

# The Churches of Auraria

**In the 1850s gold fever hit Colorado.**

William Greene Russell and his brothers panned out seven ounces of gold in July of 1858, at the mouth of Dry Creek on the South Platte. Inflated news of this modest strike sparked the Pikes Peak Gold Rush, a barrage of some 35,000 fortune-seekers.

The Russells founded the pioneer settlement of Auraria the following October, naming it after their home town in Georgia. "Auraria" is a Latin word for gold.

As the tiny frontier town prospered, an intense rivalry soon developed with an equally prosperous neighbor across Cherry Creek-Denver. Although Auraria boasted the first school, public house and library, the first stagecoach arrived in Denver circa 1859, thus establishing Denver's supremacy. On the chilly, moonlit night of April 6, 1860, a ceremony on the Larimer Street Bridge united the two towns. Auraria then became west Denver, thriving for decades with attractive homes and flourishing businesses.

This early economic success allowed Auraria to support several three Catholic churches within a six-block radius, and an Episcopal chapel that later became a Jewish synagogue. As Auraria slowly changed from a middle class, residential neighborhood to a heavy industry district, the needs of the people changed. By the time the Auraria Campus was constructed in the early 1970s, only two of the Catholic churches and the synagogue were still standing. St. Cajetan's, St. Elizabeth's and Emmanuel still remain as an integral part of the campus and a reminder that Auraria was the place where Denver began.

*Photo by Michael Gamer*



# St. Elizabeth's

The building of the railroads brought a new immigrant population into Denver. A number of these newcomers were German Catholics; at least twelve families settled on the west bank of Cherry Creek in the 1860's. The German Catholics set about building their own church and parish school in 1868. They also pleaded with Bishop Joseph Machefol for a German priest. In August of 1878, the foundation of St. Elizabeth's church was laid and construction began.

By the middle of September the church was partly completed and Mass was being celebrated inside. In 1880 a parish school opened in the small brick house once used as the parish rectory.

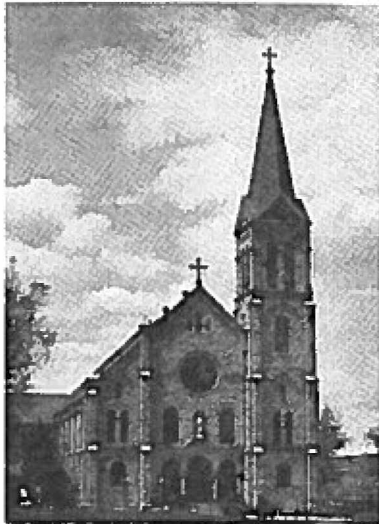
The original plan for St. Elizabeth's had been to make it the national parish for the Germans, but soon Irish immigrants began to move into the neighborhood. The Germans felt they had built the church, paid for its construction, and that it belonged to them. The Irish petitioned for their own church, and one year later construction began on Saint Leo the Great Catholic Church.

The Franciscan order took charge of St. Elizabeth's in 1887. Three years later, the original St. Elizabeth's church was torn down, two lots on 11th Street

purchased, and fundraising began for a new church and school. Two brick buildings at 10th and Champa streets were purchased and quickly converted, the larger serving as St. Clara's convent and the other as St. Clara's Orphanage, which later moved to the outskirts of Denver. The old orphanage buildings were eventually converted to the St. Rose Residence for Women.

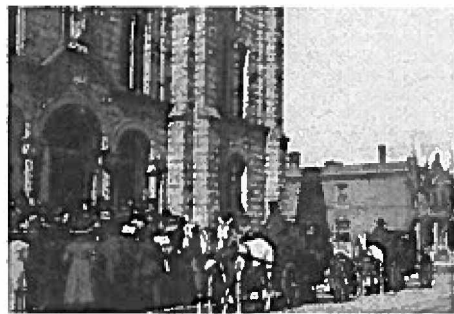
All of these projects were remarkable considering the economic conditions in Denver after the Silver Crash of 1893. Undeterred by financial difficulties, the creative pastor, Father Francis Koch, found unemployed laborers who were glad to work for low wages.

