

## JOE'S CAFÉ...Stop by for a tasty bit!

Joe Romanazzi, Past Grand Knight

### Who Built the Mysterious Loretto Chapel Staircase?



Santa Fe, New Mexico, was founded in 1610 and is the oldest capital city in the US. It is the historic hub of the southwest, connecting the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro Trail, the Santa Fe Trail and the Old Spanish Trail. It is in Santa Fe where the Loretto Chapel with its mysterious circular staircase was built almost 150 years ago.

The construction of the chapel began in 1873 and was originally named *Our Lady of Light*. The name was later changed to the Loretto Chapel. The Gothic Revival building was consecrated in 1878 and was maintained by a religious order of Catholic nuns, the Sisters of Loretto. When the Loretto Chapel was completed, everyone realized there was nothing in the building plans showing how the choir loft more than twenty feet above the floor was to be accessed. Carpenters were called in to address the problem, but they all concluded access to the loft would have to be via ladder as a staircase would interfere with the interior space of the small Chapel.

Legend says that to find a solution to the seating problem, the sisters made a novena to St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. On the ninth and final day of prayer, a man appeared at the Chapel with a donkey and a toolbox looking for work. Months later, the elegant circular staircase was completed, and the carpenter disappeared without pay or thanks. After searching for the man and finding no trace of him, some concluded that it was St. Joseph who had come in answer to the sisters' prayers.

Another theory about the carpenter's identity has come from Santa Fe historian Mary J. Straw Cook in her 1984 book *Loretto: The Sisters and Their Santa Fe Chapel*. She postulates that the builder was François-Jean "Frenchy" Rochas, citing a 1895 newspaper article about the murder of the reclusive rancher. The article described Rochas as "an expert worker in wood" and claimed he was the man behind the Loretto Chapel staircase.

The Loretto staircase, a sleek, beautiful staircase comprising 33 steps (33 being the age at which Jesus was crucified), wrapped around 360 degrees twice. It was held together with only wooden pegs, no nails or glue. Even more unbelievable was the spruce wood it was made of was not indigenous to New Mexico. There are no central columns or support beams, and it appears that all the weight is self-supported at the base. Additionally, there were no railings. The legend has it that some of the nuns were so afraid to descend that they would crawl down on their hands and knees.

My Brothers, Loretto Chapel was used daily by the students and nuns of Loretto Academy until the school closed in 1968. It is no longer affiliated with the Catholic Church. It is now a privately owned museum and wedding venue. The spiral staircase at Loretto Chapel has long puzzled visitors, including architects and physicists. Some people insist, as the sisters concluded at the time, that St. Joseph built the amazing staircase. Others believe he sent someone to build it. Either way, the structure is considered a miracle, an engineering marvel, and even a scientific curiosity. What about you?

Who do you think is responsible for building the mysterious circular staircase inside the famous Loretto Chapel?

**St. Joseph, *foster father of the Son of God*, pray for us!**