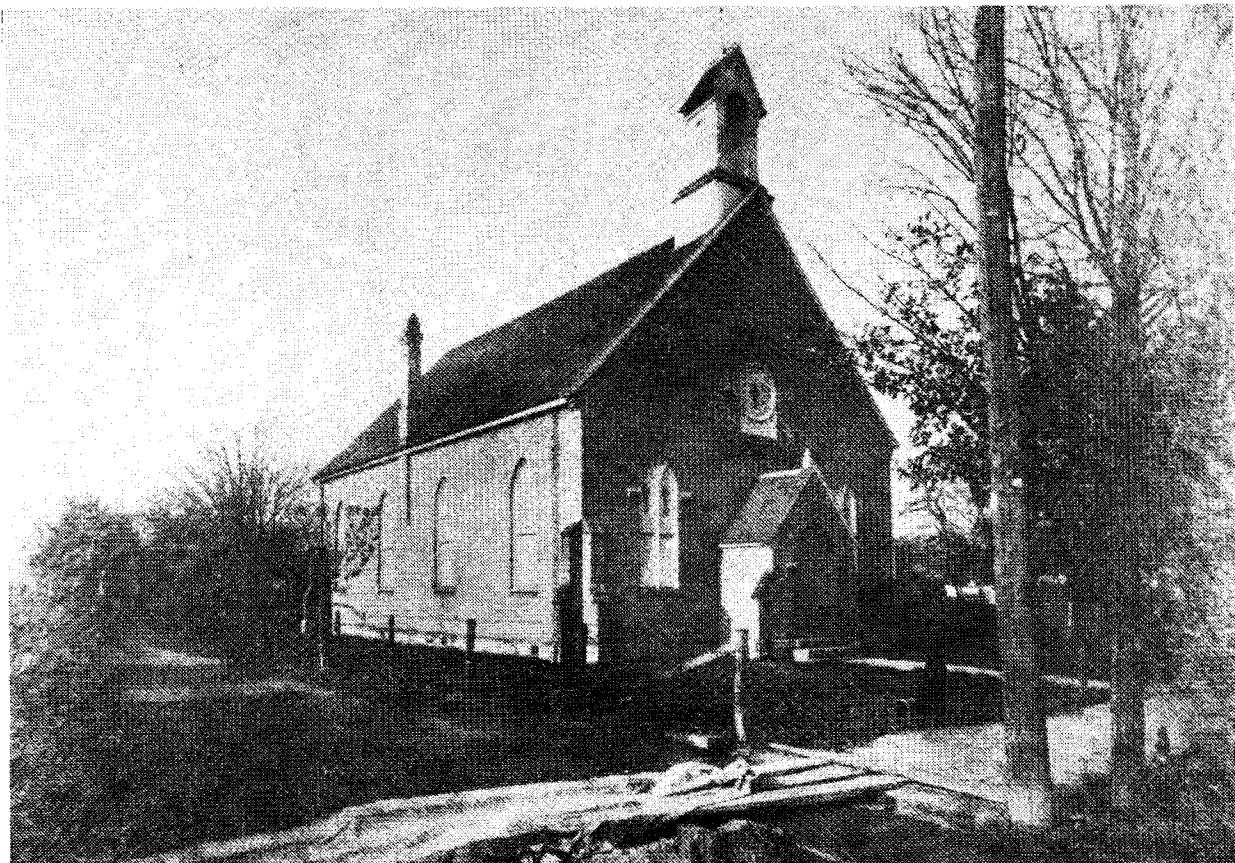


Barquilla de la Santa Maria

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St. Joseph Church, Frankfort, Ohio, circa 1900.
(Photograph courtesy of Mr. John Grabb
and the Ross County Historical Society)

