

The Remarkable Msgr. Keogh Fr. Steven Avella

The Rectors of the Cathedral of St. John have all left their mark. Some were builders and decorators. Some were known for their erudition, and others for their exceptional speaking abilities. Each rector faced unique circumstances that required adaptation, ingenuity, and a sympathetic archbishop.

One of the longest serving rectors was Father (later MONSIGNOR) James Keogh, whose term lasted from 1880 until the day of his death, New Year's Day 1910. He literally re-made the outward appearance of the Cathedral and completely renovated the Cathedral block between Jackson and Van Buren.

He was born August 15, 1847 in County Wexford, Ireland and in 1856 migrated with his family to the United States. He grew up in the Cathedral parish. He entered St. Francis de Sales Seminary and was ordained by Archbishop John Martin Henni on September 4, 1864. He served in "Irish" (i.e. English-speaking) parishes in Janesville and Monches. He taught English for a time at St. Francis Seminary. In 1879, he became a naturalized citizen of the United States and in 1880, replaced Father (later Monsignor) Patrick Donohoe as the pastor of the Cathedral. He was reluctant to come, but Henni pressed him, giving Keogh the right to pick his own assistants. He eventually chose two priest-nephews: Father Paul Aylward and Father (later Monsignor) David Ahearn. Aylward would die in service of the Cathedral. O'Hearn, a trained canonist, later became rector after his uncle.

In his nearly 30 years as rector, Keogh was whirlwind of energy. Since the Cathedral was always in debt, he was constantly on the move, raising money, sponsoring fairs and hosting speakers to help ease the burden of debt. In 1893 it was Keogh who oversaw the construction of the "new" Cathedral tower—mostly the gift of John Black. This exterior renovation led to a major makeover of the interior of the Cathedral, including the placement of beautiful new windows.

His proudest accomplishment was the upgrading of the facilities for the Cathedral grade school and the formation of a high school. He recruited the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa to teach. Overseeing every detail, he built a new school and auditorium. On the day the cornerstone was laid, he was elevated to the rank of monsignor—an honorific title Cathedral rectors had for many years.

The school project broke his health and efforts to recuperate in Texas led to serious surgery in the summer of 1909. He returned to the Cathedral but faded quickly. The news of his death was announced by Archbishop Sebastian Messmer during a Pontifical High Mass on New Year's Day. People left the Cathedral in tears.