

11-1-1980

The Dream of Bishop Loras: A Catholic Iowa

Thomas E. Auge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

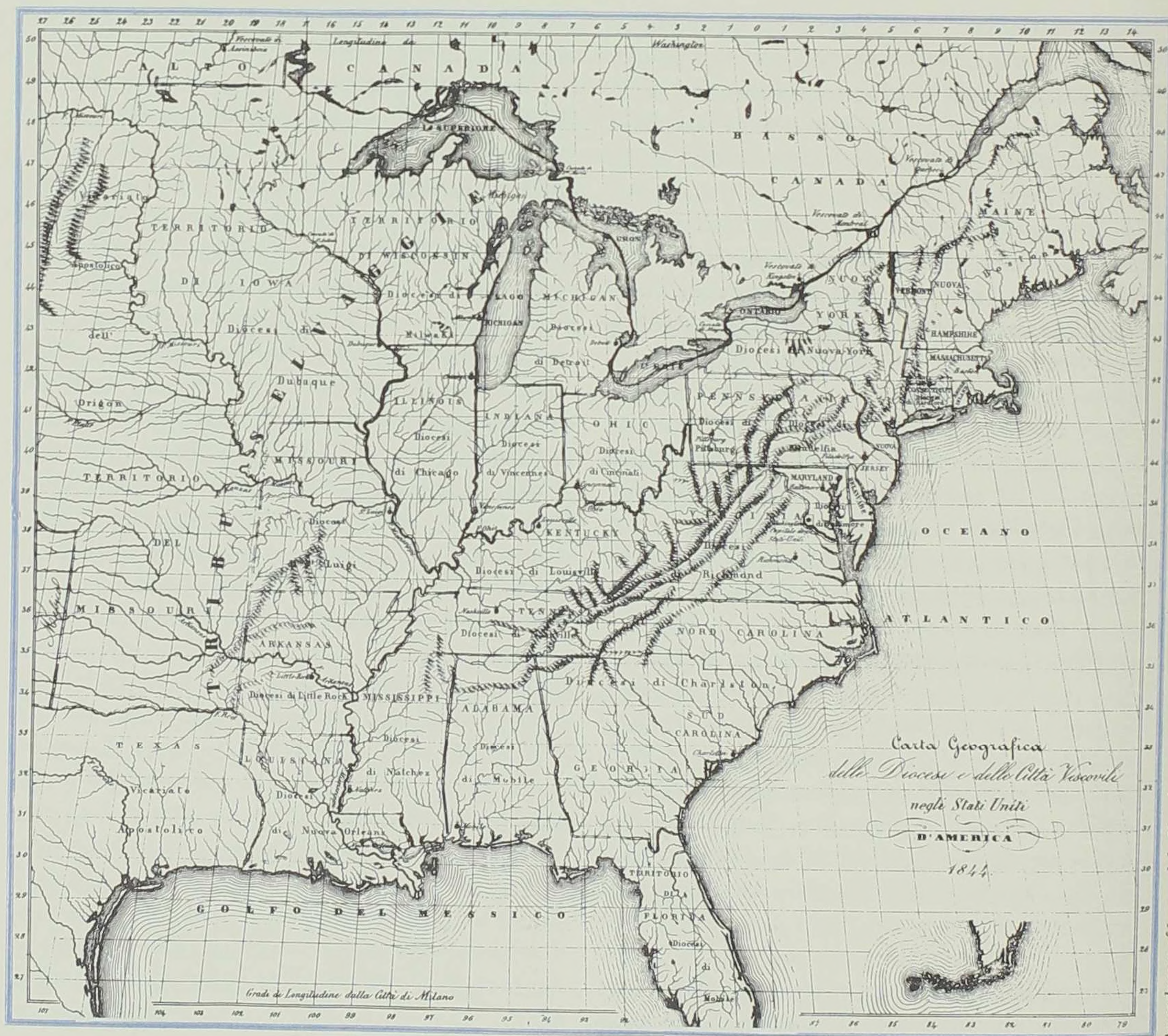
Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Auge, Thomas E. "The Dream of Bishop Loras: A Catholic Iowa." *The Palimpsest* 61 (1980), 170-179.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol61/iss6/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.



An early map of Iowa and the United States, from the Memoirs of Samuel Mazzuchelli (courtesy Thomas E. Auge)

The Dream of Bishop Loras

A CATHOLIC IOWA

by
 Thomas E. Auge

The people gathered at the river front in the early dusk of an April evening. The year was 1839 and the residents of the frontier town of Dubuque were awaiting the arrival of the new Catholic bishop of the region. When the steamboat reached the landing, a short, stout, middle-aged man accompanied by two priests and a servant boy descended to the wharf. Mathias Loras, the first bishop of the new diocese of Dubuque, had come to assume his duties.

