

History of St. Patrick's Church (One Hundredth Anniversary Church Directory of 1998)

The great increase in manufacturing jobs in the late 1880's brought many foreigners into Whitinsville. In 1875, there were 1,306 people who were born in Ireland or Canada, most of whom were of the Catholic faith. Available evidence shows that the first Mass within town limits was said by a famous missionary priest, by the name of Reverend Fitton, at what is now Riverdale, in 1834. Before this, many people went to Uxbridge or Milford to attend services.

Whitinsville Catholics began to attend Mass regularly in 1852 when Father O'Reilly of Blackstone instituted monthly services. About this time, services were begun in the Rockdale section of town largely populated by French Catholics. In 1853, Reverend E.J. Sheridan, the first resident pastor of Uxbridge, began attending Whitinsville as a mission, saying his first Mass in a house on Church Street in Rockdale. When St. Mary's church in Uxbridge was finished on August 10, 1855, people from Whitinsville began to attend mass there. By 1865, St Mary's could not take care of all the Catholics. It was felt that the town needed its own church and Rev. Dennis O'Keefe purchased the land for one in 1868, at the corner of Church and Cross Streets in Whitinsville, where the church is still located.

Rev. O'Keefe's successor, Rev Dennis Moran, build and had the first church dedicated to God, under the patronage of Saint Patrick, in 1870, having Mr. Murphy of Providence as the architect. The first service was held on Christmas Day in 1870. Rev. Henry L Robinson became pastor in 1871. He was assisted by Father Langier, who especially administered to the French, who were the larger part of those of Catholic Faith.

Rev. H.L. Robinson, D.D., succeeded Father Moran as resident pastor of Uxbridge. He changed the position of the church in Whitinsville, building a stone basement and fronting the edifice on Church Street. Upon his promotion to the permanent rectorship of Chicopee, in May, 1889, the Whitinsville mission was raised to the dignity of a parish and the Rev. Peter S. O'Reilly was sent as first resident rector. Immediately upon assuming responsibilities of the parish, he took a complete census. He purchased from the Whitin Machine Works the land upon which now stand the rectory, the garage and the rear of the new church. Father O'Reilly employed a Boston architect to design the parochial residence. The house was finished and occupied in January, 1890.

The necessities of the parish showed an urgent need of a cemetery. In the following spring, Father O'Reilly purchased a tract of fourteen acres, centrally located between the villages of the town, a mile to the south of St. Patrick's Church, which under the title of St. Patrick's Cemetery

was consecrated by the late Bishop O'Reilly, in June 1890. The cemetery has since been fenced about, graded, and beautiful.

In the summer of 1994, beautiful granite pillars, engraved with the names of Saints and connected with heavy iron chain, replaced the old fence along Providence Road. Each pillar has been donated by Parish members in memorial of deceased loved ones, at a cost of \$500 each.

On Pro Life Sunday in October, 1997, a new section of the cemetery was developed in the northern area of the cemetery. This new area is known as the Corpus Christi Section. It was a new granite altar dedicated to those who respect life in all forms. It is used for the annual Memorial Day Mass and other liturgical celebrations. The altar and benches were donated by the Mumford Council of the Knights of Columbus.

The original St. Patrick's Church, build for a mission chapel, had long since proved itself inadequate to the needs of a parish church. The finances showed at this time a surplus of money in the treasury. Father O'Reilly felt it necessary to provide increased facilities for his people.

It was about this time that Father O'Reilly read an essay, in a religious magazine published in Boston, on church architecture in America, written by Charles Donagh Maginnis, a young Irishman educated at the Cusack's Academy in Dublin. Mr. Maginnis was the lead draughtsman of the City Architect's office in Boston, where he worked with another architect of gifted talent by the name of Matthew Sullivan.

The editor of the aforementioned church magazine asked Mr. Maginnis to write an article on church architecture in America. Mr. Maginnis consented on the condition that he be given rein to say what he pleased. The editor agreed. The result was a scathing characterization of the artistic shortcomings of the churches of the faith here in the United States.

