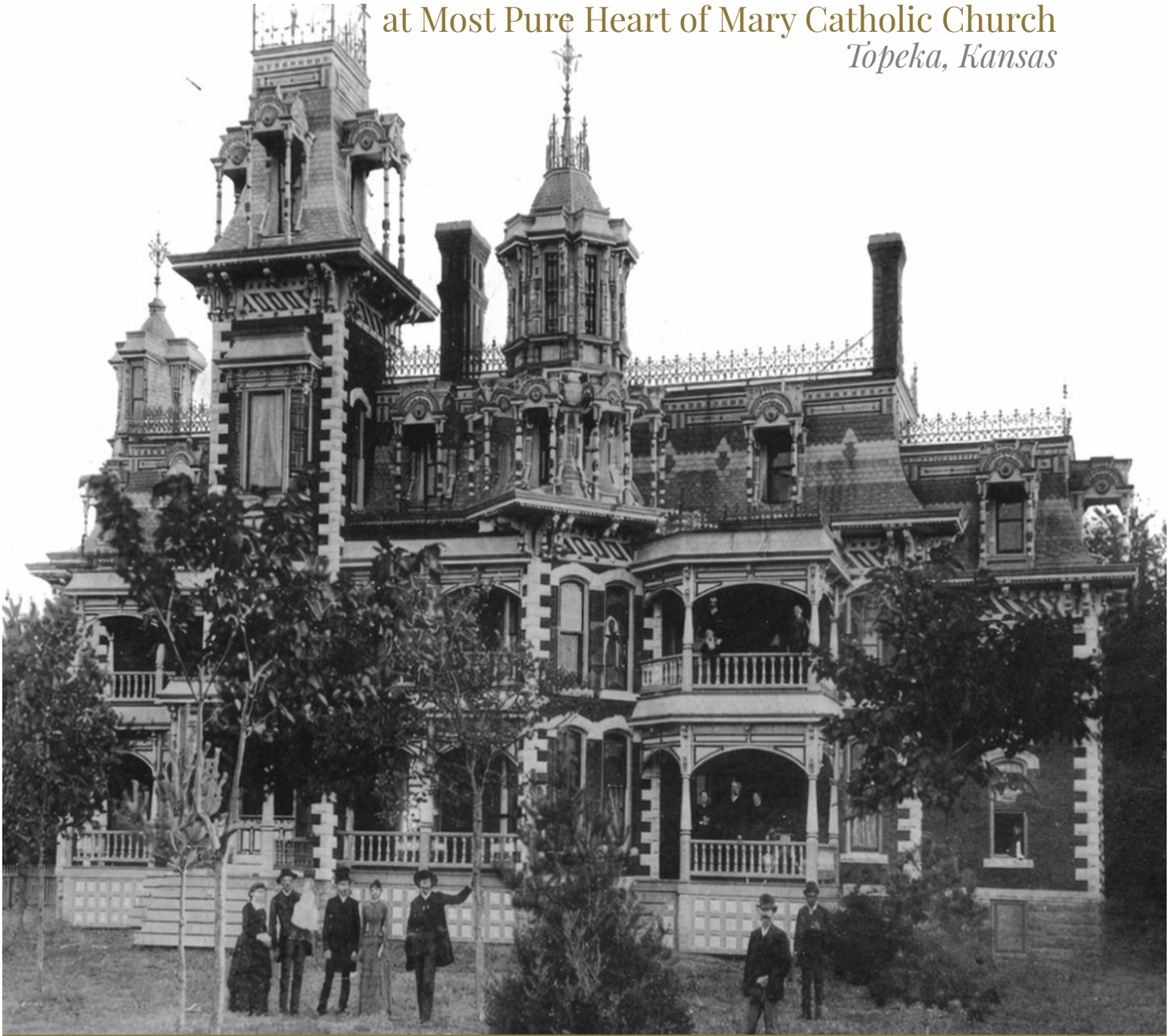


STONE'S FOLLY

at Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic Church
Topeka, Kansas



1887

Erastus Stone
begins construction

1889

Financial ruin halts building;
Stone forced to sell unfinished building

1900

Charles Parham leases the property;
begins College of Bethel

1901

January—Members report speaking
in tongues for the first time; this
becomes foundational moment for
the Pentecostal Movement

July—Notorious bootlegger Harry Croft
purchases mansion, displacing Parham
and followers; transforms it into a “row
house”, a public nuisance to locals

December 6—Fire breaks
out and rapidly consumes
the whole mansion

1905

Thomas Owen clears out debris,
builds modest home atop portion of
mansion's remaining foundation

1946

Property sold to Bishop Schulte of the Diocese of
Leavenworth; Most Pure Heart of Mary parish begins;
Owen house becomes home to resident priests

2019

Resident priests move into
new rectory, vacating
Owen house

2026

Owen house demolished,
preserving the underlying original
Stone's Folly foundation

THE STORIED HISTORY

The story of Stone's Folly begins with Erastus R. Stone, a man about whom relatively little is known. Born in Illinois in 1836, Stone built a successful nursery business specializing in fruit trees. He later amassed a considerable fortune through the purchase and platting of a thirty-acre tract of land southwest of Topeka, retaining a portion of the land as the site for his ambitious undertaking.

