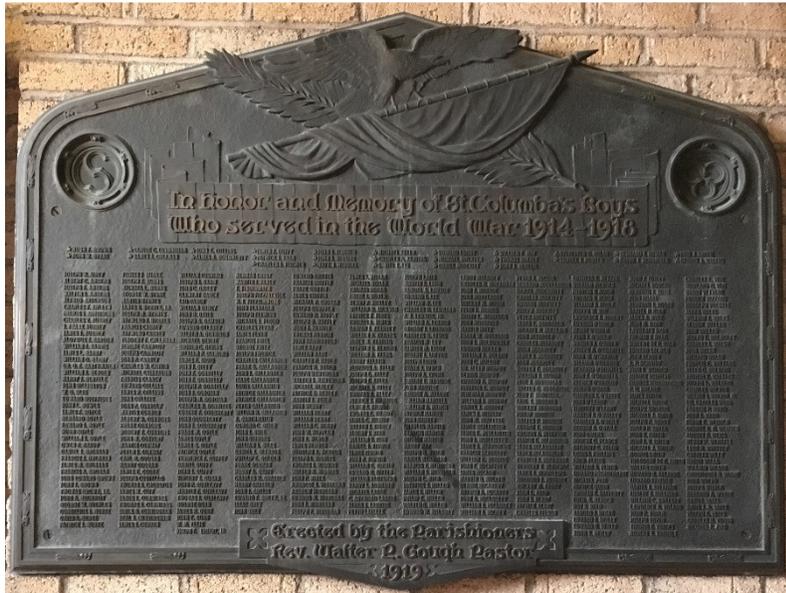


# The Doughboys of St. Columba's

By Chris Gibbons

Published in the Philadelphia Inquirer April 6, 2017



It was Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 1919, and the Solemn Military Memorial Mass for the doughboys of Philadelphia's St. Columba parish had just concluded. The attendees, led by an armed guard and color bearers, two from the Army and two from the Navy, filed out of the beautiful church and gathered in the school yard at 24<sup>th</sup> and Lehigh. The December 6, 1919 Catholic Standard and Times noted that during the Mass, seats were reserved in the middle aisle for the members of the families of the twenty seven boys of the parish who gave their lives during the Great War, and now these same family members were accorded the area closest to the cloaked structure now positioned at the front of the school yard. The late-autumn chill and overcast, sullen grey sky not only reflected the somber mood of the crowd, but many of the faithful likely believed that on this day, even God was sad. A ten year old boy stood next to the structure. A respectful silence fell among the crowd, and some wiped away tears, as the sorrowful eyes of the parishioners fell upon the boy. They knew why he had been chosen to unveil the large memorial tablet in honor of the St. Columba's doughboys who fought in World War I.

----

St. Columba's parish was founded in 1895, and the beautiful Gothic church at 24<sup>th</sup> and Lehigh was constructed in 1904. The parish was primarily comprised of Irish immigrants from the surrounding neighborhood known as "Swampoodle." I visited the church, now known as St. Martin de Porres, in March of 2014, and as I glanced up at its facade the Irish heritage of the masons and original parishioners was readily evident within the Gothic architecture of the building itself. High above the main entrance was a huge Celtic Cross, and just under it was a statue of St. Columba, the Irish missionary and Patron Saint of Derry. Statues of St. Brigid and St. Patrick also adorned the front exterior, and as I glanced up at them, I thought I heard my grandfather's voice, with his thick Irish brogue, whispering in the wind: "Ya see...the saints are lookin' down upon ya, lad." Although I knew it was just the wind and my imagination, I smiled anyway and softly answered, "I hope so, Grandpop." My

search for the Roman Catholic High School alumni who gave their lives in World War I had stalled, and it led me to St. Columba's that day. My father, an alumnus of both St. Columba's parochial school and Roman, suggested that I head down to the old church for some new leads. "There's a big monument in the vestibule", he told me. "It has the names of all of the guys from the parish who fought in World War I, and it also lists the ones who were killed. St. Columba's was a big feeder parish to Roman back then. Some of them might have gone to Roman."

I entered the church and was immediately struck by its beauty. Ornate stone, tiles, and brick trimmed in gold and green lined the walls and ceilings, with elaborate carvings, statues, and stained glass throughout the interior. I entered the vestibule and there, on the far wall, was the largest World War I Memorial tablet I had come across thus far. The December 6, 1919 Catholic Standard and Times described it as "a beautiful massive bronze tablet, 4 feet high and 6 feet wide, said to be the most elaborate of any erected in the city, and which is the gift of the parishioners." Carved upon the tablet are the names of the 486 members of the parish who served in the armed forces during the Great War. A special section contains the names of the 27 boys who gave their lives. My father turned out to be right, as subsequent research revealed that one of the boys killed, Frank T. Schommer, was a Roman alum. However, there were two names among the 27 that immediately caught my attention: Charles J. Fischer and John J. Fischer. I couldn't help but wonder if they were related.

-----

Ten year old Joseph Fischer stood at the front of St. Columba's school yard that Thanksgiving Day in 1919, and unveiled the Memorial Tablet that held the names of the doughboys of St. Columba's, including his brothers, Charles and John. A street parade of the parish soldiers who returned home under the command of Lieutenant Joseph Yates followed the unveiling ceremony, and the women of the parish held a banquet that evening for the doughboys. But for the parish families of the boys who never returned, the moment was bittersweet. The parents of St. Columba's Daniel Lee wrote a poem about their son that was published in the Philadelphia Inquirer just one month before the unveiling of the Memorial tablet that conveys the deep sense of loss and anguish these families must have endured:

*"A precious son from me was taken,  
A voice we loved is still,  
A wound within my heart is sealed,  
Which never can be healed,  
To France he went a volunteer,  
His love, his life was given,  
His body was not returned to me,  
But his soul was sent to heaven."*

Private Daniel E. Lee, of Philadelphia's 315<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, is buried at the St. Mihiel American Cemetery in France.

*(Chris Gibbons is a Philadelphia writer. gibbonscg@aol.com)*