

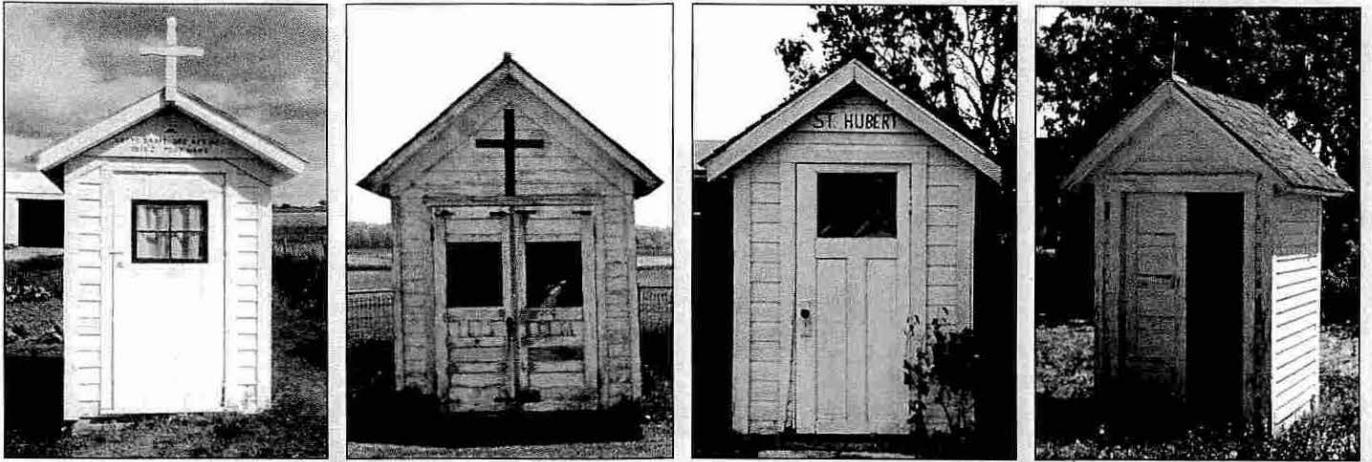
Belgian Roadside Chapels of the Door Peninsula

The title of a book *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State* published more than forty years ago suggests the importance of ethnic islands in the settlement fabric of Wisconsin.¹ Evidence of ethnic islands and their associated cultural landscapes remains throughout much of the state. One such island settled by Walloon-speaking Belgians can be found in Northeastern Wisconsin's Door Peninsula, which is composed of portions of Door, Kewaunee and Brown counties.²

Belgian immigrants, in particular, were attracted to this area between 1853 and 1857 from their homes primarily in the provinces of Brabant, Hanaut, and Namur.³ Cheap government land was available at \$1.25 per acre. More than 3,800 foreign-born Belgians resided in the three county area by 1860, representing 34 percent of the peninsula's population. Approximately 70 percent of the Belgians were clustered in an area that was to evolve into the rural Belgian ethnic island. The remainder were to be found largely in or very close to Green Bay, a city of 2,275 people.

A distinctive ethnic imprint emerged on the landscape as more Belgians settled in rural Door Peninsula. The most visible examples of the imprint were found in the forms of folk architecture. Many of these forms survive as relics and continue to serve as a cultural index for understanding the original settlements.⁴ Prominent among the structures found on some farmsteads today are the

by William G. Laatsch & Charles F. Calkins



The typical roadside chapel—twenty-four still exist—measures 9 feet in length and 7.5 feet in width. The gable roof stands 9 feet at the peak and slopes to 6.5 feet at the eaves. Situated next to the

road, the chapels sit a few inches off the ground supported by fieldstones of dolomite and have a wooden or metal cross fixed above the door or roof peak.

outdoor bake ovens, some of which are still used on rare occasions.⁵ Another Belgian folk structure is the small roadside votive chapel found on individual farmsteads and built by the devout, Roman Catholic, Walloon-speaking Belgians.

