

Fall 1997

# New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter, Vol. 17, No.1

New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/njchc>



Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission, "New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter, Vol. 17, No.1" (1997). *New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission newsletters*. 48.  
<https://scholarship.shu.edu/njchc/48>



# New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter

VOLUME XVII NO. 1

AUTUMN 1997

## Early Days at Holy Trinity, Westfield

At the end of the Civil War western Union County was hardly a hotbed of Catholicism. Priests from other areas attended to the religious needs of the few Roman Catholics in the area. Sometimes on a Sunday the pastor of Saint Mark's in Rahway, Father Thomas Quin, came to say Mass. Lacking a church, the community celebrated the liturgy in one or another private residence, often in what later became Miller's Store on Broad Street. At other times, people borrowed the Central Railroad hand-car and as many as could pumped their way to Mass in Plainfield or Rahway.

The slowly increasing Catholic population throughout the area led Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley in 1872 to assign a resident pastor, Father Gregory Misdziol, with responsibility for Westfield, Cranford, Stony Hill and Basking Ridge. Born in Silesia in 1831, Misdziol had studied at St. Vincent's, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, before completing his theological studies at Seton Hall, where he was ordained in 1865. Before his assignment to Westfield, Misdziol had served in Trenton, Elizabeth and New Brunswick, where he had been pastor of Saint John's from 1866 to 1871. Part of his new charge was to erect church buildings for the liturgy in each town.

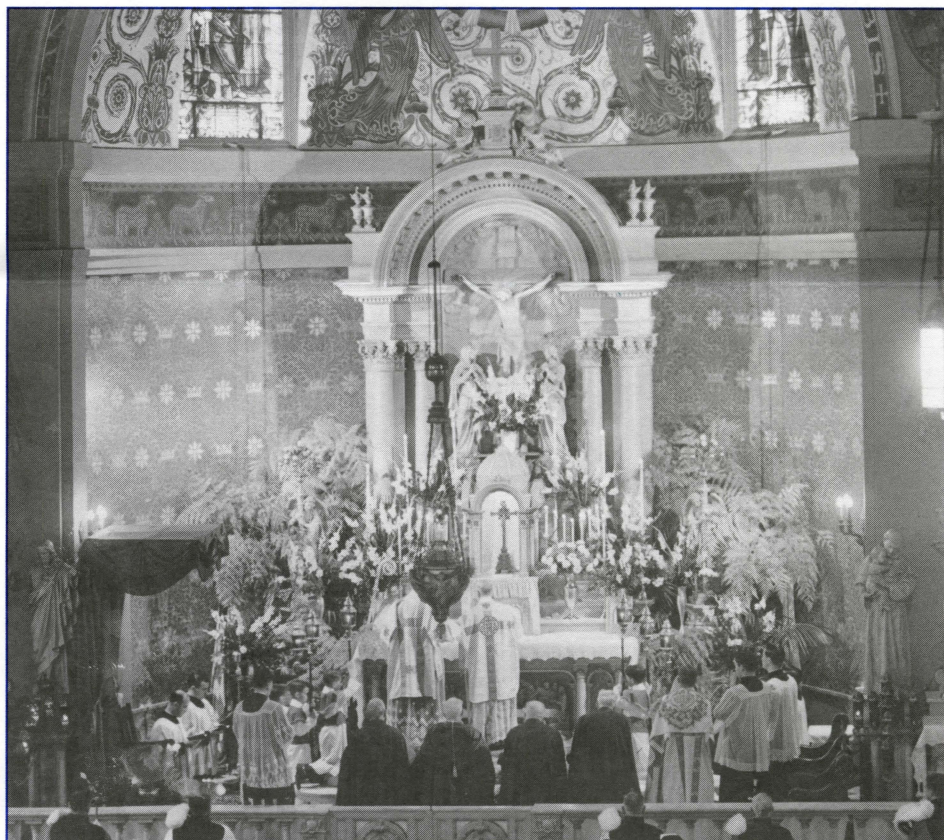
While searching for a location in Westfield and building the church, Misdziol celebrated Mass each Sunday in the Central Railroad freight office. On Saturday evenings men and women of the parish regularly went to the office to clean and set up for Mass on the following morning. Late in 1872 the congregation found a plot of land on what was then New York Avenue and bought it for

\$600. Over the next several months they erected what Bishop Michael Augustine Corrigan described as "a neat frame church" when he dedicated the building on September 21, 1873, and then administered the Sacrament of Confirmation there for the first time.

