

—TO PRESERVE THE FLAME—

*"How are these good people to be attended as desired?
[A church] will be necessary to preserve the flame at
present kindled."*

--Rev. James Fitton
December, 1833

—TO PRESERVE THE FLAME—



His Holiness Pope John Paul II



His Excellency,
Most Reverend Timothy J.
Harrington, Bishop of Worcester



His Excellency, Most Reverend
Bernard J. Flanagan,
Former Bishop of Worcester

— CONTENTS —

<u>Introduction</u>	<u>09</u>
<u>Beginnings</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Time of Troubles</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>Years of Triumph</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>Time to Endure</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>Time of Renewal</u>	<u>51</u>
<u>Chronology</u>	<u>58</u>
<u>Pastors of St. John's</u>	<u>60</u>

— INTRODUCTION —



St. John's is an experience. It is a holy place. It is a family. It is alive. It is the stone the builders rejected that is the cornerstone of the structure. It is the testimony that there is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. It is the founding parish of the Church of Springfield and of the Church of Worcester. It is forever in the hearts of its people. It is a history of outstanding priests, zealous religious and fine people. It is, thankfully, in us and we shall never be the same again.

Timothy Meager has given us a unique, real and charming account of St. John's. It will, I am sure, be a moving memorial for years to come.

Written in 1984, our history of one hundred and fifty years of service to our Lord and our Neighbor, it is part of our celebration.

It is good that we remember. It is essential that we never forget that it is in Jesus that we live and move and have our being.

Blessings.

Rev. Francis J. Scollen
Administrator of St. John's
May 1984

—BEGINNINGS—

One hundred and fifty years is a long time. America was a very different country one hundred and fifty years ago. It was a land largely of farmers and small villages. Mills and crude machinery had only just begun to sprout along its rivers and creeks. The capital of the country, Washington, D.C. reflected the rough rural society of the new nation. In the 1820s and 1830s, it was hardly more than a tiny hamlet; rutted wagon tracks, a few boardinghouses, and an unfinished Capitol and White House only recently carved out of the Maryland wilder-ness. The nation was new. The capital was new, but perhaps most important, American ideas about liberty and equality were also new and, indeed, revolutionary. The revolution itself was not an abstraction known only in history books; it was a living, concrete memory. A veteran of the revolution, James Monroe, occupied the White House just six years before the first church was built on Temple Street, and the President during that church's construction, Andrew Jackson, still bore a scar from a scuffle during that conflict. To the rest of the world this upstart nation, with its talk of the rights of man, was still suspect. Most of Europe was sinking under the tyrannical reigns of monarchical autocrats; China, Japan and Africa had not yet roused from the sleep which followed their ancient glories; and Latin America had only recently broken the chains of servitude which it had tied to Spain. Even England, that supposed paragon of progress, allowed but a tiny fraction of its people to vote in the 1830s, and until 1829 had barred all men of the old faith, Catholicism, from the political process.

Worcester was also a very different place one hundred and fifty years ago. It was not an insignificant town; the taverns and inns clustered near the courthouse, the mansions on "Nobility Hill" opposite the town hall, the cattle fair and its elegant balls, even the tree lined streets reflected Worcester's importance as shire town of the county. Yet as late as 1831 there were more cows in the town than voters, and outside the short stretch of Main Street between Lincoln Square and City Hall virtually the entire town was farmland. In fact, as late as the 1850s, the area on Highland Street behind Lancaster Street was considered so far "out of town" that it was called "Ore-gon." It is true the railroad, represented by a little steam engine built in England and stagecoaches adapted with iron wheels, arrived in the city on July 4, 1835. Yet that was such a novel event that hundreds walked miles from surrounding villages to line the tracks and marvel at such a curious and no doubt un-safe contraption.

—BEGINNINGS—



The old United Arms Hotel on Main Street, where most sources suggest the first Catholic mass in Worcester was celebrated by Bishop Benedict Fenwick on October 12, 1826.

Worcester Historical Museum Collection

If it is hard to imagine Worcester, America, or the world so long ago, it is harder still to retell their stories. Documents are lost, scraps of paper discarded, notes abandoned in the rush of 150 years. We do not know for sure, for example, when the first Catholic mass was said in the town. Most sources suggest that Bishop Benedict Fenwick of the New England Diocese said the first mass on October 12, 1826 in the rooms of the United Arms Tavern on Main Street. Yet other accounts say that the first mass was said underneath a tree on Pond Street or in the quarters of an Irish family on Front Street in the late 1820s. We know even less about when the first Catholics came to Worcester or the surrounding region. Arcadian French-Canadian Catholics were quartered here in 1755, and Indian captives converted to Catholicism in Canada had made their way back to Westboro and other nearby towns as early as 1740. Some, like Rev. John J. McCoy, a curate at St. John's and later pastor of St. Anne's, and the Honorable Dr. John J. Duggan, the second Irish Catholic mayor of Worcester, sought

—BEGINNINGS—

earlier roots. Mixing up what was true with what they devoutly wished to be true, both men would claim that St. Brendan and his band of Kerry monks had touched New England's shore in the sixth century. Duggan proclaimed the evidence "irre- futable" that certain Indian tribes in America were the direct descendants of Brendan's monastic followers.

Whatever the virtue of Duggan's of McCoy's contentions, the evidence is truly irrefutable that by 1834 there was a substantial and growing Catholic population in Worcester. They had not come in stone boats or on a monastic mission like St. Brendan, but overland, many of them traveling from New York, for a more mundane purpose to build a canal connecting Providence and Worcester.

Though most of Worcester's native Yankees welcomed the canal and the dizzying upward spiral of prosperity it touched off, they were more suspicious -- even fearful of the Irish newcomers who came to build it. To these descendants of the Puritans, newcomers of any sort were a cause for alarm.

In 1820 the town had only 19 immigrants out of a population nearing 3,000. Irishmen? Even worse, papists? These laborers threatened a revolution in the lives of men and women whose very schoolbooks had taught them to fear the Roman church, the "whore of Babylon" and her minions. Worcester's natives, then, were more than uneasy in 1825 when nearly a thousand of the Irish canal workers descended on the Blackstone Valley south of them.

The Yankees might have grudgingly acknowledged that these Irishmen knew how to work. While puffing continuously on their clay pipes to keep the insects at bay, the Celts steadily extended the canal north, hacking their way through the Blackstone Valley underbrush, wading hip deep in swamps, and scooping out earth at a rate of two cubic yards per man every hour. Yankee farmboys could do no better. In fact, they had done a great deal worse. Local contractors had initially employed men from nearby farms to build the canal. Eager, but inexpert, the farm boys had botched the job and the canal company had been forced to turn from their labors to the Erie Canal. Yet, if the Irish were good workers, the local natives could not overlook their shameless customs: "jigger breaks" of whiskey or rum taken four to six times a day to stimulate the workers in the cold, boxing and wrestling matches at night in their work camps, and, of course, worst of all, their religion.

On July 4, 1826, the worst fears of Worcester Yankees were realized. The Irishmen descended on Worcester itself, their numbers swelling to nearly five hundred. Some townsmen made light of the Irish newcomers; the *Massachusetts Spy*, for example, printed Worcester's first ethnic jokes in 1826. Other Yankees panicked. They petitioned the town's selectmen to ban the "Irishies" from Worcester altogether. Most, however, sensing the canal's promise, resolved to put up with the Irish, as temporary undesirable byproducts of progress. Barring them from the village proper, they virtually restricted the Celtic workers to their camps in the meadows on the far East Side of

—BEGINNINGS—

town (near the present Shrewsbury Street). These people were reassured by the town fathers like Edward Lincoln, who told them that "the Irish have come to build the canal not live among us."

Lincoln was wrong, for perhaps as many as one hundred Irishmen stayed in Worcester, or the vicinity, after finishing their canal work. More importantly, at least some of his fellow townsmen learned that they had misjudged these Irish canal workers. While the Irishmen who came to Worcester were indeed different from the natives, many, perhaps most, who stayed in Worcester were not bedraggled peasants trained only for the meanest labor. They were skilled workers, the younger sons of modestly prosperous Irish farmers from the thoroughly anglicized provinces of Eastern Ireland (the counties of Leinster and coastal Munster). Like the Yankees themselves, they had their eyes set on the bountiful opportunities promised by America, and more specifically Worcester, now that they had completed the canal. Most prominent of these Irish entrepreneurs was Tobias Boland, the construction boss who had first brought the Irish to Worcester. The muscular Boland had come from a prosperous Irish farming family in County Kildare. Though orphaned at an early age by the ravages of the great rebellion of 1798, through hard work and good connections he became a major contractor long before the construction of the Blackstone Canal. He and his partners, for example, had built many commercial buildings in Boston, including the city's Long Wharf, and had played a prominent role in the construction of the Erie Canal. By the 1840s, Tobey Boland would be a guest at White House soirees. By the time he died in 1888 he would be one of the nation's leading contractors, with homes in New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. None of Worcester's other early Irish Catholics matched Boland's accomplishments but many, like the smaller contractors, Joseph Lomasney and Edward Powers, or the boatbuilder, Francis McAnemy, achieved modest success. Still others like Robert and John Laverty or Charles O'Neill fulfilled age-old Irish dreams by buying their own land.

Not all of the early Irish Catholics were as successful as these men; many, perhaps most, eked out more precarious livings. Some found regular jobs in the warehouses which sprung up near the canal, or on the canal itself where most of the boatmen were Irish. Perhaps the most famous of these was Patrick Doyle. Doyle was literally a giant, a 6' 6" powerhouse. He had made a name for himself as a boxer in England, and was considered by some the unofficial champion of the world, before he appeared in the Worcester area around 1830. For the next few years he worked at what might be called "security" jobs for the canal company and for William Lincoln, a faithful friend of the Irish in Worcester. (Doyle's methods in this line of work were very direct). Later, he returned to England and then Ireland where he died in the famine of 1846. In addition to the men like Doyle who worked more or less steadily for the canal company in Worcester, a number of Irish floaters stop-

—BEGINNINGS—

Boland

Worcester contractor Tobias Boland, who brought the first Irish to Worcester.

helped construct the Blackstone Canal, Boston's Long Wharf and the Erie Canal
Worcester Historical Museum Collection



ped in the city, laboring at whatever jobs were available for however long they lasted. This number increased substantially in the 1830s with the construction of railroads from Worcester to Boston, Albany and Norwich, Connecticut. Some of these laborers also worked in an ill-fated scheme to mine coal at the north end of Lake Quinsigamond. This work proved particularly hard and dangerous, as at least twelve Irishmen lost their lives in the mines to murders or accidents.

This steady influx of Irishmen and other Catholics into Worcester caused difficult problems for their church. In 1832 there were but sixteen priests in the entire Diocese of New England. The diocese thus was hard pressed in its efforts to provide Worcester's rapidly growing Catholic community with pastoral care. The first priest assigned to Worcester's Catholics, Rev. Robert Woodley, for example, served Catholics in Providence, Rhode Island as well as in Worcester. Until 1830, he could visit Worcester but twice a year. Later, as Bishop Fenwick found more clergymen to serve his far-flung diocese, Rev. Woodley came more regularly but still only once a month to say mass or hear confessions. On the many Sundays he was absent, local lay leaders led their fellow Catholics in services called "dry masses," services which included readings from scripture as well as prayers. (Such dry masses were not unknown to those Irish construction workers for in Ireland itself, bloated in population and short on priests, they were common in the 1820s.) There was, of course, no church in Worcester, as yet. Most of these liturgies, whether led by priests or by laymen, were held in the open air, on large boulders near the railroad cuts in southeast Worcester or under a *scalan* (an arch of pine boughs set up to protect the priest and the altar). This too was common in early nineteenth century Ireland,

—BEGINNINGS—

where English persecution and poverty had hindered the construction of Catholic chapels.

As the number of Catholics in Worcester increased in the early 1830s so did the pressure to assign a permanent pastor to the town. In 1832 Robert Lavery wrote the bishop lamenting that new generations were being born, including his own children, who not only received little instruction in the faith, but were not even baptized. Though the bishop replied that he could do little to help the Worcester Catholics, Lavery persisted, writing again the next year.

By that time, the bishop had decided to assign a new priest to the Worcester mission. The new priest, Rev. James Fitton, was no stranger to the Irish contractors and their workers. Indeed, he was a distant relative of Toby Boland and Boland's partner, and it is likely that they had some say in Bishop Fenwick's choice. Nevertheless, Rev. Fitton was an apt choice for this mission. Boston-born, he seemed the very embodiment of his time in American history. Like so many of his countrymen - fiery Protestant preachers like Charles Finney, or mechanical tinkers like Eli Whitney and reformers like Dorothea Dix - he overflowed with optimism and energy. In his own words, he was constantly "preaching in public and private, town and schoolhouses, barns and garrets" throughout his vast missionary territory of Connecticut and western Massachusetts. In 1833 he performed the first baptism in Worcester, and he presided at the first Catholic marriage. By December of 1833, he was writing excitedly to the Bishop about the prospects of erecting a church in the town. He noted that there were as many as one hundred Catholics in the vicinity of Worcester (he included such faraway towns as Dudley, Leicester and Oxford in that estimate), and predicted that construction of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad would bring many more. Rev. Fitton asked the bishop, "How are these good people to be attended on Sundays as desired? This will be necessary to preserve the flame at present kindled."

Receiving the bishop's approval, he gathered these Catholics together on April 6, 1834 in a stone building on Front Street west of the canal to collect money for the new church. The prospective parishioners generously contributed \$500, a princely sum in an age when very few men earned as much as half a dollar a day. Rev. Fitton later remembers that "The project was looked upon at times as rather quixotic; but the missionary who received from his venerated and beloved bishop to do as to him seemed best, fancied he saw...in its surroundings a population of thousands in the future."