ST. JOSEPH MISSION FRANKFORT, CONCORD TOWNSHIP, ROSS COUNTY

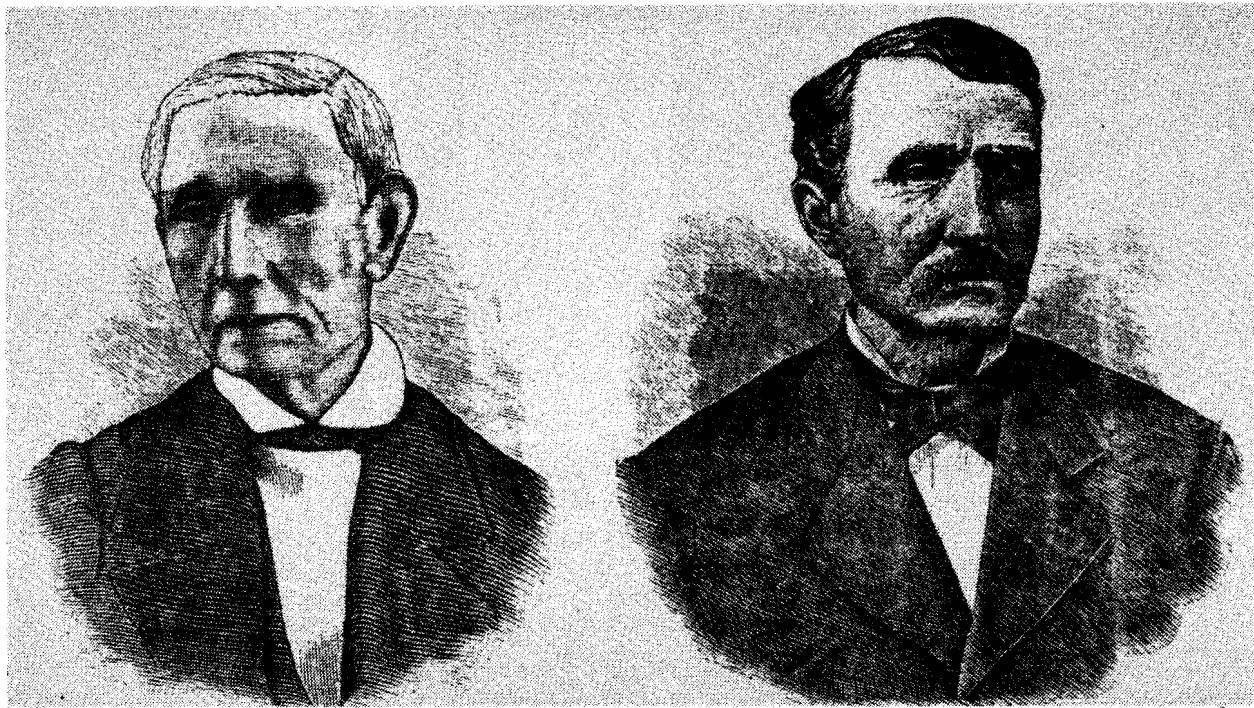
The origin of St. Joseph church in Frankfort, Ohio can be found in the pristine Faith of the Catholics of early nineteenth century Ireland, which had been purified by over two centuries of persecution and oppression. In the sixteenth century, just after England's King Henry VIII with the consent of almost all of the English bishops renounced the Pope's authority in spiritual matters, the Irish and Catholic forces of the north of Ireland were rallied in

opposition to Henry's policy by the courageous Rory O'Donnell, Bishop of Doire. The bishop's first cousin was Manus O'Donnell, ruler of the adjacent land of Tir-Conaill (the modern County Donegal), who wrote to Pope Paul III in 1537 seeking help. If the Holy Father would provide help, he trusted, "the stones, the trees, the fowl in the air and the fish in the sea will rise to aid him, and much more the people, who are very Christian." Little material help was provided over the next 250 years as the dark night of oppression crushed Irish society and attempted to crush its faith, but the "very Christian" people endured.

On June 20, 1798 in the townland of Templemoil in the Diocese of Derry (the ancient Diocese of Doire), there was born a boy named John McNally, the second son of James and Susan (McCloskey) McNally. Despite the persecution of 250 years, the faith of this family was that of the Bishop of Rome, preserved through the Holy Sacrifice offered by selfless priests on "Mass rocks" under the open sky. Despite the fact that as recently as 1782 it had been illegal for a Catholic to conduct a school in Ireland, James McNally was known as a fine scholar, a school-master, and a surveyor, for learning had been preserved in the illegal, outdoor "hedge schools." John McNally inherited nothing of a material kind from his parents, for they had nothing of this kind to give him and as early as his eighth year he was working as a cowherd to help his father support the family. However, he inherited from them both their steadfast faith and their love of learning and these he brought with him to Ohio. With his sisters he instilled them in the Catholic mission at Frankfort, where they brought forth two priests and a religious sister, vocations all out of proportion to the size of the tiny community.