The design for the new St. Elizabeth's was based on the cathedral structures of Europe. While the church was nearing completion, Father Koch commissioned a St. Louis



The Gothic St. Elizabeth's Church is an impressive monument to the German immigrants who were very influential in Denver's history.

The interior of St. Elizabeth's was remodeled in 1968. Some of the additions included stained glass windows from Paris, a modern Venetian glass tile mosaic that was hung behind the altar, a 12-foot rose-colored window in the choir loft, plaques on either side of the altar, new chandeliers, new confessionals, stations of the cross in the old German tradition, twelve brass crosses and candle holders, and a bank of organ pipes placed in the choir loft. The cost of these changes was \$250,000 and was paid from the estate of May Bonfile Stanton, who died in 1962.



Construction was completed on the new St. Elizabeth's Church in 1889. This photo was taken in the early 1900s. Bill Bower Collection.

The year 1968 also marked an end and a new beginning for St. Elizabeth's. Three years earlier St. Leo's had closed, making St. Elizabeth's the territorial parish. One year later the church was declared a Denver Landmark. In 1969 it was nominated and accepted for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. In the 1970s, however, the parish faced its greatest challenge as the prospect of Urban Renewal and the creation of the Auraria Campus became a reality.

The parish adjusted to the campus by providing a place where students could gather and relax. This was the St. Francis Interfaith Center, which was built using funds from the Bonfile Foundation.

To build the center, the school, the St. Rose Residence and the convent were razed. As they were being torn down, a bit of Denver's past was uncovered. When the cornerstone of the old school building was removed, workmen found plans for the school and three 1890 newspapers: *The Colorado Journal* (in German), *The Daily News* and *The Rocky Mountain News*. The St. Francis Center officially opened on October 2, 1979.

In 1983 the Franciscans turned over St. Elizabeth's to the Capuchin order, which had been in Denver since 1970, bringing an end to almost 100 years of Franciscan involvement and guidance in the parish. The St. Francis Center is now the property of the Auraria Foundation and serves as a meeting space and reception hall for the campus and community.

company to cast in bronze three large bells for the belfry. Two of the bells had been paid for, but the third still awaited a donor. Father Koch went to the wealthy German brewer, Philip Zang, who owned the largest brewery in the Rockies and asked Zang to donate the money needed to buy the third bell. Father Koch assured him that his donation was strictly business. The priest also promised that "Every time that great bell rings it will advertise your brewery, it will cry your name far and wide. Zang! Zang! Zang!" Since St. Elizabeth's was just two blocks from the competing Milwaukee (Tivoli) Brewery, Zang agreed.

On January 23, 1898, construction was completed on the new church. That spring, the Bishop formally dedicated St. Elizabeth's, which measured 132 feet by 66 feet with its spire reaching 162 feet high. The church was constructed of rusticated rhyolite (lava stone) quarried at Castle Rock, its architecture predominately Gothic with a few Romanesque touches. The interior of the church featured statues and woodwork carved in Germany.

Thanks to the polished plans of the Franciscans and the generosity of Colorado's German Catholic community, St. Elizabeth's was completely debt free by 1902, the first church in the diocese to retire its debt.

In the autumn of 1907, the ill-fated Father Leo Heinrichs became Superior. On Sunday, February 23, 1908, Father Heinrichs celebrated six o'clock morning Mass. At Communion no one paid much attention to Giuseppe Alia, who knelt at the altar rail to receive the host. Alia jumped to his feet and pulled a revolver out of his coat. Joseph Hines, an altar boy assisting the priest, cried out a warning, but it came too late. As Father Heinrichs turned in the boy's direction, Alia placed the gun against the priest's chest and fired. Moments later Father Heinrichs died. He was only forty years old.

An off-duty police officer, Daniel Cremin, captured Alia before he made it out of the church. Alia was found guilty and executed July 15, 1908.

Although the shooting attracted national attention as rumors of a socialist plot spread, it is far more likely that the murderer was mentally ill. Today, a plaque on the wall marks the spot where the assassination took place.

Shortly after Father Heinrichs' death, Bishop Matz reconsecrated the church. The years following the horrifying murder of its pastor provided quiet growth and change for St. Elizabeth's.