The church was small, but it was large for the congregation. The new pastor counted 100 people in the parish when he arrived, and the numbers grew slowly over the next several years, reaching about 300 at the turn of the century. The

small numbers meant limited income, and the parish facilities grew slowly. Some understanding of the straitened circumstances is revealed in the fact that when Father Misdziol was transferred in 1874 the parish owed him \$589.53 in back salary and two years later, when Father Peter S. Dagnault, his successor, was in turn transferred, it owed him \$312.92. In 1894 the parish had to borrow \$500 to make necessary repairs on the church.

*continued on page 2*



*Monsignor Henry J. Watterson, pastor of Holy Trinity for 55 years, celebrates High Mass in the current church in 1945.*



## Holy Trinity Church

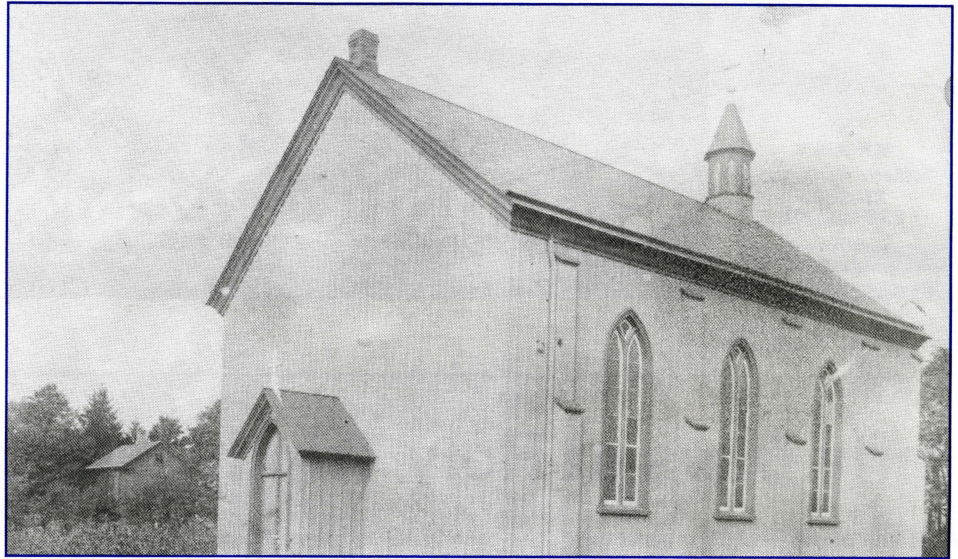
*continued from page 1*

Perhaps part of the difficulty lay in the fact that pastors had to serve several churches and they changed frequently. Misdziol's 18 months as pastor was the longest tenure of the first four pastors. In March 1874 Father Peter S. Dagnault succeeded Misdziol. Born in Quebec, he was ordained in 1860 and served in his home diocese for a decade before coming to Newark. He remained as pastor at Westfield for 14 months and then in May 1875 gave place to Father Adolph Bergmann. The latter had completed his theological studies in his native Germany, been ordained in 1873 and come to Newark immediately. Bishop Corrigan first placed him at Saint Mark's, Rahway, and then sent him to Westfield.

