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Statue of the Virgin Mary, desecrated in a Know-Nothing attack on St. Mary’s Church, Newark in 1854. (Star-Ledger photo.)
What Is The NJCHRC?

In 1974, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a document urging residential bishops “to grant access to the diocesan archives without undue limitations when properly accredited historians request it.” Newark Archbishop Peter Leo Gerety, recognizing in his chancery records a rich scholarly potential, and anxious “to have this valuable collection of materials stored and assembled in a manner conducive to its use as a historical source,” transferred custody of the archives to Seton Hall University on January 6, 1977.

A New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission, composed of religious and lay scholars, was formed to coordinate the transfer and acquire other relevant primary documentation. In addition, the group envisioned an ambitious publications program to disseminate this newly available research material. Commission members currently include: Bishop John J. Dougherty (former Seton Hall president and scholar-in-residence) chairman; Joseph Mahoney (Seton Hall history professor) project director; Msgr. William Noé Field (Seton Hall library director); Carl Prince (New York University history professor); Peter Mitchell (president of Stockton State College); Fr. William Keller (Seton Hall history professor); Bernard Bush (New Jersey Historical Commission executive director); Sr. Margaretta Marchione, M.P.F. (Fairleigh Dickinson University professor); George Reilly (Seton Hall history professor) Fr. Francis Saymour (Archivist of the Archdiocese of Newark); Fr. Edwin Vose Sullivan (Seton Hall sociology professor); Mmiriam Murphy (Executive Director, New Jersey Committee for the Humanities); Rev. Raymond Kupko (Archivist of the Diocese of Paterson); Sr. Mary Ellen Gleason (Archivist, Sisters of Charity); and Msgr. Theodore A. Opednaker (Archivist, Diocese of Trenton).

Seton Hall quickly demonstrated its commitment to this pioneering project by providing storage space in the McLaughlin Library and engaging a full-time archivist (Peter J. Wosh) to administer the collection and other University holdings. After receiving a generous donation from the Knights of Columbus, the Commission began purchasing archival quality storage equipment to insure the proper care and preservation of this highly valuable collection.

Results have already benefited New Jersey’s scholarly community. A wealth of previously untapped primary source material, tracing diocesan development from 1853, has been opened for research. Collections document the careers of several important prelates in the nineteenth-century Church hierarchy, including James Roosevelt Bayley and Michael A. Corrigan. In addition, sources illuminate the lives of thousands of less articulate urban, immigrant, working-class churchgoers who constituted the bulk of New Jersey’s Catholic congregations. Bishops’ diaries and correspondence, records of benevolent, charitable, and fraternal organizations, priests’ biographical data, annual parish reports and sacramental records comprise the major portion of this material. Though more recent documentation (1930-present) is not presently available to scholars, its preservation and orderly transfer to Seton Hall is assured. The implications of this pioneering project for social scientists should be obvious, and many researchers have already taken advantage of Seton Hall’s new acquisitions.

Other NJCHRC projects include an active, expanding oral history program, the publication of an introductory history of the diocese (The Bishops of Newark 1853-1978, Seton Hall University Press, 1979) and a concerted effort to collect individual New Jersey parish histories. Researchers, scholars, or individuals interested in the Commission and its workings should contact Peter J. Wosh, University Archivist, McLaughlin Library, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079, or phone (201) 762-7052.

Publications

A primary NJCHRC priority involves publishing and encouraging scholarly works concerning New Jersey Catholic history. In the past year, several studies of note have appeared. The most comprehensive and ambitious is the Commission’s own Bishops of Newark 1853-1978 (Seton Hall University Press, 1979), which provides an introductory overview of diocesan development from its earliest beginnings to the present. Six scholars combined in this endeavor, each bringing a particular expertise, perspective, and style to the project.

