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An Overview of Saint Michael’s Cathedral
In Passaic, New Jersey

Cathedrals are usually imposing buildings. The very word “cathedral” carries connotations of majesty and grandeur. We often forget, however, that cathedrals often did not start with these advantages, and it is good that we recall at times how they did begin.

Industrial development arrived early in the area which became Passaic County. Alexander Hamilton’s Society for Useful Manufactures established Paterson at the Great Falls of the Passaic River, one of the prime water-power sites on the Atlantic coast, and thus gave that city an early lead. Until after the Civil War no other area in Passaic county showed a notable growth of industrial activity. But the development of the Dundee canal in 1860 and the arrival of the railroad began to put Passaic on the industrial map. Textiles were the chief product, and it was to textile factories like the Waterhouse Mill that natives and immigrants began to flock in the late 1870s.

Perhaps “flock” is too strong a word to characterize the early population growth. As late as 1890 the population of the city was only 13,028, but in the next decade it more than doubled to 27,777. Prominent among the newcomers, beginning in the late 1870s, were growing numbers of Slavic peoples from the Austro-Hungarian empire and from the parts of old Poland absorbed by Prussia and Russia. And a substantial number of these were Catholics of the Ruthenian/Byzantine Rite.

The earliest immigrants of the Byzantine rite worshipped and received the sacraments in the Roman rite churches which thus far were all that had been established -- in Passaic this meant at the church of Saint Nicholas. But like the various ethnic groups within the Roman rite, these immigrants longed for their traditional ways of worship, the familiar rites and the well-remembered hymns of the Church they had learned in their native land.

This yearning began to be satisfied in the 1880s when the Reverend Alexander Dzubay started visiting the Ruthenian Catholics in the Passaic area. By 1890 the increase in the number of Greek Catholics in Passaic led Bishop Winand Wigger of Newark, who supervised and supported Dzubay’s activities in the continued on page 2

Church interior today
absence of a Byzantine Rite bishop in the United States, to approve the group’s desire to establish their own parish, and in November of that year Saint Michael’s Parish was incorporated under the laws of New Jersey. Communicants of the parish lived not only in Passaic, but in Dover, Hibernia, Clifton, Garfield, Lodi and elsewhere in New Jersey; some even came from over the New York border. But the parish still lacked its own place of worship.

In 1891 Father Nicephor Chanath was appointed the first resident pastor of Saint Michael’s and in that same year the parish bought the Dundee Chapel, a mission chapel erected by the Presbyterians in 1880 at First and Bergen Streets in Passaic. After some internal modifications, this building served the growing congregation for a dozen years. What did not increase as rapidly as the number of communicants was the income. Father Chanath had to struggle according to the May 3, 1905 Passaic Daily News to keep the parish solvent in these early years. He won that battle because the parish expanded the church and built a rectory in 1893, and in 1897 invited Bishop Wigger to consecrate the cemetery.

Still, there were other problems that are not clear in the records that still exist. In January, 1894, Chanath wrote to Bishop Wigger, in response to some complaint sent to the chancery. The pastor explained that the limited income of the parish kept the salary of the cantor low. The cantor was also the choirmaster and organist, and on weekdays served as the sacristan; he was, in fact, the best cantor around. When the parish income increased, Chanath promised, he would receive $20 per month. The agitation of this question, the pastor continued, was part of a conflict over the position of cantor. The implication obviously was that the matter was of little moment.

Things did not entirely quiet down for Father Chanath at Passaic. Later in the year he apparently asked Wigger for permission to go to Scranton, Pennsylvania, for three months, and on December 7 the bishop assented and noted that he expected him back. Wigger also wrote to Father Eugene Szatala to assume charge of Saint Michael’s for the three months of Chanath’s absence. Chanath, however, arranged to remain in Scranton and Szatala continued as rector of Saint Michael’s until 1902, when Father Nicholas Molscanyi became the third resident pastor.