This article examines the character, function, distribution, and origin of twenty-four Belgian roadside chapels. Terry G. Jordan has suggested the need for such geographical studies:

...largely absent, so far as I can tell, from...American [folk architecture] researches has been ecclesiastical folk architecture, though European geographers have devoted some attention to this subject.⁶

Exceptions can be found in the work of Jordan on traditional rural chapels in Texas, James Griffith on the folk chapels of the Papago Indians in Arizona, and Ingolf Vogeler on the chapels and shrines in central Minnesota.⁷ Erick Swanick's bibliography *Religious Architecture of Canada* contains a few references to works that could be classified as studies in ecclesiastical folk architecture.⁸ These studies represent only a "scratching of the surface" of what needs to be done with this topic. This article should contribute to the existing but fragmentary research.

Characteristics

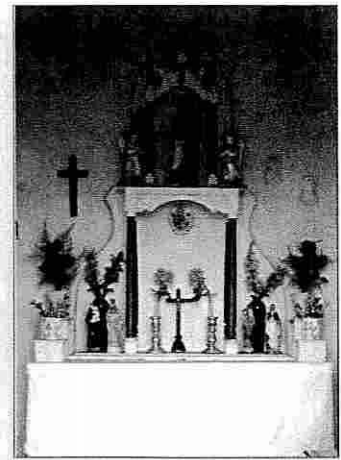
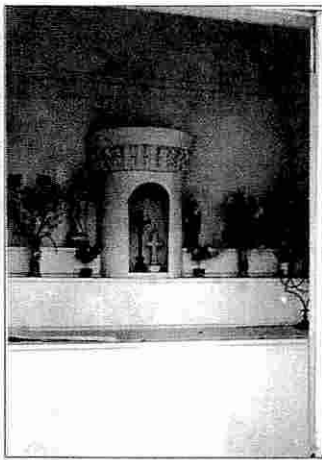
The Belgian roadside chapel is a small structure. At first glance, it could be mistaken for a tidy tool shed or a commodious privy! A typical chapel is of frame construction, rectangular and measures 9 feet in length and 7.5 feet in width. The gable roof stands 9 feet at the peak and slopes to 6.5 feet at the eaves. Of the twenty-four chapels, the largest is 12 feet by 10 feet and 10 feet high, whereas the smallest is 6.5 feet by 5.5 feet by 8 feet. They sit a few inches off the ground and are supported simply by fieldstones at the corners or, more commonly, rest on a foundation of locally quarried dolomite.

Chapels generally have no windows, but if present, one small window may be found in the door. Neither the window nor the door contains religious symbols. A wooden or metal cross may be attached, however, immediately above the door or attached to the roof peak. Three stone chapels have crosses incorporated in the dolomite walls by the deliberate arrangement of the building stone or glacial erratics, which provide contrast in color, size and shape in such an arrangement. An inscription above the door may attest further to the building's Religious function and clearly sets it apart from a tool shed or privy. These inscriptions are always in French and may be lettered on a board or stamped out of metal. Examples include *Notre Dame Des Afflices Priez Pour Nous* (Our Lady of Afflictions Pray for Us) and *Saint Ghislane Priez Pour Nous* (Saint Ghislane Pray for Us).

Whether frame or stone the Belgian chapels exhibit uniform interiors, which are finished with lath and plaster, plaster wall board, or recently installed sheets of paneling. If plastered, the walls and ceilings are painted a pale color: white, blue, green, or yellow. Floors are commonly made of varnished hard or soft woods and occasionally are covered with linoleum, indoor/outdoor carpeting, or compositions tiles.

The focus of this one-room structure is the altar, which is located directly opposite the door. Wooden, two or three tiered, usually without a cloth or lace cover, the altar provides a simple but adequate place for religious artifacts. The center of the higher tier is reserved for an element of special significance: a cross, a crucifix, a statue either of the Blessed Virgin or of an appropriate saint. The lower tier has a variety of other symbolic elements, including smaller statues, crosses, vases (with either artificial or fresh flowers), a containers holding Holy Water and a can or small box for donations. Altars display as many as two dozen items, all arranged systematically to achieve symmetry in order to emphasize the dominant cross

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The altar, usually located opposite the door, is the focus of the Belgian roadside chapel. Typically religious articles, such as crosses, crucifixes, and statues, and vases of flowers are arranged in a symmetrical fashion. Interior uniformity as well as a kneeling bench are staples of the chapels as are Holy Water, donation holders,

or statue. Furnishings are limited to a simply-built kneeling bench and, in the larger structures, a wooden chair or two.