Yet Rev. Fitton had first to set up his church, and that would be no easy business. Remember that Worcester in the 1830s was a nearly homogenous community of Yankee Congregationalists. A century before the Puritan ancestors of these Worcester Yankees had chased another group of Irishmen, Ulster Irish Presbyterians, out of town and burned the church the Ulstermen tried to erect. As late as 1834, when Fitton began to build his church, the only Protestant denominations in

—BEGINNINGS—



Christ Church, the first church in Worcester and the predecessor of St. John's, was enlarged several times and renamed "The Institute" before it was torn down in the 1920s. *Courtesy Catholic Free Press*

—BEGINNINGS—

Worcester besides the Congregationalists were the Unitarians and a tiny band of Baptists. The Methodists, Episcopalians and Quakers did not build churches or meeting houses in Worcester until after the Catholics constructed theirs.

Rev. Fitton, then, was taking a giant step in the town's history when he set about building a Catholic church in Worcester. Some, perhaps most, of the town's natives were horrified at that prospect. Rev. Fitton did manage to purchase a lot at the corner of the present Salem and Franklin streets for the church. Yet when the owner of the land happened to in-quire of Rev. Fitton what the priest intended to do with the land, he took back the deed immediately and burned the document in the priest's face. Fortunately, more enlightened local natives such as William Lincoln, Francis Blake and Harvey Pierce (the latter two later converted to Catholicism) helped the priest acquire a new lot for his church, an old cornfield split by an abandoned wagon track on what was then thought to be the far side of town.

Still, most Yankee Protestants remained suspicious and hostile. Even after railroad workers, laboring mostly at night, began carving out the foundation for the church, Yankee townsmen flocked to the site of the church to ridicule the Catholics working there. One "elderly man," for example, viewed Walter Boyce, a Catholic working on the church, "with the greatest scrutiny and curiosity." Finally, Boyce asked him "If he thought I had horns on." Well, said the stranger, "I was led to believe so and it has been preached to us. But I find I am entirely mistaken, for you are a fine strong, healthy appearing race of men."

Rev. Fitton and his "strong, healthy" men persevered in spite of such skepticism. So eager were they to celebrate the building of their new edifice that Rev. Fitton said mass on the foundation in the open air before the sidewalks had been built or the roof had been raised. Despite these rough circumstances, hundreds walked from towns as far away as Clinton to take part in the service. The construction of the church proceeded slowly, however. Through most of 1835 the work stalled, and not until the summer of 1836 was the church completely enclosed. Even then the plastering of the walls and the laying of the floors had not yet been finished. Yet Bishop Fenwick, who had journeyed to Worcester in July of 1836 to see the new church, proclaimed the "Grecian Doric" wooden building to be a "neat structure." Inside, the church was simply adorned. There were about fifty pews on the floor and six in the gallery, though not all of them were used. Three large paintings hung on the walls, one of the Crucifixion by Mr. J. Healey, an American artist in Belgium, and the other "inferior" works of the Assumption and the Crucifixion.

More important than the building itself, however, was the effect its construction had on the Catholic people of Worcester. In 1836 the permanent congregation numbered 118 adults and children, but by the following year two hundred were baptized, the bulk of them children of the transient laborers laying nearby railroad tracks. By Christmas of 1836

—BEGINNINGS—

the first communion class had received the Eucharist and Bishop Fenwick had also traveled to Worcester to administer confirmation for the first time. By that year lay men and women had organized not only the church's first choir but also an orchestra which included a violin, cello, clarinet and flute. A year earlier in 1835 Catholics had also purchased land for their first cemetery. Previously, the town fathers had refused to bury Catholics locally and bodies had to be shipped to Providence. The location of the first cemetery in Worcester was far from ideal, set among the farmlands in the far western part of the town near the present Newton Square. (It could perhaps be said with little exaggeration that only by dying could Irish Catholics move to the West Side in those days). Nevertheless the cemetery was but another of the many signs of the permanence of the Catholic community in Worcester.

A happier symbol of the permanence, perhaps, was the establishment of two Catholic schools in the town by 1836, one in the basement of the new church on Temple Street, and one of grander vision on Pakachoag Hill about a mile to the southeast. There students and faculty alternated their studies with work on the wheatfields and grape vineyards of the surrounding farmland and simultaneously laid the foundation for New England's first Catholic college, Holy Cross.

In 1841 the little Greek Doric wooden building rising out of the cornfield was dedicated. It was the first Catholic church in western Massachusetts. Yet it was far more than a building; it was the symbol of a community, an odd and diverse mixture of men and women brought together by a single faith. The Irish laborers, roughhewn and raucous, made up the bulk of the congregation, but there were others. Mary Davis, a black woman, had come north from Hartford with Rev. Fitton to tend to the church's altar cloths and the priests' vestments. Fit-ton had also attracted a more curious group from Maine. Every summer in the 1830s a band of Penobscot Indians travelled to Worcester, camping at the foot of Temple Street so that they could hear the words of their former missionary. Soldiers training for the Seminole wars in Florida also attended mass at the new church, as did a few Yankees who braved the social ostracism of their fellow townsmen to cast their lots with Catholicism. The church's name, simply Christ Church, then was apt. The people who gathered there were Christ's people, a diverse group made up largely of outcasts from prosperous and proper society: Irish laborers, blacks, Indians, and Yankee "defectors". Together they built a community in the 1830s, but their work was not done. Holding that community together in the 1840s and 1850s would be a stiffer test.

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

It was a warm day, that Palm Sunday in 1847. Spring had come early to Worcester. The East Side of the town was crowded. Hundreds of men had descended on Worcester for the hiring fairs held to recruit workers for construction of the Providence and Worcester Railroad. Other men had journeeyed to Worcester with their families to attend the mass marking the beginning of Holy Week and to visit friends and relatives after the services. The rutted roads of Worcester's Irish shantytown in the Meadows were clogged with people; the shebeens, Irish grogshops, were jammed with tipplers. Having drunk most of the tavern owners dry, a large crowd of men gathered in front of Peter Conlevie's Swan Hotel near the canal basin in Washington Square. The sun was beginning to set on Worcester's western ridges. Donlevie, a sexton at the newly built St. John's Church and a respectable man of modest prosperity, had closed his tavern for the day. Yet the crowd was thirsty and, more important, they were angry. They called Donlevie out and demanded that he open his bar. Soon they surged forward over his desperate protests and broke into his place. A nearby constable noted with alarm that the "Irishies" were in riot and then quickly fled.

After their assault on Donlevie's tavern, a shout went up from the mob that more liquor could be had at a brewery on Grafton Street. The rioters thus raced out of the square and up Grafton Street, only to be stopped by a single watchman at the brewery who told them no drink was stored there on the weekends. Perhaps they were befuddled by the watchman's calm or his tone of authority, for the mob believed him and turned away to surge down Water Street on the east bank of the canal, smashing windows, hurling bottles, laying waste to all in their path. At the Madison Street Bridge they crossed

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

the canal into “Scalpintown,” a relatively sedate neighborhood where most of the “lace curtain” Irish lived. The main body raged north toward Green Street, while splinter groups plied the alleyways, cursing the residents and calling them out to fight. There was one man they wanted more than any other: Tobey Boland, or “Lord Normansby” as they called him, the title of a notorious rackrenting landlord in Western Ireland. When they reached his “Castle” on Green Street they were disappointed. He had left for Providence after the hiring fair. The mob flew down Temple Street to find their second target: Rev. Matthew Gibson, pastor of St. John’s Church. Gibson was in his rectory eating dinner when the crowd arrived at this doorstep. He stepped on the porch to address them. These rough Irishmen, tough peasant farmers, hardened by work on the railway and fueled by a long simmering discontent, would not listen to this man they called the “landlord’s priest,” the “Saxon tyrant.” They surged forward onto the porch, pushing Gibson out into the street, and manhandled him. He quickly escaped to the nearby home of a friend, and the crowd, after boarding up the rectory’s doors and windows and finally expending its passion, dispersed. Gibson, still shaken and fearing for his life, fled to Boston on the night train.

The roots of Worcester’s Palm Sunday riot ran deep. They extended back to Ireland itself and centuries of oppression, broken dreams and frustrated hopes. Since Cromwell’s time in the seventeenth century at least, the western part of Ireland, the province of Connaught, had been the most “Irish” part of Ireland and the most impoverished. Slashing and burning, Cromwell’s Puritan troopers had herded the old Irish gentry into Connaught, where they had been sealed in by the great fortress at Athlone. Though English landlords eventually took over the western lands too, the Anglicization of the west proceeded more slowly. Well into the late nineteenth century (and even until today to some extent) Connaught remained “Irish”. The Gaelic tongue, rapidly disappearing elsewhere, hung on there and old Celtic customs, tales and beliefs also persisted in that province long after they were forgotten in other parts of Ireland. This persistence of Irish culture was as much a desperate clinging to what was familiar in the face of brutal hardship as an act of conscious cultural resistance. Life in the west along the craggy coasts and boglands of Mayo, Galway and Sligo was a constant struggle for survival. Though few Catholics anywhere in Ireland could boast prosperity, these Connaughtmen, as well perhaps as the farmers of Donegal in Ulster or West Kerry in Munster, were sunk in the worst kinds of poverty. Their mud hovels and stone cabins could be distinguished from the hillsides they dotted only by the smoke rising from their peat fires. In the 1830s and 1840s children ran naked or clothed only in their father’s tattered coats. In one parish in Donegal there were but 10 beds, 43 chairs and 243 stools for a population of 9,000 people in 1837. In 1843 a traveler exclaimed: “Heaven may pardon my ignorance! Now that I have seen Ireland it seems to me that the poorest among

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

the Letts, the Esthonians (sic) and the Finlanders live a life of comparative comfort.”

By that time some of the westerners, finally uprooted from their traditional life, had begun to drift to America. The early Irish immigrants to Worcester, who founded Christ Church in the 1830s had come from eastern Ireland, the Province of Leicester or the southern coasts of Munster Province. As late as 1845, two-thirds of Worcester’s Irishmen came from the east and the south, one-third alone from Cork. Yet by 1850 that had all changed. Half of all the Worcester Irish by that year hailed from western counties like Mayo, Sligo, Galway, Donegal and Kerry, and the “boys of Mayo” were more numerous than emigrants from any other part of Ireland.

This shift in the sources of Irish emigration to Worcester had significant consequences for the Catholic community in the Massachusetts town. The new men, many of them perhaps Gaelic speakers, were suspicious of the old settlers who called themselves Irishmen and yet looked, talked and dressed like Englishmen or Yankees. Perhaps more important, the new men, unskilled and impoverished, were almost totally dependent on the old settlers, the “pioneer Irish,” for jobs and housing. Worcester’s burgeoning factories along Union Street or near the Junction relied largely on native Yankee farm boys or girls for their labor. Irishmen were relegated to construction work, principally on the railways, and the contracts for this work were held by Tobey Boland and other Irish pioneers who had come to Worcester with the canal. All through 1844 and 1845 there had been grumbling on the railroad lines, extending northward into New Hampshire. Boland and his friends were pushing the men too hard, the western Irishmen complained. For their part, Boland and the other contractors felt the new men were indifferent workers, unskilled, sloppy and rebellious. Further, the “pioneers” argued, when the westerners returned to Worcester in the winter after the construction camps closed down, they drank and carried on in such a manner that even friends of the Irish among the town’s Yankee population had become alarmed. In 1845 Boland had, therefore, begun to recruit French Canadians, said to be hardworking, relatively docile and cheap, for the construction gangs.

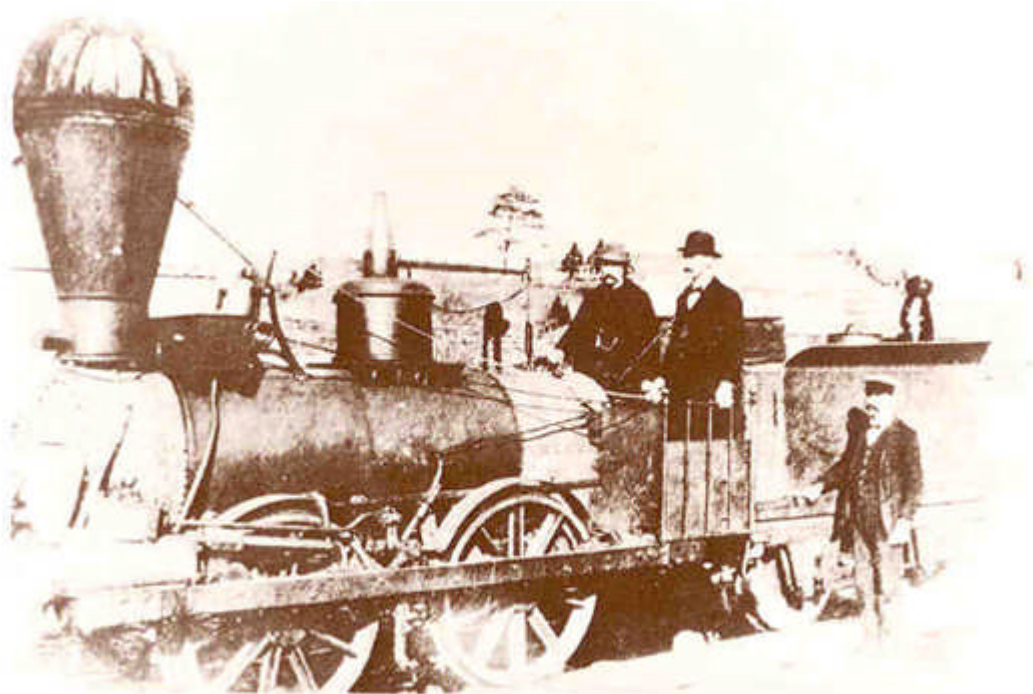
Disgruntled, the westerners began to flock to meetings of the secret Shamrock Society. Modeled after the secret societies of Ireland like the “Whiteboys” and “Ribbonmen”—groups that had fought to protect Irish tenants from eviction and the burden of heavy tithes from the Protestant Church of Ireland—branches of the Shamrock Society had appeared in railroad camps across America, where they acted as quasi labor unions. In 1846 the Shamrock Society cropped up among the Irishmen in Worcester. By that time the tensions of the railroad camps had begun to infect the town. Unemployment, especially among the newcomers, was running high, and evictions from Irish tenements owned by the pioneer Irish were on the increase.

