

Cloning a Chapel

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The Portiuncula Chapel is prominent feature on the grounds of Mayslake Peabody Estate, but do you know the story behind the original chapel and other replicas in the United States?



The Original Portiuncula Chapel
Born in 1181 or 82, Francesco di Bernardone, now known as St. Francis, was the son of an affluent Assisi family, but after having a vision of Christ on a trip home from a pilgrimage to Rome, he renounced his wealth and chose a life of simplicity and poverty as a friar. He spent years restoring ruined churches in and around his home town, including the one known today as the Portiuncula Chapel.

Written accounts of the chapel only date back to 1045, but it's said that hermits from the Valley of Josaphat

built it in the fourth century. The sandstone chapel is early Gothic in style with Romanesque features; a statue of the Virgin Mary nursing baby Jesus stands inside the small ornate belfry.

Fifteen yards away from the restored chapel, Francis built a hut, where he lived and performed charitable acts. Other people soon moved nearby, creating a religious community that would be the foundation of the Order of Friars Minor, more commonly known as the Franciscans. Francis died in his hut on Oct. 3, 1226, and was canonized two years later by Pope Gregory IX.

After his death, the chapel underwent several alterations, including the addition of a side door to accommodate an orderly flow of pilgrims. A magnificent six-part fresco painted in 1393 by Ilario da Viterbo adorns the apse, and the rear façade features Perugino's "Crucifixion," which the painter completed around 1485. On the front façade is the 1829 fresco "St. Francis Receiving the Pardon of Assisi" by Johann Friedrich Overbeck.

At the request of Pope Pius V, construction began in 1569 on a basilica that now houses the Portiuncula Chapel as well as the Transitus Chapel, which was built on the site where St. Francis died.

Mayslake Peabody Estate

Mayslake's Portiuncula Chapel was built as memorial to the property's original owner, Francis Stuyvesant Peabody. After his death in 1922, Peabody's family sold the property to the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart, Order of Friar Minors, and his widow and son commissioned the Franciscans to build a copy of the chapel. It was dedicated in 1926 and again in 1974 after the Franciscans moved it to its current location.

Although a fairly authentic replica, the chapel has some differences. A colorful stone mosaic of St. Francis receiving the Pardon of Assisi graces the front exterior, and there's not a fresco on the back. The interior is entirely without decoration.

Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America

An early friar at this 1889 monastery in Washington, D.C., believed many Americans could not afford a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, so he created replicas of religious sites, including the Portiuncula Chapel, which was likely the idea of monastery founder of Fr. Godfrey Schilling. According to monastery publicist Susan Gibbs, the life-size reproduction built between 1925 and 1926 has “narrower stones than the original, [a] red tile roof, but no artwork and a simpler bell tower.” The interior has “plain white walls, simple movable wood pews, white marble altar and simple cross.”

Cardinal Cushing Centers

The idea for this full-scale replica, which was dedicated in Hanover, Massachusetts, in 1953, came from Boston’s Archbishop Richard Cushing, who ensured every piece originated from Assisi. Chief craftsman Frank Tarzia visited quarries near the Italian town, selecting, cutting, color-matching and numbering stones so the replica would be as accurate as possible. However, because the chapel was intended to be the cardinal’s mausoleum, the interior was redesigned as a crypt with an altar rather than a place of worship. Its steeple is also more Romanesque than the original, and a statue of St. Francis rests on the roof.



Franciscan University of Steubenville

After a 1985 trip to Assisi, Father Sam Tiesi used donations and local stonemasons to complete this Ohio replica in 1987. The chapel is simple in design without any frescoes. Inside are a single tabernacle, a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament, and 20 seats and kneelers. As Tiesi wrote, “[O]ur desire was to have our Portiuncula ... similar to the way it might have been when Francis finished rebuilding it in 1209. We tried to be true ... to certain aspects of the original: the size, the three doors ... the two windows on one side, a Roman window on the other side, the rustic stone structure, the bell tower, and the elevated altar.”

National Shrine of St. Francis

Completed in 2008 and 78 percent of the size of the original, the Nouva Porziuncola chapel in San Francisco, California, is accurate in almost every detail, including reproductions of the Overbeck and Perugino frescoes. It’s also considered a holy site in its own right. On Aug. 2, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI’s Papal Decree gave it a Pardon of San Francisco, an expanded version of the Pardon of Assisi.

These are all the replicas of the Portiuncula Chapel we could find. If you know of any others please contact us.