Bergmann came to grief on an expedition to New York City and Newark, ostensibly to buy candles for the church. But in New York he first bought some clothing and then did some extensive sightseeing and, the religious goods stores having closed, he decided to try Newark on his way back to Westfield. Here, too, the stores had closed. Wearied from a full day of walking in new shoes, he sat down in a storefront to rest his feet. A patrolling police officer questioned him and said "Come along." Father Bergmann, who had not revealed that he was a priest, thought he was being escorted to the train station; instead, he found himself

arraigned and tossed into the drunk tank. After two nights there, he contacted the vicar-general, who arranged his release. His explanation did not satisfy the bishop, who withdrew his faculties and replaced him in Westfield with Father Augustine Eberhard.

Eberhard, a native of Baden, Germany, had joined the Redemptorist order in 1861 and been ordained in 1870. He served with the Redemptorists in several states before leaving the community and being received by Corrigan into the diocese of Newark. He lasted at Holy Trinity only ten months, from August 1876 until June 1877.



*The "neat frame church" built by Father Misdziol and blessed in 1873.*

In just under five years, the parish had experienced four pastors. All four were foreign-born, a clear indication of how dependent the American church was upon immigrant priests for its growth. Misdziol came from Breslau, an area on the border between Polish and German majorities and its possession repeatedly a political issue; Dagnault was French-Canadian, Bergmann and Eberhard were German. Their foreign backgrounds meant that their understanding of how priest and people, and priest and bishop, functioned together had been shaped by different cultures, and they had different expectations. These differences sometimes caused dissension within the parish and popular dissatisfaction with the pastor. Eberhard is a case in point.

Bishop Corrigan noted in his journal in June, 1877 that Eberhard, "who did not succeed with his people at Westfield," had been authorized to leave the diocese. Failure with the parishioners is at least partly explained in the pastor's correspondence with Corrigan. After a Confirmation in May, 1877, Eberhard wrote to the bishop to apologize for the "poor people's conduct." Noting that "not one knelt down to kiss your Lordship's hand and ring," he assured the bishop that he had "given them a good scolding for it" and explained that he himself was so embarrassed "that I could scarcely look at you." In this same letter the pastor also complained that he could not find lodging in the vicinity of Westfield.

Eberhard undoubtedly responded to the ceremonial gaffes of the parishioners at



*Central Railroad freight office in Westfield, site of Sunday Mass for local Catholics in 1872-1873.*



the Confirmation in terms of the expectations raised by his background, but neither the bishop nor the parishioners considered the shortcomings important and the people clearly did not like being publicly called "half-civilized." When Corrigan suggested that Eberhard seek a position outside the diocese, the latter agreed, but warned that his successor would soon "see what kind of people [the parishioners] were."

In June 1877 Corrigan with some reluctance appointed Father William Wiseman as temporary pastor at Westfield and Cranford to succeed Eberhard. The bishop's caution stemmed from parochial dissatisfaction with Wiseman at Saint Mary's, Gloucester four years earlier, which had resulted in his removal from office. Whether Wiseman had learned in the interval, or the circumstances made his personality and ways more appealing in Westfield, he remained as pastor of both locations until his transfer to Newark in 1892. The congregations grew somewhat during this period and Corrigan in February 1878 noted that "a good spirit now prevails in both Westfield and Cranford"

Wiseman's tenure in Westfield marked a turning point, in that the resultant stability fostered the development of a community spirit. As the area grew in population, so did the parish, but its growth was slow. By the second decade of the 20th century, nonetheless, Westfield Catholics were poised for take-off, sufficiently large in number and economically prosperous enough to build and expand a modern parish plant. The appointment of Father Henry J. Watterson in February 1913 marked the opening of this era. For 55 years, until March 1968, as pastor he led in the establishment of a parish school, high school, a new church building and other parish facilities. He and his parishioners built well on the foundations their predecessors had laid.

Westfield Catholics look back over 125 years as a parish community this year, and can do so with a great deal of pride. Their story, like that of every parish, reminds the observer that beginnings are often difficult, complicated, and, to the participants, unclear in their impact. But faith, prayer and work can bring astounding results.