Just as the altar is crowded but orderly, the walls are similarly adorned with pictures and a variety of certificates. The pictures, often relatively large, usually depict a special saint. In many cases it is clear that they have a European origin and have been purchased at a notable shrine. While interviewing an elderly Belgian gentleman at his chapel, he gazed at the pictures, turned and said, "I got arts wert tousans," indicating the value he placed on his art collection.⁹ At the same time, he revealed a relic ethnic speech pattern persists in the rural areas inhabited by Belgians, and among Belgians residing in Green Bay. The certificates are, on the other hand, of local origin and acknowledge a baptism, first communion, marriage, or death. Those dated before 1920 are inscribed in French. Chapel walls, then are like pages of the family Bible where significant family events are recorded.

In most cases, a chapel resides on the farm of the family whose ancestors built the structure. If this is the case, the family continues to care for the building and its contents. Where the farm has changed hands, the new owner may assume responsibility for the chapel, or, if no interest is expressed, a nearby relative or friend of the former owner may maintain the building. Whatever the case, the Belgian chapels are seen as important structures in the rural communities of the Door Peninsula.

Function

There is no doubt that the general form of the chapels is secondary to their function. These are votive chapels that were built by devout Catholics and dedicated to and in honor of different saints or the Blessed Virgin in gratitude for favors sought or received through prayer. Although they may be used now for general purposes such as family devotions or as sites where people will gather on special occasions to say the

pictures of saints, and religious documents, such as marriage, birth and first communion certificates. Roadside chapels in Belgium, which are made of brick and stone, are usually devoid of interior decoration, are open to the elements, and are located in a variety of places.

Rosary, their primary function is a place of prayer for those who seek relief from the types of distress similar to those that caused the chapels to be built initially. Several examples will illustrate the point.

A chapel that is actively used today was originally built in the late nineteenth century by the Constantine Flemel family near Rosiere. The Flemels had several children die in infancy as a result of convulsions. They subsequently built a chapel in honor of St. Ghislane (actually St. Ghislain), the patron saint of small children, so that the family would have a place to pray for the intercession of the saint. Their devotion and sacrifice in building the chapel at this time are significant because there were two Catholic churches within a two-mile radius of the farmstead. Following its construction and early use, the Flemels had three very healthy children born to them, each ultimately reaching adulthood. This chapel's miraculous reputation has continued and is attested to in the following letter:

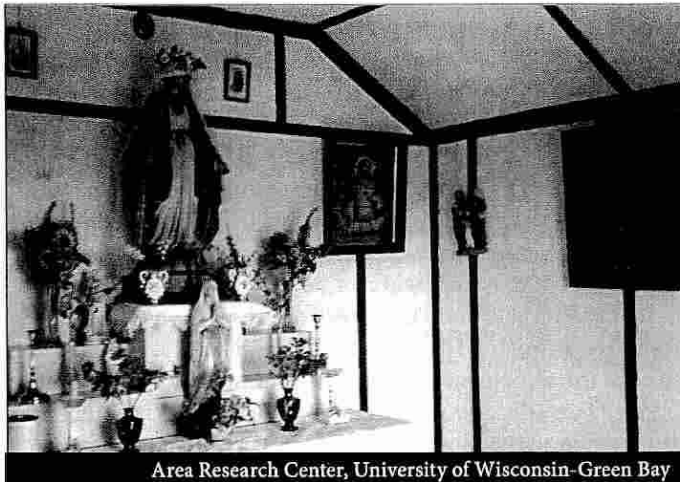
Nov. 30, 1962

De Pere, Wisconsin

Dear Friends

I supposed you's [sic] will be surprised to hear from me, but I have a girl who falls in convulsions and I know ma took me over to that chapel where you are now for it, and they say it helped. Mabel mentioned its [sic] still up. I'd like to take Coleen there. We'll go this Sunday, Dec. 2 or next if we can't make it then. It will probably be around noon or after twelve so were [sic] home before dark. If you plan on going away leave it open and I'll leave a note that we were there. If we don't make it this Sunday, write and let me know if the chapel is still there. I put a card in the envelope. The one next door has a married sister that might come along too.