A few days after its publication a telephone call from the editor of the magazine came to Mr. Maginnis at the Boston City Hall telling him that the pastor of the Parish of St. Patrick's in Whitinsville – a small mill town in Worcester County – wanted to see him as soon as possible.

A meeting was arranged and Mr. Maginnis learned from Father O'Reilly that he was planning on building a new church and he wanted "the author of that article to design it." While Mr. Maginnis was flattered by this remark he was also apprehensive. The article had not been written with the intention of drawing business; his object had been simply the unselfish motive of stressing the fact that the "aesthetic aspect of the Catholic form of worship was one of its most essential elements: of vital moment as a factor in bringing the consciousness of the worshipper a sense of the spiritual through its expression in terms of beauty and the harmonious order of our God-made world".

The young Maginnis until now had been wholly engaged in civic problems and before accepting the commission offered him by Father O'Reilly, he asked how could the pastor trust him as

competent to make a worthy design for his church when all he had done was to characterize existing shortcomings. Was there any assurance that with his inexperience in ecclesiastical design he could do anything better?

Father O'Reilly replied to the effect that the writer of that article had shown that he knew so thoroughly what he was talking about that he felt no doubt as to his constructive talent.

Thus, this first commission proved to be the determining factor in Mr. Maginnis's decision to specialize in ecclesiastical art. St. Patrick's Church stands as a pioneer landmark in the remarkable revival of Roman Catholic Architecture which took place in the United States in the early 20th Century.

The construction of St. Patrick's Church launched Mr. Maginnis into international renown. His next assignments were designing Holy Cross College Chapel, Boston College, and the Knute Rockne Memorial at Notre Dame. He also designed the Recitation Building on the campus of Boston College in Newton, Massachusetts, as well as numerous other churches in and around the Boston area.

"Mr. Maginnis always brought a high degree of enthusiasm and appreciation of the real possibilities of material, the value of wall surfaces, and the efficient massing of ornament, light and shade, to the project at hand. He used color a great deal even though carried out in monotone.

In the Autumn of 1897, the old St. Patrick's church was moved to the southern extremity of the church lot to serve as a house of worship until the new one could be completed.

The cornerstone of the new St. Patrick's church was laid on Sunday, May 15, 1898. The number of spectators was estimated at 3,000, and would have been double if the weather had been pleasant.

For several days it had been impossible to get a carriage in any of the surrounding towns as they were all hired to come to Whitinsville for this occasion. Numerous people even road in on bicycles. The exercises of the day opened with the celebration of the Children's Mass at 8:30 A.M. by Bishop Thomas D. Beaven of Springfield, who also administered the communion. He was assisted by Fr. O'Reilly.

At 10:30 A.M., Rev. D. F. McGrath of Holyoke celebrated the parish high mass and was assisted by Rev. Cornelius A. Sullivan of Worcester, formerly curate to Father O'Reilly. Very Rev. Dr. James Lynch of Utica, NY, cousin of Father O'Reilly, preached the sermon at this mass, and a feature of this mass was a tenor solo, "Ave Maria", sung by Father O'Reilly. Bishop Beaven pronounced the benediction.

The services connected with laying the cornerstone began about 3 P.M. A temporary altar had been erected for the occasion and a temporary gallery made for the choir. Bishop Beaven,

escorted by 13 altar boys and assisted by two deacons of honor and the attending priests, blessed the interior of the church and the altars, and then passed out of the edifice and blessed the stone proper, the doorways, and re-entered the church to chant the psalms.

They returned to the cornerstone, where the Bishop secured it with cement using a silver trowel, which the choir, under the leadership of Miss Mary E. Driscoll, and with Robert J. Ferris of Woonsocket, RI as organist, sang the “Veni Creator”.

