

The History of St. Marie's Parish and Schools

The high banks of the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys separated the city of Cohoes into downtown and "Island" residents, and people on "the Hill" ("sur la Cote"). The people living on the Hill, mostly French-speaking families of workers at the Harmony Mills, attended St. Joseph's Church and sent their children to the parish school. In June of 1899, following an extremely difficult winter when children had to negotiate the primitive roads to get downtown to St. Joseph's School, a committee was formed to request financial assistance from Monsignor Dugas, pastor of St. Joseph's, to establish a school on "the Hill." Permission was granted, and six lots were purchased from Peter Lansing for \$2,250. The school was built in 1900 at 145 Vliet St., and dedicated to Notre Dame de Palvoisin. The school was located on the Simmons Avenue side in what is now the parking lot of the new St. Marie's (later Cohoes Consolidated) School. While the students did not have to journey up and down the hill to school, their teachers did. The students were instructed by the Sisters of Ste. Anne, a French Canadian order, who traveled from St. Joseph's convent on Congress St. In 1901, when a fire destroyed the convent and members of the order departed the city, two women of the parish volunteered to teach during this crisis to keep the school operating until the return of the nuns. The next year, permission was granted by Bishop Burke to erect an addition on the western side of the school building to be used as a chapel; on Christmas Day 1902 Ste. Marie's Chapel was dedicated at a Mass celebrated by Msgr. Dugas.



The original school for the parish of Ste. Marie, opened in 1900. An addition, used as a chapel, was added in 1902. The church remained in the building until 1927, when a new structure was built. Classes were taught in the building until 1955, when a new school was built on Leverage Avenue.

As the population grew rapidly on the Hill, residents again petitioned Monsignor Dugas, to build and establish a parish of their own. This plan was presented to the Bishop, who gave it his approval, and the Articles of Incorporation for the new parish were documented on July 16, 1906. Father George E. Gagne was appointed as pastor to "Mater Misericordiae" (our Lady of Mercy). A rectory was constructed in 1912 at 122 Vliet St.; the brick structure replaced the original rectory, a two-story wood frame building at 110 Vliet St., which still stands today. The Rev. Paul Leduc sang his first Mass at Ste. Marie's in 1915; he was the first of many vocations from among members of the parish.

In 1916, the old convent, under the supervision of Sister Mary Theophile, was deemed inadequate so a building at 30 Watervliet Avenue was purchased and refurbished for the Sisters of Ste. Anne. A new wing was added in 1951. The convent closed in 1976 as vocations dropped and there

were too few nuns remaining to support a convent. Also in 1916, a building fund was established to construct another school to house grades 5 through 8 because the old school could not accommodate a growing enrollment. This school was located on Vliet Street, across from the present church. It is now a parking lot.

The next requirement was a new church. In 1920, Father Gagne formulated a plan for a "temple of God worthy of the faith" and a building fund was started. Land was purchased and construction began in 1926. The brick and limestone structure of Gothic design was completed in 1927, and the first service in the new church was Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve of that year. The next three years were devoted to beautifying the parish grounds and the other parish buildings. On September 19, 1930, Father Gagne passed away just short of the silver anniversary of his ordination, leaving behind a congregation saddened by the loss of the man who had done so much to develop the parish.

Father Napoleon LaPalme was named new pastor of the church in 1930. Planned improvements to the parish were halted by the Depression, but the congregation endured. Father LaPalme retired in 1937 due to poor health, and was replaced by the Rev. Harvey Desautels, who served the parish until 1941. The next pastor, the Rev. Adrien Bechard, was faced with a large parish deficit due to the Depression and its aftermath, but he worked diligently to overcome this financial difficulty and a mortgage-burning ceremony for the church was held in 1947. The interior decoration of the church was the next priority, and by 1951 this work was completed. With many new families joining the parish, Father Bechard foresaw the need for a new school. A School Fund committee was established with the fundraising goal of \$120,000. Within ten days, pledges were received for \$134,000. Construction began in 1953 on the new school, which was completed by Spring 1955. Father Bechard was elevated to Right Reverend Monsignor on June 4, 1961. He continued to serve the parish, and died suddenly in February 1965 on the steps of his beloved church. The Assistant Pastor Marc Touchette was appointed Parish Administrator immediately after, and served until June of that year when the Reverend George T. Quinlivan was placed in charge of the parish. He remained at St. Marie's until February 1968. During this period the reforms of Vatican II began to be enacted in Catholic churches worldwide; among the changes was the delegation of more responsibility to the parishioners. In St. Marie's, this would include the appointment of laypeople as lectors and Eucharistic Ministers, and the establishment (in 1973) of a Parish Council. In 1968, the Rev. Lionel Guillaume became pastor, and reforms continued. The Mass would thereafter be in English instead of Latin and the priest would face the congregation in celebration of the Mass. Changes to the sacristy, completed in 1972, included removal of the altar rail.



In 1971, pastors from Catholic parishes throughout the City of Cohoes gathered to discuss the parish schools. A decision to consolidate the nine catholic schools in Cohoes was made, and the school building of St. Marie's was chosen to house grades K-5, while grades 6-8 would attend classes at St. Agnes. The fifth grade classes moved to St. Agnes for a time due to high enrollments. Cohoes was a pioneer in school consolidation, with an extremely successful program that served as a model for other communities.

In 1975, Father Guillaume was transferred to Corpus Christi parish in Clifton Park, and Father Leo Potvin was installed as pastor, the 6th in the history of St. Marie's. Vandalism by fire damaged the front interior of the church in 1977, prompting the installation of a security system in the church and its other properties. The restoration of the church's pipe organ and stained glass windows, as well as an upgrade of the heating system, were accomplished during Father Potvin's tenure. Father Potvin left the parish in 1984; he was followed by Father Albert, and Father Hiney in 1987. In 1988, Father Arthur Becker became pastor, and continues at the parish to this day. Because of the shortage of priests and an interest in containing costs, St. Marie's church was merged with churches of St. Agnes and St. Patrick, becoming Holy Trinity parish. Masses are still held in the St. Marie's Church building.

On June 6, 2004, the once-flourishing Consolidated Catholic School at St Marie's was closed due to declining enrollment. It was the last remaining parochial school in the city. The building is now being used for parish functions and social services.

Thanks to Anne Marie Nadeau for providing information for this article.

JC/Spindle City Historic Society newsletter staff (Winter 2004)