Thanks—Irene¹⁰



Area Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

In another case, Joseph Derenne, who was born in Bousoux, Belgium, and came to Duvall, Kewaunee County, in 1887 at age 14, was diagnosed in 1902 as having incurable cancer. At the urging of his brother, the family decided to build a chapel in honor of Our Lady of Lourdes. The finalization of the building plans reportedly had a positive effect on Derenne's deteriorating health. While the chapel was being constructed, Derenne's brother returned to Belgium. He brought back a large piece of a religious statuary, which was placed on the altar. Family members believed that the construction of the chapel was responsible for the miracle that further restored Derenne's health.¹¹

Joseph Destree, a Belgian stone mason who had a reputation in the Door Peninsula for building with the local Niagara dolomite, got hot lime in his eyes in about 1870 while practicing his trade. Fearing for his eyesight, he built a chapel in honor of St. Adele, believed locally to be the patron saint of eyes, who herself had been born blind but had her sight restored upon baptism. Destree maintained his eyesight throughout his life.¹² The chapel remains in its original location and is maintained by his descendants. People with eye afflictions still come to the chapel with the hope of having their prayers answered.

Although the chapels are privately owned, they are available and commonly open to all, Belgians or non-Belgians, who care to use them. It appears that ten chapels are used on a rather regular basis, especially during late spring, summer, and fall. Deep snow accumulation during winter curtails access, and the cold weather discourages even the most faithful. Information about their usage was obtained through interviews, registrations in guest books, and observation. Three of the chapels had frequent visitations, six or eight per week, by family members, neighbors, and people from outside the immediate rural Belgian community. Of these, one was used consistently by the elderly owners, and it was well known that they encouraged and welcomed use by others. Its guest register for the summer months of 1981-1986 showed that visitors had come from Algoma, Green Bay, Luxemburg, Milwaukee and Sheboygan, Wisconsin, as well as from St. Paul, Minnesota, and Hollywood, Florida.¹³ Presumably, many locals also used

Belgian-American Digital Research Collection



Northeastern Wisconsin boasts one of the country's largest concentrations of Walloon-speaking Belgians. The Belgians remained a homogeneous people, due in part to language barriers and rural poverty that isolated them from their neighbors. Today, many Belgian descendants still reside in the 35-square-mile area their ancestors settled. They retain traditional customs and observe old traditions. Some farms have been in the same family for more than one hundred years, and fourth and fifth generations still speak Walloon, a dialect of French.

One of the largest collections of materials dealing with these Belgian-Americans is housed in the Special Collections Department of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Cofrin Library. This is a result of a project undertaken in the 1970s to record the undocumented historical, social and cultural legacy of this unique ethnic group.

The collection includes oral history tapes, architectural surveys, maps of farms, records of town governments, family papers, church records, pedigree charts, and a subject vertical file.

The oral histories cover subjects such as folklore, fishing, customs, foods, occupations, and the Walloon language. The tapes are abstracted, and a subject index is available.

The architectural surveys identify typical Belgian architecture, including log, stone and brick houses; small chapels; outdoor ovens; and summer kitchens. Nine in-depth architectural surveys were conducted, and photographs of all the structures on the farms surveyed were obtained as were oral history interviews with the owners or previous owners. Maps were drawn to scale showing the location (both past and present) of structures, gardens, orchards fences, fields, driveways, etc. A more general survey of Belgian architecture was also conducted encompassing more than eighty farms.

The subject vertical file includes donated Belgian-American pedigree charts, newspaper clippings, copies of select passenger lists, postcards, files on Belgian families, and miscellany.

In an effort to make this historical and cultural collection more accessible, parts of it have been recently digitized. Go to <http://webcat.library.wisc.edu:3200/BelgAmrCol/> to visit this important source of historical information. On the main page, click on "Subject Search." From there, researchers may explore the architecture surveys, listen to the oral history recordings, read a select number of digitized immigration history books, or enter in a keyword and search for a family name or other subject.