The stone was made of brownstone, inscribed with the words: “St. Patrick’s, 1898”. A box was deposited in the stone containing several rare coins, a pamphlet containing a history of Whitinsville, an essay written by Father O’Reilly on the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Whitinsville, an essay written by the architect, Charles Donagh Maginnis on the architecture of St. Patrick’s church, and a copy each of the Worcester Telegram, the Worcester Daily Spy and the Uxbridge Compendium.

Rt. Rev. Msgr. Thomas J. Conaty, D.D. Rector of Catholic University of Washington, D.C., preached the cornerstone sermon. His text was “For other foundations can no man lay but that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus” I Cor, iii, 2.

Dr. Conaty was not a stranger to the parishioners of St. Patrick’s at the time, and all were anticipating a worthwhile sermon. He spoke for about 45 minutes.

The exercises came to a close with the apostolic benediction, pronounced by Bishop Beaven. During the address, a collection was taken for the church, as was the custom when first entering a new edifice of this kind. The silver trowel, which the Bishop used to lay the cornerstone, was to be given, with distinguished honors, to the parishioner who contributed the most money on this occasion.

The altar boys who assisted in the ceremony were: Edward Lunney, Timothy Regan, Thomas Tynan, Andrew Cabill, William Sherlock, James Duggan, John McGuinness, William Hansbury, Edward Hansbury, Samuel St. Andrew, William Raso, William Cooney and Thomas Devlin.

The plans for the new church include the capacity to hold 1000 people; however, seats for only 900 were placed upon completion of the church in early November, 1898. The other 100 were added at a later date. The octagonal chapel, which forms a handsome and unique feature of architecture of the church, originally had seats for 200.

Upon completion, the church was regarded as one of the most beautiful edifices in Massachusetts because of its architecture, and is an ornament to Whitinsville even at the present time.

Extensive plans were undertaken in the spring of 1994 to renovate the exterior and portions of the interior of the church, as the elements of nature had done some damage to the brick face and some leakage had occurred in the interior of the building. The architect contracted to perform these services is Mr. Bill Brown, AIA Professional Corporation of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The new church, and the one that currently stands today, was build of brick and terra cotta and copied from the Cathedral at Prato and San Zeno in Verona, Italy. The bell tower is placed back toward the chancel end, giving a balanced proportion to the whole. This emphasizes the design at the chancel end rather than at the entrance.

Also, in the case of St. Patrick's, the position of the tower gives a buttressing effect against the slope of the hill. It is build so as to show the lightening effect obtained by the gradual enlargement of the openings as it ascends, while the perpendicular outline is strictly preserved. Since the tower does not touch the church at any part, it is really a campanile.

An interesting plan was devised for the stained-glass windows. In the aisle windows, there is arranged a series of the early saints of Celtic origin, such as St. Kevin, St. Brendan, and St. Columbkille. The central window of the chancel is occupied by the Crucifixion, the window at the right by St. Peter, and on the left, St. Paul. (While this was the original plan, we have a window of St. Bridget where St. Paul was to have been.) The chapel windows depict incidents in the life of St. Patrick.

Over the vestibule, as you enter the church from the main entrance, is a lovely rose stained glass window.

The Stations of the Cross were made by a French sculptor, Tissot. They received first prize in the Chicago world's Fair in 1893. Their colors are historically correct, and the detail in the people depicted is exquisite.

A gem of Ecclesiastical Art is the panel which decorates the main entrance on Cross Street. The central figure is the Blessed Virgin with the Infant Jesus in her arms. St. Patrick is on the left side and St. Bridget is on the right side, both kneeling adoration. Jesus has just presented a jeweled crown to St Patrick, and is now giving his Blessing. St, Bridget kneels with hands clasped in prayer. Beside her is the lamp of hope. In the rear is an Irish tower and sunburst. Angels' heads in clouds ornament the background. In order to see this panel at its best, it must not be viewed from directly in front, but from a position some twenty-five feet below. This panel is also reproduced in the interior of the church at the entrance to the chapel from the chapel.