Gradually, the neighborhood began to decline from middle-class homes to low income dwellings, warehouses, and small industrial plants. Nonetheless, St. Elizabeth's remained a vital, growing parish.



The murder of Father Leo Heinrichs in 1908 gained national attention, spreading rumors of a socialist plot.

# St. Cajetan's

In the early 1820s, Spanish-speaking people began arriving in the predominately Irish and German neighborhoods of Auraria. A majority of these newcomers decided to attend St. Leo's, the Catholic Church built for the Irish in the 1800's. When conflict developed between Hispanic and Irish parishioners, Father William O'Ryan, pastor of St. Leo's, asked the Theatine Fathers to minister to the needs of the Spanish-speaking Catholics in the parish.

Leading Hispanic women presented Bishop Henry Thien with a petition requesting a separate parish and church and the involvement of the Theatine Fathers, who had been active in the American Southwest for centuries. The Theatines were founded in 1524 by St. Cajetan of Vicenza, who came from a family of bankers and is credited with creating the first credit union.

In 1822 Father Bartolomeu Caldentey began saying Mass for the Hispanics in the basement of St. Leo's, and immediately began to raise funds for a new church. In September, Father Caldentey was recalled to Rome to become the Superior General of the Theatine order. Before he left, however, he went to see John Kernan Mullen, a poor, uneducated Catholic Irishman who had become a millionaire flour miller. Born in Ireland, Mullen came to the U.S when he was fourteen. He bought his first mill in 1875, the Star Flour Mills in North Denver, and within four years owned three more. In 1885 he created the Colorado Milling and Elevator Company, which by 1911 had spread into four other states. Mullen never forgot his beginnings in the Auraria neighborhood. He was one of the key figures in the founding of St. Leo's, helping the parish out of its financial crisis in 1888. At the time, Mullen still owned his old home on Ninth and Lawrence streets, even though he had built a mansion in the Capitol Hill area.

Mullen agreed to give the land on Ninth and Lawrence to the proposed parish on one condition: the parishioners were required to show their good faith



St. Cajetan's in the 1960s. The school, convent and health clinic were razed in the 1970s.

by raising \$5,000. Put to the challenge, the parishioners managed to raise over \$4,000. Unfortunately, the bank in which they had deposited their money failed and they lost everything. Mullen was satisfied by their show of faith, however, and donated the land and a small house to serve as a rectory. He also contributed money to begin the construction of the new church.

Theatines and the Hispanic parishioners moved out of St. Leo's basement and into a small house on the Mullen property. Masses, classes and church meetings were held there. The parish borrowed \$15,000 for the construction of the new church and broke ground on October 1, 1924. By January 1925, the basement of the church was finished, the borrowed money was exhausted and the parish was in debt. The council decided to hold services in the basement until the bills could be paid.

Mullen's wife, Catherine, had been a strong supporter of the new church. With her death in March 1925, Mullen felt compelled to provide support to the parish in his wife's memory. Mullen donated \$65,709 of the needed \$89,000 to finish the church. The cornerstone was laid on June 11, 1925.

Before construction was completed, Mullen expressed his desire to see St. Cajetan's consecrated. He agreed to retire the church's remaining construction debts. St. Cajetan's was completed and consecrated March 21, 1926, and dedicated as a memorial to Catherine Mullen.

Many of the parishioners had helped build the church, donating labor for carpentry, masonry and woodcarving. The church itself was built of brick and stucco and had two belfry towers in the front. The interior was trimmed in pine and oak wood with plaster walls. Lines to simulate marble wainscoting were drawn on the walls. The main altar was ornate, with carved, painted white wood, and included niches for statues and the crucifix. Robert Willison, who designed the Denver Municipal Auditorium and St. Dominic's Catholic Church, was the architect.

The 1920s and 30s saw the addition of the St. Cajetan Clinic. During 1934 the clinic was renamed the Ave Maria Clinic, and served as an outpatient department for Denver's three Catholic hospitals. The clinic, partly funded through the United Way, was roughly the equivalent of today's modern medical centers; it continued to operate until 1969 when it was closed by the archdiocese. The sick were then steered to the updated outpatient facilities in the three Catholic hospitals and to the



For nearly 60 years, St. Cajetan's was a religious and cultural center for the Hispanic community.

neighborhood clinics established in the 1960s by Denver's department of Health and Hospitals.

