

St Joseph's Stairs

More than 100 years ago in 1852, the Sisters of Loreto travelled to New Mexico from Kentucky. Their superior, Mother Matilda died from cholera on way and four Sisters arrived Sante Fe in New Mexico in September 1852. One of the four Sisters became a new Superior named Sr Magdalene. They lived in a one-roomed house. Bishop Lamy planned for the Sisters to help teach the people so they needed a convent and a school. Mexican carpenters began to build the school and it was called the Loreto School of Our Lady of Light. began on the chapel later in 1873, designed by an architect called Mouly who also designed the Cathedral in Sante Fe.

The Mexican workmen were working on the first Gothic structure with the enterprise placed under the patronage of St Joseph 'in whose honour they prayed every day that he might assist them in the project'.

Work progressed despite financial problems. The Sisters were delighted with the Chapel. When the choir loft was finished, they discover there was not enough floor space left to build a stairs up to it. The loft was very high and it seemed not possible to fit a stairway up to it. Mother Magdalene called in many different carpenters but each of them said 'It can't done'. The only way was to pull the whole loft down and start again

but this was financially impossible for the Sisters. The Sisters wanted to have a choir ready for the Christmas celebrations. Sisters of Loreto decided to make a novena to St Joseph for a solution.

On the last day of the novena, a grey-haired man riding a donkey arrived at the Convent gate carrying a tool chest. He said he had heard they needed someone to build a stairs they were having difficulty with and he offered to try and build it for them.

Mother Magdalene accepted gladly and he set to work with what looked to be very antiquated tool. The Sisters never seemed to see him come or go but he was always there before anyone else in the morning and if they returned to the Church



after evening prayers, he was always gone.

As Christmas got nearer, the Sisters were getting ready for liturgical celebrations. They prepared the altar, cleaned out all the dust and chippings left around from the building work and decided to seek out their beautiful crib which they brought in boxes all the way from Kentucky.

When the crib was assembled, they discovered they were short of one figure and that was St Joseph. They searched high and low for the statue of Saint Joseph but could not find him.

On Christmas eve the carpenter announced he had finished the stairs and would have to go as he had important duties he had to attend to. Mother Magdalene went to get the money to pay him but when she came back he was not there. As he was now finished and while she expected him to return for

his pay, she felt she should go to the timber yard and pay for the timber he had used. To her utter amazement the timber yard owner never had a visit from any man building a stairs for the convent and knew nothing about it.



That evening Mother Magdalene was very puzzled as there was no record of the man or where the timber had come from. When she passed by the crib on her way through the church, she saw the crib and there to her great surprise was the figure of S Joseph. She knelt down to say a prayer and as she stared at the statue, she suddenly realised she was looking at

the statue of the carpenter who had built the stairs for them.

No one had ever found out where the timber came from and nothing had been paid for the timber that built the stairs as no one came forward to claim payment.

The winding stairway is now seen as a masterpiece of beauty and a wonder of engineering skill because of the way it was fitted into what seemed an impossible space. The stairs makes two full 360 degree turns and there is no supporting centre pole. It just seems to hang there with no visible support. The entire weight is on the base. Some architects have said that, by all the laws of engineering, it should have collapsed at the moment anyone stepped on it.

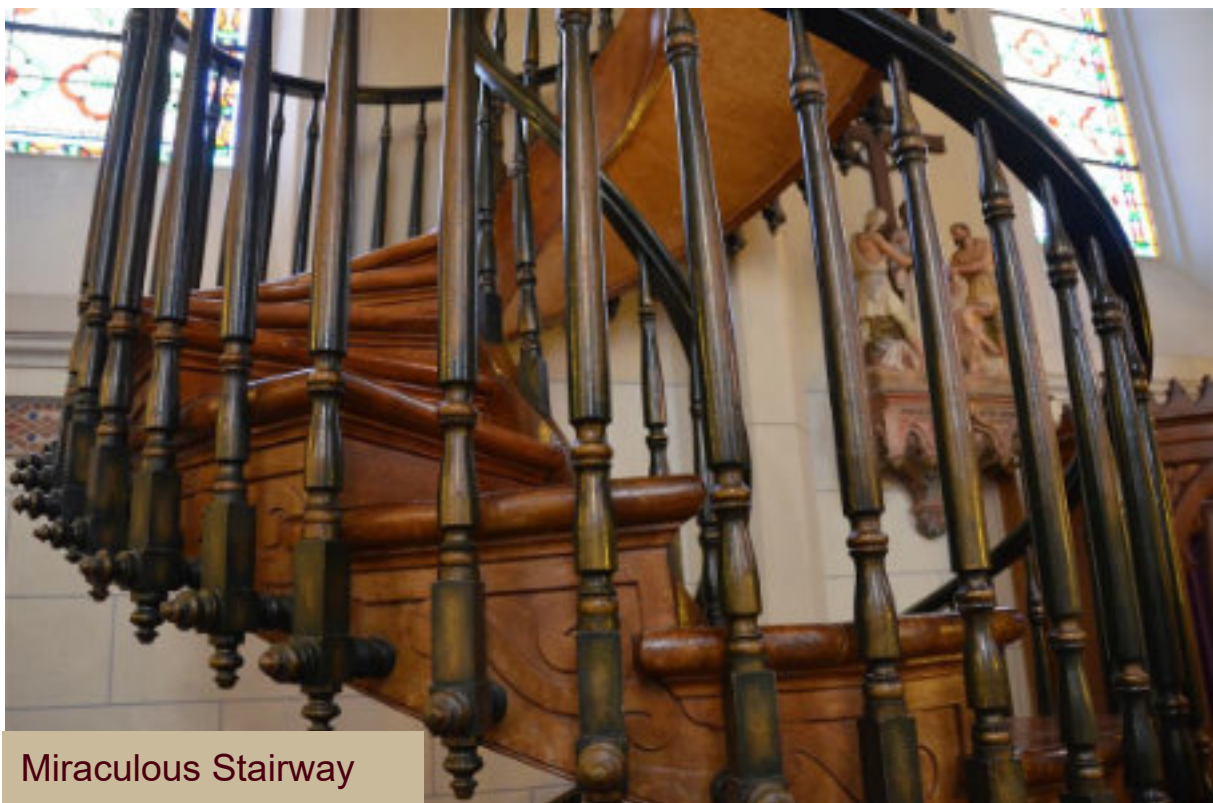
When it was examined by experts, it was discovered that the stairway was put together with wooden pegs or dowels only; not a single nail or screw was used. The part under the threads and between the strings looks like wood but it is just plaster with horsehair to strengthen it. The stairs has now been used daily for over a 100 years.

Visitors have now come from all over the world to see the wonderful stairway. Architects cannot understand how the stairs was constructed or how it remains sturdy after 100 years of use.

A Santa Fe architect, Urban C Weidner, who was an expert on timber construction, said he had never seen a circular wooden staircase with 360 degree turns that did not have a supporting pole down the centre. Mr Weidner found the perfection of the curves to be baffling.

The original stairway has no bannisters. They were added four years later.

The Sisters of Loreto know that the stairway is St Joseph's answer to their prayers and they believed that the grey-haired carpenter was St Joseph himself.



Miraculous Stairway