In 1820 he left his parents' home and came to Canada, where he spent some time at the city of Quebec. There he found employment and he entered a school in order to learn French but, taking offense at some insult by the teacher upon his scholarship, he determined to come to Chillicothe, where some of his school-mates had already settled. Walking most of the way, and in the process making one hundred fourteen miles in two days, he arrived at his destination in the fall of the same year. He soon obtained employment as a school teacher and taught at a district school in Concord Township for three years. The first money he cleared, amounting to \$75, he sent to his aged parents in Ireland. He next became a clerk for a merchant in Frankfort and in 1828, by industriousness and saving, was able to purchase the establishment, which he operated for ten years. During this period he also purchased some undeveloped farm land west of Frankfort.

Up until 1837, the closest Catholic church where Mr. McNally could perform his religious duties was at Somerset, whence he often traveled for that purpose. In 1837 Rev. Damian Juncker made Chillicothe the center of his missionary efforts in the Scioto Valley, and in 1838 Mr. McNally moved into Chillicothe and went into the wholesale and retail grocery business there. He retired from this business in 1850 and moved to his farm two miles west of Frankfort, which he began to improve while at times taking up other business interests. While visiting New York City in 1855 on business he lacerated the muscles of his left leg while stepping from a horse-car and was lame for life. "His days thenceforth, with rare exceptions, were passed upon his farm, in the supervision of his home business and the enjoyment of his books and the society of his friends." His sister, Mary, who had been only about three years old when John left Ireland, joined him in this country some years later.



John McNally
1798-1879

James A. Dexter
1847-1925

In 1845 she married George M. Dexter, a native of Lincolnshire, England. George was not a Catholic but it was not many years before he accepted as his own the faith of his wife. The Dexters and their children lived on John McNally's farm west of Frankfort and it was with them that he spent the rest of his days.

It was during this period of sometimes seeming inactivity that Mr. McNally was most generous in returning gifts to that Church which had sustained his family for so many years in Ireland. He provided for the education of his nieces and nephews, including the neice who became Sister Mary Dexter, S.C., and the seminary expenses of his nephew Rev. Alfred D. Dexter. In 1871 and 1872 he paid all but \$400 of the \$6,000 cost of building St. Joseph church in Frankfort. (1)

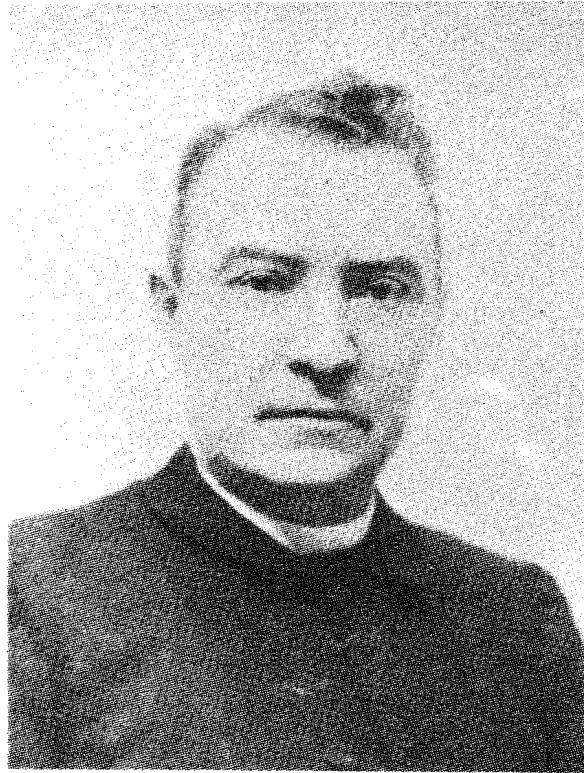
St. Joseph church, "the crowning effort of his life," was built on lot 76, on the northwest corner of Second street and the first alley north of Springfield street. The mission appears to have been organized about 1862, at the same time as the mission in Waverly. The first baptisms there were recorded at Chillicothe St. Mary's in 1862 and the church lot was purchased on October 22, 1864 from the trustees of the First Regular Baptist Church for \$400. (2) The new brick church measured about thirty by forty feet and was a little gem, with all of the accoutrements traditionally associated with Catholic churches. The wooden ceiling was not plastered but was decorated with paintings. The plaster walls were painted and decorated in the style typical of the period, with painted wainscot and trim around the windows. The Stations of the Cross were framed paintings, six pairs hung between the windows on the side walls and the remaining two on the front wall, flanking the sanctuary. There were three altars, but only the main altar had a tabernacle; behind this hung a painting of St. Joseph, seated on a bench with