By this time it was evident that the remodeled Dundee Chapel building was inadequate to meet the parish needs and in 1903 the old building was torn down and a new one was built at the same site. Troubles here were of various kinds. One was opposition from some non-Catholics to the building of the church. According to one old newspaper clipping, thefts of materials from the construction site hampered progress. “One rather unscrupulous gentleman,” a parish history records, “amassed such a collection of stolen building materials in his garage that discovery of them by the police was inevitable. When this occurred, the man casually dismissed the incident and attempted to explain that it was his seven-year-old daughter, not he, who was responsible for the theft.”

Another problem surfaced when one of the twin towers of the new building crashed to the ground during a severe windstorm. Although the architect’s plans for the building had been approved by the city building inspector and met all the requirements of the local code,
construction possibly did not follow the plans. Moreover, some of the bracing had been removed from the interior of the tower when the bells were hung, and not yet been replaced. The building inspector required extensive strengthening of both towers before construction could continue. Nonetheless, the parish completed and dedicated the building in autumn 1904.

When Saint Michael’s parishioners celebrated in May, 1905, the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the parish, they could look back on a decade and a half of struggle and difficulty through which they had come with success. Father Molscanyi recalled in his sermon at the anniversary Mass the difficulties with which the parish had had to contend and urged the people to remain steadfast in their faith and adherence to the Church.

The congregation of 1905 had no way to know that they had built a cathedral; they just built their parish church. But when, in 1963, a new diocese was established to meet the needs of the increasing number of Byzantine Catholics in the eastern United States, Passaic was designated as the see city and Saint Michael’s as the cathedral. Since then it has been the central church of a diocese that extends from Maine to Florida. This stage of the story would undoubtedly both surprise and gratify those who began the tale back in the 1880s.

Meet the Commission

Welcoming the newest member of the Commission is in reality welcoming back an old friend—well, a friend of many years. Peter J. Wosh is a native New Jerseyan who completed his bachelor’s degree at Rutgers University with highest distinction. Wosh then took his master’s degree at New York University, adding a certificate in Archival Management, Historical Society Administration and Historical Editing to his history training.

While earning his master’s degree he undertook an internship in the archives at Seton Hall University, eventually became archivist of the University, and worked actively with the Commission on a number of projects. He served as one of the editors of the Diocesan Journal of Michael Augustine Corrigan, published by the Commission in 1987.

In 1984, Wosh became archivist of the American Bible Society in New York City, while he continued work on his doctorate in history, which he received in 1988. Soon after he became Director of Archives and Library Services for the American Bible Society, a position he held until 1994, when he joined the history department of New York University and became director of the Archives Program there.

In the meantime Wosh has continued to publish on aspects of American economic and religious history, and has served the Society of American Archivists, as well as other professional organizations, in numerous capacities.

In regard to the Commission, Wosh has served on the Publications Committee and will continue to do so. The Commission is very pleased to welcome him back, and looks forward to his contributions to our work.

In Remembrance of Professor George L. A. Reilly

A founding member of the Commission, George L.A. Reilly, passed away on April 27, 1997. A graduate of Seton Hall College, he completed an M.A. in history at Harvard University before joining the United States Army in World War II. Reilly landed in Normandy on D+3 as an artillery forward observer and fought through the European campaign, ending up a battery commander. After the war he earned his doctorate in history at Columbia University and taught briefly at Rutgers University and Caldwell College before returning to his alma mater.

Reilly specialized in British and Irish history, served as chairman of the history department and taught for over 40 years before his retirement in 1992. Professor Reilly wrote the history of a number of north Jersey parishes and was a resource frequently called on by his colleagues for help and guidance. The Commission will miss his readiness to assist on all occasions, quiet wisdom, and ready wit. Requiescat in pace.
In April the New Jersey Historical Commission awarded a grant to the Catholic Historical Records Commission for the publication of *New Jersey Catholicism: An Annotated Bibliography*. Although much has been written about Catholics in New Jersey, finding that material is sometimes difficult because no adequate bibliography has been published. Several years ago Father Augustine Curley, O.S.B., set out to remedy this lack.

Father Curley has compiled an extensive bibliography, mostly from his own researches, but also with help from librarians and bibliographers around the state, fellow-members of the Commission and the public. The final stage before printing (preparation of an index) will begin soon and is expected to be completed shortly after Labor Day.

Further details will appear in a subsequent issue of this newsletter.