Jean Wentz

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the chapel, but they did not bother to sign the register. Votive candles were provided for those visitors who had neglected to bring their own.¹⁴ Another of these three chapels was used frequently, but primarily by family members. The young farmer/owner indicated that he and his wife used the chapel for prayers “at least a couple of times a week” and that his parents, who formerly lived on the property, came from their home to maintain the chapel and pray in it “more often than we do, almost every day.”¹⁵

The other seven chapels were visited an estimated six to ten times a month. This pattern of visits is characteristic of chapels owned by someone other than descendants of family members originally responsible for their construction. Although new owners, many of whom are non-Belgian, will maintain the chapels, they do not use them with the same frequency as in the cases of those chapels that are identified with particular Belgian families.

The remaining fourteen chapels are used rarely, if at all. Five of these no longer function as chapels. The religious artifacts have been removed from them, and they stand idle. No new functions have been assigned to the vacant buildings, however. The farmsteads on which these chapels are located are owned by non-Belgian, non-Catholic folks, who have moved into and have diluted somewhat the Belgian stronghold. They are rural non-farm people who commute to nearby Green Bay for their livelihoods. Their allegiances are not to the Belgian community and its customs.

Location Within the Farmstead

Clearly, the chapel is part of the ensemble of buildings constituting the Belgian farmstead; yet, its distinctive function and, in turn, unique location on the farmstead tend to set it apart because of its orientation to a section line road. At the time of their original construction, the chapels were placed adjacent to roads so that the faithful could have free and immediate access without having to enter the farmstead proper via a lane or driveway. To this day, chapel owners do not exercise the remainder of the farm in general. They view the chapel as community property, and freedom of access is encouraged. The same certainly does not apply to the rest of the farm property, which is considered private—trespassing is overtly discouraged. The distinctiveness of the chapel’s location is further enhanced by its being separated from the house, barns, and driveways by a low hedge, flower garden, or fence. Thus, the chapel becomes more of a sanctuary and less a “farm” structure. Visitors park their cars along the road’s shoulder and walk a few short steps to enter a chapel.

Whereas proximity to a road is an advantage for both user and owner, it is, however, a disadvantage for the longevity of some chapels. Road widening, errant vehicles, and overzealous snowplow drivers have on occasion reduced a chapel to a pile of kindling wood. At least four owners have anticipated either the possibility and have moved their chapels a greater distance from the right-of-way.



Distribution

Field work has identified twenty-four chapels on the Door peninsula. Of these, twenty-one are located in the Belgian settlement area. This area, defined by farm ownership where approximately 80 percent of the farms are owned by Belgians, contains numerous elements of Belgian material and non-material culture. Most of the chapels are found in the vicinity of Rosiere, a hamlet on the Door-Kewaunee county line, which continues to be the stronghold of Belgians. Three chapels are located outside of the settlement area near Green Bay. Two of them were moved from the area’s community of Brussels to their present locations and the remaining chapel was built and maintained by a Belgian family.



Outside of the Origin

Belgium’s Walloon region was the source area for the Door Peninsula chapels. While similar in size and function there are notable differences. The Walloons used brick and stone almost exclusively for building materials. Instead of the typical rectangular door, the Belgian chapels feature an arched, often Gothic, entrance with the interior protected only by a metal grill. Open to the weather the interiors are rather plain with only a few plants flanking a statue or a crucifix. The locations of Walloon chapels in Belgium are less predictable than the cases in Wisconsin. They are found in urban centers, along rural roads, within forests, or incorporated into farmyard walls.

Conclusion

The nature, function, distribution, and origin of the Belgian roadside chapels of the Door Peninsula have been analyzed. Wisconsin’s rural Belgians have demonstrated remarkable persistence in their attachment to the Door Peninsula and in the maintenance of their culture. There are signs that the solidarity of the Belgian settlement area is being eroded somewhat by the movement of non-farm, non-Belgians into the area. Should this continue at an accelerated rate, the elements of Belgian culture—including the roadside chapels—may disappear as the Belgian population is diluted.