the Child Jesus on his lap. The church had eight rows of wooden pews and could accomodate about ninety persons, not counting those who might fit into the small loft. It was heated by a stove on each side aisle, each with a brick chimney. (3) The quality of the building and the Bishop's permission which must have been obtained to build it indicate a generally-held hope that the Catholic community would some day grow to the point that a pastor could be assigned there, a hope never to be realized.

The Catholics of Frankfort had been under the care of the priests of Chillicothe St. Mary church for many years and the new St. Joseph church remained under the care of these same pastors until about the year 1900. From about 1885 until about 1894, Frankfort (with Waverly and New Vienna) was taken care of by Rev. Thomas Boulger, who lived at Chillicothe and at Waverly.

John McNally was described as having a somewhat irritable, sensitive nature, but nevertheless was easily forgiving and kind. His business and social reputation was high. His acts were marked by integrity and honor. Upon his death, December 27, 1879, the sense of loss in the community was so great that his funeral at St. Joseph church was one of the largest ever known at Frankfort. Rev. J. B. Murray came from Chillicothe to preach at the funeral.

Alfred D. Dexter was the eldest child of George M. and Mary (McNally) Dexter, born on May 18, 1846. He was educated at his uncle's expense at Mt. St. Mary's Seminary and was ordained by Archbishop Purcell on Sept. 23, 1876. His first Mass was offered, with his first sermon, at St. Mary's church in Chillicothe on the following Sunday. His first assignment was as assistant pastor at Kenton, where he remained for five years, one year of which he spent at Bellefontaine. From 1881 to 1889 he was pastor at Marysville, during which time he laid out and developed St. John Cemetery and built a church in Mechanicsburg, which was a mission of Marysville. In 1889 he returned to his home parish of Chillicothe St. Mary as pastor. During his eighteen years there, the interior of the church was redecorated and stained glass windows were installed, St. Margaret's Cemetery was started, and the Sisters of Charity were brought to teach the parish school. He was very popular with the congregation, "their relations realizing the true christian ideal represented under the figure of the shepherd and his flock." He left Chillicothe in 1907 to become pastor at Hillsboro, where he remained only a short time before being named pastor of St. Charles parish in South Charleston. He was offered larger parishes during



Rev. Alfred D. Dexter
1846-1915

the next few years, but he declined these because of his love for the people of South Charleston. He was held in the highest esteem by the citizens there and he extended his kindness and benevolence to all, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. He died there on April 20, 1915; the remains were brought back to Chillicothe for interment. He had served the Church with loyalty and fidelity, which were among his most noteworthy characteristics. (4)

Father Dexter was born and raised and spent thirty-one years of his priestly life and his mortal remains now lie within the present boundaries of the Diocese of Columbus, but in territories then in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Only his last assignments in Hillsboro and South Charleston took him further afield. (3)

The youngest child of George and Mary (McNally) Dexter was Sarah, who entered the convent of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati and went by the name Sister M. Dexter, S.C. For many years she was stationed in Dayton. (5)

James A. Dexter, the second son of George and Mary Dexter, took his uncle John McNally's place in the Frankfort Catholic community. He was "one of the main-stays" of the Church in Frankfort and was a member of its choir. Although he was first of all a farmer, well-educated and remained well-informed and was a correspondent for several newspapers. He was active in local politics and as a justice of the peace was known for his impartial judgement and fair decisions. (6) He eventually retired to his home in Frankfort, where he died in 1925. He and his wife had three children, but of these one died at an early age and the others moved to Dayton, so that St. Joseph church lost its leading family.

