

# A Tale of Two Westports

“More than a century ago, a band of hardy Irishmen migrated to Wisconsin soil and stopped atop a hill overlooking beautiful Lake Mendota. Homesick and weary, these immigrants thought as one, ‘It is just like our homeland, Westport on the sea, and here we will stay.’ And so it became Westport on Wisconsin’s Lake Mendota, and here the little group planned and built its church, St. Mary of the Lake.”

- Lucille Brystom, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 29, 1951



Dane County Plat Map, Township of Westport,  
1873



Historical Map of County Mayo,  
Ireland

## Our First Church

“The Irish settlers had emigrated to America to escape the tyrannical and lawless oppression which then existed in their beloved native land.”

—Rev. Patrick Walsh, Pastor (1874)



“The original congregation consisted of 25 families among which were such familiar Irish names as Roche, Walsh, Freney, O’Brien, Collins, Ruddy, Downey, Kennedy, Hackett, Tierney, Butler, Powers, Fitzgibbons and Cummins.

“St. Mary of the Lake was definitely the Irish church of the district, for Irish families came from miles around – from Lodi, Dane, Poynette, and Sun Prairie – to have their children baptized there, baptismal records reveal. These families included: Whiteman, Connors, Gaul, Milledy, Connelly, Howe, Lyons, Kelly, O’Brien, Butler, O’Dwyer, Asby, Corcoran, McDonnell, Judge, Gallagher, Moran, Walsh, McGuire, Mulcahey, Clyner, Freney, Gannon, Crook, Ruddy, Sweeney, Galvin, Kennedy, Roach, Halligan, and Dyson.”

*(Waunakee Tribune, 75-year jubilee article)*

## The Artists

The windows in St. Mary of the Lake church were designed and created by Conrad Schmitt Studios of New Berlin, Wisconsin. The artists, Bernard O. Gruenke and Peter Recker, collaborated on many projects during their distinguished careers, including the Basilica of the National Shrine of Mary at Holy Hill, one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Wisconsin.



“As art is one of the noblest human pursuits, the artist’s work becomes a representation of his time: his buildings, statues and paintings are an indication of how a sensitive society thinks, dreams, and communicates.”

–Bernard O. Gruenke

“The works a man makes for a church should induce the atmosphere of prayer and make the congregation realize its relation to God.”

–Peter Recker

## Bernard O. Gruenke and Peter Recker

**“Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colours, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery.” – Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists, 1999**



Bernard O. Gruenke began his art studies in Milwaukee and once traveled to Philadelphia to visit the city’s first stained glass workshop. “This is where I experienced my first impression of stained glass as an art form, with color not only being reflected from the surface but being penetrated by the light. It created an impact that remained with me throughout my life,” he said.

In the late 1930s he applied for work at Conrad Schmitt Studios – “literally sat on their doorstep,” he recalls. Gruenke’s persistence paid



Bernard O. Gruenke

Peter Recker, 1952

off. He would later become president of Conrad Schmitt Studios, highly respected for his artistic and innovative style.

In 1996 he was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Stained Glass Association of America. He died in 2012 at the age of 99.

During his career, Bernard Gruenke often traveled to Italy, France, and Germany. He studied the work of the past as well as modern art, once remarking how the German abstract art of the time seemed to express “a thought or the essence of a prayer

or a theme.” On one of his journeys he met German mosaic artist Peter Recker, who was restoring mosaics at the Vatican after recently completing a modern mosaic in Rome. Gruenke was inspired by Recker’s modern designs and commissioned the artist to work with him at Conrad Schmitt Studios in the United States. Recker had spent 22 months as a prisoner of war and spoke of how his spirituality affected his work. He describes the 1950s – when St. Mary’s was designed – as “a period in which the artist must present a strong figure of the Savior...a deep-eyed figure with force and even something stern in the expression. Modern man had become “a little hardened,” he said. “It is difficult to carry him out of his own thoughts.”

(Conrad Schmitt Studios, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Archives)

## Stories in Stained Glass

### Every Saint Has a Story

At St. Mary of the Lake, the stained-glass windows honor several saints whose lives made a direct impact on the spread of the Catholic faith in our state, diocese, and parish. The panel beneath each saint depicts that saint’s influence in our state, and a gold plaque at the side of each window serves as a dedication to someone who followed in the saints’ footsteps.

#### **The Epistle Side:**

**History of the Catholic Church in**

**Wisconsin** St. Ignatius

St. Norbert

St. Dominic

St. John Vianney

St. John the Evangelist

St. William of Monte

Virgine St. John Baptiste de

La Salle

#### **The Gospel Side:**

**History of St. Mary of the Lake**

**Parish** St. Patrick

St. Raphael

St. Peter

St. John the Baptist  
St. Bernard of  
Clairvaux St. Albert the

Great  
St. Edward

"[The Saints] provide a good and clear example for us of what it looks like to live our lives in the service of God. They were human beings like us in all things, even sin, who trusted in God and lived their lives in God's presence. The saints are not saints because they did great things but rather because they allowed God to accomplish great things through them. Thus a key characteristic of a saint is openness to God. Saints are also models of holiness because they preached and lived the Gospel in their daily lives."  
-bostoncatholic.org



## Saint Raphael Archangel

*Raphael* means "God heals" or "medicine of God." He is the angel of youth, travelers, happy marriages, and the blind. He is a defender of the church, guardian of the family, helper in time of need, and angel of joy.

St. Raphael is shown holding a walking

stick .

He is known to protect pilgrims as they journey.

The fish he holds signifies the gall which he used to heal Tobit's blindness in the Old Testament Book of Tobit.

This window is dedicated to Rev. Francis Xavier Etschmann, a missionary priest from Austria. He established St. Raphael's church in Madison in 1850 and served as a missionary to surrounding areas.

He offered the first Mass in Westport. Pictured is the house of

Patrick Tierney, one of the homes where Mass was celebrated before St. Mary of the Lake was built. St. Raphael's message is that God knows our works of mercy as well as our sufferings. He is always with us.

"Thank God! Give Him the praise and the glory," he reminds us.

St. Raphael's in Madison, one of the earliest Catholic churches in the New World to serve Irish immigrants, became the cathedral for the diocese in 1946. It became the site of major religious events, ordinations of priests, and installations

A "Way of the Cross" was installed on the property of old St. Raphael's until a new cathedral could be built.



*O Raphael, lead us towards those we are waiting for, those who are waiting for us! Raphael, angel of happy meetings, lead us by the hand towards those we are looking for! May all our movements, all their movements, be guided by your Light and transfigured by your Joy.*

of bishops.

In 2005, St. Raphael's Cathedral was destroyed in an arson fire. Three years later, the church was demolished, and St. Raphael's parish merged with St. Patrick and Holy Redeemer parishes in order to share facilities for the downtown Catholic community.