In 1936 the parish announced that it would build a school and convent. Both buildings were designed by the famous Denver architect T.H. Buell. When the school opened, tuition was \$20 for each family, regardless of size. In an attempt to reach out and help more people, St. Cajetan's established Our Lady of Victory Mission in 1937. This tiny chapel was set up at West Twelfth Avenue and Umatilla Street to help the poor people living in the South Platte River bottoms. The flood of 1965 washed away the mission and it was never rebuilt.

To help Hispanic families buy cars and homes, and meet life's occasional emergencies, the St. Cajetan's

armed robbery occurred. The credit union was robbed twice more, once in September 1961 for \$500 and the last time in July of 1967 for \$195. Only the final robbery resulted in arrests.

In June of 1964 it was discovered that the bookkeeper for the credit union had been embezzling funds amounting to more than \$14,000. According to the auditors, interest income accounts were short from 1959 to June of 1964 by approximately \$150 to \$180 a month. She had also written up several fictitious loans from which she embezzled \$7,000. The bookkeeper confessed she had been going to the dog tracks and attending church bingo games held in the basement of St. Cajetan's.

After the last robbery was solved and the embezzler revealed, St. Cajetan's

When Auraria was built, St. Cajetan's survived to perform

## Restoration of St. Cajetan's

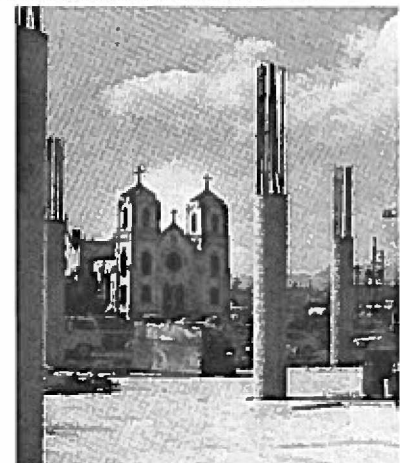
In the Fall of 1990, St. Cajetan's received a major exterior facelift. Weather-worn and lacred with chipped paint, the old church was badly in need of repairs, particularly the stucco that characterized the structure. For researchers involved in the restoration the selection of authentic paint colors was an important concern.

Sometime between 1955 and 1965 the church had been painted for the first time, pink and light blue. According to former residents of Auraria, those colors may have been chosen because someone in the congregation got a bargain on the paint.

When the Auraria Higher Education Center (AHEC) assumed responsibilities for the building in the 1970s, the paint had faded to an off-white. In an effort to preserve the building, the church was repainted in the pink and blue color scheme, described by Denver historians and preservationists as "African-Caribbean," and "a wedding cake." A decade later, the church was once again repainted in pastels. Unfortunately, an oversight resulted in only the bottom half of the church being repainted, which gave the church a two-toned appearance.



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When Auraria was built, St. Cajetan's survived to perform



Note exterior restoration of St. Cajetan's in 1991 included a return to its original colors.

In January of 1991, funding was obtained for the complete restoration of the exterior of the 66-year-old church. Soon an intensive search for St. Cajetan's original colors began. After interviewing former residents of the Auraria Hispanic community; Father Probenz, pastor of St. Cajetan's in the 1970s; and Denver preservationists, a selection was made. The National Park Service analyzed and numerically coded plaster samples from the church. This process provided the research team with the church's colors—two types of gray trim, apricot walls and forest green window shutters. In November of 1991, the Denver Landmark Commission approved the color scheme.

Instead of actually repainting the church, a type of synthetic plastic stucco (elastomeric) was used on the church during restoration. Stucco is a breathable material that was applied by layers onto the brick structure. When stucco is painted, the paint seals it and keeps it from breathing, which results in cracking and crumbling of the material. This new form of stucco is expected to be more durable and resistant to cracks.

experienced a new terror, arson. In March 1968, two fires were started in the church that caused damage to a confessional booth and an altar curtain. No arrests were ever made in connection with the fires.