The hiring fairs in the spring of 1847 were the last straw.

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

Hundreds of Irish men poured into Worcester, desperate for work, but instead of the thousand jobs promised on the Providence and Worcester Railway there were only 500, and Boland and his fellow bosses insisted on hiring French Canadians as well as Irishmen to complete the Northern Nashua and Gardner railways. Warm temperatures, easy drink and years of frustration and conflict thus set the stage for riot.

Yet the riot on Palm Sunday in 1847 had a special frenzy, reflecting a particularly acute desperation. Troubles on the railroad or with landlords or shopkeepers do not fully explain it. Looming ever larger in the minds of all Irishmen in Worcester, but especially the most recent immigrants, was the dawning realization in the early months of that year that their island home had become a death house. Two years before, in the autumn of 1845, a potato blight, originating ironically on the east coast of North America, had spread to Ireland. The crop that year was only partially ruined, but the next year it was far worse. By 1847 there seemed to be no hope; people were dying in the fields, on the roads, in their homes, in the workhouses—everywhere. One observer reported that he found a whole family lying under a blanket; some members were already dead, the others were simply too weak and sick to remove them. Despite these horrors, the people of Worcester knew little of the dimensions of the disaster in 1845 or 1846. Information seemed to filter across the Atlantic in scraps and pieces. Even recent immigrants gave conflicting reports. By early 1847 the ship *Hibernia* docked in Boston with news that all Ireland was lost. Soon thereafter the refugees followed, tattered, half starved, dying of ship's fever, typhus and cholera.



The first locomotive in Worcester. Dubbed *The Lion*, it arrived from Lancaster, England in 1835.

Worcester Historical Museum Collection

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

Two hundred of them died in Worcester alone, many in the rooms set up at the new St. John's Church. Through 1847 and 1848, the members of the parish struggled to do what they could for their countrymen. In February, 1847 the congregation sent \$546.50 to the Famine Relief Fund. Yet the newest immigrants could not comprehend the abstraction of sending money to a whole country, money to feed strangers while their relatives starved. They accused the pioneers of misusing funds or holding back money and hoarding their riches. So the Catholic community once again rocked with recriminations and controversies. Meanwhile, hundreds kept vigil in the new St. John's Church; women, men, children, in tattered shawls or homespun coats, kneeling at the rail or in the pews, praying for a miracle, praying that the ones they loved could escape disaster.

The church in Worcester was caught in the center of this storm of events. Rev. Fitton sensed the rising anger of the newcomers as he made his frequent rounds through the Irish tenement district of the Meadows. He heard the men grumble about Boland and his hiring practices and the women mutter about the Irish shopkeepers, the "gambeenmen," the "Forty thieves." Though long the friend of the "pioneer" leaders like Boland, he spoke too them about their treatment of their workers and the prices in their shops. Rev. Fitton might have headed off the impending conflict, but he was restless. His energy and enthusiasm could not be satisfied with the duties of a settled pastorate. He yearned for his old work, saying mass in every barn and stable, organizing parishes and building churches. In 1843 he requested and was granted a transfer, and Rev. Adolphus Williamson took his place in Worcester. Rev. Williamson, however, was sick, and after only a few months he left for Baltimore where he soon dies. Bishop Fenwick then turned to Rev. Matthew Gibson, who had originally come north from Philadelphia to Holy Cross with the intention of joining the Jesuits. It was an unfortunate choice, however, for Rev. Gibson was an Englishman (the nephew of an English bishop), aristocratic and overbearing. Unlike Rev. Fitton, who often donned simple workingmen's clothes, the haughty Gibson insisted on wearing clerical garb as well as a fancy over-coat adorned with a luxuriant purple and white collar. Rev. Gibson's appointment was a little like touching a match to a powder keg.

Perhaps Rev. Gibson's fundamental problem was his inability to understand the religious customs and traditions of the people of his new parish. Irish laymen in Worcester had grown accustomed to having an important say in the management of their church. For Rev. Fitton this high degree of lay involvement did not prove troublesome. The lay leaders were all old friends and some, in fact, were his distant kin. Under Rev. Williamson, of course, the laity provided the church's only direction, for the pastor was initially too sick to manage the church, and later left the city altogether. Rev. Gibson was intent, however, on reasserting clerical authority. Perhaps he was mindful of the recent embarrassing battles between lay trustees

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

And the church's hierarchy in places like Buffalo, New York, Philadelphia or Baltimore. There, laymen invigorated by American ideals and customs had asserted their ultimate right to control church property. This assertion had touched off nasty struggles with the bishops in those communities, struggles which in Buffalo, for example, had led to the excommunication of lay leaders. Rev. Gibson may have been trying to squelch such an insurrection in Worcester before it gained momentum but his actions, in fact, seemed to spark a rebellion into life.

The controversies began as soon as the new pastor arrived in Worcester. Bishop Fenwick actually touched off the conflict between Rev. Gibson and the priest's flock. In the same letter Bishop Fenwick sent to the congregation installing Rev. Gibson as pastor on April 6, 1845, the bishop upbraided the people of Worcester for not purchasing proper vestments and chalices for the church. Though this issue seemed to settle quickly, antagonism towards the haughty new pastor spread rapidly through the congregation. Some zealots even tried to close the rectory to him. Within two weeks of his appointment, Rev. Gibson was writing to the bishop, imploring him to come to Worcester. On April 20, 1845, Bishop Fenwick, now aged and sick, came to Christ Church. Though he chastised the people about the need for "unity," he also suggested to them that they enlarge their church or build a new one on the same site.

The bishop's intervention seemed to quell the incipient rebellion, for after mass the laity voted to erect a new "large and respectable church built of brick" on the site of the old one. By May 12, 1845 the old church had been moved to an adjoining lot and 200 members of the congregation, working all day and night, had dug out a trench for the foundation. On May 27, 1845 Bishop John Fitzpatrick, associate bishop of Boston, came to Worcester to preside over the laying of the cornerstone. The new church would be named St. John's in his honor.

The ceremony on that dedication day was as magnificent and dramatic as Rev. Gibson and his flock could make it. Perhaps he and they hoped that the ritual would help knit their little community back again. It began on the morning of the 27th when the congregation gathered at Gibson's home. Accompanied by a band, they paraded south to Holy Cross College. Before they reached the school the Jesuits and their students came out to greet them and joined in the procession back to the church. There the large throng listened to a long oration by Rev. Nicholas O'Brien, delivered both in English and French, and finally Bishop Fitzpatrick blessed and lay the cornerstone into place (the cornerstone included a time capsule with coins, newspapers of the day and likeness of President Polk). Even nature seemed to smile on the Catholics of Worcester that day: "the weather was warm and delightful, the sun shone forth in all its splendor, and the face of nature looked cheerful and gay."

Yet no single ceremony could eliminate the conflicts which were so deeply rooted within the parish. By October 1845 the

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

new church's spire had begun to pierce the sky and rafters were resting on the walls, but there was no more money to pay the contractors. Worse, there was no way to secure a loan, for discrepancies in the deed prevented the pastor from getting a mortgage. When Rev. Gibson turned to the congregation for help, he found that the old antagonisms of the spring had not subsided. The parishioners did offer him aid in securing a loan, but in return they forced him to sign an agreement pledging that he would spend the money only on the new church. For good measure, they also instructed him to fire Tobey Boland, who had been hired as the superintendent of construction for the new church. Rev. Gibson grudgingly complied, contracted the necessary mortgage and continued the construction. By June 24, 1846 the new church was nearly finished, but the pastor's troubles did not abate. With the completion of the building he determined that he needed a new permanent sexton. Neither of the two sextons for the old church, Isadore Ledeaureic or John Sullivan seemed interested in the job, so Rev. Gibson offered the post to Thomas Magennis of Saxon-ville. Once again the congregation erupted. At a meeting in the basement of the new church, members of the parish angrily at-tacked the pastor, asking "by what right his reverence ap-pointed a new sexton without consulting them." The imperious Rev. Gibson ordered them out of the church. They refused to leave. Then he called them out one by one, until the basement was empty.

The last controversy occurred just a week before the new church was to be dedicated. To make matters worse, sym-pathizers with the rebellious laymen in the choir decided to resign from that body, and tried to encourage their fellow singers to boycott the dedication services. Rev. Gibson was frantic as he saw the carefully laid plans for that ceremony dissolve into chaos. Nevertheless, the dedication went off as planned on July 24, 1846, and rivaled or even surpassed the cornerstone service of the year before. Thousands thronged to the new brick church on Temple Street that day, including Catholics from "all the neighboring towns and villages" (many of whom walked the entire distance) and even Boston. At 10:00 a.m. a procession of Holy Cross students, laymen behind banners emblazoned with the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a host of 32 priests made its way from Rev. Gibson's house to the church. There the loyal members of the choirs sang, while Bishop Fitzpatrick said a solemn High Mass. The Gospel was read by Rev. Ryder, who then spoke for an hour, "listened to with much attention by all." At one o'clock the ceremonies had ended and all left the new St. John's with "great order and decorum."

Despite this splendid manifestation of harmony and order, even the new church could not heal the divisions within Worcester's Catholic community. Rev. Gibson's troubles with his lay trustees may have abated, but the social and economic chasm between new and old, western and eastern immigrants in Worcester's Irish Catholic community was growing even

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

wider. Rev. Gibson did little to prevent these differences from erupting into open conflict. He did attempt to suppress the western Irishmen's secret Shamrock Society, but with outright condemnations. When asked by its leaders and instructed by the bishop to investigate charges made by the Shamrock Society against the pioneer Irish bosses and shopkeepers, he replied that he found no substance in the society's charges against these men of poor treatment or over-pricing. Such a response was to be expected, for in the tempests of his early pastorate he had come to increasingly identify with the members of his congregation whose backgrounds were most like his own: Tobey Boland and the other major Irish contractors and shopkeepers. The new immigrants from western Ireland, with their strange customs, shabby clothes and rough manners, appeared to him to be no more than unruly "children." By the time of the Palm Sunday riot in 1847 it was clear that he had lost control of these newcomers, and Bishop Fitzpatrick had to come to Worcester to threaten the society's leaders with excommunication unless they recanted. Fifteen of them duly confessed publicly before the bishop at Sunday Mass at St. John's, and the threats of the Shamrocks appeared to have passed.

Unfortunately for Rev. Gibson and the other members of St. John's Church, the conflicts within the Irish population of Worcester were not the only problems they confronted. French Canadians had been coming to Worcester and by the 1840s they comprised a substantial group. Though they worshiped at Christ Church and later St. John's, they were not comfortable there. Their Irish co-religionists viewed them with suspicion; the French not only seemed strange and different to the Irish, but they also competed with the Hibernians for jobs. Further, services at St. John's were in English. For the French-speaking Canadians, this was not the source of a mere inconvenience. After nearly a half-century of life under English oppression, they had come to view their French language and their religion, Catholicism, as inseparable. To worship in English was to betray their heritage and little better than not worshipping at all.

Some Irish leaders had recognized this French dissatisfaction, and helped the French Canadians secure a French priest in 1846. Soon after Rev. Zepherie Leveque came to Worcester to minister to the French Canadians as a curate at St. John's, he recognized the need for the French to build their own church. His fundraising efforts had hardly begun, however, before he became ill and left, turning the money he had collected over to Tobey Boland. This proved to be an unwise choice, for the money raised for the French church now provoked a controversy among the Irish. When the French request for their own parish was denied in 1848, the new immigrant Irish demanded that Boland turn the money over to them to be used for famine relief. When Boland refused, a new cycle of violence erupted in the Irish community.

Rent to pieces, patched up, and ripped apart again, the Catholic community of Worcester seemed on the verge of disintegration by the end of the 1840s. By that time most of the pioneer Catholics like Tobey Boland had left the recently pro-



St. John's as it looked during the second half of the nineteenth century.

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

claimed municipality (Worcester had become a city in 1848). In this vacuum of leadership, the Shamrock Society revived and became more sinister and daring as it engaged in a campaign of extortion and violence. Gangs based on county loyalties also roamed the East Side, particularly festering in the Meadows, where they preyed upon the unwary. The city's Yankees gener-ally left the Irish to themselves, imposing a kind of quarantine on the East Side. Well they might, for it is rumored that when one new mayor threatened to clean up the illegal liquor traffic in the city's Irish districts, the Shamrock Society blew up his office.

There were some signs of hope, however. In 1847 a new priest, Rev. John Boyce, had been assigned to the parish to serve as co-pastor with Rev. Gibson. Rev. Boyce's appointment was curious in many ways, for his aristocratic background and his remarkable gifts as a writer and musician would have seemed better qualifications for a faculty position at Holy Cross or a settled pastorate in a sedate, well established and prosperous parish, rather than his position as minister to rough hewn railroad workers and Famine immigrants in a turbulent industrial "boom" town. Yet, though Rev. Boyce came from a wealthy family and had spent much of his life in England, he had been born in Ireland and had a great deal more sympathy for his immigrant parishioners and their harsh life than Rev. Gibson. They soon recognized this apparently fragile scholar as a confidante, and ever so slowly Rev. Boyce began to rebuild the bonds of trust between priests and parishioners in Worcester. There were still difficulties. His appointment as co-pastor with Rev. Gibson proved to be an unwieldy arrange-ment, for the two clashed often and decisions therefore were left unresolved. Even after Rev. Gibson had left Rev. Boyce proved to be an untidy administrator, and some of his projects, such as the attempt to establish a parochial school, ended in disaster. Nevertheless, this odd man with his refined tastes, his paint brushes and the manuscripts of his novels brought an air of hope to a Catholic people numbered by constant conflict and bickering.

