

St Mary of Mount Carmel is an imposing structure of gothic architecture which resembles the old Polish cathedrals of the homeland of the Polish men and women who sought a better and safer life in the United States.

Portage County became of the center of Polish agriculture in Wisconsin because of the availability of cheap land. The trip across the Atlantic took about six weeks, if the weather was good. Passage reportedly cost about \$30 per adult, half price for children.

About 40 families were involved in organizing the new parish, which was located 3 miles west of Amherst Junction and east of Lake Thomas. Five acres of land were purchased in 1884 from August Dulak for \$50. The original church building was 30x20 and was built in 1885. St. Mary's Congregation was legally incorporated in 1886, and Fr. AJ Maczynski was the first pastor. A small rectory was built in 1887, the present rectory in 1901. A post office for the area was established in 1891, and Orson Fancher was the postmaster. It was from this postmaster that the area community received its unofficial name. The post office closed in 1913, but the area continues to be identified as 'Fancher'.

On February 22, 1893, the trustees contracted to build a new frame church to be completed by the fall of 1893 at a cost of \$4,300. Fr. Nicholas Kolazinski was pastor as the 104x40 structure was built (where the present school building stands). Bishop Messmer of the Green Bay Diocese dedicated the new church on July 16, 1894. On March 19, 1904, the church was totally destroyed by fire. Following the fire, the original 20x30 church building was used once again. In 1905 construction began on the new church and it was dedicated on July 16, 1906. It was completed mostly with parish labor and horsepower. The steeple rises 93 feet above the roof for a total height of 157 ft. The cost of construction was about \$25,000.

In 1906 there were 155 families and the parish school had one teacher and 75 pupils. (Classes had begun in the original church building in 1901). In 1912, a large school was built for \$6,120 and was staffed by three Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1922 the school was enlarged and converted into a boarding school. On January 29, 1934, tragedy struck again as the school was destroyed by fire. The nuns and about 40 students in residence escaped into the -20 degree weather. By the end of 1934 a new brick school was completed and served as a parochial school until 1970 when the school closed.

In 1945 the Diocese of Madison was established. On December 22, 1945, Portage County became part of the Diocese of La Crosse.

A new addition, which included restrooms, new entry and elevator for handicap accessibility was completed in 1995.

The church is currently undergoing much needed interior renovation. It has been closed since October 2025 and is scheduled to re-open by May, 2026.

Our current pastor is Fr. Jerzy Rebacz.