



the oldest picture of Saint Joseph Parish

THE HISTORY OF SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

Often beginnings are shrouded in mystery. As time passes, the origins of an organization or institution become hard to discern. Such is the case when we consider the subject of Catholicism in Williamsburg. It is without question that the Church has had a presence here since the beginning of our community. As is noted in J. Simpson Africa's *History of Huntingdon and Blair Counties*, the founder of Williamsburg, Jacob Ake, was baptized and raised Catholic, though it is unclear when and why this changed. Though the claim has been made that Ake heard tale of the rich and beautiful land where he would build his settlement through the work of traveling priests who worked near his home in Maryland, this claim appears to be dubious. Originally named *Akestown*, the settlement's name was changed to Williamsburg in honor of his son. In August of 1795, Patrick Cassidy of Newry, at Ake's request, surveyed and plotted one hundred twenty lots on the tract of land owned by Jacob Ake. When the lots were dispersed (lots sold on lease for one Spanish milled dollar yearly forever), it is unclear whether any of the original holders were Catholic.



From 1808 until 1843, Williamsburg was located within the Diocese of Philadelphia. During the 1820s, the Church in Philadelphia faced many challenges. Trusteeism (a system where

the parish is largely controlled by a board of lay-trustees), schism, and often virulent attacks against the Church were common. To help address the issues facing the Diocese of Philadelphia and its bishop Henry Conwell, the Vatican appointed Francis Patrick Kenrick (up to that point a seminary professor in Bardstown, Kentucky) as coadjutor bishop of Philadelphia. While Bishop Conwell would remain as bishop, in reality Bishop Kenrick was given administrative authority. Two months after his arrival in Philadelphia, from September 5th until November 7th of 1830, Bishop Kenrick made an extensive journey through the western portion of the Philadelphia diocese. In describing his missionary journey to Western Pennsylvania, one writer has said, "He trekked about the state, confirming and ordaining, visiting farmlands, coal-mining areas, canal cities peopled with Irish laborers, seeking Catholics in backwoods areas." Due to a very heavy and demanding schedule he became ill during the trip and while at Chambersburg he wrote to a young priest in Philadelphia named John Hughes asking for help. Hughes (who would later go on to be a legendary Archbishop of New York) took over Kenrick's visitations and accompanied the bishop after he had rested enough to resume his travels on October 12th. It is recorded at the Huntingdon County Courthouse that on October 17, 1830, Bishop Kenrick, along with Fr. John Hughes and Fr. John O'Reily (pastor of Newry and Huntingdon), purchased in trust for the Catholic congregation a 100' x 200' lot in Williamsburg for the sum of \$20.00 from Joseph and Catharine Feay. Bishop Kenrick later noted in his writings that on November 2nd he Confirmed eight persons in Williamsburg and blessed the cemetery.

While there were certainly Catholics in Williamsburg prior to 1830, it was in the years that followed that the population began to grow.

Construction of the Juniata Branch of the Pennsylvania Canal began in 1827 and reached Williamsburg in 1831. In the decades that followed many, of the early Catholic residents of Williamsburg appear to be of Irish descent. Names such as McDermott, Harbison, Burns, Dobbins, Corrigan, McMahon, McKiernan, and Mulhearn were among the early Catholic residents. One of the most prominent Catholic citizens of Williamsburg at this time was Edward McKiernan who served as the Justice of the Peace at varying intervals between 1850 and 1880. Another prominent Catholic citizen of Williamsburg was Henry Harbison, who was an instrumental force in building the original church.

Prior to the establishment of St. Joseph Parish in 1861, the faithful would often have to travel to Hollidaysburg, Huntingdon, or Newry for Mass. While there were some burials in the cemetery prior to 1861, the land which Bishop Kenrick designated for a parish in 1830 would not be used for over thirty years. In an undated document (still retained in the parish records), Fr. John Walsh, pastor of St. Mary Church in Hollidaysburg, authorized the collection of funds to build a church in Williamsburg. This document, which most likely dates from 1860, contains the names of many benefactors and their pledges. A total of forty-five names are listed, with the venerable Henry Harbison listed first with a pledge of \$500.00 (in 1860, a laborer made less than a dollar a day). It should be noted that the document also lists several contributors who were Protestant friends.