Although local newspapers made no mention of the mansion during its construction, it is believed work on the eighteen-room, three-story residence began around 1887. Stone left no firsthand explanation of why he chose to build such an elaborate home. Contemporary accounts suggested that the design was inspired by medieval castles he had seen during travels in Europe, though the structure more closely reflected the popular Second Empire architecture of the late nineteenth century, distinguished by its characteristic mansard roof.

The mansion was striking in appearance: a wood-frame structure clad in red brick veneer and adorned with white cornices, two-story porches, multicolored shingles, decorative iron cresting along the roofline, and two imposing turrets. Stone spared little expense, even commissioning a hand-dug basement — an uncommon feature in residential construction at the time. Much about the mansion's construction remains a mystery. No known records identify the architect, indicate how long construction lasted, or state the final cost, though some estimates placed it near \$40,000—roughly \$1.3 million in today's currency.

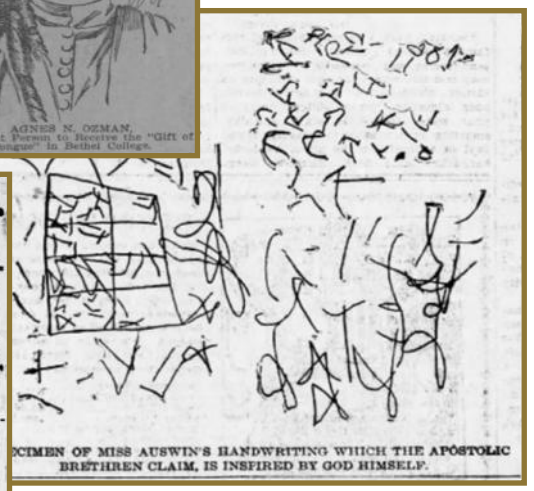
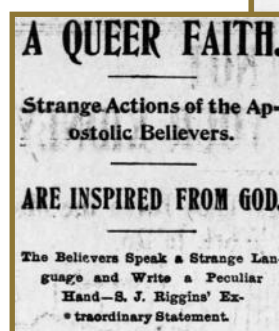
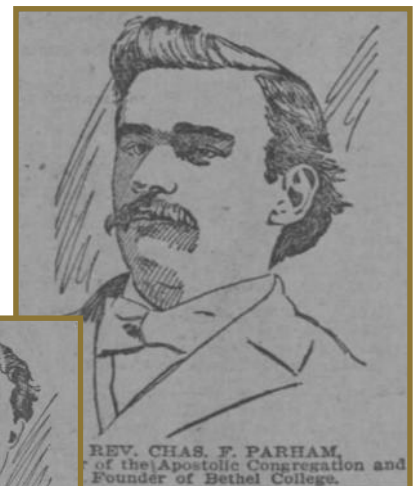
Before the mansion could be completed, a regional economic downturn left Stone unable to finish the project. Stone was forced to sell the unfinished residence in 1889 without ever living in it. The imposing structure quickly became known locally as "Stone's Folly."

Over the following decade, the property changed hands multiple times as successive owners struggled to find a practical use for the unfinished mansion. During those years, local newspapers mention the property only once, recounting a story that a wealthy cattleman had gifted the mansion to a woman who had shown him kindness during his childhood. The woman was said to have been "somewhat lost in the great mansion." Eventually, the building came into the possession of the American Sunday School Union of Philadelphia (ASSUP) in 1894.

CHARLES PARHAM AND COLLEGE OF BETHEL

In late 1900, the charismatic preacher Reverend Charles Fox Parham leased the mansion from the ASSUP and established College of Bethel within its walls. From October 1900 until July 1901, the once-unwanted residence became a place filled with prayer, preaching, and spiritual expectation as locals watched with curiosity. The community transformed the mansion's drawing room of into their chapel, while the central turret served as a "prayer tower," where students maintained a continual vigil of prayer.

On New Year's Day 1901, a student named Agnes Ozman reportedly began speaking in tongues during a prayer session. Within days, other students and Parham himself were said to have had similar experiences. Participants claimed that these utterances included recognizable foreign languages, such as Chinese and German, which



they believed would enable missionaries to preach abroad without prior language study. Although some who were present questioned the authenticity of these events, news of what occurred at Stone's Folly spread quickly among the community and beyond. The incident is widely regarded as the spark that ignited the modern Pentecostal movement, which today claims over 600 million adherents worldwide.