When rumors swept through the Auraria neighborhood in the late 1960s that the Denver Urban Renewal Authority was going to demolish the area to make way for the 171-acre Auraria campus, panicked neighbors met in the basement of St. Cajetan's. Some prayed, some decided to fight the project and others resigned themselves to the end of an era. In 1967 the neighborhood was officially declared the future location for the Auraria Higher Education Center, and in 1969 the city called a special bond election to secure funds for the project. Even though some residents organized and campaigned against the bond issue, it was approved by the voters. Fortunately, residents of the community were given funds for relocation, even if they were renters.

After the bond issue passed, there was nothing left for the residents, no

reason to stay in Auraria. Soon St. Cajetan's school and playgrounds, the Ave Maria Clinic, and the convent were demolished. Interestingly enough, all three buildings were of the same architectural style, one that may still be seen at St. Joseph's Hospital administration building.

In June 1976, the congregation moved from the old St. Cajetan's in a new church in Southwest Denver, modeled after the ancient Aztec pyramids. On October 12, 1976, the new St. Cajetan's at 4000 West Alameda Avenue was dedicated.

Since that time many things have happened to the old St. Cajetan's. Parishioners worked with preservationists to save the church structure from demolition. As a monument of Hispanic architecture, culture, history and religion, St. Cajetan's became a Denver Landmark. The Auraria Campus has recycled the church as a multi-purpose auditorium for lectures, concerts, recitals and other community functions. In 1991 the old church underwent a complete exterior renovation.

For nearly half a century St. Cajetan's had a key role in the everyday life of Hispanic residents of Auraria. The church provided medical aid, education and even financial support for its parishioners. Through hardships and heartaches, St. Cajetan's was there for its people.



The Lawrence Street viaduct was torn down in 1968, and the street became an attractive pedestrian mall. St. Cajetan's plaza now serves as a focal point for the campus.

## And then there was . . . St. Leo the Great

Auraria's Irish-American Catholics originally attended services with the German's at St. Elizabeth's. At first the two ethnic groups shared the church. But the language and cultural barriers eventually forced the parish to split, with separate priests and Mass times for each. When that arrangement proved unsatisfactory, the Irish contingent petitioned for a separate church. Denver miller John K. Mullen donated his land at Tenth Street and West Colfax for the future parish. In 1888 construction began on St. Leo the Great, which would be completed by 1890.

Initially St. Leo's was one of the more successful Catholic parishes in Denver. The driving force was Father William F. O'Ryan. Under his leadership, St. Leo's had as many as 2500 people attending the four Masses on Sundays. Nevertheless, the congregation had financial problems. In 1898 a U.S. marshal appeared before Father O'Ryan and ordered him to appear in the U.S. District Court. District Judge Moses Halest signed foreclosure papers on St. Leo's, ordering Father O'Ryan to raise \$11,200 in nine months or turn the church over to its creditors. The pastor immediately went to work asking for donations. Within nine months he had collected enough money to pay the debt, thanks to an \$11,000 lump sum gift from four friends of the congregation, \$10,000 of which was donated by John K. Mullen.

By the 1920s many of the Irish who had been instrumental in the building of St. Leo's, and whose families had attended and financially supported the church, moved out of the neighborhood as they made their fortunes. At the same time, a large number of immigrants from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking Americans moved into Auraria. A majority of these newcomers turned to St. Leo for spiritual support and guidance. Once again, cultural differences

forced a confrontation between two ethnic groups using the same church.

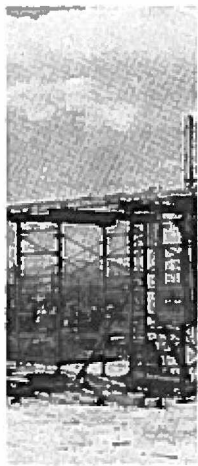
Father Martorell began holding services in the basement of St. Leo's for the Hispanics in 1923. Two years later, John K. Mullen helped finance the construction of St. Cajetan's Church for the Hispanics. Ironically, the churches were only two blocks apart. While the immediate problem was solved with the construction of St. Cajetan's, St. Leo's was never able to count on the support of the neighborhood's Hispanic population. As the congregation at St. Cajetan's would grow yearly, St. Leo's declined.