The Williamsburg parish was dedicated on October 9, 1861 and placed under the patronage of St. Joseph. It is noted the "the Bishop" dedicated the church, though the name of the prelate is not given. Presumably, the rite was presided over by Bishop Michael Domenec of Pittsburgh. From its inception, with some exceptions, the parish was served as a mission of St. Mary Parish in Hollidaysburg for sixty years. During this time Mass, was celebrated one Sunday a month. It was also during this time that the priests who were attached to St. Francis College in Loretto would occasionally serve the parish. Fr. Andrew Lambing, the eminent chronicler of Western Pennsylvania Catholic history, notes in his book *History of the Dioceses of Pittsburgh and Allegheny* that while at St. Francis College in the fall and early winter of 1869, the Williamsburg parish was committed to his care. Fr. Lambing recorded that during this period the parish had twenty-eight communicants.

The first baptism recorded in the parish was that of John Mulhearn, who was baptized on November 6, 1861. The fifth baptism recorded in the same register notes the baptism of likely the most well-known parishioner, Charles M. Schwab. Born on February 18, 1862; Schwab was the grandchild of German immigrant Catholics who settled in

Loretto. The Schwab family moved to Williamsburg shortly before his birth, as his father obtained a contract for manufacturing blankets for the Union Army and found a suitable building in Williamsburg. Charles was baptized by Fr. Walsh, then pastor of Hollidaysburg, on March 16, 1862. When he was five years old, the family returned to Loretto. After an interesting career in the steel industry, Schwab became the president of Bethlehem Steel, which under his leadership became the second largest steel maker in the United States. Schwab was also largely responsible for the construction of the paper mill in Williamsburg and the magnificent Basilica of St. Michael in Loretto. One of America's greatest industrialists, he appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1926.

In June of 1872 Bishop Domenec visited Williamsburg, where he administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to eighteen parishioners of varying ages. Among them were members of the Harbison, McKiernan, McMahon, and Wolf families. The High Mass was celebrated by Fr. Martin, assistant at St. Mary Parish in Hollidaysburg, and assisted by Fr. Walsh, pastor of Hollidaysburg. After Mass, Bishop Domenec addressed the faithful and administered Confirmation before retiring to the home of Edward McKiernan. It was during this same decade that the parish received its first resident priest, Fr. Edward McSweeney. A native of Ireland, Fr. McSweeney arrived in the fall of 1877 and enjoyed a brief tenure before an ill health forced his retirement.



Other than the brief pastorate of Fr. McSweeney and occasional service by the priests stationed at St. Francis College in Loretto, the spiritual guidance of the parish remained under the care of the priests of St. Mary's Parish in Hollidaysburg. Frs. John Walsh, Ferdinand Kittell, and Patrick Vereker, among others, all traveled to Williamsburg for the sacraments and pastoral visits. Trips were often made on horseback or by train. In addition to the priests, often times organists, altar boys, and choir members traveled to Williamsburg for Sunday Mass and Requiem Masses. In the early years of the parish, a parishioner of St. Mary's would travel to Williamsburg by train to dress the altar and prepare the church for Mass the Saturday preceding the monthly Mass. While the Catholic population of Williamsburg was always small, the parish experienced significant growth during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While many of the early parishioners were of Irish background, when the quarries began operating in places such as Ganister, St. Clair, and Clover Creek, there was a notable change in the parish demographic - Italian, Croatian, and other Slavic people began to fill the pews. Prior to 1916, many of the Orthodox faithful who later founded St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Ganister often prayed at St. Joseph's. Names such as Domitrovich, Rusich, Leipersock, Lockawich, Michelone, Bucar, Katkic, Marvich, Mumich, Malovich, Verbonitz, Figurelle, Graziano, Delich, Rabits, and Walla, among many others illustrated

the change in the parish complexion. Many of these immigrants are interred in both the old cemetery and the new cemetery, which was acquired in July of 1920.

