

ST. MARY'S ROMAN CATHOLIC

IN MANY WAYS St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church is unusual. In the first place, its name is not St. Mary's, although everyone in Nutley speaks of it always so. The church was dedicated under the title of Our Lady of Grace which, on the diocesan registers of the Roman church, remains its true name to this day.

In the second place, the cornerstone of the original church was laid in the Autumn of 1872, by three clergymen all of whom had formerly been Episcopalian ministers and had been converted to Catholicism and the structure itself rose on land that had been given for the purpose by an English Protestant, who also later became a convert.

Finally, the location in a corner of Avondale was picked to serve the Irish quarry workers and the Italian families who were just then arriving to replace the Irish quarrymen, but shortly after the church was built of the quarry brownstone, the bottom fell out of the stone market and the quarries closed.

Mrs. William Joyce, whose husband owned the largest of the Avondale or North Belleville quarries, as they then were called, was the inspiration of St. Mary's although she died before she was able to see the church rise.

An English Protestant, Mrs. Joyce was worried by the rough life of the quarrymen and their families, many of whom lived in barracks that sprawled in the fields north of Avondale Road, now Park Avenue. The barracks lay across what is now Washington Avenue, one of the busiest streets in town, but then a part of the quarry property.

The nearest Catholic church was St. Peter's in Belleville, discouragingly far for the quarrymen to reach on foot.

Mrs. Joyce called on Reverend Hubert De Burgh, pastor of St. Peter's and found a kindred soul beset by the same worries about the lives of the railroad workers and the quarrymen and, like herself, a former English Protestant. He had been an Episcopalian minister and convert to Catholicism.

Reverend De Burgh agreed to help establish a church near to Avondale and accepted Mrs. Joyce's offer to donate the land. She died suddenly shortly afterward, on May 20, 1870, but her husband carried out her wishes. The site he chose to give adjoined on the west his quarry property, just across the right of way of the Erie Railroad whose tracks were then being stretched northward and southward, simultaneously, from Nutley, the center of building.

Mrs. Joyce, whose name was Elizabeth, had taken St. Elizabeth as her patron saint and the quarry owner, in donating the land made only two stipulations: that a memorial chapel would be built dedicated to St. Elizabeth of the Holy Gospel and that the Joyce family would have the right of burial under that memorial chapel.

Mr. Joyce not only gave the land which was even larger than it is now, following the sale through the years of parcels of land on the side of Centre Street, but he also provided stone from his quarry for the foundation. He also bore the cost of the Chantry Chapel which was established in the northeast corner of the church.

Mr. and Mrs. Joyce and twelve members of their family were buried in the crypt during the occupancy of the church and their bodies remained there until about 13 years ago. At that time, Monsignor Owens got in touch with William Joyce, Jr., the quarry owner's son, who was then more than 70 years old and lived in San Francisco, offering to transfer the bodies and rebury them in St. Peter's cemetery, Belleville.

The son came to Nutley and agreed to the transfer. At the same time he got in touch with other surviving Joyces and obtained from them their consent to waive the burial right and thus gave St. Mary's a clear title to the abandoned church and to the land on which it stands.

From the time of Mrs. Joyce's visit, Father De Burgh busied himself with trying to organize the scattered Catholics of North Belleville, Avondale, Franklin, Nutley Park and Lyndhurst into a single congregation. The few Catholics responded eagerly and on Sunday, September 22, 1872, the cornerstone was laid for the new church dedicated to Our Lady of Grace.

It was at that ceremony that the three former Protestant ministers, now converted Catholic clergymen, took part. The cornerstone was laid by one of them, Reverend J. R. Bayley, Bishop of Newark and already Archbishop-elect of Baltimore. Assisting Bishop Bayley were Father De Burgh and Rt. Reverend Monsignor G. H. Doane. Father De Burgh had been transferred from St. Peter's to the new church as its first pastor.

The minutes of St. Mary's show that the title to the new church property was transferred from St. Peter's early in 1877 when the separate parish in Avondale was incorporated. Rt. Reverend W. A. Corrigan, Bishop of Newark, the Vicar General, Father De Burgh and two laymen, John Latis and John Honan, formed the first board of trustees of St. Mary's.

The strain of establishing the church was great and after five years, Father De Burgh was transferred, in 1882, to Plainfield. In his succession came Reverend John P. Morris, a native of Paterson and a graduate of Seton Hall College who had been ordained in Rome. He was a great uncle of Dr. J. B. Le Bel, of Grant Avenue.

For the next quarter of a century, Father Morris slowly built up the parish and completed the church. He obtained and installed a main altar, pews and some of the stained glass windows. Most of that was made possible by the generosity of the Morris family. Taking a church in its infancy, he left a growing institution when he died in 1904.

His successor, Father Francis A. Foy, carried on the expansion and construction. He had the wisdom to buy land, instead of selling piecemeal to meet rising church expenses, and bought the lots which are the site of the newest St. Mary's Church and rectory. He built a parish hall which still stands on the school grounds and had expansive plans when, after a brief pastorate, he died suddenly.

Father Foy was succeeded by Father William L. Cunningham from 1904 till 1917.

