morning of March 12, Kaminski noticed a band of some thirty-five of the bishop's supporters coming towards the church. Kaminski realized that the men were coming to take the church by force and ran to his living quarters in the back of the church (where he resided after he was removed from the rectory) to grab two revolvers. One of his altar servers went to ring the bells, the signal that trouble was coming. Kaminski bolted the back doors of the church and ran to bolt the front when ten of the men entered.⁴⁵

Predictably, the accounts disagree on what happened next. The *World-Herald* reported that Kaminski and the men exchanged words before one of the bishop's followers fired at Kaminski. The *Bee* reported that Joseph Nowiski, a leader of the bishop's men, entered the church with his gun drawn but that Kaminski made the move to fire first. Nowiski fired in response. Kaminski told the *World-Herald* that, after being told to put his hands up, he was fired upon by the bishop's men and only fired back in self-defense. Adam Przanowski, one of the ten men in the church, claimed that Kaminski fired first after refusing to peacefully hand over the church.⁴⁶

What followed was not disputed. As bullets flew through the church, one of the bishop's men, Joseph Dargaczewski, was hit twice in the leg by Kaminski's bullets. One shot passed through



Above Left: *Omaha World-Herald* columnist Elia Wilkinson Peattie. From *Famous American Men and Women: A Complete Portrait Gallery of Celebrated People*. Chicago: Wabash Publishing House, 1896, p. 365.

Above Right: Saint Wenceslaus Church in about 1920, 1432 South 14th Street, Omaha. In its early days the parish was mostly Czech. NSHS RG3882-1-55



Left Center: St. Joseph's in 1922. Completed in 1887, it was a German parish. NSHS RG2941-6-57



Right Center: Funeral card for Bishop James O'Connor. NSHS RG2411-4121



Left Below: The first St. Mary Magdalen's Catholic Church in Omaha, identified here as the "Old German Catholic Church." NSHS RG2341-2-3

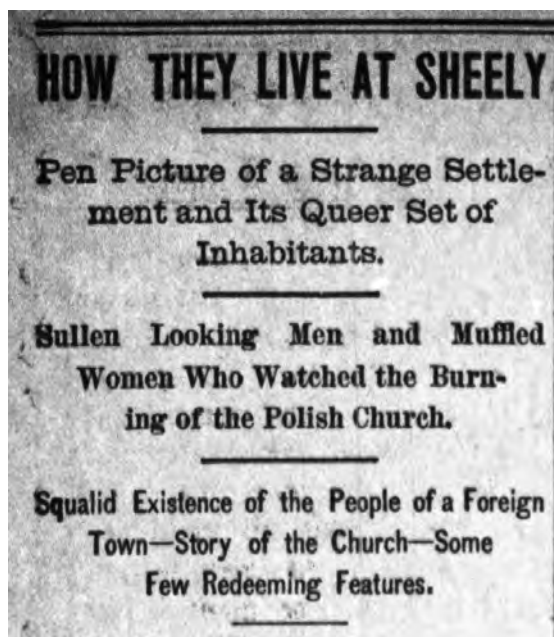


Right Below: Bishop Richard Scannell, second from left. Durham Museum, Omaha

Omaha World-Herald,
March 13, 1895



Omaha World-Herald,
March 31, 1895



his right knee; the other hit his left ankle. The wounded man cried, "Kill the ----. I am shot." Kaminski took cover behind the altar and avoided the barrage of bullets aimed at him. Finding it too difficult to hit Kaminski, the men left. Dargaczewski crawled out of the church on his hands and knees and was moved to a nearby house, where he was treated by a doctor.

News of the attack spread quickly through Sheelytown. "[H]undreds of women and children armed themselves with clubs and revolvers and hurried to the church to avenge" Dargaczewski, the *World-Herald* reported. The mob surrounded the

church, broke open the front doors and smashed the windows, but Kaminski's position behind the altar was too well-protected for anyone to attempt to enter the church.

As the riot continued, the church "resembled a miniature battlefield." Five altar boys hidden in the sacristy helped Kaminski load his revolvers as he fought off attackers. The altar was riddled with bullet holes, as was an image of the Blessed Virgin.