With the new immigrants, the parish grew large enough that a resident priest was assigned. The last priest who served Williamsburg from Hollidaysburg was Fr. Patrick Vereker, who did so from 1900 until 1921. On July 21, 1921 Fr. James P. Padden was appointed as the resident pastor of St. Joseph Church. His stay was brief and lasted until January of 1922 when Fr. Ildephonze J. Denny was appointed. In April of 1922 Fr. Denny bought the first rectory (from G. Roy Patterson in the amount of \$2,800) and made a number of improvements to the church building. Following Fr. Denny's departure, the parish received Fr. Joseph Brett, who was succeeded by Fr. John Sostaric, who had the interior of the church frescoed. Father Sostaric served the parish for five years and was followed by Fr. Anthony Choby, who remained only one year.

From 1933 until 1943, the parish was served by Fr. Ferdinand Kruetzkampf, a native of Germany. Fr. Kruetzkampf spent many years working in Africa as a missionary and spent ten years working in an African-American parish in Detroit. When he came to Williamsburg, he arrived with a great deal of experience as a priest. During his tenure the parish sought to establish a nursing home for elderly women. Securing a large house at 703 First Street in May of 1934, Fr. Kruetzkampf also enlisted the help of three religious sisters from the Sisters of the Most Holy Redeemer in Würzburg, Germany (Bavaria), who arrived in October of the same year. An article in the *Catholic Register* from November 11, 1934 points out that the home was open and "now able to care for eight old women." While St. Joseph's Home did not have a long life, it was but an example of the humble dedication of Fr. Kruetzkampf. When he died he was buried in the parish cemetery.

Fr. Kruetzkampf was followed by Fr. Stephen Milcic. Young and ambitious Fr. Milcic set about strengthening the parish in various ways. With regard to the physical plant of the parish, Fr. Milcic commissioned new pews and an altar rail. Before these projects could be completed, Fr. Milcic died at the age of thirty-four.

Fr. Milcic was followed by Fr. Francis Reed Hoy, to date the longest serving pastor in the history of the parish. Fr. Hoy served as editor of the *Catholic Register* during his nearly twelve year assignment at St. Joseph's. It was during his time that the church was renovated, with almost all of the work being done on a voluntary basis by the parishioners. A new altar was installed by Joseph Lockevich, the floors were sanded, and Charles Leipersock and James Pitcher painted the interior of the church with a memorable color scheme consisting of a pink ceiling,

light green walls, and dark green baseboards. It was during this time that Anthony Prysbeck served as the parish organist. In May of 1951 construction began on the parish hall. As is the longstanding custom at St. Joseph's, the work was done primarily by volunteer efforts. A semi-basement structure it measured 50 x 77 feet. In 1956 the parish celebrated its 95th anniversary with a Solemn Anniversary Mass on April 18th with the famed Priest Choir of the diocese in singing. The tenure of Fr. Hoy was a memorable chapter in the history of the parish; these were the days of various religious sisters coming for summer catechism, forty hours devotions, and parish bazaars serving Italian dishes.

Fr. Hoy died on February 9, 1959. For a time the parish was administered by Fr. Paul Hatch, T.O.R., and received a new pastor a few months later in the person of Fr. Elmer Pica. With a memorable sense of humor, Fr. Pica served the parish for three years. It was during his time in Williamsburg that the building fund was started with a new church building in mind. Fr. Pica was replaced by Fr. Charles

Leonardis whose tenure lasted nine years. In May of 1963 Ellwood Figurelle, a native son of the parish was ordained a priest. In 1971 Fr. Raymond Karr was appointed pastor and under his direction ground was broken for the new church and rectory on June 11, 1972. The *Catholic Register* estimated the cost of the building, which was built to seat two hundred forty-seven, to be approximately \$250,000. Brown's Construction of Spruce Creek was the general contractor for the new church. A few weeks after ground was broken for the new church in June of 1972, Hurricane Agnes wrought a path of destruction that affected Williamsburg and its environs. The old church, hall, and cemetery all experienced as a result of the hurricane.