After the departure of the James Dexter family, the mantle of leadership of the Frankfort Catholics fell upon the David B. Towell family. Mrs. Towell, born Ella Devine, was a niece of John McNally. (7) The youngest of the eight children of David and Ella Towell was Charles A. Towell, whose faith and love for the Church matched that of the mission church's builder.

Charles A. Towell was born in Frankfort on June 10, 1892 and was baptized by Father Dexter on July 6; the sponsors were James Flynn and Sarah Dexter. He attended the Frankfort public school and, when the family lived for a time outside of Cincinnati, attended St. Aloysius parochial school there. Their sojourn there was short and the family soon moved back to Frankfort, where Mrs. Towell and her brother Augustine Devine owned and operated a large farm on Paint Creek. There Charles spent some of his teen years. He attended St. Xavier High School and Xavier University in Cincinnati. He received his seminary education at Mt. St. Mary's, Norwood, and St. Mary's, Baltimore, where he was ordained for the Diocese of Covington on January 6, 1922. He returned to Frankfort and offered his first solemn Mass at St. Joseph's. His biographical sketches refer to St. Joseph's as the "family chapel," no doubt referring to the kinship between the Devines and the McNallys.

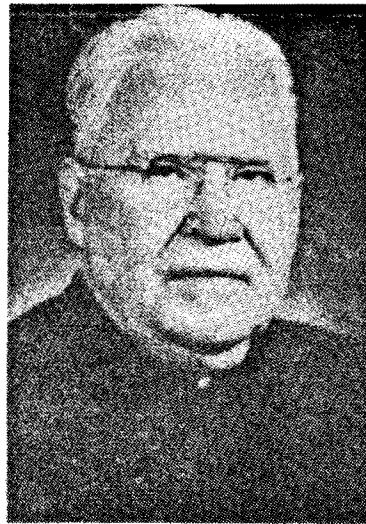
For the rest of his life, Father Towell was engaged in pastoral work in various parishes of the Diocese of Covington, the longest and last assignment being at St. Agnes parish in Park Hills, near Covington. At the same time, he taught in the Catholic high schools and was very involved in the growth of Catholic hospitals and nursing homes in the diocese. He rose to the highest

ranks among hospital administrators on the diocesan, state, and even international levels and was awarded many honors by the Church and by hospital associations. He was elevated to the rank of Monsignor, Papal Chamberlain, in 1949.

Monsignor Towell has been described as "a huge, gruff man, with a heart of gold." With most persons, he had to have the last word (in his deep bass voice), and many times his kindness was misunderstood by those who did not yet know him well. But, it was said, the tiny old German Sister of Notre Dame who was his housekeeper could tell him what to do. His hospital work took him into the ranks of the powerful, but he was willing to rise at an early hour to distribute Holy Communion in the chapels under his care or in the parish church. He is remembered for his charity, counsel, and encouragement, especially regarding seminarians and the postulants of several religious orders. In all his work, he was sustained by devotion to the rosary and the Sacred Heart. His last days were spent at St. Charles Nursing Home, one of the many facilities he had helped to bring to Covington. He died there on January 12, 1971, in the 79th year of his age and 50th of his priesthood. (8)

About the year 1900, Frankfort, along with Chillicothe St. Mary's other missions at Waverly and New Vienna, was placed under the care of the pastor at Greenfield St. Benignus parish, from which it apparently was served for the rest of its existence. By the late 1920's, the Towells were about the only Catholics left in the Frankfort area. On special occasions, Rev. Henry J. Granamm of St. Benignus would offer Mass for them and the few others who would gather in the little church of St. Joseph. Rev. Aloys Leon of St. Benignus is said to have held services at St. Joseph as late as 1940 and Monsignor Towell offered Mass there on his visits home. (9)