In 1940 Monsignor O'Ryan died. At the time of his death, the church was kept alive only because of the \$160 per month received from the estates of the late Verner Z. Reed and John K. Mullen.

On February 28, 1955 Father Robert A. Banigan, the parish's last priest, announced the closure of St. Leo's. Catholic officials stated that the dwindling number of parishioners had caused the archbishop to close the church. Those families who continued to seek service at the

downtown church were asked to go to Mass at either St. Elizabeth's or St. Cajetan's.

Father Banigan writes, "I told the parish members this morning that it was better to shut down now instead of letting the elements, dust, wind and snow damage it further. Old age just caught up with St. Leo's." Perhaps it was doomed from the beginning because it was "built on a foundation of prejudice." The Auraria Campus Technology Building now occupies the site of the old church.



become a meeting space and arts center for the campus.



St. Leo's was demolished in 1968, just a few years before preservation efforts associated with construction of the Auraria Campus might have saved it.

# Emmanuel Chapel

The Emmanuel Chapel is the city's oldest church structure. In 1859 Colonel Lewis N. Tappan built a non-denominational Sunday School, which was conducted by Professor Owen J. Goldrick, Denver's first school teacher, on the present site of the Emmanuel Gallery. Shortly thereafter, the school was moved to Tenth and Lawrence and named the Union Sunday School. In 1874 the site was purchased by Bishop John F. Spaulding for an Episcopalian chapel.

The building was constructed of stone with twelve-foot by eighteen-foot wall buttresses, a mixture of Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles. The windows in the front and along the sides are Gothic style. Originally, rose-stained glass windows enhanced the front and back walls.

From 1874 to 1893, it remained part of the Episcopal diocese. When the congregation moved to a new building at Twelfth and Lipan streets, the Cathedral chapter of the Brotherhood of Saint Andrew held services in the chapel they renamed Saint Andrew's Mission. From 1893 to 1903, lay readers and members of the Young Ladies Guild of the Cathedral maintained a mission. A Sunday School, a sewing school and a mothers' meeting were conducted by laymen and clergy within the chapel.

At the same time, commerce and industry flourished in the neighborhood, attracting more immigrants to the area. Survivors from the Jewish Atwood Agriculture Colony and those from the Cotopaxi colony soon streamed into Auraria to try their hands at becoming merchants, small store owners, peddlers and junk dealers. With this influx came the need for a Jewish synagogue.

There had been a small Jewish congregation, Shmona Amunoh, in existence since the late 1800s, on Fourteenth and Blake streets. Their synagogue was destroyed by the 1880 Cherry Creek flood. The congregation was forced to move three more times for a variety of reasons. Finally, in 1903, the members of this old congregation and the new immigrants purchased the Emmanuel Chapel from Bishop Spaulding. The two groups then formed the congregation Shearith Israel or Remnant of Israel.

The interior of the chapel was remodeled in the image of a traditional Orthodox Synagogue. The ceiling corners were replastered and rounded in the Orthodox style. A balcony was also added, where the Jewish women sat.

By the 1920s the Jewish population in Auraria declined. When World War II



*In the 1960s, Emmanuel was used as an artist's studio. Today it serves as an art gallery for the three Auraria schools.*

ended, there were only fifteen members of Shearith Israel. Finally, regular services ceased in 1958, when the remaining congregation was unable to gather the required ten men for Saturday and holiday services. In late 1958 the synagogue was sold to Wolfgang Pogzeba, an artist, for \$10,000.

From 1958 to 1973, Pogzeba used the building as an art studio. He updated the electrical and plumbing systems and, except for replacing the original wooden doors with bronze, he made few changes. In 1969 Emmanuel Chapel was approved for listing on the National Register of Historical Places. As a registered United States landmark, no federal funds, such as urban renewal or federal highway funds, could be spent in any manner that might jeopardize its historical integrity.

Four years later, in 1973, Emmanuel became part of the Auraria Campus. Currently the Emmanuel Gallery is used by the Community College of Denver, Metropolitan State College of Denver and the University of Colorado at Denver as a shared art gallery.

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Colorado Historical Society  
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