In April of 1973 the parish received a new pastor, the energetic Fr. Donald Boslett. Fr. Boslett celebrated the first Mass in the new church, several months before its dedication, at midnight on December 25th 1973. Two

hundred thirty-five people attended the Mass, with two hundred attending the 7 o'clock Mass the next morning. This is worth noting, as the parish had only one hundred twenty families at the time. On April 28, 1974 Bishop James J. Hogan blessed the new St. Joseph Church. Former pastors Frs. Pica and Leonardis returned for the dedication and Fr. Faber J. Malloy was the homilist. Tom Sault of the parish served as the commentator for the Mass, the organist was Michelle Landis (later Haney), and the choir was directed by Charles Hauser. While the construction of the new church was a time of great rejoicing in the parish, it was nonetheless bittersweet. The venerable old church, which served the parish for over one hundred ten years, was razed on July 26, 1975. In its place a bell tower was erected.

Fr. Boslett was transferred in 1977 and replaced by Fr. James Skupien. It was during his time that the parish had to examine the issue of a considerable debt. Under the direction of Cecilia Burkett, a small, exceptionally dedicated group began to make and sell candy. Any attempt to describe the dedication of the candy makers would fall short. From October until Christmas the crew worked in the church



basement making candy seven days a week. Thanksgiving dinner was served in the Church basement as the day could not be lost. After one week off after Christmas, the candy makers went back on the job, seven days a week, until after Easter. Candies were mailed to places as far away as Florida and Texas. On a full day candy making went from 7:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m., with only a short break. The parish paid off the debt in six years, due in large part to the work of the candy makers.

Fr. Skupien was transferred in 1983 and Msgr. Francis Ackerson began his assignment at St. Joseph parish. In 1986 Fr. Leonard Voytek was assigned to St. Joseph, replacing Msgr. Ackerson when he retired from parish ministry. After arriving at Williamsburg in October of 1987, Fr. Voytek helped to secure the purchase of the former gas station next to the parish, converting it into a parish center. Fr. Voytek was reassigned to Windber in 1993 and replaced by Fr. Dennis Kurdziel. During the time of Fr. Kurdziel the rectory and church experienced renovations. Fr. Kurdziel served the parish for seven years and was followed by Fr. Bernard White in 2000. In 2004 Fr. White was replaced by Fr. Leo Lynch who remained as pastor

until 2010. In July of 2010 Fr. Aron Maghsoudi was appointed Parochial Administrator of the parish and on September 27, 2011 was named pastor.

In May of 2011 Dorothy Leipersock received the Prince Gallitzin Cross from Bishop Mark L. Bartchak. She was selected for this commendation as recognition of her eight decades of service to the Church and her parish. In many ways Dorothy, along with countless others, have given their very best to the Church and to dear St. Joseph Parish.

Down through the ages, as members of Church, our ancestors really have rejoiced in hope, been patient under trial, and persevered in prayer. While God remembers the good deeds done by our forbearers, may their memory burn brightly in our minds and hearts. From the pioneer Catholic families in Ake's settlement, to the men and women who built the quaint old St. Joseph church, to the immigrants who endured ridicule and heartache, to the priests, religious, workers, mothers, fathers, benefactors, and candy makers who have made this day possible, we express our gratitude, for we stand on the shoulders of giants. ■



YESTERDAY & TODAY

Left- Summer School of Religion, 1948. Pictured with Sisters of the Sacred Heart, M. Annunciata and M. Christine

Right- Summer School of Religion, 2011. Pictured with Fr. Aron Maghsoudi and Sisters of the Sacred Heart