

## *Bella Vista Buildings We Love*

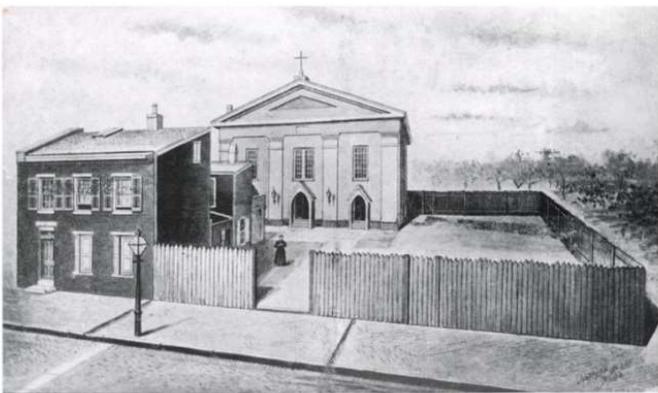
### **Building of the Month – St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Church**

**712 Montrose Street**

**Built 1891**

*By Ralph Marano*

Imagine you've left your birthplace, the only place you've ever known, to travel across an ocean seeking a better life for you and your family. After a long sea voyage, you find yourself in this new land where the people speak a strange language and practice different customs. This was the experience of the Italians who arrived in Bella Vista in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They naturally stuck together to share their traditions, foods, religion, language, and heritage. For them, St. Mary Magdalene di Pazzi church was the corner stone of their new life in America.



Old St. Mary Magdalene di Pazzi church and rectory

In 1852 Bishop John Neuman created a special parish for the new Italian immigrants. Purchasing an old African American Methodist Church on Montrose Street, he named it in honor of St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi, who became a Carmelite nun at age 16 and was canonized as a saint in 1669 by Pope Clement IX. She is the patron saint against sickness and sexual temptation. This was the first Italian “nationality parish” in the U. S.

During parts of the 1860's the church was shared with French immigrants, and it was renamed the Church of the Immaculate Conception by the Archdiocese. It was eventually designated for Italians, and the original name was reinstated. Planning for a new church begun, and the current building, designed by distinguished ecclesiastical architect Edwin Forrest Durang, was completed in 1891. The cupola seen here on the right was destroyed by fire in the 1930's.





The congregation included many prominent community leaders, but its most famous parishioner was Mario Lanza, a tenor, actor, and Hollywood film star of the 1940's & 1950's. Born Alfredo Arnold Coccozza, he lived at 634 Christian Street, the site of this PA historical marker. It was said that "his smile was as big as his voice." Sadly, he died of a pulmonary embolism at the age of 38, when he was celebrated as the most famous tenor in the world.

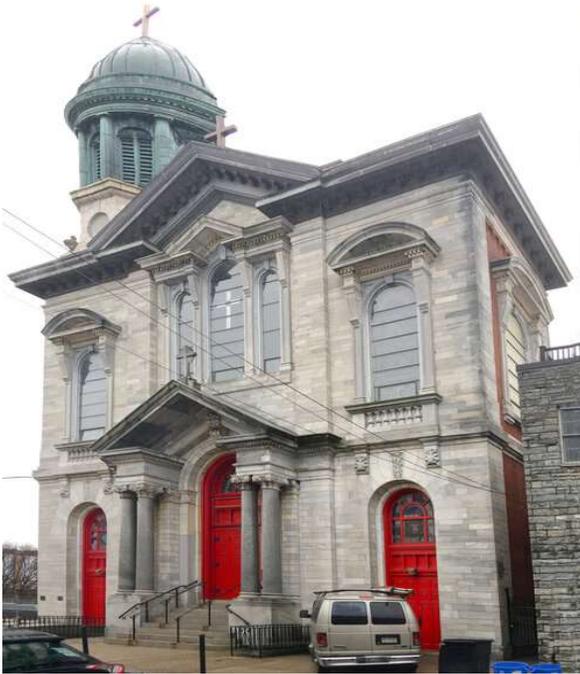
**To view a four-minute video showing the spectacular interior of the church and highlighting his beautiful voice go to: <https://youtu.be/9-mcDYRmD1A>**

St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi parish thrived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but as the congregation became smaller with declining birth rates and movement to the suburbs, in 2000 the Archdiocese merged the parish with St. Paul's in the 900 block of Christian Street. The former convent was sold and converted into condominiums in 2010, and the former rectory, which housed The Mario Lanza Museum, was demolished a few years ago. The museum found a new home at 1214 Reed Street, where it still operates. With the parishes combined, Sunday Mass and sacraments are still held in the church, which is administered by the pastor of St. Paul's.

The Parade of Saints, a longtime tradition of the parish, is still held on a Sunday every May at the Italian Festival on 9<sup>th</sup> Street. Parishioners carry statues of the saints through the Italian Market from St. Mary Magdalen di Pazzi to St. Paul's, stopping at 9<sup>th</sup> and Washington for a blessing by the pastor. Tradition says that if you pray to your favorite saint, your prayers are more likely to be answered if you pin a dollar to the saint's robe.



## The Church Today:



## References

Di Giacomo Donna J. (2007) The Italians of Philadelphia. Arcadia Publishing.

DiPilla Michael (2016) South Philadelphia's Little Italy and 9<sup>th</sup> Street Italian Market. Arcadia Publishing.

Haas Kimberley <https://hiddencityphila.org/2019/07/history-may-lie-deeper-under-a-church-rectory-in-south-philly/>

Juliani Richard N. (1998) Building Little Italy Philadelphia's Italians Before Mass Migration. Penn State Press.

Juliani Richard N. (2007) Priest, Parish, and People Saving the Faith in Philadelphia's "Little Italy". ND Press.

*Interested in learning more about Bella Vista's historical buildings? The BVNA Preservation Committee meets on the third Tuesday of the month at 7:00 p.m. For information contact: [info@bellavistaneighbors.org](mailto:info@bellavistaneighbors.org)*

*All are welcome.*