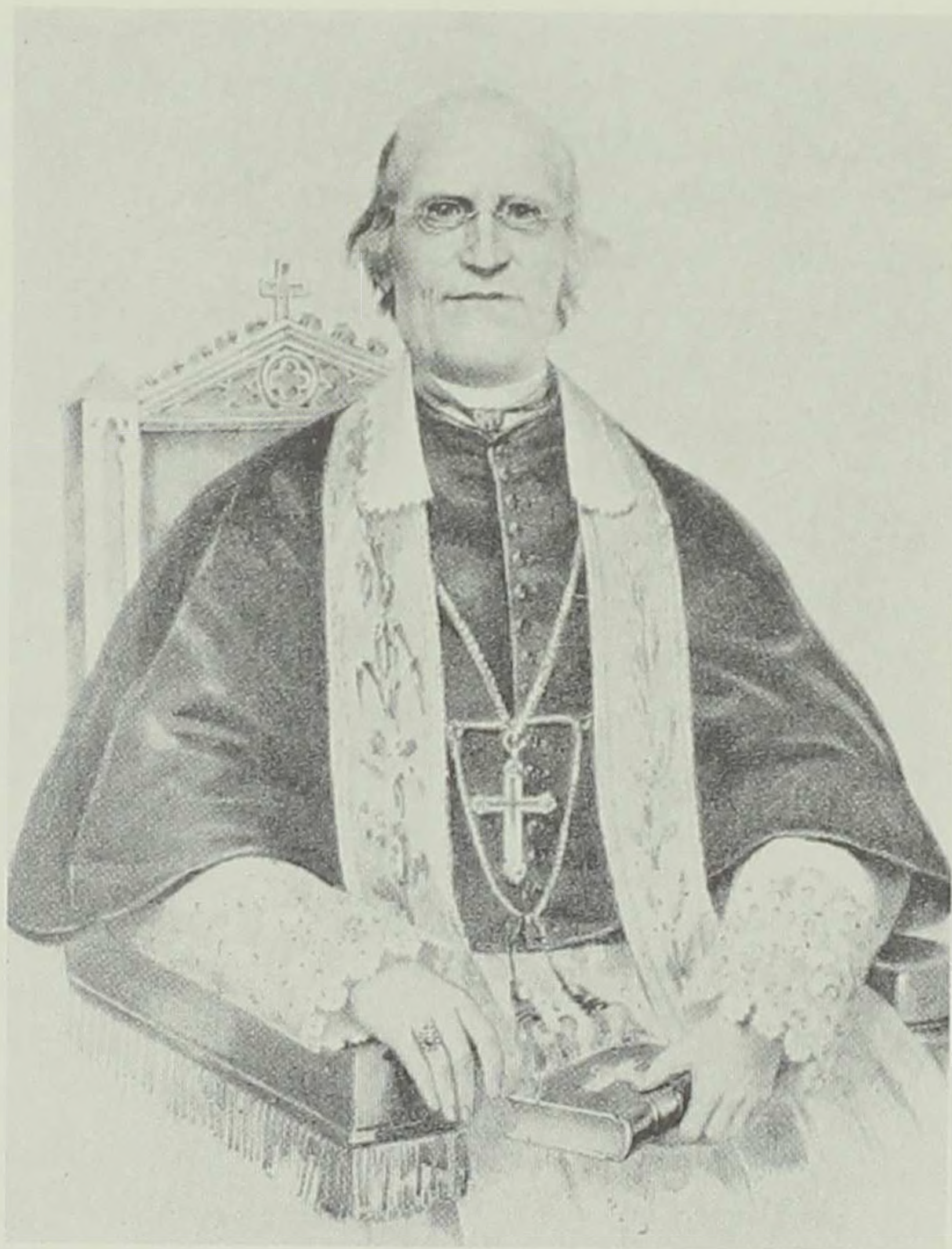
The new bishop, so eagerly welcomed by his people, was in many ways unusually well-prepared for his responsibilities. A native of Lyons, France, he was the product of a prominent—and well-to-do—bourgeois family. While he was an infant, his father fell victim to the Jacobin reign of terror during the French Revolution. The fatherless child, the tenth of eleven children, had the benefit of a strong, pious mother who reestablished the family fortune and provided a stable, secure environment for her many children. While still a boy, Mathias Loras decided upon the vocation of the priesthood, for which he prepared himself in the seminaries of his native city. His piety and industry were such that even before his ordination he served as a teacher in a minor seminary. Later, he became the superior of two such institutions in the Archdiocese of Lyons.

His achievements in his native city notwithstanding, Loras, like so many of the French clergy of that day, felt the pull of the foreign missions. In 1829 he joined Bishop Michael Portier in the diocese of Mobile, Alabama where he worked for eight years, again with evident success. He helped to found and was the first president of Springhill College; he was the pastor of the see parish [the diocesan center] in Mobile and was the vicar-general of the diocese. He came to Dubuque, then, a mature priest, experienced in pastoral, administrative, and educational work.

But the Dubuque diocese posed some problems. A frontier region, the diocese embraced an area that had been open to white settlement for less than six years when Bishop Loras arrived. The territory for which he was responsible was vast, stretching from the northern boundary of Missouri to Canada and from the Mississippi to the Missouri River. There were, however, few Catholics, indeed few whites in the new diocese. Most of it was Indian country inhabited by various tribes with a few white soldiers and fur traders stationed there. The only American settlements were some towns located along the west bank of the Mississippi River from Dubuque to Keokuk. With the closing of the Mississippi River each winter, these rustic towns had to depend upon their own meager economic and cultural resources, since their isolation left the inhabitants suspended in frozen animation till the coming of spring. And in good weather, the bishop's responsibilities required almost constant travel over the trackless prairie of the enormous diocese. Almost fifty years of age in 1839, Loras was not entirely suited either physically or culturally for life in the rough and sometimes brutal environment of an American frontier.

