

Context 6 – Religion

Time Span – 1842-1950s

Three Pillars of the Community

Chaska's three major churches and associated faiths — Guardian Angels Catholic Church, St. John's Lutheran Church, and the Moravian Church, provided more than religious anchors for the town. Indeed, they inform Chaska's physical layout, with the First Ward centered around Guardian Angels, the Third Ward clustered around St. John's, and the Moravian Church on City Square in the middle. The city is defined by the spires of these churches, particularly the 165-foot steeple of Guardian Angels. The clock bells, ringing at 15 minute intervals from the Guardian Angels spire, is perhaps Chaska's most recognizable sound.

Even more than this physical iteration, the three congregations (plus other, less prominent ones) reflect the spirit of the town — the wide range of ethnic groups and faiths, the religious values of the area, the educational opportunities, and the over-arching theme of faith and community. Churches provided the gathering spots in town, and one's congregation was as important a factor as one's home and occupation. In short, religious institutions in Chaska provided the town with three major initiatives — social organizing and opportunity, networks for community interaction, and acculturation for newly-arrived immigrants.

Guardian Angels

The history of Catholic worship in Chaska began in 1842, when Jean-Baptiste Faribault asked Father Augustin Ravoux to open a missionary outpost in the Little Prairie area. Though he built a small log chapel, the apparently un-converted Dakota threatened to burn it down, and it was sold to Catholics in Wabasha and floated down the river to them.

In 1858, when Minnesota achieved statehood, the Benedictine fathers decided to try again. Founding members of the church were George Faber, Conrad Fink, William Glatzel, Michael Guenser, Mathias Jacobs, Florian Linenfelser, Andrew Riedele, Joseph Schindler, Martin Schneider, John Schug, William Schwie, and Mathias Zimmer. It was said that the choice of the name came from Guensler's two-year-old daughter Margaret, who chose the guardian angel icon from a stack of saint's pictures.

As in other Chaska congregations, members first met in each others' homes. Between 1858 and 1860 a small brick structure built on East Third and Ash Streets, with simple wooden planks as pews, became the first Guardian Angels Church of Chaska. In 1863 a group of recently arrived Dutch immigrants purchased new pews and in 1864 a "large gallery" was added. However, growth was exponential, and in 1868 work began

on a new church at Second and Cedar Streets (the current location), designed by architect Charles Bachman. The church campus also included a rectory, and cost six thousand dollars in total to build. The dedication was on September 3, 1870, with the congregation walking from the old to the new church. An 1871 lottery financed much of the construction, with the top prizes being the old church buildings and lots.

The next issue the congregation addressed was that of a school. In September 1877, Sisters Brigitta, Melanis and Martha were brought in from Pennsylvania to begin a curriculum. The school initially enrolled one hundred students, and had grown by half again within two months. Students came from Chaska and surrounding communities, for a fee of 50¢ per month. A fourth teacher, Sister Baptista, arrived later that year to specialize in music.

In 1880 the church added two structures to the complex. The first, built across the street at a cost of \$7,000, was a large, two-story building with a twenty-foot steeple. It was used for classes, plus living and sleeping rooms for boarding students and later for housing the Sisters. The second project was smaller — a two-story brick addition to the parsonage at the cost of \$2,500.



Early photograph of the Guardian Angels complex

Soon, however, even the additions could not keep pace with a growing congregation, and a new church was planned. The new church was dedicated on October 1, 1885. Built at the cost of \$28,000, it was considered one of the “most adorned” buildings in the area. The steeple, at 162 feet, was the tallest landmark in the area, with four large bells, ranging from 350 to 1,500 pounds. Inside, the ceiling soared to 39 feet.

In 1902 the church building succumbed to fire, leaving only a brick shell and the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The steeple had toppled onto the George DuToit house next door. It was noted as one of the most spectacular fires in Chaska’s history, and underscored the need for a municipal water system.

Just one year later, the church had been rebuilt to much the same configuration and was dedicated by Archbishop John Ireland.

Guardian Angels then focused its efforts on its high school, which opened in 1922 and remained open through 1973. In the beginning, classes were very small, with only two students graduating in the first two years. Students were very active in raising funds for school improvements, and were also involved in extra-curricular

activities ranging from the basketball team to the orchestra to class plays. Some of these were reduced or eliminated during the Depression, but expanded afterwards — including bowling, since the school had its own alleys. Other traditions ranged from the crowning of the May Queen to the popular class ring exchanges. Guardian Angels High School was well-regarded by Chaska residents for the quality of its programs and the integrity of its students, a reputation that carries forward to the congregation and the remaining elementary school today.

