EARLY CATHOLICISM ON AQUIDNECK ISLAND

Roman Catholicism attained a toehold in Newport as early as the Revolutionary period. Records cite that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated by the French priests who accompanied the allied troops to Newport. Before the turn of the century refugees from the French Revolution sought shelter on Aquidneck.

In January 1827, Reverend Benedict J. Fenwick, second Bishop of Boston, dispatched his cathedral assistant, Reverend Patrick Byrne, to visit Rhode Island. On Aquidneck Island, Reverend Patrick Byrne discovered that the Catholic population was more numerous than he had anticipated. Large-scale construction at Fort Adams and expanded mining operations in Portsmouth had attracted Irish immigrant laborers. According to Father Byrne's account, approximately one hundred eighty persons received the sacraments during his visit. Consequently, the following year Bishop Fenwick appointed Father Robert Woodley to investigate the feasibility of establishing a church in Rhode Island. The inhabitants of Newport exhibited such enthusiasm that Newport was chosen as the most advantageous location. As a result, Saint Mary's was incorporated on April 8, 1828, as the first organized parish in Rhode Island.

The Sisters of Mercy Begin

During this time the cornerstone for a Religious Order was being laid. The origin of the Sisters of Mercy stemmed from one woman's inspiration and desire to serve the poor, the sick and the uneducated. Catherine McAuley, a devout Irish heiress, initiated her work by establishing a residence in Dublin for homeless working girls and orphans. The Religious Order was founded on December 12, 1831 when Mother Mary Catherine McAuley and two companions pronounced their vows of Religion in the Presentation Convent in Dublin. Pope Gregory XVI officially confirmed the Order of the Sisters of Mercy July 5, 1841.[1]

American Foundations

Mother McAuley personally longed to extend her Mercy mission to the United States. She bequeathed this desire to one of her loyal companions, Mother Mary Frances Xavier Warde. The foundress of the first American Convent of the Sisters of Mercy came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, December 2, 1843 with a community of six sisters. At this time in history, the diocese of Hartford included the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island with Providence serving as the episcopal residence. In 1850 the Right Reverend Bernard O'Reilly, D.D., who had recently been appointed second Bishop of Hartford, applied for Sisters of Mercy from the Pittsburgh community. On March 11, 1851[2] Mother Frances Xavier Warde and four Sisters arrived in Providence without ostentation[3] due to the continuing religious intolerance in New England during this period.

The Sisters Arrive in Newport

A school at Saint Mary's parish had been in operation since 1846 under the direction of a lay teacher, as was then the custom.[4] The Sisters of Mercy arrived in Newport in 1854, largely as a consequence of personal friendships between Mrs. Goodloe Harper and members of the Order. In 1843, on her way through Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Mother Frances Xavier Warde had met Miss Emily Harper, the beautiful young granddaughter of the patriot, Charles Carroll. The two became immediate friends. Until their deaths, Emily and her wealthy mother, Mrs. Goodloe Harper, were generous benefactors to the Sisters of Mercy.

The Harpers owned "The Rock," a summer residence in Newport and were desirous of having a convent of Mercy established on the Island. In pursuit of this goal, Mrs. Harper purchased a parcel of land opposite the Church on Spring Street. At the request of the Harpers, Father Fitton, pastor of the Church, donated a small cottage nearby which had previously served as a chapel while the new church was being constructed. This cottage was relocated on the Spring Street lot and a wing was added to each side in order that the building could be utilized as a convent and parochial school. The convent was named Saint Mary's of the Isle.[5]

St. Mary's Convent School Begins

As superior of the new convent, Mother Frances Xavier Warde chose Sister Gertrude Bradley who had recently professed vows in Providence.[6] Accompanied by three other Sisters, Mother Frances and Sister Gertrude sailed on the steamboat "Canonicus" from

Providence, at 2:00 p.m. on the rainy afternoon of May 3, 1854 and disembarked at Newport, "The Eden of America," as it was then called. The only vehicle available was an old "hundred and two"[7] coach, which provided transportation to Spring Street.[8]

Upon entering the convent the Sisters discovered there was nothing to eat or drink. Later, however, the Pastor did send his housekeeper to the convent with some bread and tea. The house was unheated and must have been a very humble and uncomfortable dwelling for we read, "But the cottage was subject to a nocturnal plague of fleas and rats which made it all but uninhabitable."[9] Despite this extremely cold reception and with meager provisions, the Sisters settled themselves in their convent and prepared for their ministries.