Detective Hudson of the Omaha police arrived in the midst of the gun battle, but his attempts to restore order only increased the mob's rage. Six other officers were called in but were no more successful in calming the riot. Rioters brandished weapons over their heads and called for Kaminski to be hanged. A group of Kaminski's supporters gathered to guard the church's back door. When a woman threw a tin can at this group, an all-out brawl began in the church yard, with rocks tossed about and revolvers brandished. The police arrested two men beating each other with pitchfork handles, averting greater violence, and cleared the church yard of protesters.⁴⁷

By noon, the church had calmed down substantially. Two men were treated for gun wounds and a third suffered head injuries. Many more were injured, including Kaminski supporter Anton Inda, who single-handedly fought off attackers going toward the church's back door. Thankfully, there were no deaths. Joseph Dargaczewski, however, had his leg amputated.⁴⁸ His brother, Nick, secured a warrant for Kaminski's arrest on the charge of illegally discharging a firearm. Kaminski in turn filed charges against his assailants, including Nicholas Cherek.

A tense silence descended upon Sheelytown that night. Bands of men gathered at the saloons, waiting to see if more happened. Police remained on guard at the church and at the police station.⁴⁹

During a brief stay in jail before being released, Kaminski told reporters, "I do not regret it a particle that I shot [Dargaczewski]. If I were placed in the same position again I would act in the same way, only I think that I would be cooler and shoot with better effect... I shot at the men's legs... because I did not intend to kill them, but I would do differently next time. They deserved to be killed, for they entered my premises like robbers."

Scannell responded to the riot saying that he had no connection with any of the participants and that he would allow the work of the lawyers to run its course. As to Kaminski's claim that he was a valid Roman Catholic priest, Scannell

said, "He claims to have been ordained by Archbishop Vilatte. There is no such archbishop in the church. There is a man in Wisconsin by that name who calls himself a bishop, but with no right whatever."⁵⁰

After the neighborhood settled the following day, the police arrested the major ringleaders of both factions. Kaminski was charged with shooting with the intention to kill, while his assailants were charged with the same as well as contempt of court. Judge G. W. Ambrose, the judge who decided the case in favor of the bishop, ordered that the Kaminski faction could control the church until the time for filing an appeal had passed. The Omaha police were sent to the church to ensure that no other attempts at seizing the church would be made.⁵¹

Dozens of Poles packed the courthouse to witness the opening of the trial on March 16. Despite vigorous questioning, little was revealed. The major decision was that only five of Scannell's supporters had guns, meaning the others were let go.⁵² Meanwhile, Sheelytown resumed its tense quiet. Kaminski celebrated Mass without incident, but police continued to monitor the neighborhood for signs of trouble.⁵³ For the next week and a half, no trouble could be found.

The calm ended on March 27. A crowd of stunned observers—5,000 in number—gathered around the church around 9:30 that night to see the wooden frame of St. Paul's ablaze. Hardly a word was spoken; the children trembled and wept. One girl exclaimed, "The priest, he say: 'I never leave this town till I see the bare bones of this church!' And he is seein' 'em!" She was immediately silenced by a young man pulling on her sleeve. Embarrassed, she fled the crowd. Elia W. Peattie described the scene:

The night took on an air of conspiracy. Women hurried to the fire with their faces so muffled that they could not be recognized. Men watched the weeping flames from the near hills, content to stand up there among the treacherous water gullies, rather than to approach nearer. A solitary policeman walked among the crowd, with apprehension in his eye. A subtle, deadly, repressed excitement made itself felt. One knew that in the hearts of the silent people round about was a smoldering and hot hatred. One suspected that in the pockets of those sullen looking men were weapons of destruction,

and could easily imagine that those taciturn, yet emotional women would have enjoyed the flurry of a sudden riot, and that their strong brown hands could have hurled stones with energy and effect.⁵⁴

Kaminski claimed that he and a group of his supporters pledged to his protection were in the priest's quarters in the rear of the church when two pistol shots were heard. The men rushed outside to find the front of the church on fire. Fearing for his life, Kaminski ran to a friendly bar nearby. His followers tried to salvage as much from the church as they could.