Perhaps as important, that community itself was producing a new lay leadership that would help to rescue it from anarchy. In 1849 a group of veterans returning to Worcester from the Mexican War had established a social club and militia society called the Jackson Guards. The organization was unique among Irish Catholics in Worcester, for it included members from almost every segment of the city's Irish society, new immigrants, old ones, and the bulk of the men, perhaps, children of immigrants who had attended the early St. John's schools. These men continued to meet socially until one of their members was attacked by one of the gangs then rampaging through Worcester's East Side. After unsuccessfully seeking help from the police and civic authorities, the Jacksons took matters into their own hands. Donning their uniforms, they marched through the East Side, systematically searching out their culprit. When they finally apprehended him, they held their own court martial and carried out their own punishment.

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

Though their actions could not be considered legal, the Jacksons had nonetheless brought the first sign of order into the Irish community in nearly two years. For the next few years they continued to serve as the “policemen” for the East Side and by 1852 had routed most of the gangs and the Shamrock Society.

There were other signs of hope among Catholics in Worcester in the 1850s. Many of the missions established in surrounding towns by Fitton or Gibson had begun to build their own churches: St. John’s in Clinton; St. Bernard’s in Fitchburg; St. Louis’ in Webster; St. Patrick’s in Rutland; and St. Bridget’s in Millbury. In the city itself, a new parish, St. Anne’s, emerged in the neighborhood of the Meadows. Though begun as a French Canadian church, control over the new parish had reverted to the Irish as the ill-fated French could not find the proper financing. To serve as pastor of the new St. Anne’s the bishop chose Rev. John J. Power, an in-tellectual, almost frail priest, who would nonetheless dominate Worcester’s Catholic community for the next fifty years. At St. John’s, too, there were heartening developments, particularly in the organization of a whole flock of societies, including: the St. John’s Mutual Relief Society, the Young Catholic’s Friend Society, the Catholic Library Association and the St. Vincent’s Society. Most of these organizations met in the old Christ Church, renamed Fenwick Hall and later renamed again as the “Institute,” and which now stood next to the new St. John’s. In succeeding years, renovations and the addition of rooms to the old church rendered its appearance virtually “unrecognizable,” a cause of chagrin among the older parishioners. Yet the renovations and additions were in fact tangible, hopeful signs that the parish community was once again united, and the old divisions healed.

Yet the times of troubles had not ended for Worcester’s beleaguered Catholics in the 1850s. If the conflicts within their community had subsided, their battles with their Protestant neighbors had only begun to enter a new and dangerous phase. To the Yankee natives of Worcester, already trained to fear and suspect “papists,” the anarchy in the Irish community in the 1840s surely must have seemed the foreshadowing of disaster. The violence, the gangs, the mobs and secret societies all took their toll on the relations between Catholics and Prot-estants, which were already fragile at best. As more and more of these Irishmen arrived, nearly 3,000 in only five years, im-poverished, unskilled, demoralized by catastrophe and frus-trated by restricted opportunities in America, the Yankees of Worcester could not see the marks of oppression on these newcomers. They could see only a mounting threat to their civilization. In 1854 a depression and a fire in the Merrifield building which drew thousands of Yankee workers out of work combined with the heavy costs borne by the city in building a new poorhouse for the poorest of the Irish im-migrants to set the stage for an anti-Catholic crusade.

In that year a secret society, the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, appeared in Worcester, and within a few months its

— TIME OF TROUBLES —

membership rose to over one thousand men. The society, dedicated to countering the “papist” threat and curbing im-migration, quickly became known as the “Know-Nothings,” for here in Worcester and elsewhere their members were strictly pledged to keep the society’s activities secret and respond, “I know nothing,” when questioned by outsiders. Anti-Catholic sentiment ran deeper and was more widespread in Worcester than these thousand “Know-Nothings.” In the fall of 1854 anti-Catholic candidates virtually swept Worcester, the new anti-Catholic mayor winning over 70% of the city’s vote. There were other signs of the new nativism as well: anti-Catholic demagogues like James S. Orr, alias the “Angel Gabriel,” ranting and raving on the Common’ random sniper attacks on the Catholic East Side; and a visit to Holy Cross by the “Nunnery Committee” of the state legislature, poking through classrooms and dormitories, searching for stashes of arms or women rumored to be held captive by the priests. (After visiting the college, the committee adjourned to a lo-cal house of ill fame at state expense, a trip which, when later revealed, did much to discredit the “Know-Nothing” movement.)

The “Know-Nothing” crusade collapse almost as soon as it had arisen. Within a few years the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner had disappeared, and most of the anti-Catholic political leaders faded into their former obscurity. Yet the mutual suspicion between Catholics and Protestants in Worcester continued. Not until the Civil War would the tensions begin to diminish. By the end of the war it was difficult for the local zealots to continue their attacks on Catholics, when nearly half the men who joined the Union Army and over half who gave their lives for the Union were Catholics. Who now could openly question the loyalty of Catholics to their country? Who could suspect a Sergeant Plunkett, who lost both arms carrying the stars and stripes into the teeth of Confederate fire at Fredericksburg? Or a Captain O’Neill, cut down while leading the charge at Cold Harbor? With the end of this sacrifice in blood, the time of troubles seemed to end for the Catholics of Worcester. In the mourning for their young men (many of them recently arrived in this country), whose bodies now lay buried under the fields of Antietam, Gettysburg and Spotsylvania, the long night of Worcester’s Catholic peo-ple was finally giving way to a new, more hopeful dawn.

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

It was, James Mellen, editor of the Worcester Daily Times, proclaimed, the “greatest event” in the Catholic history of “this vicinity.” Even by a modest estimate, 10,000 people attended the different services at St. John’s that day. There were three bishops in attendance, Bradley of New Hampshire, O’Reilly of Springfield, and Archbishop Williams of Boston. A “host” of priests thronged the church, a choir composed of the best voices from the five Catholic parishes in Worcester sang to the accompaniment of thirteen-piece orchestra. A flock of sodality members and the nattily-uniformed St. John’s Temperance cadets crowded the pews. Outside the church, throughout the “Island,” Irish and American flags draped the residences and businesses of men like Jonathan Boland and James Dunn and the Fay brothers. It was July 28th, 1884, and the people of St. John’s were celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of their parish.

There would be more celebrations at the brick church on Temple Street in the next few decades. Two hundred priests would fill the church in 1889 to honor the pastor, Msgr. Thomas Griffin, upon his appointment as domestic prelate. Three years later a vast crowd of well wishers, including four ex-mayors of Worcester, would return to commemorate Msgr. Griffin’s twenty-five years as a priest. In 1896 there would be yet another jubilee for the church, the fiftieth anniversary of the present brick St. John’s Church, a celebration which was yet another “greatest event” in the Catholic history of “this vicinity.”

Pomp and splendor was not reserved only for special occasions in those days, however. On annual feasts like Corpus Christi, for example, the church was decorated with Irish, American and papal flags, and the St. John’s cadets led a procession of hundreds of boys and girls through the streets of the Island. Even on an average Sunday orchestras and choirs made High Mass such a musical extravaganza that priest felt compelled to remind their parishioners that they were not at the opera but attending a serious religious service.

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—



Monsignor Thomas Griffin, pastor of St. John's from 1885 to 1910. Hailed as a "Captain of Industry" by the *Boston Herald*, Msgr. Griffin built new parishes, schools and Providence Hospital, the forerunner of St. Vincent.

Worcester Historical Museum Collection

Catholics in Worcester had good reason to celebrate in a grand manner in the turn-of-the-century era. As they well knew, they had come a long way. Indeed, the progress of the church in Worcester seemed so rapid to them that could attribute it only to the miraculous intervention of Divine Providence. Bishop Patrick O'Reilly, who had served as pastor of St. John's between 1867 and 1870, recalled at the 1884 Jubilee celebration that barely one-third of the pews at the little Christ Church were filled for Sunday mass in the old days. Rev. John J. McCoy noted in 1900 that only fifty years before Catholic feasts, even Christmas and Easter, had passed unnoticed every year in the "gloomy" Worcester dominated by the descendants of the Puritans. Yet by 1884 worshippers spilled out of the pews and into the aisles at the seven Sunday masses at St. John's. By 1900, as McCoy proclaimed: "New England knows Christmas with all its sweet symbolism and the children of Puritan descent watch for it, and listen for the story of the Christ child as eagerly as do those who bear names like ours."

There were other signs, more concrete signs, of this progress, too. Between the Civil War and the dawn of the twentieth century, eight new Catholic parishes appeared in Worcester, most of them carved out of the old St. John's. And yet the mother parish continued to flourish. St. John's built two new schools, one for girls in 1872 and one for boys in 1891, initiated the drive to build a Catholic hospital in the city, fostered the development of an industrial school for boys, and supported a host of parish sodalities and societies. These did indeed appear to be years of triumph for the Catholics of Worcester and their mother church, St. John's.

Perhaps the man most responsible for this development was Msgr. Thomas Griffin. In 1905, the *Boston Herald* called him a "Captain of Industry," likening him to the great business-men of his era, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan. It was an apt description. Msgr. Griffin had, in fact, been a successful businessman even as a teenager, before he gave up that career to devote himself to his church. Yet the shrewd business instincts and the intense drive for success never left him. Indeed, one might say he became a businessman for his church. He was not a scholar; he had not time to mull over theological fine points. His mind was too full of fundraising schemes, sharp land purchases and the details of building contracts. His rock-hard, bull-headed features fully reflected his blunt and direct manner and stubborn energy. He drove his parishioners and curates hard in the forty years of his pastorate, but perhaps no harder than he drove himself.

Of course, Msgr. Griffin's success at St. John's was not the result of his labors alone. Indeed, for the first two decades of his pastorate he was fortunate to have the help of perhaps as talented a group of curates as has ever served in a Catholic parish in Worcester—or anywhere else, for that matter. The first was Rev. P.J. Garrigan, who later became the pastor of St. Bernard's in Fitchburg, vice rector of Catholic University and Bishop of Sioux City. Rev. Garrigan's successor at St. John's was, if anything, an even more remarkable man. Rev. Thomas

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

J. Conaty, born in Ireland but brought to America as an infant, would eventually move on from St. John's to become pastor of the new Sacred Heart Parish in Worcester. While there the tall, lean Rev. Conaty would not only make the South Worcester parish one of the most dynamic churches in the city, he would also serve as the president of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America, president of the Catholic Summer School, treasurer of the American branch of the Irish Land League, and for good measure publish and edit a nationally-respected magazine. In 1896 Rev. Conaty left Worcester to become president of Catholic University, and in 1903, bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles. The last priest in this distinguished succession, Rev. John J. McCoy, would not achieve the national repute of his predecessors. Yet Rev. McCoy, perhaps, had a more profound effect on the people of St. John's while assisting Msgr. Griffin. Like Rev. Conaty and Rev. Garrigan, Rev. McCoy was a zealous supporter of total abstinence from alcohol. Yet the young, powerful square-jawed Rev. McCoy seemed more successful in converting the streetwise young Irish toughs of the Island into teetotalers. Perhaps it was harder to dismiss temperance as unmanly when it was preached by a man of Rev. McCoy's athletic prowess—he had been a starring pitcher on the Holy Cross baseball nine. Whatever his appeal, young men flocked to the temperance societies he founded in the parish. When he finally transferred to his own parish in Westboro in 1886, his temperance men were so incensed that they sent a delegation all the way to Springfield to plead with the bishop to return their priest to them (He would return to Worcester in 1905, but not to St. John's. After serving in Chicopee, he would become pastor of the old St. Anne's where he remained until his death in 1922. While in Worcester, he founded a number of organizations, including the Catholic Women's Club.)

Despite this abundance of clerical talent, the new prosperity of St. John's was ultimately a reflection of the progress of its people. Though chunks of territory were sliced off continually for new parishes, St. John's still retained a healthy congregation of over 9,000 in 1890, and over 10,000 as late as 1910. By 1880 about 26 percent of the fathers of families in the parish were white-collar workers, mostly clerks, mailmen, or grocers, or skilled manual workers, such as plumbers, machinists and carpenters. Their children were even more successful at breaking into white-collar or skilled work, the sons as bookkeepers and machinists, the daughters as salesgirls and teachers. In-deed, by 1910 almost half the teachers in Worcester's public schools were Irish Catholics, a higher percentage than almost any other city in America, including Boston and New York. Some of both the old and new generations achieved even greater success. Matthew J. McCafferty became the first Irish Catholic judge in Massachusetts history, and even ran for governor on Ben Butler's ill-fated People's Party ticket in 1884. Andrew Athy from Green Street, the former bootmaker, was also a well-respected local political figure, so well-



Revs. Thomas J. Conaty (top) and John J. McCoy, two of a group of extraordinarily energetic clergy who served St. John's in the second half of the nineteenth century.
Worcester Historical Museum Collection

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

respected that he was actually nominated by both the Democrats and the Republicans for alderman in 1883 and was the first Catholic to run for mayor in Worcester's history. It would be yet another St. John's man, however, Philip J. O'Connell, who would actually be the first man to secure that office in 1901.

