

History of St. Patrick's Church (Fiftieth Anniversary Program of 1949)

As far as we can learn from the hazy past, the first Mass within the limits of Northbridge was said in Riverdale by the famous missionary priest, Rev. Father Fitton, nearly one hundred and sixteen years ago (1834). Father Gibson, of Worcester, has left documents which show that he celebrated the Holy Mysteries more than one hundred years ago in Northbridge and Whitinsville. To this English priest falls the honor saying the first Mass in Whitinsville. The Catholics at that time were obliged to go to Uxbridge, Milford, and other places for the ministrations of Holy Church. As far as we can learn, Catholics began to attend Mass regularly here in 1852, when Father O'Reilly of Blackstone instituted monthly services. In 1853, Rev. 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, and in Rockdale. When St. Mary's Church in Uxbridge was finished in August 10, 1855, the good people of Whitinsville went there until their own chapel was erected. In May, 1857, Father O'Keefe received the pastorate of Uxbridge, having Whitinsville as a mission. It was he who purchased the site of the chapel on the corner of Church and Cross Streets in Whitinsville. In 1870, Rev. D. C. Moran built and had the first church dedicated to God under the patronage of St. Patrick, having as his architect Mr. Murphy of Providence.

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 made a complete census of the parish. He purchased from the Whittin 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 a beautiful and commodious 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, Uncle to Father O'Reilly, in June 1890. The sermon for this occasion was delivered by the Rev. Dr. Conaty, then of Worcester, to a gathering of about three thousand five hundred people. The cemetery, pronounced one of the most desirable natural sites for burial purposes in New England, has since been fenced about, graded and beautified.

The old St. Patrick's Church, which was built 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 in the

treasury. Father O'Reilly felt it incumbent upon him to provide increased facilities for his people. In the Autumn of 1897, the old church was moved to make room for the new. Father O'Reilly sought expert opinion at home, and abroad, with reference to true church architecture. No suitable American style was yet in vogue. After much study, expense, and travel it was deemed expedient to adopt the North Italian Gothic in all its purity of architecture and simplicity of style. Mr. Charles D. Maginnis of Boston, a gifted architect of the firm of Maginnis, Walsh, and Sullivan, was engaged for the work.

Our church is of selected brick and terra cotta, and modeled after the Cathedral at Proto and San Zeno in Verona, Italy. It seats one thousand people. 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.

Conditions here did not demand a basement church, so an octagonal chapel was built. In this chapel are the baptistery and two confessionals. An altar was erected so that all week day functions could be performed in the chapel, leaving the main church for Sunday services only, if desired. Between the chapel and church is a small lobby, from which a winding staircase leads to the jube. This is a small choir room from which the choir may accompany services either in the main church or chapel.

Directly opposite the chapel is a vestry. Over the vestry and approached by the tower stairway is a room which may be used by various societies. The wall on the church side of this little hall is pierced by a large screen arch so this can also be used as a gallery.

However, the main gallery and organ are found over the vestibule at the front of the church. In the background is a beautiful rose window. The sanctuary opposite the main choir gallery is deep, giving ample room for the solemn ceremonies of Holy Church.

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. The chapel windows depict incidents in the life of St. Patrick.

Our unusual Stations of the Cross were made by Tissot, the noted French sculptor of Paris. They received first prize at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Their colors are historically correct.

There is a beautiful panel over the Cross Street entrance. The central figure is the Blessed Virgin with the Infant Jesus in her arms. On the left side is St. Patrick, on the right St. Bridget, both

kneeling in 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 a sunburst. Angels' heads in the 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 church.

A large crowd gathered for the laying of the cornerstone on Sunday, May 15, 1898, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The late Rt. Rev. Thomas D. Beaven, D.D., bishop of Springfield, using a magnificent silver trowel, deposited these articles beneath the cornerstone: an essay by the Pastor, Rev. Peter S. O'Reilly, on the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Northbridge, an essay on St. Patrick's Church architecture by Charles D. Maginnis, the sermon of the day, a box containing several rare coins, one copy each of the Worcester Daily Spy, the Uxbridge Compendium and the Worcester Telegram.

All present returned to the entrance of the church where the ceremony of the blessing of the walls was performed. Next came the sermon by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Thomas J Conaty, the Rector of Catholic University in Washington. People of all denominations attended. September 24, 1899 was the Feast of the Dedication.

Later, the grading and landscaping were artistically done. Concrete walks were laid down, Lombardy (Northern Italy) poplar trees were planted, and the whole estate rendered neat and charming.

