



Building a City: The Life and Work of Rev. James Wagner

April has been a joyous month for the diocese with the ordination of a new auxiliary bishop. During this time, we have come together not only to celebrate this joyful occasion, but also to look back on the long history of the Diocese of London. Father James Wagner, first pastor of St. Alphonsus Parish in Sandwich (now Windsor) contributed much to the diocese, and a biography of his life is an excellent way to examine the very early history of our diocese, so that we may better understand our roots.

Rev. James Wagner was born November 13, 1837 in Heringen, Lorraine, France, where his father was a professor of classics. He entered the Seminary at Nancy, where he desired nothing more than devotion to foreign missions. Little did he know that his desire would be fulfilled, when the Archbishop of Toronto, Bishop De Charbonnel, discovered him while visiting France, searching for men to serve the missions of western Ontario.

By August of 1857, Father Wagner travelled from France to Baltimore alongside a group of other seminarians. During this time, he studied English; upon his mastery of it, he travelled to Sandwich and taught English to others until his ordination. Bishop Pineseault performed his ordination on June 3, 1860, and he was immediately sent to St. Mary's Parish in Simcoe, as well as having missions in Windham and LaSalette. For the four years he resided there, from 1860 to 1864, he constructed not only a rectory, but also a mission church in Vienna. Only then did poor health necessitate his return to Sandwich.

By June of the following year, he was recovered, and it was then that Bishop Pineseault named him the first resident pastor in all of Windsor. During this time he flourished: some of the many activities credited to him were directing the founding of St. Alphonsus Church, Hotel-Dieu Hospital, St. Mary's Academy, the first Negro Mission in all Canada, establishing the Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph in Windsor, and building churches on Pelee Island. He visited France and Germany to raise money for these numerous projects, and it is easy to see how central many of them still are to Windsor today.



This photo is Father Dean (James) Wagner with young black children who were part of the Black Mission in Windsor ca. 1880.

He briefly served at St. John the Baptist Parish in Amherstburg for two months in 1876. By the following year, he was promoted to Dean of Windsor for his virtues and the great services he had performed for Windsor.

The later years of his life are not as well documented, but he celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as a priest in June of 1885. By 1896, he was ill, and again sought to return to his homeland to recover his health. Sadly, that did not happen, and he passed away in his hometown of Heringen on August 26, 1896, where he was buried. St. Alphonsus erected a memorial tablet shortly after his death, and celebrated a requiem service on September 2, 1896. Father Wagner's service to the diocese, and his establishment of so many institutions in Windsor, shows how one man can have a large impact.

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