Though the book’s title emphasizes the diocesan ordinaries, and each section focuses on a particular bishop’s reign, several chapters exhibit a sensibility to the Church’s social welfare and charitable programs, parochial schooling controversies, and immigrant parishioner base. As the first attempt in 75 years to update and analyze the Diocese of Newark’s history, this 184-page illustrated volume offers a useful introductory survey to secondary schools, introductory college survey courses, and the general reading public. Some outstanding individual chapters constitute highly professional works as well.

Copies of this volume may be obtained by mailing a check (payable to Seton Hall University Press) or money order of $5.95 for the paperback, $10.00 for the hardbound, or $50.00 for a special gold-embossed edition to: The Librarian, McLaughlin Library, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

Raymond M. Ralph’s “The City and the Church: Catholic Beginnings in Newark, 1840-1870,” New Jersey History, Autumn-Winter 1979, eschews conventional approaches to Church history and “drawing on the techniques of the new urban and social history” examines Newark Catholicism “from the bottom up.” By examining such non-traditional historical data as parish registers, birth, baptismal, marriage, and death registers, Ralph paints a fascinating portrait of the city’s mid-nineteenth-century Catholic population. The author concludes that these undervalued Newarkers “overcoming the shock of immigration and the harshness of urban life...built their parishes, supported their schools, struggled with themselves and saw their leaders do likewise, and tried to maintain their identity in an often hostile environment.”

Robert Emmett Curran, Michael Augustine Corrigan and the Shaping of Conservative Catholicism in America 1878-1902 (Arno Press, 1978) provides a new interpretation and perspective on the controversies which rocked American Catholicism in the late nineteenth century. Though dealing only briefly with Corrigan’s tenure as Bishop of Newark, Curran explores the fascinating relationship between Corrigan and Seton Hall’s first president and Bishop of Rochester Barnard J. McQuaid. Studies of the period, anyone interested in the problem of adapting Roman Catholicism to American political and social institutions, and, more broadly, proponents of the role of the individual in history should find this a challenging and thought-provoking interpretation.
From the Collections

In May 1879, Newark's second bishop, Michael A. Corrigan, recorded in the
diocesan diary a visit to the nationally
renowned resort town of Cape May.
During dinner with the local pastor, Fr.
Theophilus Degen, "the conversation
turned on the great fire last November,
which destroyed acres of houses in
Cape May, when the fire alarm an-
nounced a new fire directly opposite
the Church, in Mr. McCann's stables.
For a time, the anxiety and excitement
were intense. The wind was not
strong, fortunately, and the fire was
checked in half an hour or so. It was
the work of incendiaries—the eleventh
attempt of the kind since November."

More excitement lay in store for the
Bishop, however. While he was taking
an early evening stroll on the beach,
"another fire broke out near the
church, in an ice-house! It was like
Pandemonium all that night, shouting,
yelling & c..." Corrigan further noted
that on leaving the place next morn-
ing, I ascertained that all last winter
there was no fire in the church, and no
possibility of making one, there being
no chimney, and that in the high
winds, Father Degen also had no fire
in his sleeping room, 'for fear of a con-
flagration! The cold is intense in
winter, as the church is like a barn,
unplastered, and with a hundred
chinks. How the poor people could
hear mass is a mystery."

This devastating series of fires which
virtually leveled the isolated resort
town in the late 1860's and 1870's obvi-
ously exacted great economic and
psychological hardships on Cape May
residents. Ironically however, these
conflagrations also planted the seeds
of future community prosperity. The
subsequent redevelopment of Cape

Parish Histories

A principal Commission activity dur-
ing the past year involved collect-
ing and cataloguing parish history
booklets and commemorative publica-
tions. Responding to an appeal from
New Jersey's bishops, 324 parishes
have forwarded 389 histories to Seton
Hall. Ranging from a booklet
celebrating the "35th Anniversary of the
Consecration of St. John's
Church, Mulberry St., Newark," issued
in 1893, to the Silver Jubilee book of
Midland Park's Nativity Church
(1976), these publications vary widely
in content, bulk, and quality. Virtually
all, however, provide valuable in-
troductions to local church history.
Cumulatively, they document a wide
range of Catholic experiences and ex-
hibit interesting perspectives on
diocesan growth. Some older
volumes, in fact, serve as primary
source materials expressing the
thoughts, attitudes, and concerns of
earlier Catholic generations.