Moreover, his background hardly fit the expectations and needs of the Catholics he was to serve. They, too, were frontier settlers: independent, self-reliant, and impatient with authority. Most were immigrants—German and Irish—who had brought with them to this distant land their ethnic identities and cultures. Loras and his few priests, all French with the exception of the Italian Dominican, Samuel Mazzuchelli, were ill-prepared to serve these parishioners. Aside from Mazzuchelli, who had been in the Dubuque area since 1835 and was gifted in languages, none of these clergymen spoke English well. Even Loras, despite his years in Mobile where he had ministered principally to Catholics of French ancestry, was deficient in this language.

Loras was also dismayed by the scant re-



Mathias Loras, first bishop of Dubuque (SHSI)

sources of the Catholics in his diocese. The town of Dubuque—with a population of around 1,200—contained the largest congregation, a hundred or so families, mostly Irish. Through the efforts of the capable and energetic Mazzuchelli, a small stone church—St. Raphael's Cathedral—stood ready for use. Some twenty miles southwest of Dubuque, a group of Irish farmers had settled in Maquoketa (today called Garryowen) in northern Jackson County. Here in 1840 the indefatigable Mazzuchelli would supervise the construction of St. Patrick's Church. In the southeastern corner of Iowa, in Lee County, a group of German Catholics had built a small wooden church at Sugar Creek (St. Paul). And in Davenport, the Italian priest built St. Anthony's—this enterprise aided by the huge half-breed, Antoine LeClaire. Unfortunately, there were few Catholics to use the church.

Such were the meager resources greeting Loras when he first arrived in his diocese that one wonders whether the decision to form a Dubuque diocese was premature. Normally, one could reasonably expect that a new diocese would have sufficient means to support its bishop and clergy. This was not the case in Iowa in 1839 or for many years to come. But there were attractions to building a diocese on a newly opened frontier where cheap land was readily available. Here one could lay foundations for the future. The new bishop recognized this from the start.

Advised by the experienced Mazzuchelli, Loras conceived of a grand design: he would fill the fertile, vacant prairies of Iowa with Catholics. Undeterred by the shortage of money and priests, the bishop set out to accomplish this goal. Relying upon the financial assistance of European missionary societies, Loras purchased land at every opportunity. In his first four years in the diocese, he spent over \$20,000, a substantial sum when an acre of government land was only \$1.25. If some of these acquisitions met the needs of Catholics already living along the Mississippi, in other parts of the state his purpose was to encourage future settlement. His dream was that Catholics would come to Iowa to people this land, and that parishes, churches, and schools would fill these empty spaces. To realize this vision, Loras had to turn to the Catholics of Europe and the eastern cities of America. Consequently, he made great efforts to attract people from these areas to his diocese. Throughout his tenure as Bishop of Dubuque, Loras had letters published in Catholic newspapers and magazines in the United States and Europe informing Catholics of the advantage of settlement in Iowa. Less than a year after he arrived in Dubuque, the following notice appeared in American newspapers:

A Catholic Church will be erected next summer in Burlington, Iowa Territory with a clergyman. Editors of Catholic pe-

riodicals will please insert this notice in their columns for the information of Catholic immigrants to the far west.

S. Mazzuchelli
January 29, 1840

And in 1849 Loras sent the following request to the editor of the *Boston Catholic Observer*:

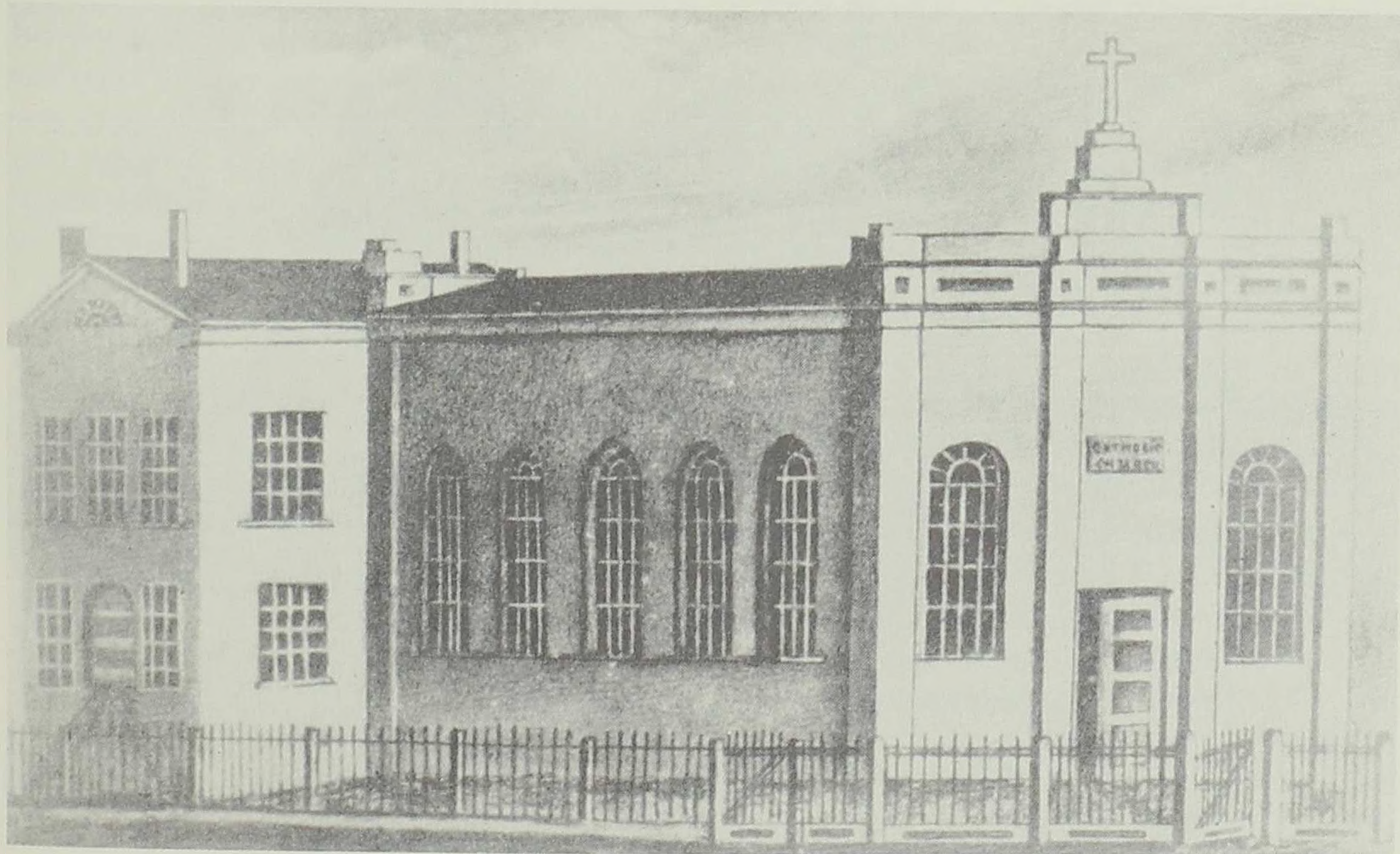
Would you recommend in your journal the southern part of my diocese as a truly desirable country for Catholic emigrants, either Irish or German?

In early 1855, Loras reported to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith that he was in correspondence with the *Boston Pilot*. This newspaper, he added, had a wide circulation in America and Ireland. He also informed the Society that he was writing to German newspapers. His hope, as he expressed it in this letter, was to persuade Catholics that now was the time to settle in this country, when government land was reasonably priced. If Catholics failed to take advantage of this oppor-

tunity, he warned, then Protestants would do so.

In other letters published in the eastern Catholic press, Loras took a somewhat different line. Aware of the challenges of frontier life, he included in his invitation to Catholic immigrants advice as to what problems they might face if they decided to settle in Iowa. He cautioned that sufficient financial resources were necessary. A new settler had to have enough money to purchase land, to provide the means of cultivation, and to subsist for two years, since he would earn little income during that period. Finally, Loras stated that he could not promise to provide a church and a priest for every group of Catholics that moved into his diocese.

Loras made a special effort to encourage Irish immigrants to come to his diocese, particularly after a visit to Ireland in 1850 revealed to him the poverty of that unfortunate land. As early as 1841, he appointed a committee of laymen to correspond with the newly founded



St. Raphael's Cathedral and Bishop's House, Dubuque, 1835-1839 (SHSI)

