



*The History of
Saint Mary Magdalen Parish
Founded 1951*

The Post-War Era of the 1950's saw rapid expansion and migration to suburban areas throughout the country in the hopes of raising families in tightknit communities; North Wilmington was no exception. While the population increased, the number of Catholic churches in the area remained spread out, requiring Catholics to drive out of their communities to attend Mass. This all changed in 1951 when Bishop Edmund J. FitzMaurice, the fourth Bishop of Wilmington, announced the formation of a new parish in North Wilmington near the Pennsylvania state line. A seven-and-a-half-acre plot of land on the corner of Concord Pike and Sharpley road would soon become St. Mary Magdalen Parish.

With the announcement of the new parish came the announcement of its first pastor: Rev. Henry A. Miller. Father Miller was the pastor of St. Charles in Cape Charles, Virginia. At the time, the northernmost part of Virginia was a part of the Diocese of Wilmington. With this new assignment, Father Miller went from the diocese's most southern point to one of its most northern points. He would move into a small frame house located on Sharpley Road, making it the parish's first rectory. As Father Miller focused on building the new parish, the first parishioners of St. Mary Magdalen began searching for the items needed to have a mass. Various local groups and neighboring parishes offered old and extra materials to the young parish. The only thing missing was a space to worship. James Carr, an early St. Mary Magdalen parishioner, offered up an unused store on Concord Pike across from the property. This store eventually became Van's Liquors. Now with all the necessary components, the people of St. Mary Magdalen Parish were ready for their first Mass.

On September 23, 1951 at 8 am, almost exactly three months after Bishop FitzMaurice's announcement, St. Mary Magdalen held its first Mass. The empty store turned chapel had a seating capacity of 150 people; over 200 faithful St. Mary Magdalen parishioners crammed into every available space of the chapel to participate in the first of many Masses. The makeshift chapel did not have any room to kneel, nor did it have an altar rail, requiring parishioners to receive the Eucharist standing up. As this was prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Eucharist was normally received while kneeling at the altar rail. Soon, the ever-growing number of parishioners required an "expansion" of St. Mary Magdalen. Another store located next to the chapel was offered as an overflow chapel, but this too consistently reached capacity. To accommodate further, there were three, four and ultimately five Masses said every Sunday.

By 1953, it was critical for St. Mary Magdalen to expand to a more permanent structure. Five Sunday Masses were still not enough to accommodate all parishioners; school-aged parishioners were receiving catechism classes but had to attend school elsewhere. The young parish was united in faith, but still fragmented. So, the parish conducted a major fund drive aimed at financing the construction of a building with two purposes: a two-level school with classrooms, faculty rooms, cafeteria, and kitchen, as well as a dedicated space for worship. In a testament to the people of St. Mary Magdalen that remains true today, the financing drive received overwhelming support, and within two months of the drive's initiation, construction began in the summer of 1953. Construction of the school-church was quick, lasting barely a year. Fittingly, the first Mass in the newly completed 700 seat church was held on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalen, July 22, 1954. As the people of St. Mary Magdalen gathered to worship in

their beautiful new church, many expressed their gratitude and affection for the little store-chapel across Concord Pike, the first home of the parish.

On September 7, 1954, the very first St. Mary Magdalen school children walked through the doors to begin their Catholic Education. 200 students – 125 boys and 75 girls – filled grades first through sixth. The Bernardine Sisters came to St. Mary Magdalen to teach the new students, a role they would fill for the coming years. Bishop FitzMaurice blessed and dedicated the new school-church building on October 10, 1954 followed by outdoor Benediction at a beautifully decorated temporary altar. Clergy from across the area came to the celebration, and the St. Mary Magdalen Choir, directed by George Finnman, the parish's first organist and choir director, provided music. Over the next five years, school enrollment increased dramatically with an average yearly growth of nearly 100 students. By 1959, total enrollment was 613 students. The increase in students called for an increase in teachers. Plans were made to build a new convent on the grounds of St. Mary Magdalen to accommodate the living needs of the Bernardine Sisters, who at the time were occupying the small farmhouse on the property. The brick convent was dedicated in October of that year.

The 1960's were a time of great change throughout the world. St. Mary Magdalen was no exception. The decade brought profound change to our young and ever-growing parish. The lower floor of the school was converted to a secondary worship space to once again accommodate overflow parishioners on Sundays. Ten Masses were now said every Sunday, and that still was not enough. In 1965, Fr. Miller, along with his Parish Council, took the final steps to bring parishioners' dreams to fruition: a permanent

church building, dedicated solely to worship. Plans were submitted to the appropriate diocesan officials and were quickly approved. Estimates for the new church were around \$813,000 (\$7.046 million adjusted for inflation). Ground was broken in the spring of 1966 with construction lasting a year-and-a-half. Finally, on Christmas Eve in 1967, 16 years, three months and a day after St. Mary Magdalen Parish's first Mass in the store-chapel, faithful parishioners gathered for Midnight Mass for the first time in the new permanent church. 1,400 attended the first Mass, a far cry from the 200 people 16 years prior. On the night of Christ's birth, the people of St. Mary Magdalen saw the culmination of over a decade of hard work, community growth, and prayer. The church was finally fully completed in 1968 with the laying of carpeting and the installation of a 65-foot steeple. A dedication Mass celebrated by Bishop Thomas J. Mardaga on September 8, 1968 fully cemented the new church's status as the official place of worship for St. Mary Magdalen Parish.

The new church has more significance than just being the first permanent church on the property. It was one of the first churches in the world to be built following the end of the Second Vatican Council. It was designed to follow all new recommendations and Liturgical Laws outlined in the council's writings. Perhaps the most noticeable change was the forward-facing altar. Reflective of Vatican II's desire for modernization within the church, the contemporary design of St. Mary Magdalen promotes an openness and calling for congregational participation.

In the decades following the construction and dedication of the new church, the parish thrived. Groups of all kinds formed and held meetings, socials and fundraisers; new projects popped up from time to time. Some of these include additions to aid in the parish's music, including the addition of three brass bells in 1977, the installation of a

new pipe organ in 1990, and a new carillon in 2006. The installation and dedication of the new 1,708-pipe organ concluded with a recital presented on the new instrument. In recent years, the pipe organ went through a restoration. Leaks in the roof above the pipe cases caused extensive damage, leaving half of the instrument unplayable. Not only did the church see cases of expansion, but the school as well. In 1994, ground was broken for a new \$2.5 million multi-purpose

addition. This included a gymnasium, a stage for productions, a center for the arts, library and computer space. This new addition was dedicated on June 15, 1995. The gymnasium floor is currently under renovation and will be completed in the coming weeks.

Today we see St. Mary Magdalen as our home. It is a special place that grounds us in faith, education, and most importantly, community. Without a faithful, dedicated community, there would not be 70 years of St. Mary Magdalen to celebrate. Continued support from parishioners, school families, parish and school staff and volunteers help make St. Mary Magdalen such a special place. Without its people, a parish is nothing. As a new era begins, it is clear that St. Mary Magdalen will continue to thrive and expand further. Younger generations continue to get involved in our parish, interest in groups remains high, and generosity is indescribable. From school fundraisers and parish picnics to basketball games and our unique Candlelight Vespers, involvement, support and dedication are front and center. Congratulations St. Mary Magdalen on 70 years of faith and community. Here's to 70 more.

Compiled by Ryan Ifkovits