

EARLY HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BANGOR

Early Bangor

There was no significant Catholic population in Bangor prior to 1820; the first settler arrived in 1769, and by 1800, the population was only 277, mostly English descendants of the colonists, many of them still loyal to the British crown.

The population began to grow during the next 20 years, although life was hard; there was a fatal epidemic during 1809 and 1810, and the War of 1812 brought a force of 500 British troops into town in 1814, where they looted many stores and burned or captured many ships in the harbor. The winters of 1815 and 1816 were extremely severe (it snowed in June, and birds died by the thousands), and some settlers decided to head west. But speculators were arriving to acquire timberland, and the town was growing.

The Early Catholic Community

Meanwhile, times were tough in Ireland, with a poor economy and wide-spread religious persecution of the Irish Catholic population, which prompted many to start emigrating in the early 19th century to the United States and Canada. Conditions in Canada were not much better, and a few of the immigrants started to migrate south into Maine.

The nearest Catholic mission at that time was in OldTown, at the Penobscot Indian reservation, and the few Catholics in the area were required to travel there to attend Mass.

The first Mass was celebrated in Bangor by Reverend James Conway in December 1828, at the home of James Carr on Court Street. The following year, a dwelling on Broad Street was occasionally used as a temporary place of worship.

In 1832, Quebec and the Maritime Provinces of Canada were hit by a cholera epidemic, and many of the Irish immigrants fled the ghettos, especially from St. John, N B, and headed south toward Bangor. In a two-week period in August of that year, over 800 crossed the new covered bridge over the Penobscot River into Bangor. The City fathers approached the governor for help in preventing their entry, and sent a delegation to Ellsworth to encourage that community to turn back any further stragglers, but to no avail. Bangor's population had suddenly become 20% Irish.

And they were not welcome. They were dirty, tired and sick; their strange clothes were in tatters; they spoke an unknown language (Irish); they had no belongings, no money, and no means of support; and, most appalling, they were Roman Catholic! It was feared that they would infect the native population with cholera, but that never happened. And they stayed. They settled into tenements in the Hancock Street area, the lower Union Street and Front Street area (known as Devil's Half-acre), and the area around the Gas Works north of Main Street.

Most of them went out daily in search of work, becoming known as Day Laborers. They worked as loggers in the woods, or in the many sawmills; they loaded and unloaded ships in the busy Bangor harbor; they dug trenches and built sewer lines, built new streets and sidewalks, and laid railroad tracks, earning about 85¢ a day, but they survived.

The First Catholic Church and Cemetery

Benedict J. Fenwick, the Bishop of Boston, was very aware of this increase of Catholics into an area where no established Catholic parish existed, and in 1832 he appointed Reverend Patrick McNamee as the first permanent pastor in Bangor, and in on May 5, 1833, he purchased a lot on the

west side of Court Street from Patrick Owens for \$400., to be used as the site for a new church. Located in what is now a portion of Coe Park, the lot measured 62' x 104', and in April of 1834, the bishop bought another lot located west of the first. Ground was broken for the new church in the summer of 1835 on the first lot, and the church was dedicated in the winter of 1836 as St. Michael's, with the Reverend Michael Lynch as its first pastor.

Realizing the need for a cemetery to serve the needs of the new Catholic parish, in April of 1836 the Bishop purchased eight lots located between Buck Street and Lincoln Street from William Magan and John Quinlin at a cost of \$450. The lots included what is now the portion of West Broadway lying between those two streets, and the adjacent small park to the south.

The Catholic Church was thus formally established in Bangor.

Devastation in Ireland

In August of 1845, an event occurred in Ireland which would have a profound and everlasting effect on the country and its population: in a period of a few weeks, a blight hit the blossoming potato crop, almost completely destroying it.

At that time, more than 75% of the native Irish population was living in abject poverty, as tenant farmers on land formerly owned by their ancestors, 90% of which had been forcibly taken by the English. The population had risen to 8¼ million people, making Ireland - almost the same size as Maine - one of the most densely-populated countries in the world. The Irish grew as many crops as possible on their meager holdings, with at least two-thirds of the harvest going to the landlord to cover the rent; they were also required to pay a hearth tax to England, as well as a tithe to the hated Protestant Church of Ireland.

For their own needs, the Irish grew potatoes. One acre of potatoes would support a family of six from harvest in the fall until the following summer; they were easy to grow, they were nutritious, and they left the bulk of their remaining holdings to grow the much-needed cash crops. They ate potatoes morning, noon and evening.

The loss of the crop was devastating, but didn't stop the flow of the other crops and livestock out of the country to line the pockets of the already-wealthy landlords. The potato crop would also fail for the next five years, and assistance from England was totally inadequate. Deaths from starvation and fever started in 1846, and by 1850 one million people had died, and another 1½ million had emigrated, mostly to North America, and many ending up in Bangor. It was a repeat of the 1832 influx of the Irish, but in far greater numbers.

A New Catholic Church, and a New Catholic Cemetery

As a result of the Irish famine immigration, the size of the Catholic community suddenly exceeded the capacity of St. Michael's church, necessitating that the church doors be left open during Mass so that the hundreds who could not be accommodated inside could participate in the outside yard. A parcel of land was acquired on York Street, and under the guidance of Reverend John Bapst, then the pastor of St. Michael's, the cornerstone for "St. John the Evangelist" Church was laid on December 8, 1854.

At that time, anti-Catholic feelings were running high in Bangor, influenced by The Know Nothing Party; false rumors that a "nunnery" was being established in the basement of the new church led to a growing threat that the church would be burned to the ground, necessitating the posting of armed laborers and their wives at night to insure that the previous day's work was not

destroyed. The construction proceeded, and the first Mass was celebrated in the partially-completed church on Christmas Eve, 1855. The church, with a capacity of 1,200, was formally dedicated on October 12, 1856, and St. Michael's Church was subsequently torn down.

The cemetery on Buck Street was also reaching its capacity, and in December 1854 Father John Bapst purchased 14 acres of land located adjacent to Kenduskeag Stream on Ohio Street from four parishioners - Michael Boyce, Alex McKinnon, Patrick Wall, and Michael McCarty - for \$2,100. A new cemetery was started at that location the following year, then known as Birch Hill Cemetery, and it is believed that at least some of the gravestones, if not the remains, were relocated from Buck Street to the new cemetery; stones dating to 1845 have been observed in the new cemetery. It is not known exactly when the name of the cemetery was changed, but records dated in the early 1870's bear the name Mount Pleasant Cemetery, which prevails today. Mount Pleasant Cemetery has been expanded by the purchase and development of additional land over the years, and was bisected by the construction of Interstate I-95 in the early 1960's, and now encompasses a total area of 69.5 acres, of which 41.9 acres has been developed. At its present rate of development, it is estimated that Mount Pleasant will be able to serve the needs of the Catholic community for another 300 years.

Another Catholic Church for Bangor

With the continuing influx of immigrants and the growing families of those who came earlier, as well as the expansion of the west side of the city away from St. John's, it soon became apparent that another parish would be required; consequently, in May 1872, the area on the west side of Kenduskeag Stream was set off as the parish of St. Mary, and on September 16, 1872, the cornerstone was laid for the new church on land at the corner of Cedar Street and First Street; Reverend John W. Murphy was designated as the new pastor. During its construction, masses were held in the Basement of City Hall; the finished church was dedicated on December 8, 1874.

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