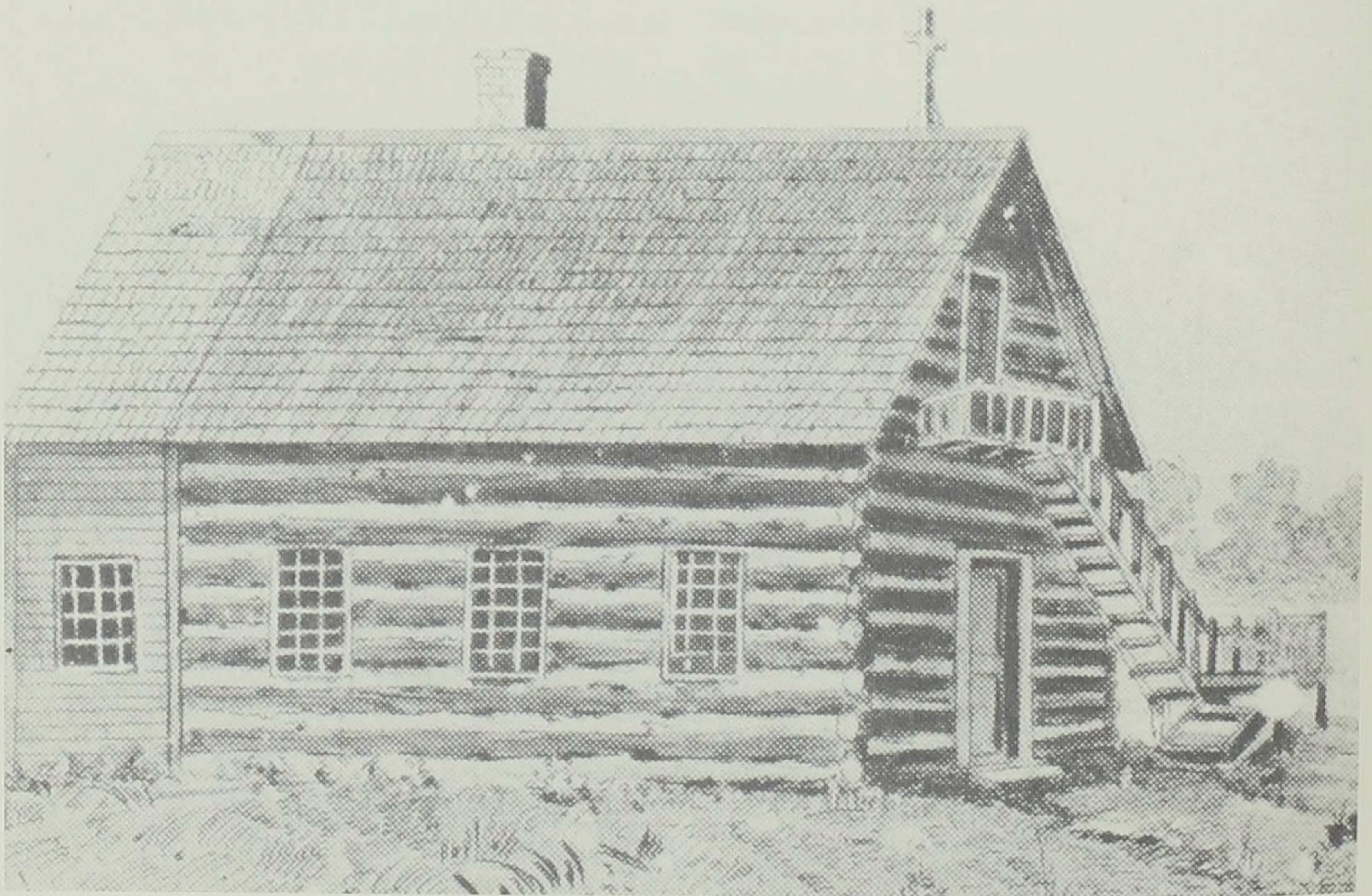
Irish Emigrant Society of New York. President of the group, Charles Corkery, in responding to queries from New York, modestly described Iowa as "the garden of America, the Eldorado of the West."

In 1856, Loras sent representatives to the Buffalo Convention on Irish Emigration, held under the leadership of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, who had visited Dubuque a few years earlier. About the same time, the bishop sponsored the Catholic Settlement Society of Iowa. Organized in Dubuque, this society sought to found branches throughout the state and to impose a membership of three dollars to provide funds for settlement. In 1857, Loras sent Father Jeremiah Treacy to New York to lecture on the opportunities for Irish Catholics in Iowa. Father Treacy aroused the ire of Archbishop Hughes of that city, who disapproved of these efforts to convince the Irish to leave their

ethnic communities in eastern cities.

Although specific evidence of the success of these efforts by Loras is scanty, he did influence many Irish and German Catholics to settle in Iowa. There were occasions when the bishop played a direct role, providing personal advice and assistance to immigrants. In 1843, some German Catholics living in Ohio decided to move farther west. Having heard of the interest of Bishop Loras in Catholic immigrants, they decided to consult with him. When they arrived in the Dubuque area, they sent two men to meet with the bishop. Together they chose a site in western Dubuque County, where these settlers established the German Catholic community of New Vienna.

In late 1849, an Irish priest, Thomas Hore, visited Dubuque. Hore had led a group of Irish immigrants to America, first stopping in Arkansas where they found conditions unsuitable.



First St. Boniface Church, New Vienna (SHSI)

Leaving his party in St. Louis, Hore came up the river to consult with Loras. The result of this meeting was the establishment of the Irish parish of St. Lawrence, Wexford in Allamakee County in northeastern Iowa.

Perhaps the most interesting ethnic community brought to Iowa by Loras was a group of Irish Trappist monks. Living in destitution in famine-ridden Ireland, these Trappists decided to found a monastery in America. Learning of their intention, Loras wrote to them offering as a location an extensive acreage some twelve miles west of the city of Dubuque. So generous was the gift of Loras that the monks accepted his invitation, and in 1850 established the monastery of New Melleray.

Despite his continuous and deep commitment to bringing Catholic immigrants to Iowa, Loras occasionally had difficulties serving these communicants. Nothing shows better the zeal and determination of this priest than his dogged pursuit of the German and Irish Catholics of Europe, while at the same time he was engaged in disputes with their counterparts in Iowa. The problems that Loras experienced with such immigrants arose in part from circumstance and in part from the personalities involved.

