

ST. MARY PARISH

Years of Grace

"Let us run steadily the course mapped out for us, with our eyes on Jesus, the cause and completer of our faith."

Letter To The Hebrews, 12



St. Mary Parish is a treasury of memories. Its riches span more than one hundred thirty years and are measured not by the wealth of its buildings but by the countless people it brings closer to God through the sacraments, through the social programs it encourages and supports, and through the heritage of love and faith it passes on to future generations.

Walk through its streets. There is a climate here, a mood that speaks of the shared joys of more than a hundred Christmases, the splendor of more than a hundred Easters. But there is more. Though full of years, the parish is youthful, vigorous, resilient. It acknowledges its past, the tapestry of events and faces and changes that have gone before; but it looks toward tomorrow, providing the foundation upon which its children may build; for they are, ultimately, its bone and blood and destiny.

A Long Look Into The Past

It was largely because of their children that the settlers who founded St. Mary Parish left their homeland, a small number of immigrants among the first in a tide that was to carry almost three million Irish across the Atlantic before 1871.

They fled religious persecution, economic and social repression and widespread famine, racing from places whose names were to echo over and over in their minds like the refrain of a mourning bell: Dublin, Tipperary, Galway, Dun Laoghaire. They arrived at the shores of the New World oftentimes more heartsick and destitute for remembering what they had lost. They had few possessions and less money, and sometimes the poverty they found in America was almost as severe as that they left behind. What they retained, however, was a love of freedom, an irrepressible zest for life, courage, and the sustaining faith of their ancestors.

At first it was mostly men who came. Their frugal ways and hard work filled empty purses with the accumulated pennies of each day's toil, and yielded at last the coins and bills that brought loved ones to join them. Armaghs and Claremen, Sligos and Corkonians, all scraped together the twelve dollar steerage passage to come knocking at America's golden door. Then having crossed the ocean the pioneers scattered: westward to work as track layers for the railroads that soon would criss-cross the continent; to labor on the canals that united the country's waterways; to work with the crews who helped build the great Eastern industrial cities in which a flood of raw materials would be turned into a flow of manufactured goods.

Members of one of these crews, Irish Catholics arriving aboard the sloop "The Guide" at Birmingham in 1833 to work for real estate entrepreneur and industrialist Anson G. Phelps, were to form the nucleus of St. Mary Parish. They were not the first Catholics, however, to settle in the area. That distinction is accorded a young French former soldier, Claudius Barthelme, who came in 1760 carrying the seeds of faith from his native land as a gift to his new country.

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