

# History of St. Mary's Priory

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The property is a Banquest/Hotel complex known as Pittsburgh Grand Hall for Banquets and The Priory. From their website:

**St. Mary's Priory** The Priory Hotel began its existence in 1888 as just that - a priory. The St. Mary's Priory, to be exact. What is a priory, one might wonder? It is a place where clerics gather and live, communally, like a monastery or convent. In the case of the St. Mary's Priory, the clerics were Benedictine monks and priests, some of whom lived in residence, some of whom ministered to the adjacent St. Mary's Church (now our Pittsburgh's Grand Hall at The Priory), and some of whom would stay between clerical assignments. The St. Vincent's Arch abbey, located in nearby Latrobe, is the seat of authority for the Benedictine Order in the United States. Many of the Benedictine priests and brothers traveling to Latrobe would rest their heads at the St. Mary's Priory

**The St. Mary's Parish and Church** The St. Mary's Parish was founded in 1848 by German, Austrian and Swiss immigrants living in a neighborhood then known as "Deushtown" (or "Germantown"). (Since that time the neighborhood was rechristened as "East Allegheny," but has recently re-adopted the Deushtown moniker in commemoration of the area's German heritage.) St. Mary's was the first Roman Catholic parish founded in what was then Allegheny City, a city separate and apart from the City of Pittsburgh and which now comprises Pittsburgh's North Side.

The St. Mary's Parish was founded in 1848 by German, Austrian and Swiss immigrants living in a neighborhood then known as "Deushtown" (or "Germantown"). In 1850, parishioners began to build their own church, a towering edifice build in the Italianate style. They completed the project in 1854, a massive structure with over 10,000 square feet of floor space and space for more than 900 parishioners. Many of the parishioners were Germanic speaking immigrants, and masses were routinely said in German.

Notably lacking in the 1854 design were stained glass windows. These were purposely omitted for fear of vandalism by the infamous Know Nothing Party - a terroristic socio-political organization reminiscent of the 20th Century Ku Klux Klan. One of the main activities of the notorious group was breaking the windows of Catholic churches. The stained glass windows which now grace the Church (Pittsburgh's Grand Hall at The Priory) were placed in 1912. They were crafted by the Tyrolese Art Glass Company of Innsbruck, Austria, and were lovingly restored in 1995 as part of the Grand Hall renovation project.

**In the Path of Progress** In the early 1970's, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation announced that the route of the long-planned Interstate 279 feeder highway (from downtown Pittsburgh to the northern suburbs) would wind directly through the location of the St. Mary's Church and Priory (not to mention the school and Lyceum, which were located across Nash Street and which were eventually demolished).

After exhaustive negotiations between the diocese and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and despite St. Mary's rich history and historic landmark status, it was agreed that the state would pay \$1,294,000 for the church and adjacent building, including the priory.

This left the parish in an uncertain state for nearly a decade. It continued to occupy the priory building and church as a tenant, but the flock dwindled for the doomed church. Toward the end, there were only two priests left to occupy the massive priory and the majority of parishioners were single retirees - widows and widowers

On Sunday, September 27, 1981, Father Bede Hasso walked into the first full house the church had seen in years and offered St. Mary's final mass. The coup de grace came eight years after the state took control of the property. On August 31, 1981, Bishop Vincent M. Leonard issued a decree of suppression of St. Mary's Church. Four weeks later, on Sunday, September 27, 1981, Father Bede Hasso walked into the first full house the church had seen in years and offered St. Mary's final mass. The following day the parish, with the remainder of its fold being absorbed into Our Lady Queen of Peace parish, closed forever.

Saved from the Wrecking Ball Ribbon Cutting Ribbon Cutting for the Hotel Expansion Demolition of the St. Mary's Church and Priory was scheduled to begin in 1982. Until then, the buildings sat hulking and empty. By coincidence another Catholic church, St. Boniface, was also in the way of the planned path of Interstate 279. St. Boniface, located on East Street, perhaps a mile North of The Priory. An active group of St. Boniface congregants and neighborhood activists, through a variety of techniques including lawsuits and protests, eventually succeeded in convincing Penn DOT to reroute the highway and avoid the destruction of St. Boniface (and by happy circumstance, St. Mary's Church and Priory).

Edward Graf was a business executive and his wife Mary Ann a homemaker when they acquired the church and priory from Penn DOT by auction in 1984. Historic preservationists, the Graf's knew that they wanted to preserve the properties but did not know what new use was appropriate for them. Eventually, they settled on a hotel for the former monastery, and The Priory opened its doors in November 1986 after more than a year of renovations.

It was not until after the Grafs acquired the properties that Ed Graf learned that his family history was tied up with that of the church. His great grandfather had been married there in 1877, and his father, as well as many of his aunts and uncles, had been baptized and attended school there.

In 2009, the Graf family undertook their most ambitious project yet, the construction of a completely new wing to the existing hotel. After nearly two years of planning and construction, on December 31, 2010, the Priory Hotel opened its new wing, which expanded the property's capacity by 17 guest rooms to give it a total of 42 - an expansion of more than 70%!