

**History of St. Hyacinth Parish**  
**1850 - 1993**

One hundred years ago — in 1879 — St. Hyacinth Parish in Westbrook was established to provide for the religious needs of a growing Catholic population of the Mission of Saccarappa.

**Following are excerpts from the parish history written by Msgr. Philippe Desjardins, Pastor, 1916—1967; Rev. Antonio Gosselin, Pastor, 1968—1986; and the present parish church historian, Philip Laviolette.**

1850 - The first Catholic family to settle in Westbrook (then known as came to old Congin (Falls) in 1850 and lived in a brick dwelling on Cumberland St., south of the white house, Westbrook's first tavern. It was the family of John Brown.

1854 - Another one of the first Catholics known to have come to Westbrook was John Graham. He arrived from Canada in 1854 and died in 1900 at the age of 87.

1858 — Several Canadian families from Britannia and Acton, P.Q. settled in Saccarappa. They were the nucleus of Westbrook's present large, prosperous, and respected Catholic population.

1860 - tax lists of the period reveal a growing number of Catholic names, or names of some who have left descendants here: John Brown, Thomas Cragan, Thomas Doolin, David Stack Patrick Welch. Most of these came to Westbrook from Portneuf in Quebec, a result of recruiting by an agent of the Warren Mills. The building of the Grand Truck Railroad, put into operation in 1854, had occasioned the employment of young Canadians, who thus became familiar with these parts and with the opportunities open to them because of the building industries here. The two brothers Adam and Lazarre LaViolette helped build that railroad and settled in this area from Carleton, P.Q. The Duchaine (Duchesne) family came from Chicoutimi, P.Q.

1868 - The older inhabitants tell of a cloudburst which was followed by such a flood in the river that a large section of the shore tumbled into the stream. The obstruction had to be cleared in a hurry; the urgency sent someone to Canada looking for men to help, Young ren accepted the offer. A few of these men, later, took up their residence in Westbrook and here they remained. This was known as the Great Landslide of 1868. The river changed its course.

So, it is that the first French-Canadians found their way to Westbrook – the Perrins, the LeVesque's (Bishops), LaBrecques, Poitras, Harnois, come to mind as early examples. Their numerous descendants are well known.

These original Catholic settlers had to go to Portland for Sunday Mass and the ministrations of religion, and they walked; there was no other recourse. In later years, they liked to tell how many of them carried their footgear in their hands, a large part of the way, to save shoe leather, how they carried their lunch along when they intended to receive Holy Communion, and had their breakfast on the way back.

John Graham, Jr. told the writer, Msgr. Desjardins, that he remembered hearing about the Mass celebrated at Cumberland Mills, in the house of John Brown. This would be in the late 1860's, and quite probably Father DeRose of the Cathedral staff was the celebrant.

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1871 – We know that Father Ponsardin of Biddeford made a visit here, July 21, 1871; that he said Mass in the Warren Block, at the corner of Main and Bridge Streets; that he baptized. The records of St. Joseph's in Biddeford bear testimony to that effect.

1873 – The Catholics were increasing in numbers, Brigham Hall, at the corner of Bridge and Main Street, was leased and furnished as a chapel; pews were installed. Once, Confirmation we administered in that chapel by Bishop Healy. Among those confirmed that day was Mary Lefebvre, later Mrs. Michel LeVesque.

1877 – A committee of three, Thomas Doolin, Hyacinthe Tremblay and John Ashley (Lafreniere) had collected funds and, October 15, had purchased on Brown Street a house and parcel of land large enough to accommodate a church.

A priest attached to the Cathedral, Father Bogartz, was charged with the care of the Westbrook Catholics. He was a Belgian. Father Bogartz, after taking charge, lived in the home of Mrs. Thomas Collins until the old house had been made ready for his occupancy.

1879 - It was possible to Celebrate Mass in the unfinished church, Easter Sunday. Father Timothy P. Linehan, of the Cathedral, was the celebrant. In July Father A.D. Decelles was appointed pastor and took up his duties immediately.

In view of the fast-growing Catholic population, he decided to build larger than at first intended. An addition for a church sanctuary and a sacristy was planned and executed. The church was ready for dedication by Bishop Healy, August 22. At the time, the parish of St. Hyacinth numbered 175 families. Bishop Healy was the first black bishop in the United States.