NOTES

1. Fred L. Holmes, *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the 'Badger State'* (Eau Claire: E.M. Hale, 1944).
2. Charles F. Calkins and William G. Laatsch, “The Belgian Outdoor Ovens of Northeastern Wisconsin,” *Pioneer America Society Transactions*, 2 (1979), 8.
3. Holmes, 164. For a demographic analysis of his migration, see Mary Ann Defnet, et. al., *From Grez-Doiceau to Wisconsin: Contribution à l'étude de l'émigration wallonne vers les Etats-Unis d'Amérique au XIX^e siècle* (Bruxelles: DeBoeck Université, 1986).
4. Cotton Mather and Matti Kaups, “The Finnish Sauna: A Cultural Index to Settlement,” *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 53 (December, 1963) 494-504.

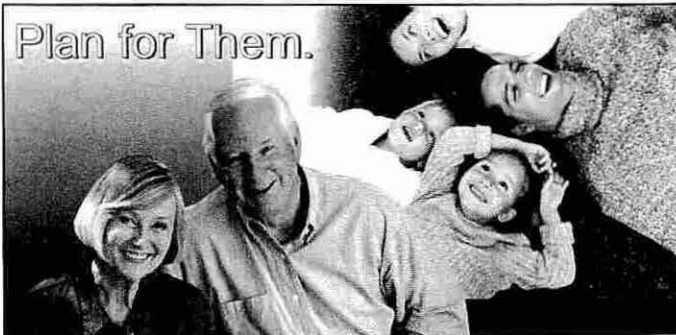
5. Calkins and Laatsch, 1-12.
 6. Terry G. Jordan, "The Traditional Southern Rural Chapel in Texas," *Ecumene*, 8 (1976), 6. also see, Peirce F. Lewis, "Learning From Looking: Geographic and Other Writing about the American Landscape," in *Material Culture: A Research Guide*, ed. by Thomas J. Schlereth (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 44.
 7. Jordan, 6-7; James S. Griffith, "The Folk-Catholic Chapels of Papgueria,"

Pioneer America, 7 (July, 1975), 21-36 and Ingolf Vogeler, "The Roman Catholic Culture Region of Central Minnesota," *Pioneer America*, 8 (July, 1976), 71-83.

8. Eric L. Swanick, *Religious Architecture of Canada* (Monticello, Ill.: Vance Bibliographies, 1980).
 9. Interview with Jule Vandertie, Rosiere, Wisconsin, August 17, 1978. With his heavily accented English, Mr. Vandertie was attempting to convey the belief that his chapel art works were worth thousands of

dollars. The obvious discrepancy between the perceived and real values is an indicator of the very high sentimental value placed on the chapel and its contents by most owners.

10. Mrs. Melvin (Irene) Campbell to Mr. and Mrs. Jule Vandertie, 30 November 1962. Letter in the possession of Mrs. Jule Vandertie.
 11. "Catholic Roadside Chapel Donated to Park," *Heritage Hill Intelligencer*, n.v. (Summer 1984), 7.
 12. John Kahlert, "Devout Belgian Settlers Built Shrines Out of Faith, Gratitude," *Door County Advocate* (Sturgeon Bay), September 7, 1978, 1, part 2.
 13. An informal guest register found in the chapel owned by Mr. and Mrs. Jule Vandertie, N.W.1/4, N.E.1/4, S.32, T.26N., R.24E., on August 20, 1981.
 14. Interview with Mr. Jule Vandertie, July 6, 1978.
 15. Interview with Mr. Randy Vincent, August 21, 1981.



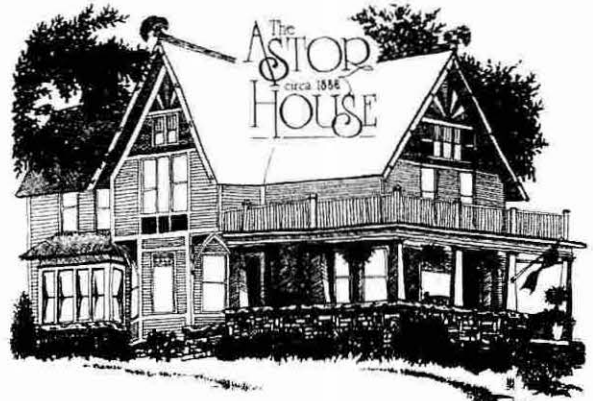
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