By the time the fire department arrived, the church was beyond saving. The nearest fire hydrant was nearly 1,000 feet away and had low pressure. Soon the flames spread to a neighboring brick building, a house occupied by the Krystynek family. The firefighters were not able to save the Krystynek home. A small cottage behind their home was destroyed as well. After an hour, all that remained of the church was a pile of charcoal and ash, along with two chimneys torn down by the firefighters.

The church was valued between \$3,000 and \$5,000 and contained over \$1,000 of vestments, banners, and liturgical vessels, as well as a \$400 organ. (In today's money, the organ would be worth approximately \$10,000 and the church \$130,000.) Kaminski told reporters that the church's insurance had just expired. He hoped to build a new church in a new location with the permission of his superior, Vilatte, and said that the bishop's faction should assume the debts of St. Paul's. "The other faction has burned down the church," he said. "They have been plotting against me ever since I came here. My life has been threatened. They tried to kill me, or drive me from the church. When they could not do that, they tried another plan."⁵⁵

Kaminski's story was contradicted by the report of the Krystynek family, the church's neighbors and fellow victims. In their telling, Kaminski and his followers had been transporting boxes of goods out of the church each night under the cover of darkness, suggesting that they planned to leave the church regardless. Shortly before the fire began, they saw two men with lamps walking through the church towards the front. Then the flames began to come, not from the front door, but from the belfry over the front of the church, and soon spread across the roof. This testimony was corroborated by Frank Dargaczewski, the brother of the man who was shot

Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, 24th and Bancroft. A Polish parish, the first church was built in 1896 and replaced in 1927 with this building, which stands to this day. NSHS RG2341-497



by Kaminski. Dargaczewski's other brother, Nick, a saloon keeper, said he overheard members of the Kaminski faction say, "We have been beaten so far, but there is a way to get the best of the devils yet. We can burn the ---- church down and that will settle it." Suspiciously, the church was burned on one of the last days the Kaminski faction could legally occupy the church. Just before the fire, the courts rejected the faction's attempt at an appeal.

On April 1, the police arrested Kaminski for arson based on evidence submitted by Nicholas Cherek, a supporter of the bishop. "The arrest and the gravity of the charge confronting him caused the so-called priest to turn very pale," the *World-Herald* reported, "and although he has been very eager and apparently anxious to talk about the church unpleasantness heretofore, he was averse to discussing the changed condition of affairs." He was denied his request to call a bondsman, causing him to be sent to jail. He was soon joined by several of his followers.

The evidence was heavily stacked against Kaminski. The boxes of goods that the Krystyneks claimed they saw Kaminski move out of the church were found, as was proof that someone at the church purchased kerosene. Furthermore, witnesses disputed Kaminski's story that he had to flee the church for his life without his hat and coat; they claim that he was dressed in both. Lastly, it would

not have made sense for the bishop's supporters to burn the church on March 27, as they would have legally taken possession of it on March 29.⁵⁶

Kaminski and his friends were released the next day for the hefty bond of \$1,000. Frank Cherek, a Kaminski ally, had escaped to Chicago, but officers were sent to retrieve him. Kaminski told reporters that he lived in daily fear of assassination but that he would remain with his people despite their misfortunes.⁵⁷

The trial began on April 3. After initial testimony by Nicholas Cherek and police officers on the first day, the sensational evidence was revealed on April 4. A boy testified that he had delivered coal oil to the church before the fire. The oil was given to Kaminski. Two women claimed that Anton Inda and another man left the church shortly before the fire, with Inda saying, "Never mind the fire." One witness claimed that one of the defendants said, "I hope someone will set fire to the church and stop all this trouble." Another witness heard one say, "We were knocked out in court, but we will get even by burning the church."