For St. John's this new prosperity of its people and the energy and talent of its priests proved to be a happy combination. The old divisions, western and eastern Irishmen, had virtually disappeared (though politicians in a pinch might still invoke memories of the Kerry mountains or the coast of Mayo to wring out a few more votes in Democratic wards). While some members of the congregation might complain about Msgr. Griffin's extravagance, the vast majority nonetheless contributed dutifully to his many construction projects and basked in the glory of his achievements. St. John's thus entered its glory years, a busy, almost frantic, time of building and organizing and an era of growth and seemingly unbounded optimism.

The prosperity and dynamism of St. John's was, of course, most evident in the parish itself. Few major improvements had to be made in the church or the Institute, already so stoutly and grandly built. Nevertheless, Msgr. Griffin undertook a number of renovations in the basement of the church and the rectory in the 1880s, while also adding rooms to the Institute and moving it slightly west in the same decade. According to one skeptic, Msgr. Griffin simply felt the Institute blocked the sunlight from penetrating the stained glass windows on the Church's west side, and thus the building had to be moved. Msgr. Griffin's energetic young curate, Rev. John J. McCoy, also left his mark on the parish's buildings. His improvements, in fact, were perhaps the most popular of all, particularly his effort in the early 1880s to outfit some rooms in the Institute as a gymnasium, which eventually inspired the formation of an expert gymnastics team in the parish.

As before, however, the buildings of St. John's were only a reflection of the vitality of the parish community. Evidence of the congregation's energy and progress could best be found in the popularity of its societies and social events. Planned for months in advance, they often ran for as long as two weeks and included: speeches by local politicians such as the reigning mayor; dance music provided by orchestras; plays and "living tableaux" —children dressed in costumes symbolizing all the great nations (Ireland in the front rank, of course); lotteries on items ranging from a ton of coal to a portrait of the bishop; and voting contests for the most popular foreman in the wire mill, or clerk in a downtown store, or most popular girl or boy in the parish. (These voting contests often produced intense rivalries with disastrous results, as at a St. Anne's fair in the 1890s when the local newspaper exposed the attempts of a local saloonkeeper to trade rounds of drinks for votes to elect his daughter the most popular girl in the parish.) In addition, of course, there were booths of every variety selling hand crafted articles, candies and cakes, ice cream and lemonade. These



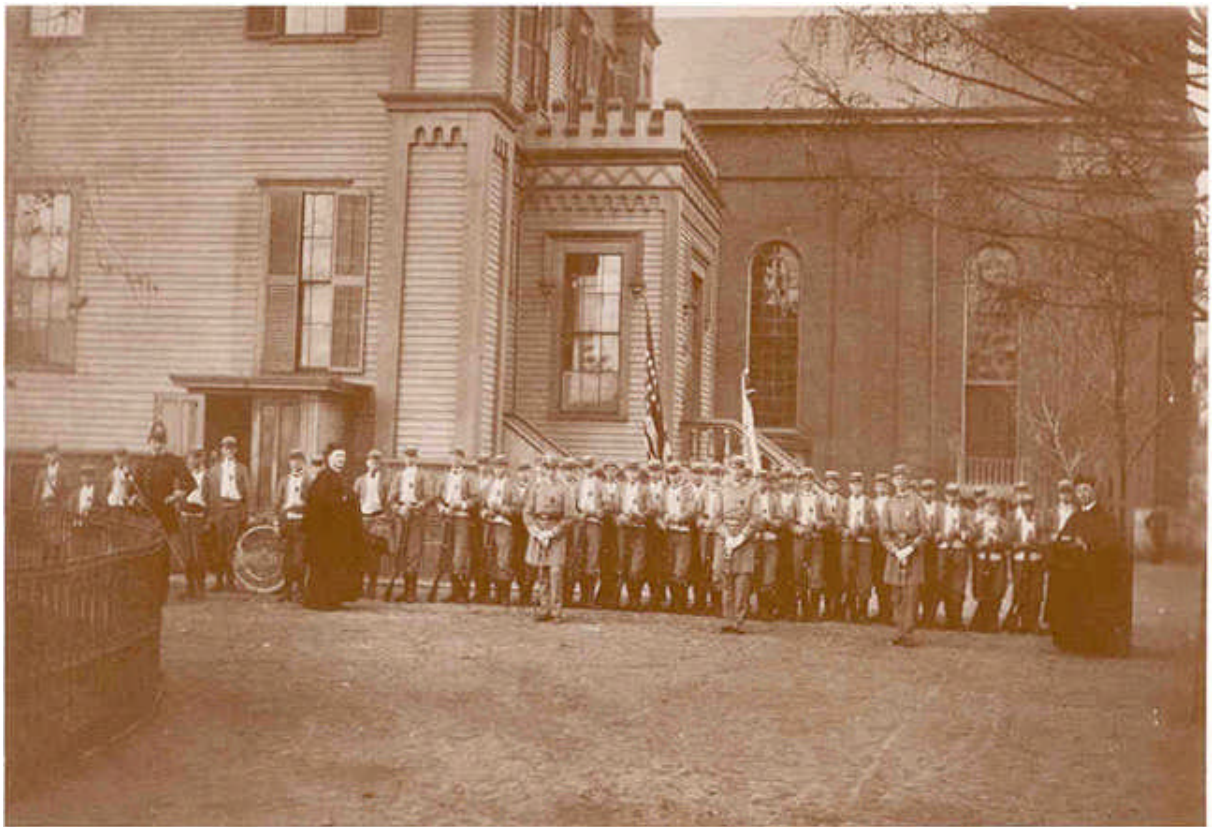
Andrew Athy (1832-1898), bootmaker, undertaker and politician. Athy served on the Worcester Common Council and the Worcester City Council; he represented Worcester in the General Court and, in 1886, became the first Irishman to run for mayor. Athy founded the family funeral home in 1875, and his descendants still operate the business today.

Courtesy Anthony Athy

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

Fairs, were often so large that the Institute was too small to house them and they had to be held downtown in Mechanics Hall. Parish picnics were not so formal, but nearly as grand. Thousands from the parish would gather at the train stations, packing as many as ten cars, to be whisked away to Lake Wau-shacum or other nearby resorts for a day of horse races, boat races, baseball games, track and field events and, of course, abundant food. In addition to the major events like picnics and fairs, the parish or its societies put on lectures, stereopticon shows, concerts, whist parties and coffee parties weekly or almost daily.

Many of these events were sponsored by the church's societies, which multiplied rapidly in the late nineteenth century. By the 1880s there were sodalities for Married Ladies and Unmarried Ladies, as well as ones devoted to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In addition, there were Holy Name and St. Vincent de Paul societies and two large temperance clubs, the St. John's Temperance Cadets for teenaged boys and the St. John's Temperance and Literary Guild for young men in their twenties and thirties. The latter was an especially popular organization, perhaps the most popular club in Worcester in its day, largely due to the wide variety of activities it sponsored: baseball and track and field teams, a four-oared crew, lectures, debates, concert recitals, picnics and dances. In the next few decades some of these clubs would disappear (temperance fell out of favor in the early 1900s), but



St. John's Cadets stand in formation beside the Institute during the 1880s.

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

new ones often took their place. One of the most important for the women of the parish was the Ladies Charitable Benevolent Association, an insurance society brought to St. John's from Titusville, Pennsylvania by Mrs. Anne Sweeney in 1910. Within a few years, Mrs. Sweeney and her cohorts would establish branches of the L.C.B.A. in almost all the other parishes in Worcester.

The parish itself was healthy and thriving then, but Msgr. Griffin still found much to do. Perhaps his first priority was to establish a school in the parish. Before the troubled times of the 1840s, a small school had flourished, first at Tobey Boland's home and later in the basement of the old church. Yet in the turbulence of the 1840s the school seemed to disappear and efforts to revive it in the 1850s floundered. Thus, when Msgr. Griffin tried to establish a new school only two years after taking charge of the parish in 1870, many members of his congregation were skeptical. Nevertheless, the relentless Msgr. Griffin soon plunged ahead. In the summer of 1872 he secured the services of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur as teachers. When the sisters arrived on August 26 that year from Boston and Cincinnati, they found no desks in the makeshift class-rooms Griffin had rigged up in the Institute. Within two years, however, the driving pastor had built a new school on Vernon Street and the tireless sisters were educating over three hundred children as well as teaching night school.

The Sisters of Notre Dame were bound by a rule of their order, however, which prohibited them from teaching boys above primary school age, and Msgr. Griffin was determined to provide for the boys of his parish. Thus, in 1884 he traveled to Ireland to visit with the Christian Brothers and ask them to come to Worcester to establish a boys school at St. John's. The brothers agreed, and in 1886 sent a delegation to Worcester to begin the effort. They did not stay long. Griffin had no building for them, and thus had asked them to live and teach in some run-down tenements owned by the church. The brothers resented these conditions. More important, these Irish brothers had difficulty adjusting to the "manners and customs" of the new land, which was a polite way of saying that they found the young Irish American city boys of the Island a good deal more difficult to handle than the respectful youngsters of rural Ireland. The St. John's Boys School limped along in the tenements with an overworked lay staff until 1892, when Msgr. Griffin built a new modern school facility. His negotiations for the land for this school had been somewhat mysterious; so mysterious, in fact, that some suspected that Griffin was angling to become Bishop of a new Worcester diocese and purchase the land as a site for his new cathedral. By 1893 he had lured the Xaverian Brothers to teach his boys. The Xaverians, a Belgian-based order long established in America, proved to be somewhat tougher (or perhaps more patient) than the Christian Brothers. In any event, they refused to be chased away and have taught at St. John's ever since.

The schools completed, Msgr. Griffin did not rest on his laurels. His vision now turned outside the parish to the needs of

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

Worcester's entire Catholic community. Curiously, however, perhaps his greatest contribution to that community, St. Vincent Hospital, came about almost by accident. Even while he was working to build a boys school, Msgr. Griffin had become convinced of the need to establish a Catholic old age home in Worcester. Many of the Famine Era immigrants who had come to America in the 1840s and 1850s were growing old. Though most were cared for by their children, some 30 in 1892 had no recourse in their advanced years but to seek shelter at the poor farm. Msgr. Griffin's first attempt to establish such a home in 1890 (tentatively called St. Elizabeth's Home) was a bit too shrewd, and he suffered the consequences of his deviousness. He had the Ladies Charitable Society of his parish propose the idea and recruit a lay planning committee from all the parishes in the city. The scheme fooled no one, least of all the irascible pastor of St. Stephen's, Rev. R.S.J. Burke. Rev. Burke had nursed a grudge against the monsignor since 1887. In that year Msgr. Griffin had created St. Stephen's, saddling Rev. Burke and his new congregation at St. Stephen's with a large debt, while providing them with no place to worship except a drafty school attic. Rev. Burke thus eagerly tore into Msgr. Griffin's proposed old age home, and his savage attacks in the news-papers quickly killed the project. Yet the bull-headed mon-signor would not quit. In 1892 he began negotiations with the Sisters of Charity to come to Worcester to open an old age home. They refused, but when Msgr. Griffin made the same appeal to the Sisters of Providence the following year they accepted.

The old age home, of course, was never built, or more accurately, it eventually became a forgotten adjunct to a far more ambitious project. For while the sisters were preparing to come to Worcester to open the old age home, Msgr. Griffin's plans suddenly changed. Though the evidence is sketchy, a number of local doctors as well as the nuns apparently met at St. John's rectory sometime during the summer of 1893 and convinced the monsignor to establish a hospital instead of the old age home. Even members of the local Yankee elite enthusiastically backed this idea, for the new Memorial Hospital and City Hospital were overcrowded (City Hospital was even turning patients away at this time). Thus in September of 1893, the new Providence Hospital was established on Vernon Hill. The early years were difficult ones for the institution, which was quickly renamed St. Vincent. The Sisters of Providence managed to keep it alive, however, in part by selling their needlework in the community. By 1898 support from all religious groups in the city enabled the trustees of the institution to erect a new hospital building. By that time, St. Vincent had become firmly established and within twenty years the demand for its services would force the building of yet another, much larger hospital building.

St. Vincent was a fitting symbol of the progress made by Catholics in Worcester, and particularly at St. John's. For some like Rev. John J. McCoy, in 1896 the pace of change was

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

So rapid, the results so monumental, that it seemed a “giddy” dream. Others, however, could testify that such progress had not been without pain. For the people assigned to the new St. Stephen’s parish in 1887, for example, “progress” meant being torn from the St. John’s they had grown to love, and separation from old friends and lifelong societies. These people did not go quietly. They pleaded with the monsignor and the bishop to let them remain in their old parish. Ultimately they submitted to the bishops decree, and after a few difficult years began to build a new spiritual home at the foot of Grafton Hill. If “progress” was painful to some, perhaps more important was the fact that as most at St. John’s moved forward, many were left behind in poverty and despair.



St. John's school, built by
Monsignor Thomas Griffin in
1892, stood on Temple Street
until it was demolished in 1977.
Courtesy Catholic Free Press

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

Those left furthest behind, both literally and figuratively, were kinsmen three thousand miles away in Ireland. Conditions had steadily improved in the old country since the great famine of the 1840s, at least in part simply because death and emigration had reduced the terrible pressure on Ireland's limited land supply. Yet after a mild burst of economic prosperity in the early 1870s, the crops failed, and in 1879 Ireland once again seemed on the verge of famine. The people of St. John's were quick to heed the calls of the desperate relatives across the sea. Msgr. Griffin organized a mass meeting in Mechanics Hall to seek the help of Worcester's Yankees, while the bishop ordered special collections in all city's Catholic churches. By 1880 over \$1,000 had been sent to Ireland by the Catholic and Protestant people of Worcester.