Reverend Edward T. Quirk became pastor in 1917 and during his service the first parochial school was opened on September 21, 1921, with 83 pupils and a teaching staff of 3 nuns.

Father Quirk was succeeded in October 1922, by the present pastor, Monsignor James J. Owens. In 1926 Father Owens began the construction of the combination building which housed both church and school until 1952. At this time services were discontinued in the old Gothic church.

Other construction followed fast. A new convent was built and a \$26,000 rectory followed.

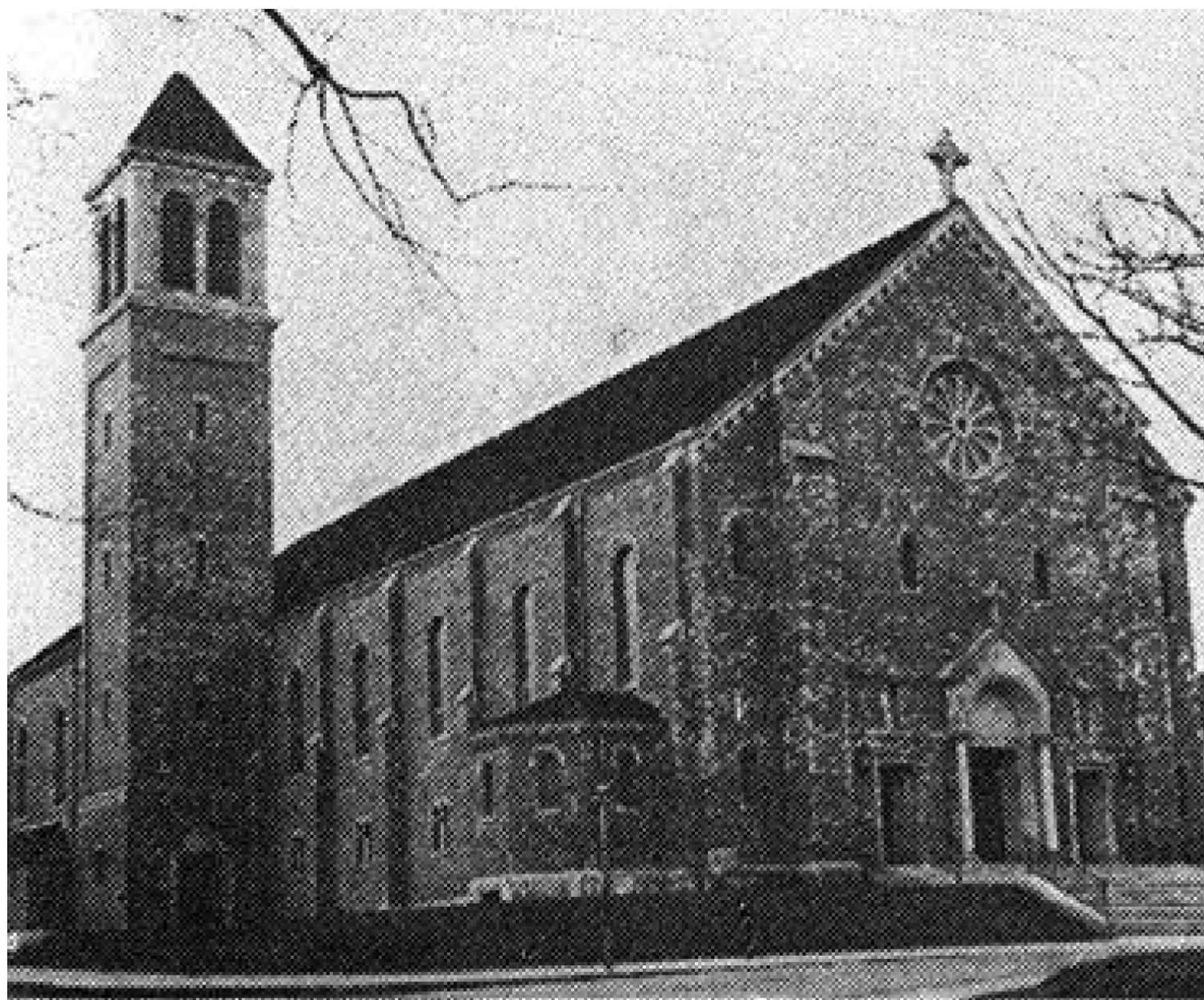
Father Owens felt the need for a church used for services only, thus leaving the combined building solely for use as a school. Hence plans were laid for the present church on the corner of St. Mary's Place and Melrose Street. The newest "St. Mary's" was dedicated on March 29, 1952, and seats 1100 at a service.

Additions have also recently been made to the parochial school which in 1960 has an enrollment of 1200.

Father Owens, who was made a Monsignor in 1948 was born in Ireland in County Roscommon. He attended Summerhill College where he was a classmate of two men who made their marks, also, in this world: John McCormack, the celebrated Irish tenor and Edward Flanagan, who, later, as Father Flanagan founded the famous "Boys Town" near Omaha, Nebraska.

Monsignor Owens has as assistants in the work of the parish, the Reverend John M. Golding, the Reverend Gerard W. Walsh and the Reverend Edward C. Higgins.

The oldest St. Mary's still stands and is used for meetings by parish organizations.



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