1881 – A parcel of land, that on which the school now stands, was bought from the Westbrook Manufacturing Co. The validity of this deed I made dependent upon transporting of the bodies which had been interred in the little cemetery, and that within two years. The following year, land was acquired for St Hyacinth's Cemetery, on Stroudwater Road, and the few bodies referred to in the deed were allowed finally to rest there.

1883 – The old house which served as a rectory was sold and moved to a neighboring lot. On the original site, a new rectory was erected. It is a frame building of 18 rooms, in the two stories throughout, besides a mansard-roof adding a third story. I will be interesting, considering present prices, to note that it cost \$5000.

On the lot purchased from the Westbrook Manufacturing Co., on Walker Street, a small school was built at the same time. Lay teachers were employed to teach and train the children. Many of our old people remember that school. Simultaneously it was used as a band hall for rehearsals of the Salaberry Band, later the Westbrook City Band.

It was called "Ecole Du Bon Pasteur" (School of the Good Shepard). This building is now on River Street behind the new St. Hyacinth Church. It is now occupied by the PROP Government Agency.

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1893 – In place of the little school on Walker Street, a brick school was built. It was September of 1894 before the school was ready for use. The Sisters of Presentation of Mary came from St. Hyacinth in Canada to take charge. Sister Caroline was the first Superior. The number of children registered for the opening, in six classrooms, was 312. Five years afterward, the first graduation class consisted of three girls.

1900: From January to March, the pastor was assisted by Rev. Thomas McGrath, a young priest of the Springfield Diocese, who later went West for his health and became Bishop of Baker City, Oregon.

1901: Father Decelles had done marvelously in the 22 years of his administration. He died on March 23, 1901. The successor, Father Alexander Dugre, was appointed May 3, and without delay began a visitation of the parish: 432 families were found.

At Midnight Mass, 1901, the church was lighted by electricity for the first time. This was a considerable improvement over the old kerosene lamps.

1911: Father Dugre had long been afflicted with rheumatism and, after ten years of devoted service in Westbrook, decided to resign, lest he became a burden to the parish.

In June, Father Arthur A. Hamel was called from St. Mary's in Lewiston to the parish of St. Hyacinth. He proved himself there as elsewhere, a wise and efficient administrator.

1916: In January Monsignor Hamel was transferred to St. Joseph's Church in Biddeford. February 11, Father Philip E. Desjardins, who had been appointed to the Westbrook parish, assumed the duties of his office

In May of 1916, the English-speaking Catholics were separated into the parish of St. Mary's. St. Hyacinth was left with 590 families.

1921: April 18, the construction of the new convent was begun, The Sisters were able to take up residence there, January 31, 1922.

1926: In September, the Dana Warp Mills ceded to us a large lot of land, at the corner of Brown Street, for the cost of removing the two houses which stood thereon. The site was intended for a new church.

In October, at a meeting of the men of the parish held on a Sunday afternoon, the idea of a new and larger church was formally launched and met with hearty approval. In order to raise more speedily the necessary funds, It was decided to raise the Sunday seat offering to 25 cents, To ask for a like amount from every working person for an offertory and to organize a fund-raising subscription.

1929: At this time occurred the collapse, nationally, of business and industry which was called "The Depression". Many of our people were out of work; those who still had employment worked only three of four days a week. Our women formed themselves into bands to sew and make over old clothes, which were distributed among the needy families.

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1932: At 2 a.m. of March 3, fire was discovered in the school and a general alarm was sounded by the police. The fire in the south-east corner of the basement had gained considerable headway, but was stopped, thanks to the ability of the Fire Department before it had worked its way through the roof.

1938: October 19, the offices previously used by the Haskell Silk Mills were bought with the land they occupied, on the site of the present Eagles Club. They were soon transformed into club rooms for our young men's Crusader Club.

1941: Construction of the new church began. It took ten years to complete, at a cost of \$280,000.

1942: The last Masses and vespers services were said in the old church on October 25, 1942. Work continued the new church (today's building) for years.

1946: Memorial Day, May 30. A "Thanksgiving Service" was held for all remaining World War II Veterans. Over 1,000 veterans took part, in full military uniform. After the service. All marched down Main Street in the Memorial Day parade.

Members of St. Hyacinth Parish were always well represented. In the service of their country. They served in the Civil War, Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War and Persian Gulf War. Many gave their life for their country.