Loras understood the special needs of these people, although he was not always ready or able to meet those needs. He recognized, for example, that these newcomers to America, isolated on the frontier, needed to be served by clergy of their own nationality. The lack of Irish and German priests, although a serious deficiency, was not the fault of the bishop. Throughout his years as head of the Diocese of Dubuque, Loras made strenuous efforts to obtain ethnic priests. In 1838, while in Europe seeking money and clergy for his new diocese, he wrote both to the Archbishop of Dublin and to the Bishop of Strasbourg to determine if they could provide priests. In 1846, Father Joseph

Cretin, the vicar-general of the Dubuque diocese, returned to France for a visit with instructions from Loras to recruit German and Irish clergy. In 1850, Loras himself visited All Hallows Seminary in Dublin to arrange for Irish seminarians to come to his diocese. In 1856, two years before his death, Loras learned of the settlement of Bohemian Catholics in northeastern Iowa. In order to meet their needs he arranged for a priest of that nationality, Francis Kruxtil, to visit with the immigrants. Father Kruxtil concluded that two Bohemian priests were needed and promised to write to bishops in Europe to obtain them.

Despite the desire of Loras to staff his churches with ethnic priests, it was years before he was able to assemble a diocesan clergy that was not predominantly French. So dire was his need that in the early years he accepted priests who had proven to be failures in other American dioceses. One of these men, Father George Alleman, an Alsatian, turned out to be a most successful pastor of the Germans of southeastern Iowa. The other, an Irish priest named John Healy, simply added to the heavy burden that Loras carried.

Some of the Dubuque clergy who were neither German nor Irish did well in serving these ethnic Catholics. Father Mazzuchelli was so popular with the Irish of the Dubuque lead mine region that many of them decided he was really of their nationality and began to call him Matthew Kelly. The Garryowen Irish parish had as its first pastor a scholarly young French priest, Father J.C. Perrodin, who had few difficulties with his parishioners. Father Anthony Palemourges, the first pastor of Davenport, admirably served a mixed congregation of Germans and Irishmen.

Loras also realized that ethnic pastors presumed ethnic parishes. He understood fully that these immigrants would find life in a strange land much easier if their worship and religious experiences continued within the national traditions to which they were accus-

tomed. Unfortunately, circumstances—especially lack of funds—made it impossible to provide German and Irish parishes wherever they were desired. The poverty of these Catholics, many of whom were hardly able to support themselves, as well as the determination of Loras to purchase land for future development, precluded the building of churches for every ethnic community. Unhappily, these new Americans had little in common other than their religion, so that there were often deep divisions in such congregations. The rural parish of St. Catherine's, some ten miles south

of Dubuque, was a case in point. Controversy arose, even before the church was built, over the question of its name. The Irish opted for St. Bridget while the Germans preferred a saint of their nationality. Bishop Loras, as an impartial Frenchman, chose St. Catherine. Suspicion of each other led to the regulation that there had to be three trustees from each nationality. Separation continued during religious services, for the Germans sat on one side of the church and the Irish on the other. Indeed, segregation extended even to the grave, for the cemetery was divided into German and Irish sections.

Several of the larger cities of the diocese, including Dubuque, had both German and Irish communities. Once again, segregation was the rule. In Dubuque, for example, each had its ethnic ghetto: the Irish in the south of the city, the Germans in the north. When money became available to build a second church in these cities, Loras chose to form German parishes, evidently because of the language problem. Thus, in Dubuque, Davenport, and Burlington, German churches were built. The Irish had to be satisfied with the older, smaller churches whose congregations included American and other non-Irish members, a situation which hardly suited these immigrants.

If the lack of ethnic clergymen and parishes resulted from circumstances beyond the control of Loras, his background and personality also contributed to his troubles with the ethnic Catholics of his diocese. He was the son of a wealthy bourgeois French family, and thus had little in common with these poorly educated, crude, and sometimes violent frontier Catholics. Furthermore, the theology he had learned in the French seminaries stressed a severe, ascetic spirituality with more than a touch of Jansenism [rigorous moralism]. The lives of the German and Irish Catholics for

Catholic Total Abstinence Society
 IN IOWA, ILLINOIS AND WISCONSIN
 "IN THIS SIGN THOU SHALT CONQUER"

It is good not to eat flesh and not to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother is offended, or scandalized or made weak. (Rom. XIV, 21.)

Look not upon the wine when it shineth in the glass: it goeth in pleasantly. But in the end, it will bite like a snake and will spread abroad poison like a basilisk. (Prov. XXIII, 31, 32.)

Be not in the feasts of great drinkers who club together for feasting, for these, sleepers as they are, shall be reduced to rags. (Prov. XXIII, 20, 21.)

Woe to you that are mighty to drink wine, and stout men at drunkenness. (Isaias V, 22.)

Woe to him that giveth drink to his friend, and maketh him drunk. Thou art filled with shame instead of glory. (Hab. II, 15, 16.)

PROMISE

—

I, N. N.,

promise to abstain
from any intoxicating drink,
unless used medicinally

and by
order
of a
physi-
cian

+

The Fruits of Temperance

—

The Holy Fear of God,
 Plenty in Households,
 Peace,
 Health of Body,
 Good Name,
 The Grace of God,
 Eternal Life.

Effects of Intemperance

—

The Loss of God,
 Poverty and Shame,
 Discord in Families,
 Sickness,
 Disgrace,
 Final Impenitence,
 Eternal Death.

Mr. N. N. has taken the Pledge for..... years, on the day of the month of in the year 18.....

