

The beginnings of the Catholic Church in Pocahontas, VA, started in the late 1800s, almost 10 years prior to the arrival of the first Catholics in the area as the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company was formed, paving the way for settlers in search of jobs to move to the area. In January 1890, property was deeded from the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company to the Wheeling Diocese to provide the site for what is now known as St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church.

The early church population was comprised predominantly of Hungarian immigrants, recruited from among newly arrived immigrants on the East Coast to work at the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company in Pocahontas. As the church construction was completed in 1896 under the oversight of Fr. Emil Olivier, who also served as its first pastor, it was named St. Elizabeth's after the patron saint of Hungary. At the time the church was built, there was no rectory or resident priest and Fr. Olivier traveled by horseback from Bluefield one Sunday each month to say Mass.

Nine years later, in January 1905, Fr. Stephen Csernitzky, from Hungary, organized the parish and records began to be kept. Later that same year, Fr. George Szikora came, but soon left and the parish was without a pastor.

With three priests in such a short period of time, the lack of a rectory in which to house a priest was seen as the primary impediment to being able to keep a priest at the Pocahontas church. In 1906, through the generosity of Pocahontas Collieries, successor to The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company, land adjacent to the church on which to build a rectory was deeded to the church.

One year later in 1907, the new rectory was completed and two Benedictine priests came to take care of the coalfield area traveling from Pocahontas in Virginia to Welch in West Virginia. Fr. Anthony Hoch arrived in 1906 and became the first resident pastor when the rectory was completed and held that position for 26 years. In the years that followed, there were as many as four Benedictine priests ministering to the area -- all living in the Pocahontas rectory.

The church underwent some renovations in 1919 when Fr. Anthony brought a friend, Theodore Brasch, from Cincinnati, OH, to the church. Brasch painted 10 life size 8' by 12' murals which still grace the church today. In the main body of the church there are six murals on the ceiling and the remaining four are in the sanctuary. Included in the murals is one of St. Elizabeth, for whom the church is named. Pocahontas Fuel Company Inc. provided the scaffolding without charge to the church while the project was ongoing.

Fr. Anthony remained as pastor of the church until 1931. During the Depression years, the Benedictines retired to their Monastery and Pocahontas was once again a mission church of Powhatan. The Rev. Martin Egan came in 1932 to minister to the mission church. Fr. John McNulty came in 1934 and in 1937, St. Elizabeth's again became a parish with a mission church in nearby McComas, WV. In 1942, McNulty left -- shortly after Pearl Harbor -- to join the U.S. Army Chaplain's Corp. Fr. W.J. Carr served from 1942-1948; and Fr. Edward J. Tighe, 1949-1950.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate served the church in the interim on a limited basis until 1951 when St. Elizabeth's once again had a resident pastor with the arrival of Fr. James Maher. Also serving in that period were Fr. Alphonsus Hayes, 1951-1957; Fr. Michael Gormley, 1953-1954; Fr. Daniel Hayes, 1954-1957; Fr. James Walsh, 1957-1961; and Fr. Vincent Cunningham, 1959-1961.

Fr. Paul Laub, became the last resident pastor in Pocahontas, beginning his service in 1961. When he left in 1970, St. Elizabeth's returned under the care of Powhatan, WV. Pastors from Powhatan continued to serve St. Elizabeth's even after it was removed from the Wheeling Diocese and became part of the Diocese of Richmond in August 1974.

Fr. Seamus Maguire served the Catholic congregation of St. Elizabeth's from 1970-1976; followed by Fr. Eugene Weber, 1976-1980.

In 1981, St. Elizabeth's was named a mission church of St. Theresa's in Tazewell as St. Theresa's achieved parish status, resulting in an odd twist of fate. What had been the original parish – St. Elizabeth's – was now a mission church of St. Theresa's – which had originally been a mission church of St. Elizabeth's. Fr. Louis Benoit was named pastor and he stayed until 1986 when he was transferred and Fr. Dan Brady became the full-time pastor. Fr. Brady arrived in 1986 and in 1987, an application was made to the Bishop to once again have St. Elizabeth's declared a full parish. In September of that year, St. Elizabeth's once again became an independent parish; however, with declines in the Catholic population in Southwest Virginia, 23 years later, in 2010, St. Elizabeth's was merged with St. Theresa's, St. Mary's and St. Joseph's to form the Holy Family Parish – one parish with four sites, which continues today.

Fr. Brady continued to serve until 2006. Fr. Mike Herbert joined Fr. Brady for a short time before being reassigned. Fr. Gaudencio Pugat arrived to serve from 2006-2011. He was followed by Fr. Burt Sare, 2011-2014; Fr. Paul Muyimbwa, 2014-2016; Fr. Felix Amofa, 2016-2017; and Fr. Jugene Espeleta, who began serving as pastor in July 2017, Along the way, additional priests assisted. Among those were Fr. Francis Musolooza and surrounding area priests assigned to regional parishes.

The physical church building has changed little since its original construction, with the exception of the church steeple. The spire was lowered after the church sustained repeated lightning strikes. A metal roof was installed and a wheelchair ramp was added to make the church more accessible. Stained glass windows were refurbished and general maintenance on the more than 120-year-old church has maintained its character and the beauty and craftsmanship of the original church building throughout its long and storied history.