*Members of the Commission after concelebrating a Mass for the late George L.A. Reilly, a founding member of the Commission. Left to right are Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock, Father Michael G. Krull, Bishop Dominic A. Marconi, Monsignor William N. Field, Monsignor Francis R. Seymour and Father Augustine J. Curley, O.S.B.*

## Meet the Commission



*Professor Elizabeth Milliken*

At its September 1997 meeting the Commission welcomed its newest member, Professor Elizabeth Milliken, assistant professor of history at Seton Hall University. Born in Elmira, New York, she attended parochial elementary schools there and in Flushing, Michigan and Dayton, Ohio as her journalist father moved in pursuit of his career. When her father attempted to start his own newspaper, the entire family lived for several months in tents in the wilds of Maine.

When the project fell through, they moved to Augusta, where she attended high school. From there, Professor Milliken entered the College of the Holy Cross, where she served on the staff of some student magazines, and, as she says, "lost many matches on the varsity fencing team." Professor Milliken graduated with honors, a B.A. in history and a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Professor Milliken went backpacking through Europe for some months before beginning work at a variety of jobs in Boston. Eventually she entered Cornell University, where she completed the program for her doctorate in history with a dissertation on Catholic sub-culture and the parishes of Rochester, New York.

Professor Milliken began teaching at Seton Hall University in September 1994. Her principal interests lie in women's and social history, with emphasis on religion. She has researched and presented several papers on the role of women religious in education and health care. The Commission welcomes Professor Milliken and looks forward to her assistance in its work.



## Recent Publications of Interest

Light, Dale B., *Rome and the New Republic: Conflict and Community in Philadelphia Catholicism between the Revolution and the Civil War*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.) Catholicism in Philadelphia was troubled for more than half a century after the American Revolution by a series of confrontations between bishops and dissenters—clergy or laity. The author attempts to understand these developments as manifestations of both the conflict between traditional elitist social structures and new democratic demands, and the opposition between traditional religious assumptions and a more modern industrial-scientific ethos stemming from the Enlightenment and its offspring. Almost no direct reference is made to New Jersey, but Philadelphia was the see city for what in colonial times had been West Jersey, and many of this state's Catholics lived in that jurisdiction until 1853.

Marchione, Sister Margherita, M.P.F., *Yours Is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy*. (Paulist Press, 1997.) In this work Sister Margherita, a member of the Commission and a prolific author on historical topics, presents the memoirs of Jews and Catholics about the aid the Church provided to save Jews in Italy from Hitler's persecution and refutes attacks on Pope Pius XII for alleged failures in this regard.



Bishop Marconi, left, and Mrs. Teddy Murphy, former Commission member, enjoy Bernard Bush's recollections of his service with the Commission at a small retirement ceremony for him.

## Save the Date

The New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission will hold its annual public program on Saturday, April 25, 1998, at Seton Hall University. The focus this year will be on the history of Catholic Education in New Jersey. The program will look at some of the many elements embraced in the phrase "Catholic Education in New Jersey" over the past century and a half. Look for details in the next issue of the *Catholic Records Newsletter*, but mark your calendar now. We look forward to seeing you.

Published by the New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission,  
Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2696

Most Reverend Dominic A. Marconi, D.D., *Chairman*; Reverend Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock, *Vice Chairman*; JoAnn Cotz; Reverend Augustine Curley, O.S.B.; Reverend Monsignor William N. Field; Reverend Monsignor Charles J. Giglio; Reverend Michael G. Krull; Reverend Raymond J. Kupke; Joseph F. Mahoney; Sister Margherita Marchione, M.P.F.; Elizabeth Milliken; Reverend Monsignor Robert Moneta; Sister Irene Marie Richards, O.P.; Sister Thomas Mary Salerno, S.C.; Bernhard W. Scholz; Reverend Monsignor Francis R. Seymour; Reverend Joseph D. Wallace; Peter J. Wosh. Joseph F. Mahoney, *Newsletter Editor*

SHU383-3M-97

Non-Profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Seton Hall  
University

South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2691  
Seton Hall  
University