Yet as many Irish Catholics in Worcester realized, such relief funds were temporary expedients; they offered no final solution to Ireland's ills. As Msgr. Griffin confessed, many American Irish were ashamed, embarrassed to have to continually seek charity for their beleaguered homeland. In Ireland, too, leaders and the people alike resolved never to confront the horror and suffering of famine ever again. They thus set about to free their little Ireland from the terrible grip of economic insecurity and political slavery forever. Their immediate goal was to reform the corrupt land system to prevent greedy landlords from squeezing Irish tenant farmers. Ultimately, however, most saw that Irishmen must run their own affairs, and they sought to restore the Home Rule to the island which the English had stolen from them over eighty years before.

Irishmen in Worcester enthusiastically rallied to the new Irish nationalist crusade, and St. John's almost naturally became a center of the agitation. Msgr. Griffin gave the cause his heartfelt support, and Rev. John J. McCoy emerged as one of its most prominent leaders and perhaps its most powerful orator. His booming voice could be heard at almost all of the many mass meetings, slashing away at Queen Victoria, "that raiser of hogs human and otherwise," and crying in sympathy for the "red hot torrents of your hearts best blood which your people (in Ireland) have been shedding" in their war against the landlords. Parishioners poured out their nickels and dimes to free their Irish brothers and sisters across the sea: wireworkers at the South Works contributing to rescue toiling humanity from "centuries of land theftism"; and women in the Ladies Land League working to fulfill their motto, "The land of every country belongs to the people of that country. No alien rule. Out on the Invader." While meetings were held all over the city, in Mechanics Hall or at the old rink, the parish hosted many Irish nationalist protests at the Institute. It was a fitting gathering place for the Irish crusade, the old church a link to the first Irishmen who had come to Worcester more than half a century before. Yet, though enlarged and renovated, the Institute could hardly accommodate the noisy, emotional crowds which packed it to protest the arrest of Ireland's leaders by the British—3,000 people with

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

no more advance notice than a simple announcement from the pulpit of St. John's church three days before. Emotions certainly ran high, and yet emotions, speeches, even money scrimped and saved would not free Ireland—at least not in the 1880s. It would be another thirty years or more before the Irish Catholics of St. John's would see their homeland "a nation once again."

The people of St. John's, of course, did not have to look three thousand miles away to find misery. While some members of the parish had achieved prosperity, even prominence, many struggled merely to earn enough to live on, and some failed to earn even that much. Seventy-four percent of the fathers on the Island in 1880 were unskilled workers no better than day laborers. Hundreds of the families had no fathers and were headed by widows. Though most of these were older women who could count on their children for support, some were young and helpless, like the woman aided by the parish St. Vincent de Paul Society in 1884;

Miss Riley called on the Kerr woman last night and found the baby dying of dysentery and Mrs. Kerr down with congestion of the lungs. The doctor says the baby will die and he has fears for the woman's life also...I went down this a.m. and never found a more pitiful case in my life. All was cold damp dirty and as the doctor said they would all die from the bad air.

Then, too, there were the children who had no parents. Notices like the following frequently appeared in the parish announcements:

There is an orphan boy about 11 years old who will be given into some family for adoption if any can be found to take him. If no one will be allowed to go for the summer for his board and clothing to any be given into some family for adoption if any can who wants his labor. Or:

Homes are wanting for two orphan children, brother and sister. They will be given separately if so required.

For men, women or children who had no home, there was no recourse except the poor farm. There children were whipped, women forced to work scantily dressed, and all clung to life on a meager diet of tea, bread and beans. Irish Catholics forced to live there were hardly appreciated. The Worcester Daily Times reported in 1882 that the superintendent of the poor farm threatened more than one exile of the Emerald Isle that he would "cut their Irish heart out," and Catholics often fell sick and died without receiving the last rites.

Even if they had a family and could avoid the cruelties of the poor farm, life on the Island was still very hard for most Catholic families. The men in the wire mills or foundries worked twelve to thirteen hours a day, sometimes forced to eat their lunches on the job. Young women in the envelope mills were under constant pressure to speed up their production. Industrial accidents were commonplace in those days, notices of castings falling and crushing arms and legs at Rice Barton and

—YEARS OF TRIUMPH—

Fales, or cave-ins suffocating city construction workers on Summer Street, or similar accidents at other companies or construction sites appearing frequently in the newspapers. Home life in crowded tenement apartments provided little shelter from hardship and suffering, much less comfort. The tenements, the Daily Times reported in 1882, were unbearably hot in the summer, and a housing report in 1905 found many houses with holes so large that they offered virtually no protection from the wind in the winter. Outside, the roads were rutted, often little better than dirt tracks, until well into the twentieth century (Worcester had but two miles of paved streets in 1880). Worse were the sewers; all the sewers in the city fed into the canal which flowed through the Island and South Worcester. In normal times the refuse was hardly bearable. One saloonkeeper tried to commit suicide merely by jumping into the stream. He did not hope to drown; he expected to die merely from the touch of the polluted water. When the storms hit the water backed up, flushing the garbage into the streets of the Island. In these unsanitary conditions, disease flourished. A smallpox epidemic hung on for months in the Island in 1880 long after it had disappeared elsewhere, for example, and tuberculosis, the “Irish disease,” was a troublesome problem until well into the twentieth century.

The trials of poverty and illness, then, had not disappeared among the people of St. John’s even in this, the parish’s “golden age.” Yet at least by this time, the turn of the century, the Church had the resources to address these problems and try to eliminate them. The terms “outreach” or “social service” might have been foreign to both priests and people of St. John’s in those days, but the movement to build an old age home or the construction of a hospital certainly qualified as examples of outreach or social service under any modern definition. The steady efforts of the parish’s St Vincent de Paul conference on Msgr. Griffin’s ill-fated attempt to establish the Mt. Joseph’s Home for Delinquent Boys would fit the definition as well. Even the Temperance movement was as much a reform effort as a moral crusade, for as Msgr. Griffin, Rev. Conaty and Rev McCoy well knew, the effects of excessive drinking on the working and family lives of the poor parishioners were devastation (not unlike the ravages of drug abuse on the poor today). Thus if many in the parish still suffered from broken homes, unemployment, poor housing, disease and harsh working conditions, they were neither forgotten nor ignored.

For most, however, it was a hopeful time. The old conflicts had been forgotten. Economic progress was evident not only in the bustling activity of the church itself but in the lives of many of its parishioners, and even those who had not tasted progress often found some relief or succor from their church. It was a time of Triumph, a golden age when optimism seemed well founded.

— TIME TO ENDURE —

Nineteen thirty-four. A century had passed since the first Catholic church in all of western Massachusetts had been erected in the former cow pasture which had become Temple Street. Where once there had been a rude wooden church and barely a hundred Catholics in all of western Massachusetts, now there were twenty-three parishes and nearly 86,000 Catholics in the city of Worcester alone. It was a proper time to celebrate for the people of the “mother church,” and they in-tended to celebrate its one hundredth birthday in truly spec-tacular fashion. Commemorative ceremonies were planned for the entire year, culminating in a grand Solemn High Mass to be said by the bishop on the feast of Christ the King, October 28th. Later that night thousands would flock to a “civil” celebration at the newly built Worcester Auditorium where they would hear the “Stabat Mater” sung by a choir composed of the fifty best voices from St. John’s and all the Catholic parishes in the city. The intricate performance of soloists, choristers and trios, the papers proclaimed, were “the most ambitious musical event ever to be presented by a St. John’s choir.”



St. John's as it looked in 1938
Courtesy Worcester Telegram and Gazette

— TIME TO ENDURE —

The splendor of these centennial celebrations suggested that little had changed since St. John's glory years at the turn of the century. Yet, in fact, the changes had been dramatic. Msgr. Griffin had been dead for nearly a quarter century (a battler to the last, he said mass up until the day before he died) and the parish he had called upon to support his many grand construction projects was no longer so powerful or so prosperous. By the late 1920s, St. John's had less than one-third as many members as it had had in 1910 at Msgr. Griffin's death, and the effects of this decline on the parish's finances were severe. In Msgr. Griffin's last years, the parish had raised about \$70,000 annually to meet its expenses; in 1906 alone the church had raised over \$92,000. Yet as early as 1913, revenues had fallen to about \$28,000, and they would rarely rise above that figure for the next thirty or more years (that is, when figures were controlled for inflation). Complicating the parish's financial problems further were the debts which Msgr. Griffin left. Though the church had been established for more than seventy years when the great pastor died, his many building projects and real estate schemes left St. John's with more than \$100,000 in financial obligations after his death.

The decline in revenue and population was in no way the responsibility of the pastors who followed Msgr. Griffin, Rev. Thomas Donohue and Rev. Edward Fitzgerald. Msgr. Griffin may indeed have been a superb fundraiser and organizer, but no man, no matter how talented could have reversed the changes which were taking place. Those changes were inevitable.

The most catastrophic and obvious change was the final division of St. John's territory which produced Ascension parish. In the 1890s and 1900s, a number of parishioners from the Vernon Hill area had taken to attending mass at the school on Vernon Street rather than trekking down to St. John's at the base of the hill. Soon the crowds at those Sunday masses in the school basement grew so large that they spilled out into the sidewalk. Sensing the growing demand for a parish on the hill, Msgr. Griffin began raising money for a "Church on Vernon Street" in 1905, and, by 1907, had raised over \$5,000. The creation of the new parish was put off, however, until 1910; delayed, in all likelihood, until after Msgr. Griffin's death so as not to burden him in his last years with the difficult financial consequences which the loss of revenues to the new parish entailed. His successor, Rev. Donohue, was not so fortunate. With the formation of Ascension parish he immediately found his congregation cut in half from more than 10,000 parishioners to about 5,000.

The loss of territory and, more important, population to the new Ascension Church was devastating, but there were more fundamental and long term trends which were eating away at the prosperity of St. John's Church. The most important of these was the rapid accelerating movement of Irish Catholics out of their old neighborhoods, like the Island, on the East Side. As the local Irish paper, the Catholic Messenger, explained in 1911:

— TIME TO ENDURE —

As fortune favors us and better things which others have enjoyed come within our reach, we seek to secure them. Among these are quiet homes, far removed from the turmoil, the dirt and the smoke of the busy center, and such homes as these the catholic people are seeking.

Even by that year the Catholic Messenger found “a surpris-ingly large number of Catholics (who) have located in the Western outskirts of the city...where formerly a Catholic resident was unknown.” Irish Catholics were not only moving to the West Side but to the far reaches of the southwest and northern areas of the city. By 1917, four new parishes had been created in these districts, Blessed Sacrament, St. Bernard’s, Our Lady of the Rosary and Our Lady of the Angels, testifying to the rising momentum of this Irish Catholic flight from the “busy center” to the “quiet homes” of the new neigh-borhoods.

While many Irishmen and French Canadians moved out of their old neighborhoods, new immigrants from countries which must have seemed exotic to most natives of Worcester began pouring into the city’s East Side. Between 1900 and 1920, the number of Italians in Worcester rose from 595 to 8,769, the number of Poles from 1,285 to 7,134 and Lithua-nians from 1,348 to 8,349. By 1916, colorful Italian festas and processions were commonplace on Shrewsbury Street, which had once been the heart of the old Irish St. Anne’s parish. On the Island in St. John’s parish, the changes were even more dramatic. While the Irish proportion of the Island’s families declined from 45% to 26% between 1890 and 1910, the Polish proportion rose from 1% to 31%. By the late 1930s a Polish- American youngster growing up in the neighborhood thought of it as almost a little Polish village transported across the sea. Such a description is exaggerated; the district contained large numbers of residents from other groups, particularly Lithua-nian Catholics. Further, many Irish Catholics still clung to the old neighborhood. Nevertheless it was clear that St. Patrick now had to make room for St. Casimir and Our Lady of Czestochowa on the Island.

For the older Irish parishes like St. Anne’s and St. John’s the effects of this population turnover in their neighborhoods were grim. While the people of the new groups were largely devout Catholics, they were also fiercely committed to the preserva-tion of their own languages and traditions. There fore, they im-mediately set about establishing their own national parishes. The Lithuanians were first, forming St. Casimir’s in 1894. The Poles and Italians followed quickly creating St Mary’s (Our Lady of Czestochowa) and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel respect-ively in 1903 and 1906. Thus while the older parishes lost Irish members to the west, north, or south and the suburbs, they failed, at least initially, to receive any significant infusions of new blood from the newer immigrant groups. St. Anne’s would not survive these changes; St. John’s would hold on, but barely.

Contending with these forces might have been difficult

— TIME TO ENDURE —

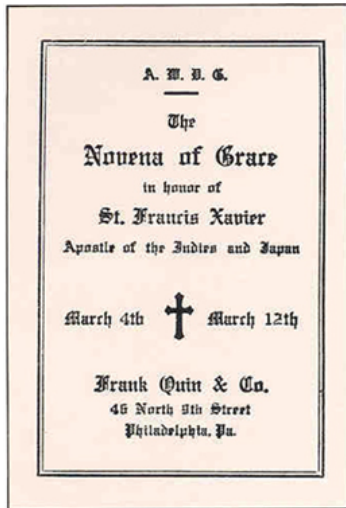
enough for the pastors and people of St. John's in the best of times. Yet the first few decades of the early twentieth century were hardly the best of times. World war, depression, and world war followed in rapid succession. In the first war, scores of young men from St. John's perished in the trenches and barbed wire of France to "make the world safe for Democracy." Nine years later, the parish honored its heroes by placing a tablet at the front of the church listing the church's war dead, its "roll of honor." In a touching little ceremony three young girls clad all in white lifted an American flag drap-ing the plaque while their tiny comrades from the grammar school saluted. The pastor, Rev. Fitzgerald, then addressed the young parishioners, stating his hope that "when the time comes you will give your service as ungrudgingly to your coun-try as these soldiers had." In modern times, however, war did not leave children or other civilians untouched. The people of St. John's were thus called upon frequently in the late 1910s and early 1920s to contribute relief funds for starving Europe. In a cause perhaps closer to their hearts, they were also asked to aid the people of Ireland suffering distress in the wake of their rebellion against England. This struggle, like the world war, was successful, but not until revolution and civil war had ravaged the ancestral home of many of St. John's parishioners.