When the Diocese of Steubenville was erected from the eastern portions of the Diocese of Columbus in 1944, the latter was compensated by the addition of territories taken from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, including the portion of Ross County west of the Scioto where Frankfort is located. Officially, this was done by decretum of Most Rev. Hamlet John Cicognani, Apostolic Delegate, dated December 13, 1944. The hopes of John McNally and Archbishop Purcell had never been realized; the Catholic community in Frankfort had never grown into a parish. The mission had been founded and maintained largely by one extended family and, as that family declined through the departure of its members for other localities, there was little reason to try to keep the mission alive. It was too small to be viable. The Most Rev. Michael J. Ready, the new Bishop of Columbus, is said to have made the decision to close the mission, and so the church was boarded up. The building remained, in a deteriorating condition, until with the concurrence of the pastors of the two Chillicothe parishes the diocese sold it for \$2,500 in January, 1973. The proceeds were given to Bishop Flaget High School in Chillicothe. The new owner razed the venerable old building and erected a house on the site.



Msgr. C. A. Towell
1892-1971

NOTES

- (1) History of Ross and Highland Counties, Ohio; Cleveland: Williams Brothers, 1880; opposite page 244.
- (2) Ross County deed book 68, page 170. The Baptist church was not on this lot; the former Baptist church was being used as a school for black children in 1880. (Williams Brothers, page 315.)
- (3) Description based on photographs taken by Mr. L. Calderone in 1972.
- (4) The sources for Father Dexter include the histories of the various parishes at which he was stationed, a sketch in The County of Ross by H. H. Bennett (Madison: Selwyn A. Brant, 1902, pages 445-446), and the Catholic Columbian of Apr. 23, 1915 (courtesy of the Catholic Times).
- (5) A letter to the Sisters of Charity has brought forth no details of Sr. M. Dexter's life or work.
- (6) Bennett, pages 446-448 and Evans, Lyle S., A Standard History of Ross County, Ohio; Chicago & N.Y.: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1917; pp 833-835.
- (7) A 1902 biographical sketch of Sheriff James Devine of Ross County, Ella Devine Towell's nephew, states that he was a cousin of Father Alfred Dexter. (Bennett, p. 445.) The baptismal record of Ella's brother Augustine Devine, in the records now kept at St. Peter's in Chillicothe, (dated 3 Sept., 1847) confirms that Mrs. Devine's maiden name was McNally.
- (8) Much of the data on Monsignor Towell was supplied by Sister Mary Philip Trauth, S.N.D., archivist of the Diocese of Covington, and by the Messenger, the diocesan newspaper, which also supplied the photograph.
- (9) Grabb, John R., St. Mary's Parish - 150 Years in Chillicothe, Ohio 1837-1987. St. Mary's Church, 1986.

ST. JOSEPH MISSION
FRANKFORT, CONCORD TOWNSHIP, ROSS COUNTY
BAPTISMS through 1900 A.D.

The following baptisms recorded at Chillicothe St. Mary's appear to have been at Frankfort or of persons belonging to the mission. Those definitely performed at Frankfort, according to the register, are so marked here. About 1885, Frankfort was placed in the care of Rev. Thomas Boulger; Father Boulger did not keep a record of his baptisms with the other St. Mary's records and unfortunately the whereabouts of his record book is not known. Records after 1900 would have been kept at Greenfield.

Feb. 14, 1862, Frankfort. James William, son of James Huffman and Mary (Kelly) Huffman, born Sept. 14. Sponsors James & Bridget Rooney. Michael Kennedy

Dec. 9, 1862, Frankfort. Samuel, son of John Huffman & Mary Kelly, born Oct. 6; the parents of Lucy & Mary Goodman were the sponsors. Michael Kennedy

Feb. 25, 1864, Frankfort. John, son of Patrick O'Donnell and Mary Divine, born 27 Jan. Sponsors Brien O'Donnell and Bridget Brennan. F. J. Tierney

Oct. 24, 1864 Amelia Angelina, daughter of Gibson Orihood and Henrietta Maddox Orihood, born March 19, 1864 in Concord Township, Ross Co. Sponsor Mary Angelina Maddux. Michael Mary Ahern

June 5, 1865 James, son of Patrick O'Donnell and Mary Divine, born March 15. Sponsors James Dexter and Mary McNally. F. J. Tierney

Oct. 4, 1866 Charles, son of Patrick O'Donnell and Mary A. Divine, born 26 July. Sponsors Patrick Lucy and Helen Divine. John B. Murray

Jan. 6, 1868 James, son of Patrick O'Donnell and Mary Devine, born December, 1867. Sponsors Richard and Helen Devine. John B. Murray

Dec., 1870 The following children of Gibson Orahood and Harriet Maddux were all baptized by Rev. John B. Murray:

John, born 20 Nov. 1856; sponsor James Dexter.