Despite the property's growing religious significance, ASSUP continued searching for a way to divest themselves of the investment. The property was at one point considered as a possible site for a military school and, on another occasion, for conversion into a pest house — a building used to isolate individuals suffering from communicable diseases. Their solution eventually came in July 1901, when the mansion was purchased by Harry Croft (sometimes spelled "Croff"), a man whose notoriety was well known throughout the region.

HARRY CROFT AND HIS ROAD HOUSE

Croft had a reputation as a bootlegger, selling and distributing alcohol at a time when it was illegal to do so in Kansas. His purchase forced Parham and his followers to vacate the premises. Although Croft initially announced plans to convert the mansion into a chicken farm, within weeks it had become known as "Croft's Road House." Carriage loads of lively visitors arrived and departed late into the night, creating a public nuisance for nearby residents and students at Washburn college. On one occasion, the property was raided by police, and in one particularly colorful episode, a neighbor tapped the mansion's telephone line in an effort to uncover the nature of the activities taking place inside. When asked about the events, the unashamed neighbor notably remarked, "The way to fight the devil is with fire." Yet despite its notoriety, the watchful eye of neighbors, and even a trial, no evidence was ever found that alcohol was sold or distributed on the premises.

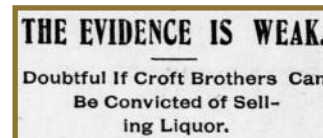
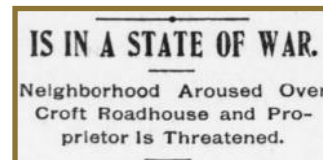
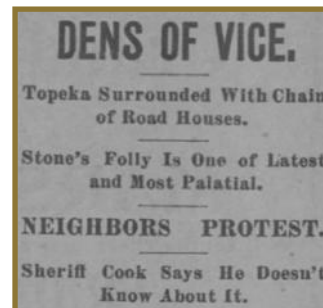
On December 6, 1901, just two weeks after the wiretapping incident, Harry Croft's wife discovered a fire burning above the kitchen in the northwest portion of the mansion that quickly spread through the wood-framed structure. Notably, Croft had removed and stored a considerable portion of the furniture in the city only weeks earlier. Although much of the remaining furniture was rescued, the building itself was beyond rescue by the time assistance arrived. In the aftermath, little remained except a lone chimney and the massive foundation stained by fire and smoke. Aside from a lone chimney and a foundation full of discolored brick, only three known photographs remained to document the mansion's brief and dramatic fourteen-year existence.

AFTER THE FIRE

The charred ruins remained seemingly untouched until 1905, when Thomas Owen acquired the property from Harry Croft after a lengthy lawsuit with the ASSUP over the remaining mortgage. Owen cleared away the debris,

Pope Leo XIII

It is sometimes claimed that on January 1, 1901, Pope Leo XIII consecrated the twentieth century to the Holy Spirit by singing the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* in St. Peter's Basilica, and that this act was directly linked to the events that unfolded at Stone's Folly in Topeka, Kansas. However, there is no known contemporary documentation that Pope Leo XIII performed such a consecration or sang the hymn that day, and no documentation suggesting a connection between Pope Leo XIII and the events at Stone's Folly before 1973, shortly after the emergence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in 1967.



salvaged usable materials, and constructed a modest home atop part of the original foundation, modifying it slightly to better suit his needs. Over time, references to the site's dramatic past became less frequent as the property entered a quieter chapter of its history, occasionally being referenced in as it hosted social gatherings and even a wedding. But the memory of Stone's Folly endured, and on July 23, 1906, Charles Parham and several of his followers returned to the site.

Thomas Owen died on January 28, 1937. His widow, Emily Owen, eventually sold the property and the home to Bishop Paul C. Schulte of the Diocese of Leavenworth for \$35,000 in January 1946. In the years that followed, an orphanage, a school, and eventually a church were constructed on the property known as Most Pure Heart of Mary parish.

The house built by Thomas Owen served as the parish rectory until 2019, when the priests relocated into a newly constructed house nearby. Afterward, the house stood largely vacant until it was demolished on February 3, 2026. At that time, unmistakable evidence of the devastating 1901 fire was found — charred brick, melted glass, fragments of wood, and other curious items. The remaining stone foundation was preserved, and those restored remains are what visitors to the site can see today — silent witnesses to the site's colorful history.



STONE'S FOLLY HISTORICAL SITE

Based upon surviving foundation and historical photographs