In a few short years, many people from St. John's itself would be in dire need of relief as their own nation suffered a catastrophe perhaps even more sinister than war: economic depression. Again the people of St. John's rallied to help the unfortunate, so many of them their own neighbors. Mr. Hamilton's Boy Scout troop performed many services for the



J. Fred Donnelly (center) and the St. John's choir at Christmastime, 1927.

—TIME TO ENDURE—



The annual Novena of Grace to St. Francis Xavier continues to draw large crowds. The missal above dates from 1929.

needy, and the parish's St. Vincent de Paul Society labored manfully to lighten the burden of the suffering. In 1936, for example, the society provided 250 loaves of bread, 274 pounds of turkey, and 50 cakes for families at Christmas; in the first month of the new year, it paid out nearly \$120 for coal for needy families. Yet even before the economic crisis had passed, jackbooted storm troopers had begun their strutting march over the helpless countries of Europe and Asia. America once again found itself at war and St. John's once again contributed its men, money and prayers. Again St. John's men heeded the call, while at home, for the second time in little more than twenty years, parishioners at St. John's called on God to pre-serve "our soldiers, sailors and airmen" and give the world "a measure of peace."

The parish did not crumble as the people at St. John's con-fronted war and depression and watched many of their neighbors move away. It endured. Indeed, it did more than merely endure; it seemed to take on a new vitality. While perhaps most members of the new ethnic groups continued their allegiances to their national parishes in the 1930s and 1940s, some of the new immigrants and more of their American born children began to appear at St. John's. By the 1940s parish announcements in March began to take notice not only of St. Patrick but St. Joseph as well. By the end of the depression and the beginning of World War II names like Jasi, Clouthier, Bergeron, DiMauro, Lepinski, Wrubel and Witkowski began to crop up in the banns of marriage or reports of organization activities announced from the pulpit every Sunday. By 1947, only a little more than one-third of the marriages in the church united Irish men with Irish women. In all other weddings, at least one partner was Italian, Lithuanian, Polish or French-Canadian. These statistics do not mean that the Irish presence in the parish had disappeared. Indeed, the Depression's one silver lining is that it appeared to slow down the migration of the older largely Irish families from the neighborhood. Further, until well into the 1940s and 1950s (and even to this day) many of those Irish and other families who had moved away to more prosperous neighborhoods still came back to St. John's every

— TIME TO ENDURE —

Sunday. The opportunity to renew old friendships after mass (especially after the 10:00 a.m. mass), the tug of old loyalties to neighborhood, school and church, and the lure of splendid liturgies would not let them break away. Still, though some Irish clung to the church of their childhood, the parish was no longer entirely “green.” St. John’s as becoming what it had been one hundred years before when Indians, Irish, blacks, and French Canadians had worshipped side by side: a “melting pot” of people united by a common faith.

“Poor old St. John’s” then, was still a vigorous, vibrant community for the first half of the twentieth century. Feast days were celebrated in grand fashion. In the 1910s and 1920s little girls dressed as angels and little boys costumed as historic church figures still led a procession around Temple and Winter Streets on Corpus Christi. The procession stopped for benediction not only within the church but at two altars outside it, one set up on the steps of the grammar school and one on the steps of the Institute. These processions seemed to fade out by the Second World War (if not earlier), but other elaborate services such as midnight mass at Christmas remained immensely popular through the early 1950s. In fact, these midnight masses were so popular that people were actually turned away (rumor has it that even Lieutenant Governor Charles F. “Jeff” Sullivan could not find a place one Christmas Eve). The interest in these services no doubt stemmed at least in part from the fame of the St. John’s choir. Led by the accomplished musicians, J. Fred Donnelly and his wife Helen, and then later, Catherine Bowe, the choir was known as one of the best, if not the best, in Worcester County. Even on a normal Sunday in the 1930s, crowds packed all of the parish’s seven regular masses as well as early morning and evening services offered during annual mission weeks. There was more than enough work for the band of sixty or more altar boys. Finally, in 1924, the parish introduced a new devotion which quickly drew immense crowds: Novenas of Grace to St. Francis Xavier. Thousands from all over the city attended these services to pray to St. Francis and hear the sermons preached by the Jesuits who, until recent years, conducted the services.

The vitality of the parish was evident not only in its liturgies but in its social life as well. Some of the older societies like the Unmarried and Married Women’s Societies and the Blessed Virgin Mary Sodality lasted until the 1920s and beyond. The temperance societies had faded out but many of the men belonged to the Knights of Columbus and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the K. of C. often sponsored masses and social events at the church for its members. The Holy Name Society also continued to flourish. In the 1940s, for example, it took advantage of St. John’s High School’s and Holy Cross’ success in athletics to sponsor popular “sports smokers” with films of the Holy Cross football and basketball teams and speakers like noted local sports figure “Hop” Riopel.

The schools, however, were the real heart of the St. John’s community. Often children from parish families received all of

— TIME TO ENDURE —



St. John's High School (left) and grade school as they looked before the high school moved to Shrewsbury in 1962.

their schooling at the parish schools. It was not uncommon, then, for graduating seniors from the high schools to have been together since the first grade. Further, though most of the girls were up on the hill and their brothers were down on Temple Street, they often joined together to stage plays or sponsor social events. Perhaps the most ambitious and well-remembered of those events were the grand musicals and minstrel shows put on by the Coyle Brothers in the ample auditorium of the old school. Students from the younger grades enjoyed days out at the Sisters of Notre Dame's home at Lake Quinsigamond, or when a little older at Whalom Park or Lake Chauncey in Westboro. Societies were active in the schools as well. In 1926, students at St. John's High School published their school's first newspaper, and by the 1940s, the high school had more than eight different clubs and organizations. Of course, the "Pioneers" by then were best known for their athletic successes. The first football game with archrival St. Peter's was played in 1925, and in the 1940s St. John's won its first New England Catholic basketball championship. Yet despite these triumphs in sports, the academic and intellectual achievements of the two schools were not inconsiderable. Eighty percent of the graduates of St. John's went to college, as did many of the Ascension graduates. Further, in the 1920s, St. John's High School was perhaps better known for its debating club, the Philliponian Society, than its sports teams. Older members of the parish recall vividly the debates with archrivals such as St. Mary's of Milford or Sacred Heart Academy of Worcester. Little wonder, then, that the schools were developing a reputation for themselves which extended far beyond Worcester or Worcester County, a reputation that attracted both the governor and United States Senator David I. Walsh to a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the boys' high school in 1929.

— TIME TO ENDURE —

The continued vitality of the parish owed much to its people who remained devoted in the face of so much hardship, but it also reflected the quality of the church's clerical leadership. Though St. John's was served by many fine priests in this era, perhaps the most powerful and well remembered was Rev. Edward Fitzgerald. Rev. Fitzgerald came to Worcester in 1924 from Our Lady of the Rosary in Clinton, a parish he had founded. The people of St. John's marveled at his energy and vigor. He almost never wore a topcoat, even on his daily walks up Vernon Hill to St. Vincent Hospital. Tall, well-proportioned and always correct, he cut a striking figure on those daily promenades. Aloof and somewhat distant, some called him "Father Fitz"—but never to his face. Nevertheless, if he did not inspire sentimental affection, he did elicit devoted respect, even among non-Catholics. When he died in 1937, eulogies poured forth from a host of Protestant and Jewish as well as Catholic leaders in the city.

Under the leadership of the powerful Rev. Fitzgerald and other priests, St. John's refused to succumb to the forces of change which might have overwhelmed it in the prewar era. Not only did the parish's liturgical and social life flourish, but Rev. Fitzgerald even embarked on a program of construction and renovation. The shrinking size of the parish, of course, prevented new building on a scale even approximately the ambitious efforts of Msgr. Griffin. In fact, some of the older buildings were torn down, most notably the Institute, the original Christ Church, which came down in the 1920s. Nevertheless, Rev. Fitzgerald and his parishioners still had their eyes optimistically set to the future, and while the Institute came down a new gymnasium for the school costing over \$200,000 went up.

If the death knell was not sounding for St. John's by World War II, the trials of the parish had not ended. The war, of course, drained off a host of young parishioners, but perhaps the most severe blows to St. John's came in the postwar years. After the war, the migration of parish families to more prosperous neighborhoods in Main South or on the West Side once again gained momentum. The Depression had temporarily held up this movement, but with the return of prosperity after the war, young veterans and others began to look for greener pastures far from the center of the city. As these families moved out, some of the homes they left on the Island were knocked down, and factories, warehouses or parking lots took their place. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, clearance for Inter-state 290 and urban renewal in the Salem Street area would further cut into the parish and force the departure of many of its parishioners. By the 1960s, the parish population had shriveled to only 1,500—or about one seventh the size it had been just a half century before.

Devoted pastors like Rev. Michael Lahey, and Rev. Donohue—the first St. John's boy to serve as pastor of his old parish—struggled valiantly to attract new members for their parish and reverse this decline, but these efforts could not stem the tide of change. Perhaps the best symbol of this decline was

— TIME TO ENDURE —

the movement of St. John's High School from Temple Street to Shrewsbury. This sad departure began in 1953 when the bishop transferred control of the high school from the parish to the Xaverian Brothers. In some respects, this shift in ownership merely reflected the increasing diversity of the St. John's student body. Even as early as 1934, a little more than half of the graduating seniors were from St. John's or adjoining parishes on Worcester's East Side; by 1952, that proportion had fallen to less than two-fifths. St. John's High School, then, had developed from a parish school into an institution with an almost diocesan-wide clientele. In the process, the number of students rose steadily from more than 200 in the mid-1920s to more than 400 by the late 1950s. By the '50s the school buildings on Temple Street were bulging with students, and the brothers felt that they could easily attract perhaps as many as 500 or more boys.

Surely a change was necessary, a relocation to a new site where more land was available and bigger buildings could be constructed. But where should the school go? In March of 1955, the Xaverian Brothers purchased the old Sweet Estate in Shrewsbury. The 105 acres would provide more than enough room for a new school, and a fourteen room house on the property could serve as living quarters for the teachers. Yet in 1957, the order seemed to have a change of heart about leaving the city. In March of that year, Brother Chad, C.F.X. sent a letter to the Worcester City Council expressing interest in the old Brookside Home property on the north side of the city. In his letter Chad suggested that the traditions of the school were "too closely intertwined with the city...to pull up roots completely." The city, however, had other plans for the land, and the decision to move to Shrewsbury became final. Ground-breaking for the new school began in November of 1959, and St. John's High School of Worcester County opened officially in 1962. Some among the students and brothers wistfully wondered whether the plush new buildings were worth the loss of the cherished memories and sense of camaraderie they had experienced on Temple Street. Yet the old high school was now gone irrevocably. In the next decade, Ascension High and finally the Grammar School would follow. Was "poor old St. John's" parish, which had survived so much, finally dying?

— TIME OF RENEWAL —



St. John's school was demolished in 1977.

Courtesy Catholic Free Press

— TIME OF RENEWAL —

In August of 1977, nearly eighty-six years after the cornerstone had been laid, the St. John school on Temple Street was torn down. For some graduates of the school it was such a significant and sad occasion that they felt compelled to retrieve a brick or other relic from the bulldozed wreckage as a reminder of their happy student days.

Three months later, on November 24, 1977, 250 people gathered at the St. John's rectory for a Thanksgiving dinner. After feasting on turkey and assorted trimmings, the diners settled into an evening of music and story-swapping which for some of them lasted until after midnight. The dinners had begun in 1972 with Bishop Timothy Harrington, outfitted in chef's cap and apron, "coordinating" the preparation of the meal. By 1982 the annual Thanksgiving dinner was attracting more than 1,000 parishioners and hungry guests, and required the efforts of a volunteer staff of nearly thirty.

The demolition of the old school building did not mark the end of St. John's; it merely marked the end of an era. Despite all the troubles of the postwar period, the church had not died. Indeed, as one assistant pastor remarked in 1981, the parish was not only "alive" but "well and growing." He found this mysterious, yet if the past history of the church was any guide it was to be expected. For one hundred and fifty years St. John's church, its people, and its priests had wrestled with every imaginable difficulty and confronted every possible obstacle. The parish had suffered, perhaps, but it had never succumbed. Revival and renewal was part of its legacy; triumphs over the odds were a matter of course.

To ascribe the renewal of St. John's to the church's tradition, however, is perhaps to underestimate the efforts of the priests and people who did so much to revive it. Priests like the present bishop, Timothy Harrington, played a critical role in the parish's renaissance. Bishop Harrington, who took up residence at the parish in 1969, brought his intense interest in social activism to the parish. In his early years at St. John's he also made the church the diocese's first center of the charismatic spiritual renewal when he organized a prayer group at St. John's in 1971. Rev. Cyril LeBeau also contributed mightily to the church's revival. After becoming pastor of the church in 1972, he made a concerted effort to lure old parishioners back to the church who had left it and attract new members to the congregation by knocking on doors throughout the neighborhood. Rev. LeBeau also founded the Urban Ministry Commission, located at St. John's Parish, a special diocesan organization committed to addressing the needs of the inner city poor. Finally, Rev. Francis Scollen, who became administrator in 1977, continued in the traditions established by his predecessors. His offhand, disarming manner ("Father Frank"), his devotion to the neighborhood and his long experience and intense interest in social action have been instrumental in the development of the parish.