REVEREND N. N.

No. President of the Society in the city of

A nineteenth-century abstinence pledge, from the Memoirs of Samuel Mazzuchelli (courtesy Thomas E. Auge)



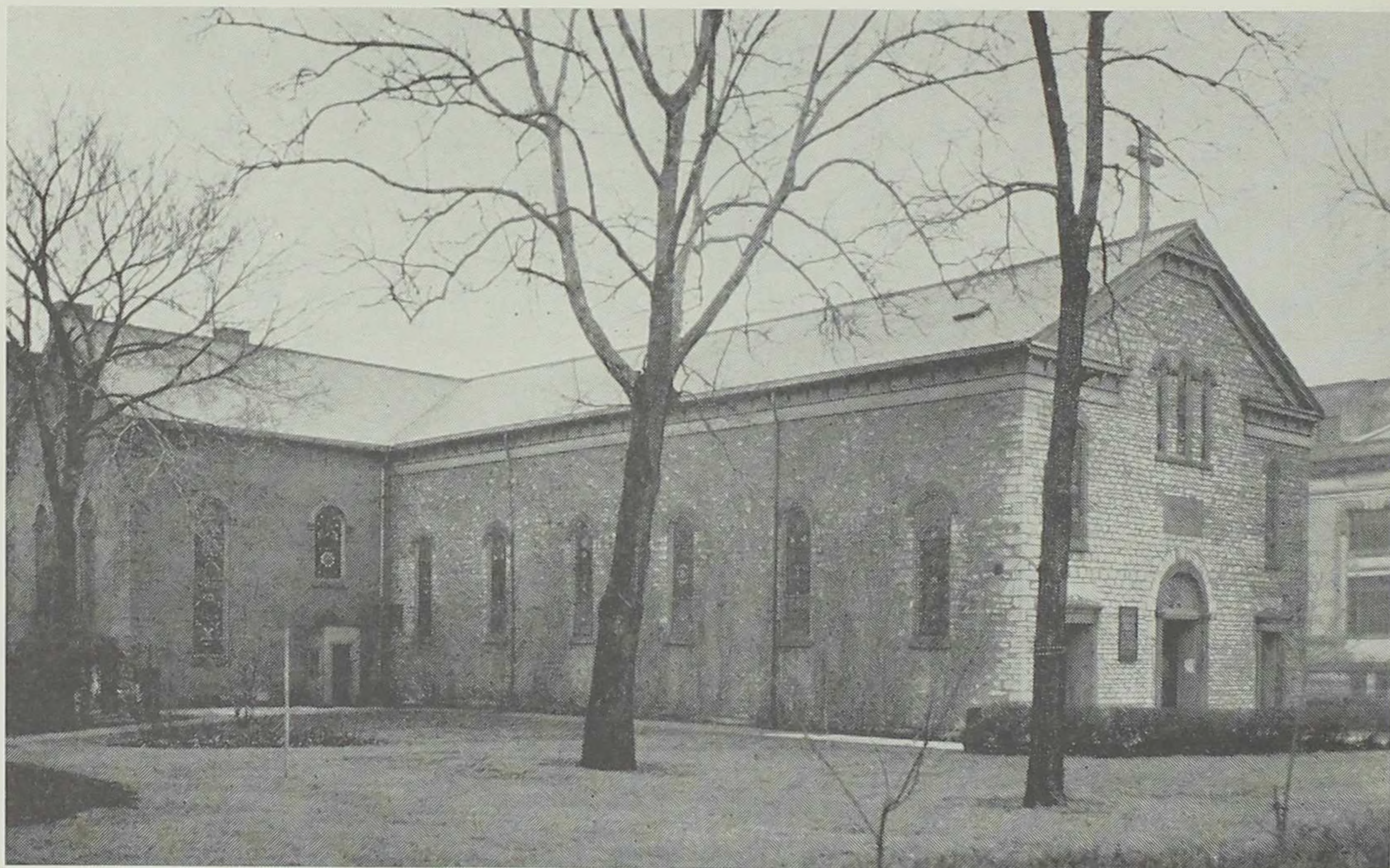
Samuel Mazzuchelli (SHSI)

whom Loras was responsible did not always measure up to the stern code of conduct that he conceived as proper. Drinking liquor was the particular *bête noir* of Loras. Certainly he had good reason to fear the abuse of liquor among the Catholics of his diocese. The American frontier was notorious for its liberality towards drinking and the consequent widespread drunkenness. Nor was there anything in the background of either Germans or Irishmen which would mitigate their use of liquor. That Loras organized and encouraged temperance movements in his diocese is surely to his credit. Still, this French priest, in his legitimate desire to curb the evils of drink, sometimes failed to recognize the cultural element in the use of spirits. In 1856, for example, Loras was in cor-

respondence with a German monastery in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in the hope of persuading several priests from this community to join him in Dubuque. The plan miscarried, apparently because Loras refused to permit these German priests to brew and drink beer, a practice in which their order had engaged for centuries. The reaction of Abbot Boniface of the Latrobe monastery illustrates the failure of Loras to comprehend ethnic issues. The abbot indignantly pointed out that not only had the Pope approved of their brewing beer but at his last audience with him, Pius IX had joked about it. The abbot closed with this parting shot: "Temperance men are either fools or hypocrites."