Later the grading and the landscaping were artistically done. Concrete walks were laid down; Lombardy (Northern Italy) poplar trees were planted.

By November 14, 1899, a contract was signed with the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland, to cast a new 5,100 pound bell. This was a gift from Protestant friends in Whitinsville. At the time it was raised to its position in the bell tower, it was the largest swinging bell in the country.

Just before Christmas, a great gathering from all over the community witnessed the hoisting of the bell. People of all denominations assisted in skidding the bell from the front entrance to the base of the tower, then hoisting it to its present position. Since then, it summons the people to all services and the Angelus rings three times a day.

In January 1904, the parish numbered 4,000 souls. Then the late Bishop Beaven deemed it advisable to set apart the Rockdale church as a separate parish. The following October, a new parish at Linwood was created. These changes reduced the number of members in St. Patrick's to 1,200.

On Tuesday evening, October 18, 1905, Father Peter S. O'Reilly died suddenly. Not only the Catholic people, but the entire community, felt this loss keenly. Father O'Reilly was laid to rest beneath the altar of the church.

Monsignor Phelan burned the mortgage on St. Patrick's Church in 1910 and purchased the Honorable Arthur F. Whitin estate, located on Linwood Avenue, for a school and convent. He also redecorated the church interior in the fall of 1923. In July, 1930, Msgr. Phelan was transferred to Worcester.

Father Foran came in July 1930, and was St. Patrick's for fifteen years. He did much toward building up the church, school and cemetery funds. Also during his time, the Sanctuary Choir was inaugurated. In January, 1945, Father Foran became ill and died in St. Vincent's Hospital three weeks later.

Down through the years there have been many church societies and fraternal organizations such as: The Holy Name Society, Married Women's and Young Ladies Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Rosary and Scapular Confraternity Altar Society, Daughters of Isabella and Ancient Order of Hibernians.

In January, 1950, Worcester County was separated from the Springfield Diocese and became the first Worcester Diocese. Most Rev. John J. Wright, D.D., became the first Bishop and St. Paul's Church, the Cathedral. In August, 1959, Most Rev. Bernard J. Flanagan succeeded Bishop Wright. On December 8, 1994, Bishop Timothy Harrington retired after serving the Worcester Diocese for 24 years. The Most Rev. Daniel Riley from Providence was inducted as the next Bishop of the Worcester Diocese.

On November 20, 1956, Pastor Rt. Rev, Msgr. James A. Deery passed away after a long illness of several months. In addition to his projects already mentioned, Msgr Deery build St. Patrick's School on Cross Street in Whitinsville, in 1952. The school had ten classrooms, a cafeteria, a gift of Msgr. Phelan, and an office. It was staffed by the Sisters of the Presentation.

Upon the death of Msgr. Deery, Rev. Francis M. Hickey was appointed the sixth Pastor of St. Patrick's Church. Father Hickey, a former curate of St. Patrick's, was later made Dean of the

Milford Deanery. Father Hickey renovated the church in accordance with the changes specified in the Second Vatican Council. He invited Sister Marilyn Salamone, a Trinitarian Nun, and Sister Emily Kane of St. Joseph's Order, to come as CCD Coordinators. On June 5, 1970 the parish purchased the Levi Dasco property which adjoins the church complex and is now known as the East Street House.

In June 1971, St. Patrick's school was closed and a number of pupils transferred to St. Peter's in Northbridge. A year later, St. Peter's school was regionalized with other parishes, including, St. Patrick's, St. Peter's, Good Shepherd, and St. James in South Grafton.