To emphasize tradition might also overlook the changes which have occurred at St. John's in recent years. One of the most important changes, perhaps, has been the influx of new

— TIME OF RENEWAL —

ethnic groups into the parish. During the 1970s, for example, largely through the efforts of Rev. Michael Bafaro, the parish added a mass in Spanish to its list of liturgical services. This addition reflected the increasing significance of Hispanics in Worcester's population, especially in the inner city districts. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of Hispanics in Worcester grew from about 700 to more than 6,000. Another group, largely older in residence but long neglected by the Catholic church, was the blacks (there has been a black community in Worcester since the early nineteenth century). In 1981, through the work of the Bishop Healy Project headquartered at St. John's, a concerted attempt was made to identify black Catholics in Worcester and provide vehicles for uniting them and bringing them closer to the church. One significant result of the project, a Black Unity mass celebrated by Rev. Warren Savage, and Afro-American priest from the Springfield diocese, was attended by over two hundred blacks and whites at St. John's church.

The newest group to become a part of the St. John's congregation has also suffered perhaps the harshest trials in getting here. These are the refugees from Indochina, Cambodia and Vietnam. Most came to Worcester in the last stages of the Vietnam War or after the final defeat of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese in 1975. Many, like Sister Theresa Khen, bore brutal hardships in leaving their homeland, escaping on leaky, overcrowded fishing boats with little or no water and food, storm tossed, harassed by pirates, and all endured without any certainty that they would be rescued or even eventually find a home.

The creaky boat Sister Theresa had boarded with 75 others was finally rescued by a Norwegian steamer, and she then eventually made her way to Worcester. There she joined Rev. Anthony Dai, himself a recent refugee, and others as part of the Worcester diocese's mission to the Vietnamese. It is a difficult mission, indeed, for the trials of the 400 or more Vietnamese who had come to Worcester by 1979 did not end upon their arrival. Despite an extraordinary capacity for hard work and tight family loyalty, language and other differences from mainstream American culture have proved to be frustrating obstacles. Yet for all their current difficulties, the Vietnamese in Worcester are the luckier ones. Hundreds of thousands died in the hail of American and North Vietnamese bullets and bombs during the war, or remain barely alive in internment camps in Vietnam or refugee camps in Thailand where, as Bishop Harrington noted recently, they live in "multiple misery."

If many people at St. John's, like the Vietnamese, were new, so too were many of the church's activities. Perhaps more than any other parish in the diocese, St. John's has reflected the new spirit of the church which began with the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. That spirit inspired a new awareness of social problems as well as a new commitment to their resolution. It also provoked exploration of new techniques and forms



Since beginning its annual Thanksgiving meal for the poor in the early '70s, the number of people served has grown to more than 1,000 per year.
Courtesy Catholic Free Press

— TIME OF RENEWAL —

of spiritual renewal. Both of these trends would become very evident at St. John's by the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The interest in social activism has perhaps been the most noticeable aspect of the recent history of St. John's. Bishop Harrington and the recent pastors, Rev. LeBeau and Rev. Scollen, have all long been associated with a variety of causes dedicated to relieving the suffering of the poor and the alienation of outcasts. Because of them and the location of the church at the very center of inner city, St. John's was a natural choice for the headquarters of the new Urban Ministry Commission. In 1974 the offices of the commission were moved to the Plumley Village housing project, but St. John's remained intimately involved in its activities. In 1981 the offices moved back to St. John's and have remained there ever since. Throughout this entire time the commission was involved in a number of different projects. Some of these efforts were controversial but all were aimed at helping the church to reach out to the powerless, the impoverished and the neglected. Perhaps the most significant early accomplishment of the commission was its sponsorship of a task force which eventually set up Abby's House, a temporary shelter for battered and homeless women. By 1980, five years after it had been established, Abby's House had provided for more than a thousand women. The commission also helped set up other agencies and organizations, such as the Neighborhood Improvement Center and Fair Share, as well as publicize the plight of Southern textile or migrant farm workers and investigate the alienation of groups like Gay Catholics. Recent efforts by the commission have included outreach to the Department of Youth Services, organization of a food co-op at Plumley Village and a campaign against the death penalty.

The Urban Ministry, though headquartered at St. John's, served the entire diocese, but the parish itself has also been in the forefront of the new social activism. Since 1978 the church has hosted speakers addressing topics from nuclear power to changes in social security legislation, and promoted workshops such as a session by Ruth Weisbauer of Children's Protective Services on relationships between parents and their adolescent children. In 1978 the parish also received a grant to develop new outreach initiatives for its inner city congregation. The interest in social activism has ever been reflected in liturgies held at the church. In 1981 Rev. Scollen celebrated a mass for Archbishop Oscar Romero, the reform bishop of El Salvador brutally assassinated by reactionaries in that country, and in 1981 Rev. Bernard Gilgun officiated at a mass for the long time leader of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day.

The most noticeable changes in the rituals or modes of worship at St. John's, however, had less to do with social activism than with personal religious renewal. "Revivalism" is not new in American Catholicism, as historians have pointed out. Nevertheless, like social activism (which also has ancient roots), Catholic revivalism was transformed in the 1960s as it emerged into a new, modern form: the charismatic movement.

The American charismatic movement first achieved organ-

— TIME OF RENEWAL —

ized form at a conference at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in 1967. By 1974 it had gained national attention, when 30,000 Catholic charismatics met at the University of Notre Dame and prayed throughout a driving rain storm. By that time the movement had already taken root at St. John's, when Bishop Harrington agreed to lead a prayer group composed largely of students at Holy Cross. From that small group the movement mushroomed to include over 400 prayer groups and perhaps 30,000 partisans in Central Massachusetts by 1977. The charismatics not only grew in numbers, however, they also provoked increasing controversy. The center of the storm in Worcester was Rev. Ralph D'Orio. D'Orio, who became an associate pastor of St. John's in 1977, had been a teacher of Spanish, Latin and Italian, and received a Master's degree in counseling and guidance before he moved into Catholic charismatic work. Whether or not he had the power of healing, as some claim, he was and still is indisputably an electric figure. By 1977 his services, held twice a month on Sunday afternoons at St. John's, were attracting thousands of worshippers, as well as national press attention. After being showcased on national television, 35 busloads carrying more than 5,000 people flocked to one of his services at the church, spilling out into the street and onto the fire escapes. Not all approved of his methods and claims. D'Orio acknowledged himself, in September of 1978, that he was a "controversial figure" and that his ministry was "different." Eventually the revivalist left St. John's, not so much because of the controversy he aroused but because the church could not accommodate the large crowds he drew. Before he

The interior of
St. John's Church.



— TIME OF RENEWAL —

departed, however, he had certainly left his own unique mark on the history of the one-hundred and fifty-year-old church.

With the charismatic upsurge, the new social activism, and the influx of new immigrants like the Vietnamese, St. John's was clearly a church in transition. Yet if there was much that was new, clearly much of the old remained. Perhaps the secret of the church's resurgence lies principally in its blend of some of the best elements of its old tradition and the stubborn loyalty of its old parishioners with new ideas and the new interest of newcomers. Irish, Polish, Lithuanian and French Canadian families, whether living on the Island, on Vernon Hill, or even outside the parish or the city, still make up the backbone of the church. If St. John's refused to die, it is because these people refused to abandon it, and if St. John's is meeting the needs of newer groups it is because these people have invested their time, sweat and money to keep their church afloat. Many of the parishioners trace the deep roots back into the history of the church, and many of its current activities still echo past traditions. The Novena of Grace to St. Francis Xavier, begun by Rev. Fitzgerald in 1924, continues to this day and remains virtually as popular as when it began. In 1981 the women of the parish began a holiday bazaar, and thought it could not rival the grand scale of the old parish fairs of one hundred years ago, it fully reflects the same commitment to the church and good fellowship of those events of the 1880s. Christmas parties today draw upwards of 300 children. Not all of the kids, or even most of them, are freckle-faced and red-haired Irish as they might have been a century and a half ago. Yet whether white, black, brown or yellow, those children are carrying on a tradition of celebrating Christmas first brought to Puritanical Worcester by the Irish pioneers in the 1830s. Today's block parties on the Fourth of July also have their roots in earlier times, specifically in those summer church picnics of one-hundred years past which emptied out the streets of the Island on hot summer days in the 1880s. And if the schools are gone, religious education remains a vital part of the parish's program. Two hundred and fifty children still show up faithfully (and to Father Frank's amazement, punctually) for catechism classes.

The traditions of St. John's, then, remain firmly fixed, even in the 1980s. Sometimes we hear the complaints that the Catholic church, or more specifically St. John's, has changed, that it is different than what we once knew. The church, and specifically St. John's, some may grumble, pays too much attention to the poor and "minorities." Yet no tradition is more consistent in the history of St. John's than the fact that it has always been the parish of the poor, the uprooted, the powerless and social outcasts. Irishmen in the 1840s, bedraggled, demoralized, and hated, have much in common with today's "minorities" (more perhaps than some descendants of the Gael would wish to acknowledge). If the parish then devotes so much of its time to today's poor, that is not new; it is merely a continuation of the precedents set by Revs. Fitton, Griffin and McCoy. Indeed, perhaps, the saddest chapter in the history of

— TIME OF RENEWAL —

the church came in the 1840s when the pastor, Rev. Matthew Gibson, proved incapable of sympathizing with the poor and oppressed in his congregation. Further, if priests speak often about injustice and suffering in El Salvador or Southeast Asia, is that really so different from Rev. McCoy or Msgr. Griffin crying out against oppression one hundred years ago in Ire-land, the world's first victim of imperialism? Much that seems new to us today is really not new at all. St. John's has only ad-justed its methods to better serve its abiding, fundamental goal: to serve not princes or kings, but the beloved of Christ, those most in need. It has served them well in these last one hundred and fifty years and, if history is a guide, will still serve them one hundred and fifty years hence.

— CHRONOLOGY —

- 1826 Construction of the Blackstone Canal begins.
Irish Catholics begin to arrive in Central
Massachusetts
- 1828 Blackstone Canal opens
Fr. Woodley begins to visit Worcester
- 1833 Robert Lavery petitions Bishop Benedict Fenwick for
a priest in Worcester
- 1834 Bishop Fenwick appoints Rev. James Fitton to visit
Worcester once each month
Foundation of Christ Church laid
First Catholic “burying ground” established
at Newton Square
- 1835 Boston to Worcester Railroad opens
Christ’s Church completed
- 1836 Father Fitton transfers his headquarters to Worcester
Penobscot Indians begin to make annual visits to St.
John’s Parish, camping on Vernon Hill before return-
ing to Maine
- 1837 Father Fitton establishes two schools, Sunday school and
Mt. Saint James Seminary (Holy Cross)
- 1843 Father Fitton gives control of Holy Cross to Jesuits
Rev. Adolphus Williamson becomes Pastor
- 1844 Father Fitchburg to Worcester Railroad opens
St. John’s Parish grows to over 2,000
- 1845 Rev. Matthew Gibson named Pastor
Foundation laid for “new” and present St. John’s
Church
- 1846 Church completed and dedicated at St. John’s
- 1847 Ladies Sewing Society formed
Mutual Relief Society formed (forerunners of the
St. Vincent de Paul Societies)
- 1848 Worcester incorporated as a city
Blackstone Canal closes
- 1852 Holy Cross College burns to the ground
- 1856 Rev. John Boyce named Pastor
- 1864 Fr. Boyce dies, succeeded by Rev. Patrick T. O’Reilly
- 1865 Presbytery constructed
- 1870 Diocese of Springfield established
Fr. O’Reilly named as first Bishop
Msgr. Thomas Griffin named Pastor of St. John’s
St. John’s serves as chancery of the new diocese

— CHRONOLOGY —

- 1872 Sisters of Notre Dame arrive at Msgr. Griffin's invitation to open a school for girls (Ascension)
- 1879 St. John's Parish one of the original charters of the St. Vincent de Paul Society
- 1881 School for boys established (St. John's High School)
- 1884 St. John's Church renovated (sacristy enlarged)
- 1885 Bishop O'Reilly leaves St. John's
- 1893 Sisters of Providence are invited by Msgr. Griffin to found a Catholic Hospital (St. Vincent Hospital)
- 1894 Xaverian Brothers arrive to assume teaching responsibilities at St. John's School
- 1896 St. John's renovated (side galleries added, stained glass window replace original windows)
- 1910 St. John's Parish serves 15,000 parishioners
- 1911 St. John's Parish divided (Ascension Parish formed)
- 1940 Church Spire rebuilt after being destroyed by lightning
- 1954 Xaverian Brothers assume control of St. John's High School
- 1963 St. John's High School moves to Shrewsbury I-290 opens (residential area of St. John's Parish demolished)
- 1970 Charismatic Movement introduced in Worcester at St. John's Parish
- 1977 First Healing Ministry in Worcester at St. John's
- 1981 St. John's Church (Rectory) listed on National Register of Historic Places

— PASTORS OF ST. JOHN'S —

Rev. James Fitton 1834-1843
Rev. Adolphus Williamson 1843-1845
Rev. Matthew W. Gibson 1845-1856
Rev. John Boyce 1856-1864
Rt. Rev. Patrick T. O'Reilly, D.D. 1864-1885
Rt. Rev. Msgr. Thomas Griffin, D.D. P. R. 1885-1910
Rev. Thomas S. Donohue, P.R. 1911-1922
Rev. Edward J. Fitzgerald, P.R. 1923-1937
Rev. John F. McDonnell, P.R. 1937-1944
Rev. Michael E. Lahey, P.R. 1944-1953
Rev. John Donohue 1954-1963
Rt. Rev. Msgr. John J. O'Brien 1964-1967
Rev. James B. Kelly (Priest-in-charge) 1967-1971
Most Rev. Timothy J. Harrington 1969-1972
Rev. William W. McGovern (administrator) 1971-1972
Rev. Cyril A. LeBeau 1972-1977
Rev. Francis J. Scollen (administrator) 1977-

—TO PRESERVE THE FLAME— <>

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