His concern over liquor led him into conflict with the Germans of New Vienna, a parish he had helped establish. The problem was a grocery which dispensed liquor across from the church. These German Catholics had the custom of stopping at the grocery before and after Sunday Mass, a practice which Loras deplored. Indeed, he considered it so pernicious that he placed the grocery and anyone who frequented it under an interdict.

His most serious and long-standing dispute was with the Irish of Dubuque. Although the bishop was partly to blame, it must be admitted that these Irish Catholics were an obstreperous and troublesome group. Many of them had been among the first settlers on the rough lead-mining frontier. Isolated from their fellow countrymen, in the midst of a Protestant American society, these Irishmen sought to preserve their national identity through social and religious activities and organizations. A few were well-to-do, but most were poor, with little money to contribute to their church. The desperate poverty of those left behind in Ireland further diminished their ability to support their priests, for many were sending money back home so that their relatives could join them in America. Father Perrodin of Garryowen conveyed the tragedy of Ireland in this paragraph in a letter to Bishop Loras:



St. Anthony's Catholic Church of Davenport, built in 1837 (SHSI)

A young man in my congregation is expecting a letter with money from Ireland. His name is Fitzpatrick, an excellent young man who doesn't drink WHISKEY. Would you watch out for his letter? This is the first time someone is getting money from Ireland.

Even under the best of circumstances and with much good will, it would have been difficult to serve these poor, rough immigrants. Even Samuel Mazzuchelli, a most adaptable and effective priest, found the Irish of the lead mines intractable. In 1837 he wrote of this to Bishop Rosati of St. Louis:

Disinterestedness, patience and humility are indispensable with the people I have here. You know well the great faults of the nation with whom I have to live.

Loras would certainly have agreed with Mazzuchelli, for he had many problems with these people. In 1844, the friction between the

bishop and his congregation led to an open break. Unhappy because the clergy of St. Raphael's Cathedral were not of their nationality, the Irish parishioners refused to pay pew rent or contribute adequately to the support of the priests. Hostility grew so great that Loras deserted his see city and took up residence in the southern Iowa town of Burlington. So angry was he with the Dubuque congregation that he wrote to Rome that he might remove his residence permanently to Burlington. As a part of this proposed change, Father Healy became pastor in Dubuque. Healy was a weak, unstable personality who only added to the problem. Instead of pacifying the dissidents, Healy became their leader, forcing Loras to return to Dubuque and remove him from the diocese.

In 1847, trouble broke out again when an Irish school teacher had a dispute with the Order of Hibernians, a Dubuque Irish society. Daniel Brodie, the embattled teacher, iden-

tified the cause when he told Loras that these argumentative Irish were "north county," with a touch of Orangeism. Still another open break occurred in 1854 over the issue of the formation of an Irish parish. A German one had been established when Holy Trinity Church was completed several years earlier, so that when a third church was built in Dubuque the Irish naturally expected that it would serve as their parish. Loras, however, had not planned on this; he insisted that the new church—St. Patrick's—be a mission of St. Raphael's Cathedral. He feared that if St. Patrick's became an independent parish, there would be few parishioners and even less money for the cathedral. Since he was in the process of building a larger cathedral, this was especially serious. Once again, the Irish used the weapon of non-contribution, and again Loras fled Dubuque, threatening to withdraw all of the clergy from that city if the Catholics there did not cooperate. Eventually, through the good offices of several Irish community leaders, the problems were resolved.

Despite these difficulties, Loras did not do badly in building the diocese. As he had anticipated, Iowa was rapidly settled, but fewer Catholics had come than he had hoped. Instead the majority of new settlers were Protestants born in the United States. Still, the efforts of Bishop Loras to attract Irish and German immigrants to his diocese left its mark

on the state. Ethnic Catholic communities appeared, particularly in eastern Iowa. Dubuque County, the area where Loras made his most intensive efforts, did indeed fulfill the dream of the bishop, for at the time of his death the majority of the population of the county was German and Irish Catholics.

Furthermore, during his tenure as Bishop of Dubuque, Loras laid the foundation for the future growth of the Catholic Church in Iowa. When he arrived in Dubuque, he found a diocese with a few hundred Catholics, four priests, and three churches. Encouraged by his prudent use of limited funds and guided by the energetic dedication of himself and his clergy, the diocese grew steadily larger, eventually reaching across the state. In 1857, shortly before Loras died, there were 49,000 Catholics living in the Dubuque diocese with 37 priests, 52 churches, and 47 mission stations. And all of this had been accomplished without destroying the fragile culture of these ethnic Catholics. □

Note on Sources

Most of the information presented in this article came from unpublished papers located in the archives of various Catholic institutions and organizations. The archives of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, which contain much of the extensive correspondence of Loras, was by far the most useful. Materials in the Loras College Library were also used. These consist of parish histories, copies of the annual *Catholic Almanac*, miscellaneous letters, and scattered newspaper and magazine articles. The only published biography of Bishop Loras of any value is M. M. Hoffmann, *Church Founders of the Northwest* (Bruce, 1937), which is somewhat dated and ignores important issues.