St. Patrick's school was rented by the town of Northbridge to be used as a public school. On Friday, March 22, 1974, the town purchased the convent and school which is now known as the Cross Street school. The old convent on Linwood Avenue now serves as the Northbridge School Administration Building. With the sale of the school, space was needed to carry on the CCD programs. The undeveloped basement of the Church was excavated and converted into a center for a church business and social functions, with a ground level entrance on the East Street side and two entrances from the main body of the church. Provision was made for CCD offices, eleven classrooms, a social hall, kitchen and storage. William M. Guertin Co., of Linwood was awarded the contract to perform the work.

In the Spring of 1972, Father Hickey was honored at a Mass and reception on the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. The following September, he retired.

Through the Second Vatican Council also came about a new experiment in Pastoral Ministry, called Team Ministry. In 1972, following the retirement of Father Hickey, St. Patrick's became part of this experiment. The new co-pastors at St. Patrick's were Rev. Daniel M. Driscoll and Rev. John J. Kelliher, who share the responsibilities in the spiritual and physical welfare of the Parish.

Father Kelliher became Parish Director of the CCD Program. Sister Mary Little, of the Sister's of Mercy, became Coordinator of the Jr. and Sr. High School program. Sister Marilyn Salamone was Coordinator of the elementary department. In keeping with modern methods of education, audio-visual aids began to be used on most programs.

Father Driscoll served as Director of the Catholic Youth Program and Superintendent of St. Patrick's cemetery. A whole new segment of the cemetery was opened in 1974. Four acres came under development to be used as needed by the Parish. In 1974, a garage was also built to house the backhoe, truck and other equipment.

In 1975, parish organizations consisted of the Parish Council, St. Vincent de Paul, Knights of Columbus, Women's Guild of St. Patrick's, Catholic Youth Council, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts.

On October 20, 1974 at 4 P.M., Bishop Flanagan celebrated a Mass in dedication of the 75th year of the building of the church, followed by the blessing of the new CCD Center and Social Hall.

Note: Addendum written in 1998.

Since 1975, there have been a number of changes in clerical leadership at St. Patrick's as well as in the other areas of parish ministry. In 1990, the era of co-Pastors came to an end. Bishop Harrington appointed Fr. George Dunkley as Pastor with Fr. John Reilly as Associate Pastor. The Pastor and Associate Pastor model has been used here since that time. In 1982, MaryAnn DiGregorio was hired as the Religious Education Coordinator. Sr. Shirley Bigwood, SSJ, was appointed as Pastoral Associate in 1982, with her primary responsibilities being to the elderly of the parish. Her untimely illness forced her to retire in 1989. Sr. Shirley entered into eternal life in 1992. St. Margaret Walsh, SSJ, was appointed in 1987 as Pastoral Associate with responsibilities to Youth Ministry and subsequently to the senior citizens. Sr. Margaret assumed new duties outside the parish in 1997.

In 1996, co-pastor Fr. William Cormier and Sr. Paulette Garipey, DHS, led the RENEW program in the Diocese and in our parish. This program of gathering people together to share their faith with one another became a watershed moment in the life of the parish. Since that time, the parish has demonstrated an ability to share its faith with one another so as to continue to grow in that same faith we have all come to love and share.

During 1985, a Centennial Fund was established by Frs. Carmody and Cormier to address the needs of the building in preparation for the celebration of the Centennial of the church. It was in 1991, that concrete plans were made to renovate, restore and preserve the parish church. In 1994, these plans were revised using a process whereby parishioners had a greater share in the design and implementation of the plans for the interior and exterior work. A Steering Committee was established with Tim Wickstrom as the Chairman. Mr. Bill Brown AIA, of Brown and Smith Architects of Colorado Springs, Colorado, was chosen as the architect for the project. In 1996, Phase I of the work was essentially completed with the installation of a new slate roof on the church and the chapel as well as copper roofing on the bell tower. Additionally, the bricks were re-pointed and interior secured from the elements.

In May of 1998, the Centennial Year of the parish, Phase II will begin and bring to a successful end the long awaited renewal of our building and of the parish.

We are indebted to Kristin Zedilis, who reconstructed this history of the parish from many different sources.