As the trial continued, Kaminski held services for his followers at a hall downtown. He said he hoped to remain in Omaha with his congregation despite being summoned by a Polish church in Pennsylvania. While he still feared for his life, he said that he would do his manly duty by staying at his post despite the danger.⁵⁸

St. Francis Catholic Church, 1926. Omaha's second Polish parish was established in 1899. NSHS RG2341-497



In a stunning twist, Kaminski was released the next day for lack of evidence. Despite the numerous witnesses procured by the police saying that the fire started inside the church belfry, Kaminski's lawyer found witnesses corroborating Kaminski's story. The assistant county attorney discharged the defendants, saying there was not sufficient evidence to keep them in jail. Kaminski's lawyer said that his faction would be prepared to show that the church had in fact been burned by member of Scannell's faction. Kaminski went so far as to say that he could produce a witness who could name the party who started the fire.⁵⁹

Perhaps he was misinformed or perhaps he was lying, but Kaminski never produced his witness. The case of the fire quietly disappeared. The cases involving the riot a few weeks earlier continued into late April, but on April 27 all the charges for participants on both sides of the riot were dismissed. Only the four men who attacked Anton Inda were fined; every other participant was released.⁶⁰


The last real trouble in Sheelytown occurred when Nick Dargaczewski's saloon, the home base for the Kaminski faction, was burned down on July 25.⁶¹ While this was apparently the work of arsonists as well, it was not mentioned again. After months of trials, arrests, riots, fires and brawls, the St. Paul's case ended with not a soul in jail.

Despite promises he would stay in Omaha, Fr. Kaminski left to minister to independent Polish parishes across the Northeast. In 1898, his old ally, Rene Vilatte, consecrated him as a bishop in Buffalo (reportedly for the fee of \$15,000).⁶²

The Polish independent movement never returned to Omaha, but it found success elsewhere. Independent parishes flourished for a time in Chicago and the Rust Belt. Few of them lasted long, but one church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, led by Fr. Franciszek Hodur, grew into the Polish National Catholic Church, which has survived to the present and claimed 25,000 members across the country in 2015.

Meanwhile, Poles in Omaha soon pushed the painful memories of St. Paul's aside and began anew, this time under the principled, popular leadership of Fr. Teobald Kalamaja, a Franciscan priest. In 1896, he purchased lots at 24th and Bancroft for a new Polish church, Immaculate Conception. Fr. Kalamaja was "enterprising, energetic, active, and full of enthusiasm and zeal about the glory of God" and "has ever since been held in veneration by succeeding generations of Omaha Poles." The parish built a new church in 1927 that stands to this day. The Polish community became so large that a second parish, St. Francis, was established in 1899, and a third, St. Stanislaus, was established in 1919.⁶³ As future generations of

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Poles looked back on the times of their forebears, the riot and fire at St. Paul's were ignored, replaced with the passively constructed memory of the original Polish church being "burned." The intersection of 29th and Elm was destroyed to make way for Interstate 480, removing at last the physical memory of a painful time in the city's history and allowing the events of 1895 to fall away into obscurity. 

NOTES

¹ Elia W. Peattie, "How They Live at Sheely," *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter, *OWH*), March 31, 1895.

² Henry W. Casper, S.J., *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska: Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration* (Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 143.

³ Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 125.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵ Casper, *Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration*, 182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 182-84.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Elia W. Peattie, "How They Live at Sheely," *OWH*, Mar. 31, 1895.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Casper, *Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration*, 184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184-185. See footnote 11 on page 185.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The bishops of America developed this policy over the course of a series of councils hosted by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in the 1800s. O'Connor announced a policy for churches in the Diocese of Omaha in 1881. See Henry W. Casper, S.J., *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska: The Church on the Fading Frontier* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 36-39.

¹⁴ *Corporation Law of Nebraska* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, Printers, 1894), 85-86. See secs. 691-695, part of the 1883 law "An act for the incorporation of churches, parishes and religious societies."

¹⁵ Casper, *Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration*, 185.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Wacław Kruszką, *A History of the Poles in America to 1908, Part IV: Poles in the Central and Western States*, trans. Krystyna Jankowski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 170-71.

¹⁸ "The First Polish Church," *OWH*, July 13, 1891.

¹⁹ Joseph John Parot, *Polish Catholics in Chicago, 1850-1920* (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), 103-104.

²⁰ Ernest C. Margrander, "Vilatte, Joseph Rene (Archbishop Mar Timotheus)," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1950), 187-89. Chiniquy's most famous theory was that Abraham Lincoln was killed by the Jesuits.