1950: The newly finished church was blessed by Bishop Fenney on January 15, 1950 – a year which coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of ordination of Msgr. Desjardins.

1959: Bishop Daniel J. Feeney of Portland, ordained two priests in our church on May 23, 1959: Father Robert J. Girouard, a parishioner, and Father Lucien McKeone from Lewiston. This was the first ordination in our church, and the first time that an ordination did not take place at the Cathedral.

1967: In January 1967, Bishop Daniel Feeney suffered a severe stroke. Bishop Gerety became the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese. An awesome task fell on his shoulders. His duty was to ask MSGR. Desjardins to resign for reasons of health and age. The majestic Monsignor only reluctantly accepted. He retired at Mt. St. Joseph, in Waterville, where he spent the last years of his life. He died on March 21, 1969, at the age of 92.

He was succeeded by Father Wilfred Soucy, in June 1967. Immediately, Father Soucy set out to make the necessary repairs to the exterior of the church. He served the parish well during his brief tenure. In September of 1968, he was appointed pastor of St. Louis in Limestone, Maine, where he served until, he reached retirement age.

1968: In September 1968, Father Antonio Gosselin was appointed pastor of St. Hyacinth. This was a time of great changes in the church with the implementation of all the changes initiated by the Second Vatican Council. He had a great task ahead to fulfill which he carried out very conscientiously.

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1974: In the spring of 1974, a letter from the Provincial of the Sisters of Presentation informed us that they would not be able to staff our parochial school after June of the same year. At that time, our school became a Center for Religious Education, and the Convent was converted into a House of Prayer. Our parochial school after June of the same year.

1975: Early in 1975, the parish council concurred with the school board's decision to close the school which was now staffed by lay teachers. A parish meeting was called, and it was decided that the school should be closed.

Among the sisters who served in this parish, one of them stands out in particular, namely Sister Evelyn Marie. She was with us since 1925, and on November 23, 1975, the Holy Name Society offered a banquet to honor her 50 years of devoted service to the parish. It was a day of triumph and appreciation.

1976: On December 5, 1976, the first Sunday of the month, fire broke out in the church hall. Thanks to the choir, which was rehearsing its Christmas program, it was discovered immediately. Yet, extensive damage was done.

1977: On May 27, 1977, we received to use the privilege of Extraordinary Ministers for the administration of Holy Communion.

1978: In preparation for the 1979 centennial of St. Hyacinth Parish, major renovations, and modifications of the interior of the church are made in accordance with Vatican II guidelines. Cost \$85,000. Twelve stained glass windows: \$45,000.

1979: The Centennial (100) Years of St. Hyacinth Parish. Many thanksgiving celebrations, religious and social by clergy, parishioners, citizens of Westbrook throughout the year – open house of church ecumenical services by Westbrook Clergy Association, ecumenical pot luck suppers in our parish hall, all Westbrook churches participating, also many other events.

1986: Father Gosselin retires after 45 years of service – 18 in this parish. Beginning this year, we will no longer have two priests to serve the parish, but only one. This is also the last year for the one remaining Sunday French Mass Service. It will be eliminated. All services will now be in English.

1986: In early July, Msgr. Robert G. Lavoie replaces Father Gosselin as pastor. These are new times and new beginnings.

A full parish membership meeting was held to decide what to do with the old school, keep it or get rid of it. Repairs were done on all three buildings. The old school became a Diocesan Retreat Center for teen-agers from various parishes of the area also served for other meetings. The Sisters' residence (the convent) became the Parish Center and Religious Education center. The rectory was renovated in and out. The office was modernized with a computer. Volunteer work kept cost down.

1987: An apartment was built on the third floor in the rectory to house the Pastoral Associate. Sister Carmelle Poutre, who served the parish with vigor from July 1 until her death March 13, 1990.

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1991: Sister Christine Plouffe, O.P. becomes the Pastoral Associate. She is a member of the Dominican Order. She shows leadership and gets things done. A great help to our pastor and the parish.

1992: 800 households are registered in the parish census.

1993: Our pastor Msgr. Lavoie celebrates his 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to the priesthood. A Mass of Thanksgiving is celebrated on Saturday, May 22, followed by a banquet for 400 parishioners.

The parish is receiving many new members that are not of Franc-American decent. Convert classes, weddings and Sunday Mass now have participants of many ethnic backgrounds. We are reminded of the universal nature of the church founded by Christ.