St. John's

In the same way that Guardian Angels defines the 1st ward of Chaska, St. John's represents the 3rd ward. The origins of the Lutheran church in Chaska also pre-date the establishment of St. John's. In 1856, the Reverend Ferdinand Sievers was the first missionary of the Missouri Synods Precursor to be sent to Minnesota. He traveled the valley with a particular eye toward German Lutherans. In 1868 Carver gained its first Lutheran pastor, and Chaska residents traveled there for services. As more farmsteads were settled and as the brickyard employment expanded, more and more settlers arrived, many of whom were German Lutherans. The need for a church of their own was great.



St. John's Church and School, circa 1891

In 1884 Carl Nimmer, Charles Buschkowsky, Albert Buschkowsky, Edward Molnau, and William Teske Sr. became the first officers of the new congregation. They made a formal call for a pastor, and the Reverend Henry Raedeke from Carver began to serve both congregations. The congregants met in homes until the church building was completed in 1885. Services were held in German.

Integral to the church's mission from the beginning was the idea of religious instruction. Initially, classes in religious instruction and German language were held at the church, three days a week. However, the congregation soon determined the need for a fuller education, so in 1892 built the adjoining school. Classes were then expanded to five days a week and included regular academics, with the Reverend Raedeke teaching the upper classes and his daughter, Louise, the lower grades. Soon after, they added Henry Raedeke, Jr. as an assistant pastor.

By 1920, the congregation was outgrowing the original building and was beginning to fundraise for a new church. These plans were accelerated, however, when the church burned down on August 23, 1921. Following the fire, each member of the congregation was charged with one day of work in clearing the rubble. Guild groups, such as the young people's society and the Ladies Auxiliary, increased fundraising efforts, and construction began soon after the fire. In the meantime, services were conducted in the courthouse, and English language services were added for the first time, on the last Sunday of the month.

The new church was dedicated soon after in 1922 with a performance by its choir. When it celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1935 eight of the original charter members were still living and able to participate in the events. Today, St. John's church and expanded school remain vibrant parts of the city's religious life.

Chaska Moravian Church

The Moravian Church, sitting directly on City Square Park, provides the middle ground of Chaska's religious denominations. It is both the oldest church and congregation in Chaska.

The Moravians came early to Chaska, with some of its first settlers being members of the Hopedale, Pennsylvania congregation. The Home Mission sent Reverend Martin Erdmann to Chaska in late 1857. The Shaska Company donated land to build a parsonage, and Erdman began missionary work in the area in the spring of 1858. Early services were held in the parsonage, the public school, the courthouse, Howe's Hall, and in private homes, with Ferdinand Theis being the first host. The congregation grew quickly, though, and with the itinerant services growing untenable, the church council voted to build a church in 1859.

The Shaska Company also donated the land for the church, and a plain, rather unfinished new structure became incorporated in January, 1860. In 1863 a bell was purchased for the bell tower, and in 1864 a melodeon was purchased and Sunday School for youth added. In 1865 the first church choir was formed.

Since services were held both in English and in German, a bilingual pastor was a necessity. This language



Moravian Church circa 1935

and cultural split also caused no small amount of tension in a rather divided congregation. Financial problems exacerbated the situation, and the original parsonage was sold off in 1879.

Things had improved, however, within a few years. In 1882, the Reverend Joseph Hillman accepted a call to the church, and a new parsonage was constructed. The members of the church became very socially and charitably active — a tradition that continues to this day. Activities included donations and a public Reading Room.

In 1889, a new church building replaced the original one, though constructed on the same site. The cornerstone was dedicated to the four-year-old daughter of Fred Greiner, Jr., who had died of diphtheria four weeks earlier. In accordance with church rules, the building could not be dedicated until the entire construction amount was raised or pledged, so a last minute campaign was waged by Greiner and HC Eder to guarantee the funds. The building opened on time, though the pulpit and pews did not arrive until a few weeks later.

The record of church capital expenditures, as kept in a purchase log between 1888 and 1890, demonstrates some typical church expenditures for that period:

Pulpit chairs	\$12
Communion table	\$6
Carpeting	\$13
Lamp for pulpit	\$4
10 choir chairs	\$16
Silver tea set	\$15

In 1898, the church also purchased a new set of bells.