²¹ Laurence J. Orzell, "Curious Allies: Bishop Antoni Kozłowski and the Episcopalians," *Polish American Studies* 40, no. 4 (1983): 37-42.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ Charles R. Kaczynski, "'What Mean Ye by These Stones?' Cleveland's Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish and the Construction of a Polish American Rhetoric," *Polish American Studies* 55, no. 2 (1998): 25-54. Other groups calling themselves the American Catholic Church were founded later.

²⁴ "He Leaves the City," *OWH*, Jan. 16, 1894.

²⁵ "Trouble in the Church," *OWH*, Dec. 27, 1893.

²⁶ "He Leaves the City," *OWH*, Jan. 16, 1894. The parishioner's petition can be found in the archives of the Archdiocese of Omaha Archives, dated Jan. 24, 1894.

²⁷ Kruszką, *A History of the Poles in America*, 170.

²⁸ "Welcome Their Priest," *OWH*, May 16, 1894.

²⁹ "In Court Now," *OWH*, Aug. 5, 1894.

³⁰ "The Other Side Heard From," *OWH*, Sept. 4, 1894.

³¹ "Everything in the Name," *OWH*, Sept. 9, 1894.

³² "Pastor's Suit Dismissed," *OWH*, Aug. 25, 1894.

³³ "Puritan Days Are Revived," *OWH*, Sept. 3, 1894.

³⁴ "Time for a Bishop," *OWH*, Sept. 9, 1894.

³⁵ "Scannell Called," *OWH*, Sept. 2, 1894.

³⁶ Kruszką, *A History of the Poles in America*, 44-45. This section was translated from the Polish by Konstancja Orzechowska, an acquaintance of the author and native of Poland. The Polish text was accessed from the Harvard digital library.

³⁷ "Puritan Days Are Revived," *OWH*, Sept. 3, 1894.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cherek, "Schismatic Poles."

⁴⁰ "The Other Side Heard From," *OWH*, Sept. 4, 1894.

⁴¹ "Tally for the Bishop," *OWH*, Dec. 9, 1894.

⁴² "Polish Church Case," *OWH*, Feb. 5, 1895. See also Jan. 22, 1895.

⁴³ "Poles Still at War," *OWH*, Feb. 13, 1895.

⁴⁴ "Sgannell Comes out Ahead," *OWH*, Feb. 24, 1895. The newspaper humorously misspelled the bishop's name.

⁴⁵ "Battle After Mass," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 13, 1895. Dargaczewski is called Dargaczewski in the original *World-Herald* report but called Dargaczewski in most other articles.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* "Riot in the Polish Church," *OWH*, Mar. 13, 1895.

⁴⁷ "Riot in the Polish Church," *OWH*, Mar. 13, 1895.

- ⁴⁸ "Battle After Mass," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 13, 1895.
- ⁴⁹ "Riot in the Polish Church," *OWH*, Mar. 13, 1895.
- ⁵⁰ "Battle After Mass," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 13, 1895.
- ⁵¹ "Setting a Large Drag Net," *OWH*, Mar. 14, 1895.
- ⁵² "Full of 'Isbies," *OWH*, Mar. 17, 1895. The term "Isbies" refers to the common ending -ski in Polish last names.
- ⁵³ "Still as a Graveyard," *OWH*, Mar. 18, 1895.
- ⁵⁴ Elia W. Peattie, "How They Live at Sheely," *OWH*, Mar. 31, 1895.
- ⁵⁵ "Polish Church Is Burned," *OWH*, Mar. 28, 1895.
- ⁵⁶ "Arrest A Priest for Arson," *OWH*, Apr. 2, 1895.
- ⁵⁷ "He's Out on Bail," *OWH*, Apr. 3, 1895.
- ⁵⁸ "Weaving A Story of Guilt," *OWH*, Apr. 5, 1895.
- ⁵⁹ "Kaminski Is Discharged," *OWH*, Apr. 7, 1895.
- ⁶⁰ "Simmering Down," *OWH*, Apr. 28, 1895.
- ⁶¹ "An Incendiary Fire," *OWH*, July 26, 1895.
- ⁶² Orzell, "Curious Allies," 42.
- ⁶³ Casper, Catholic Chapters in Immigration History, 187-88. Kruszkka, *A History of the Poles in America*, 173-74.