Unfortunately, many parishes have
not yet forwarded copies of their
histories. The success of our effort to
create a comprehensive collection
depends upon a large response. If you
are aware of a commemorative
publication not yet deposited with the
Commission please send a copy
through first-class mail to:

N.J. Catholic Historical Records
Commission
McLaughlin Library
Seton Hall University
South Orange, N.J. 07079

If your volume is unique, please con-
tact us at the above address and we
will attempt to arrange for some form
of duplication. Help us permanently
record your church's development and
make the record available to scholars.

The first Catholic church in Cape May, St. Mary's and its companion rectory. The
small wooden building served the community from 1846 to 1913.

The Commission acknowledges with
grateful the generous grant from the
Vincent and Anna Visceglia Foun-
dation which made possible this
publication.
Archdiocese’s 125th Anniversary
Celebrated with Newark Museum Exhibit

Within six months of its creation, the Archives of Seton Hall University and the NJCHRC simultaneously received recognition and a challenge. The Archdiocese of Newark determined to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the organized Catholic Church in New Jersey, and the Newark Museum offered the privilege of an exhibition as part of that celebration. Both institutions turned to Seton Hall and the NJCHRC.

The archives proved a valuable resource in garnering the material and historical background necessary to support the exhibition. Father Edmond established the Diocese of Newark and naming James Roosevelt Bayley as its first bishop were located in a deteriorating scrapbook, restored, and properly matted and framed. Msgr. William Nod Field proved particularly adept at scouring archives from Baltimore to New York and uncovering valuable records and artifacts.

A wide range of material representing the extraordinarily varied experiences of New Jersey Catholics was presented to museum-goers between October 5 and November 5, 1978. Ecclesiastical vestments, including Bishop Winand Wigger’s ornate, French-embroidered chasuble and Archbishop Thomas Walsh’s black beaver hat, documented changing episcopal fashions. The evolution of ceremonial chalices was depicted from traditional “lily cups” to modern pottery versions. Other individual highlights included a battered statue of the Virgin Mary, defaced during a “Know-Nothing” attack on Newark’s St. Mary’s Church in 1854; St. Elizabeth Ann Seton’s fruitwood writing desk, a monumental silver and enamel cloisonné processional cross presented to Newark’s first bishop, James Roosevelt Bayley, upon his promotion to Baltimore’s Archdiocese; an elaborate gold French monstrance presented to the diocese by Emmanuel, King of Sardinia; and a chalice presented to the pastor of Hoboken’s Our Lady of Grace parish by his close friend, Napoleon III.

In short, the exhibit disclosed a wealth of unexpected treasures, unearthed many forgotten records and documents, and encouraged widespread participation throughout the Archdiocese. As a rather surprising side benefit, the Seton Hall archives were enriched. Archbishop Borders of Baltimore, for example, presented Bishop Bayley’s diocesan scrapbook (1855-1872) to Msgr. Field at the 125th anniversary Mass, and this valuable documentary treasure now resides in McLaughlin Library. The exhibit also prompted a northern New Jersey family to remove the birth, baptismal, and marriage registers of an early nineteenth-century Catholic parish from their resting places in the family attic and deposit them at Seton Hall.

The astounding Museum attendance, recognition received from historical and learned societies throughout the metropolitan area, and growing historical consciousness fostered among both clerics and laymen established the validity and worth of the NJCHRC project at a very early stage and served as an impetus for future growth.

Grand Knight Joe Giannetti of the state Knights of Columbus (left) presents a check to support Commission activities to Bishop Dougherty, chairman, and Professor Joseph Mahoney, director.