In 1864 the church put in a request to the synod to open a school; that request was quickly approved, and the academy opened just six months later. Though most of the furniture and supplies had arrived by the time the school opened on November 14, 1864, the piano was icebound at LaCrosse. The Moravian Academy was very popular, both with local residents who could avail themselves of only three months of public education a year and for those from as far away as Belle Plaine and Fort Snelling who boarded at the school — first at the parsonage, then in a dormitory completed in 1866.

In 1870 the school was forced to close due to financial problems and a drop in enrollment. The building was sold to the City of Chaska, first for use as the city hall and later as part of the public schools.

The church itself, however, remained one of



Chaska's strongest religious institutions. In 1933, as part of its 75-year celebration the church received a gift of a 3,000-year-old lamp from Mizpah, a city near Jerusalem. The church today is an important part of the Moravian faith and of the City of Chaska.

Other Congregations

Early Methodist services were held in Chaska homes tracing back to 1855, with the Reverends Black and Stephenson acting as circuit riders. In 1857 the St. Anthony Falls Church Mission, assumed to be a Methodist missionary, purchased land on Walnut and Fourth for a church, but soon lost the land for failure to pay taxes.

At roughly the same time, the local German Evangelical Church was led by Reverend Ludlow. That congregation constructed a church in 1878 on cedar between Third and Fourth Streets, with Reverend Heilscher as its first pastor. At that point, the Evangelicals and the Methodist congregations appear to have merged. In 1887, the joint church added a brick parsonage and frame barn.

There also appears to have been a Baptist congregation early on in Chaska's history, as it was mentioned in one of Lucius Howe's letters. That congregation likely met in member's homes.

Associated Properties

Though the church buildings and parochial schools represent the bulk of the religious cultural resources in the city, there are a number of associated properties.

Primary among these are the cemeteries. The public (non church-affiliated) Mount Pleasant cemetery is located on "the old burying ground" just north of current Highway 212 at Chestnut Street (Highway 41). A cemetery association for the site was formed in 1863. Mount Pleasant was the site of at least one sensational grave robbery in 1884, in the "body snatching" of the corpse of Eugene Mattaz.

There are also three congregational cemeteries.

St. John's opened its own cemetery in 1921 as an alternative to Mount Pleasant. It was originally privately run by congregation volunteers, but was deeded to the church in 1939. It is located on Stoughton Avenue, at the edge of town.

The Guardian Angels Cemetery is sited on County Road 140. It is on the old Foos farm site, which was purchased in 1867 by parish member Michael Guenser on behalf of the church. The grounds were deeded to the church in 1869. It replaces an earlier site, and the bodies were re-interred as part of the transfer process.

The Moravian Church established a cemetery in 1860, on land located on Victoria Road, donated by early settler John Humpel. The site could hold about 160 plots. Located within the main cemetery is the private, Priebe family graveyard. The church also opened two outposts in nearby Laketown Township. One of these, the Zoar Moravian Church, as added to the National Register in 1980.

Lost Resources

Since the three main churches remain influential in the Chaska community, the city has fortunately lost very few religious resources. The German Evangelical church has been torn down, as has the Moravian Academy and previous iterations of Guardian Angels. Several smaller buildings and parsonages have been lost as well. In general, though, the three main church complexes retain their historic integrity.

Property Types

- Chapels
- Churches
- Guardian Angels
- St. John's
- Moravian
- Cemeteries
 - Mount Pleasant
 - Guardian Angels
 - St. John's
 - Moravian
 - Priebe Family
- Parsonages and Rectories
- Convents and Monasteries
- Schools
 - Guardian Angels
 - St. John's
- Also:
 - Residence Halls
 - Facilities (fields, gyms, labs, etc.)



Guardian Angels Church today

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. A recent Section 106 survey recommended consideration of Guardian Angels church for the National Register. Particularly compelling are some of the associated resources, such as the other buildings in the complex and even in the surrounding stone and brick wall. The HPC should explore the possibility of this nomination.
2. The Moravian Church might also be a National Register candidate, particularly as its nearby Zoar outpost is already listed.
3. In many cases, religious cultural resources are lost because congregations need to expand on limited budgets, and are ineligible for tax credits that non-profits can use in preservation efforts. The HPC should work with local churches to ensure that resources are protected.
4. The HPC should work with the congregations of Guardian Angels, St. John's, and the Moravian Church in order to promote and interpret the histories of these churches.
5. Cemeteries are generally not eligible for National Register nomination. However, in many communities, they have generated much interest and their own preservation societies. Chaska's cemeteries should consider similar initiatives.



St. John's Lutheran Church today