By November 14, 1899, a contract was signed with the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland, to cast a new 5,100 pound bell, to be installed by Christmas. This was a gift from good Protestant friends in Whitinsville. At the time, it was the largest swinging bell in this country. There is a control on the bell that regulates the tone. On the occasion of the blessing of the bell, it was placed in the front vestibule of the church. Mrs Timothy Gorman and Mr, Levi Rasco were Godmother and Godfather of the bell, which was named Mary Magdalene. The baptismal ceremony was performed by Dr. Conaty, and the sermon delivered by that learned convert, Rev. Edward Welch, S. J.

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 daily.

In January of 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, the new parish at Linwood was created. These changes reduced the number of members in St. Patrick's to 1,200. Today, we have 3,000 parishioners in St. Patrick's parish.

The Mumford Block was left as church property by the will of Mrs. Callahan McCarthy and proved a worthy gift to this parish.

On Tuesday evening, October 18, 1905, Father O'Reilly died suddenly, as he was preparing for a trip to the Mediterranean. Death was due to angina pectoris. Not only the Catholic people, but the entire community, felt this loss keenly.

Since that time we have had four pastors: the late Rt. Rev. Msgr. Cornelius A. Sullivan, Rt. Rev. Msgr. John P. Phelan, present Vicar-General of this diocese, the late Rev. John J. Foran, D.D., and the Rev. James A. Deery, our present pastor.

Msgr. Phelan burned the mortgage on our church and purchases the Hon. Arthur F. Whitin estate for a school and convent. This made a valuable addition to our church property. Today we have the Sisters of the Presentation whose Mother House is in Fitchburg. This year we have enrolled in our kindergarten forth-two children.

At the close of the First World war, we had a Memorial Service. It was held outside at the Cross Street entrance to the church. Remarks were made by the late U.S. Senator David I. Walsh. The late Rev Joseph Dinand, S. J., then President of Holy Cross College, delivered the principal address. Msgr. Phelan gave the Benediction.

Msgr. Phelan also redecorated the church interior in the fall of 1923. It was done in keeping with the Gothic architecture by the firm of Rambusch of New York.

In July, 1930, Msgr. Phelan was transferred to Worcester.

On our Honor Roll for World War I there are 130 names from this parish, four of whom were killed. Edward Anderson and Jeffrey L. Vail were killed in action. Edward Douville and Alfred St. Jean died of disease. For World War II, there are 332 names, twelve of whom made the supreme sacrifice. The list of dead are: Frank Berkowicz, Francis Bonoyer, Floyd Convent, Harvey Duquette, Royal E. Jefferson, Stanley Kmiotek, Donat Lachapelle, John Moran, Richard Moran, Charles L. Randall, Jr., Henry Trajanowski and Frank Volsick.

Father Foran came in July, 1930, and was with us for fifteen years. He did much toward building up our church, school and cemetery funds. Also during his time the Sanctuary Choir was inaugurated. In January, 1945, while travelling south, Father Foran became ill and was obliged to return home. Our beloved Pastor died in St. Vincent's Hospital three weeks later.

Down through the years, our parish has given to God six priests and twelve nuns,

Our present societies are the Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Isabella, Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Ladies Auxiliary, A.O.H., St. Jean de Baptiste, the Foresters, the Rose de Lima Society, and the Catholic Women's Council. For the youth we have the Catholic Boy Scouts and the Patricians.

Our Senior, Junior and Sanctuary choirs each have an average of thirty members.

Many fine curates have served this parish well. Several curates have since been made pastors. One curate later was made a Monsignor, and two were consecrated Bishop. Father Cornelius Sullivan became Msgr. Sullivan of Springfield, Father William Hickey became Bishop Hickey of Providence, Father Joseph Rice became Bishop Rice of Burlington, Vermont,

Father Deery came in April, 1945. He has made many fine improvements. The cemetery has a new drainage system and the Mumford property has been repaired and redecorated. The rectory and convent have been renovated. During the last months the church likewise has been beautified by DaPrato of New York.

During the summers of 1948 and 1949 we have held lawn parties at the John Whittin Lasell Memorial Field. The united efforts of all members of the parish made both parties very successful.

This year we celebrated the Golden Anniversary of the Dedication of the present St. Patrick's Church. On Easter Monday, April 18, 1949, we held in Memorial Hall our Anniversary Ball, which was a great success. On Sunday evening, November 20, 1949, there will be held in the Memorial Hall a banquet as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebration. The guest speaker for the occasion will be Rev. Edward L. Murphy, S.J., of St. Mary's Church, Boston. Remarks for the occasion will also be made by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. John P. Phelan, recently appointed Administrator for the Springfield Diocese, because of the death of the Most Rev. Thomas M. O'Leary, our Pastor, Rev. James A. Deery, and some of the older members of the parish.

This banquet will be the final event of the Golden Anniversary celebration.

Note: The Mumford Block, on the corner of Church and Prospect, diagonally across from the Church, is currently a parking lot. The building was used for many years as a place for parish meetings.