Mary, born 31 Mar. 1861; sponsor Mary E. Dexter.

Rebecca, born 19 Sept. 1864; sponsor Ellen Divine.

Elizabeth, born 16 July, 1866; sponsor Jane Dillon.

Emily, born -0 March, 1868; sponsor Mary A. Maddux.

Apr. 8, 1877 Joseph, son of Patrick Goodman [Goodwin] and Isabella Mahon, born March 9; sponsors James Dexter and Catherine Goodman. J. A. Murray

Dec. 15, 1878 Richard, son of Charles Passmore and Ann Flynn, born Nov. 27; sponsors Michael and Mary Flynn. John B. Murray

same John, son of David Towell and Ella Devine, born Nov. 11; sponsors Francis Goodman and Catherine Devine. John B. Murray

June 15, 1879 Francis C., son of Patrick Goodwin and Isabella Mahon, born June 3; sponsors James Ramey and Eliza Devine. J. A. Murray

Apr. 28, 1880 August, son of David Towell and Helen Devine, born -8 April; sponsors Edward Towell and Elizabeth Devine. J. A. Murray

Dec. 27, 1882 Frederick, son of Patrick Goodwin and Isabel Mahon, born Dec. 3; sponsors James Denni [Devine?] and Helen Conly. J. B. Murray

Nov. 6, 1883, Frankfort. Sarah Lilly, daughter of Michael Flynn and Mary Dexter, born 30 October, 1883; sponsors James Dexter and Alice Flynn. James J. O'Donohue

same James, son of David Towell and Helen Devine, born 4 Nov. 1883; sponsors James Devine and Mary Rooney. James J. O'Donohue

"According to testimony of Samuel McNally Mary Elizabeth Towell was baptized by Rev. Thomas Boulger in St. Joseph Church Frankfort O. Said Mary E. Towell being born Oct. 5th 1886. E. G. Depenbrock Aug. 29th 1923."

July 6, 1892 Charles, son of David Towell and Ella Devine, born June 20; sponsors James Flynn and Sarah Dexter. Alfred D. Dexter

Dec. 27, 1893 Alfred Dominic, son of James Dexter and Joanna Powers, born Dec. 18; sponsors Alfred D. Dexter and Mary Powers. Alfred D. Dexter

May 9, 1895 Mary Kathleen, daughter of James Dexter and Joanna Powers, born April 27; sponsors Alfred D. Dexter and Mary Powers. Alfred D. Dexter

Oct. 1, 1896 Richard Paul, son of James Devine and Matilda Coyner, born Sept. 26; sponsors Michael Devine and Mary Towell. Alfred D. Dexter

Sept. 15, 1897 Elizabeth Maurine, daughter of James Dexter and Joanna Powers, born Sept. 8; sponsors Alfred D. Dexter and Barbara Kellopher. Alfred D. Dexter

May 15, 1898 Francis M., son of Edward Towell and Margaret Ryley, born April 25; sponsors William Towell and Mary Kelly. Alfred D. Dexter

Apr. 23, 1899 Thomas Bernard, son of James Devine and Matilda Coyner, born April 1, residence Frankfort; sponsors John and Mary Devine. A. D. Dexter

Nov. 8, 1900 Margaret Elizabeth, daughter of Michael Devine and Lucy B. Hester, born Oct. 23, residence Frankfort; sponsors James Devine "Sheriff Elect of Ross Co." and Matilda F. Devine. A. D. Dexter

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197 E. Gay Street Columbus, Ohio 43215 Donald M. Schlegel, editor

