

I was recently asked by a guide: "When did the practice of pew rent end at the Basilica/Cathedral?" After investigating the question, I was unable to come up with a definitive answer, but I can provide some related information:

1. The last known pew rent register for the Basilica/Cathedral is housed at the Archives at St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park. That registry was for the year **1921**.
2. The Archivist has confirmed that there is no record of any blanket edict to the parishes in the Archdiocese to cease the practice of collecting pew rent. However, the 2nd Vatican Council (1963-5) did ultimately abolish the practice of pew rental.

Some notes on pew rent:

1. The New Catholic Dictionary of 1910 had a few words to say on the subject of pew rental, noting that it "constitutes one of the sources of revenue for the maintenance of the church and support of the clergy, especially in places where no state provision or endowment exists." The Dictionary went on to say that the practice had been approved by the Third (1884) Plenary Council of Baltimore and was endorsed by the Holy See. A rider to this approval was the stipulation that "there should always be an ample sufficiency of free seats to accommodate those who cannot afford to rent one, in order that all the faithful might conveniently assist at Divine Services."
2. The practice of renting - and in some cases, buying - pews was typical in several denominations throughout much of the 19th century and well into the 20th. Members paid an annual fee for the right to occupy a particular pew week after week, whether they occupied them or not. The pews up front were typically more expensive. While this guaranteed a better view and better sound, it's hard to believe that there was not also a certain element of social one-upmanship involved. Many churches founded in the Anglo-Catholic revival, were founded as free churches, where no seats could be rented or owned, in a direct affront to those with money, power, and influence.

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