Less than a week later, on May 8, 1854, two Sisters opened the parochial school to approximately sixty pupils. For a time the Sisters were in charge of the girls, while the boys continued under the direction of the former school master, Colonel W. K. Delaney.[10] Meanwhile Christian Doctrine classes, sodalities, and other religious activities were organized; the Sisters visited the sick and attempted to alleviate the conditions of the poor with money donated by some of the more affluent summer residents.

Although the number of Sisters was small, they succeeded in attracting new members and in arousing interest and respect among their Newport neighbors. One year after their arrival on July 11, 1855 the residents of the island community crowded into the newly erected Saint Mary's Church to view for the first time on the island, the religious reception ceremony of two young women. "There was an immense crowd present, mostly Protestants."[11]

The Misses Hannah Sullivan and Mary Ann Madden received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious names of Sisters Mary Ignatius and Mary Regis, in a service presided over by Bishop O'Reilly[12] assisted by Right Reverend Doctor McGill of Richmond, Virginia, and the Reverend Father Fitton. "It was a very solemn and imposing occasion and one which will not soon be forgotten."[13]

The Academy is Founded

As the school grew from its modest beginning to approximately four hundred students, the need for a larger facility was recognized. In 1865 the cornerstone for a school was laid and in the Spring of 1867, the Sisters welcomed their students into the new edifice on Levin Street, presently Memorial Boulevard. When the children vacated the convent classrooms for the new school, twenty-eight girls remained to form the nucleus of St. Mary's Academy which opened in October 1867.

The aim of the Academy was to instruct students who wished to pursue special studies or further their education. This Academy prepared for life many of the outstanding citizens of Newport. Among its illustrious graduates were the author of the first Diocesan History of Rhode Island, Bishop Austin Dowling, D.D., later Archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota, and the renowned and gallant Newport lighthouse keeper, Ida Lewis. The Academy remained open until 1924 when it was replaced by the larger diocesan high schools, De LaSalle Academy for boys and St. Catherine's Academy for girls.

The Defray Controversy

The Sisters' work was not always appreciated by the inhabitants of Aquidneck Island. One unfortunate incident occurred in December, 1875. It was alleged that Father Grace, pastor of Saint Mary's had refused to bury from the Catholic Church, Geneva Defray, a nine year old girl. The young girl's father declared that this was the result of her attendance at the public, rather than the Catholic school. Although Father Grace denied the accusation, the press gave extensive coverage to the affair. The controversy then developed into public schools versus Catholic schools. The following is cited from the Newport Daily News: "Knowing as we do, that public schools give a better and much more thorough education than can usually be obtained in the parochial schools . . ."[14] This indication of open hostility and lack of esteem for the sisters' efforts in the educational process was an unpleasant situation which continued to beleaguer the small Mercy community.

Regardless of the difficulties the Sisters continued in their work, and by 1884 the "Catholic School Question" had evidently begun to subside. The following is a Newport school committee report which publicly acclaimed the excellence of St. Mary's Schools.

> The number of pupils to each teacher is considerably larger than is allowed in our public schools, which must require hard work on the part of those in charge, and yet it was evident that the burden is cheerfully and faithfully borne . . .
>
> The brief visit of the chairman of the school committee and his associates was sufficient to show that those schools are in charge of faithful and competent teachers, who are devoted to their work . . .

> Whatever difference of opinion there may be as to the question of secular or parochial education, it must be admitted that the schools of Saint Mary's parish are in the highest degree creditable to those who have them in charge.[15]

The "New" Saint Mary's Convent

Meanwhile the Sisters continued in the tradition of Mother Catherine McAuley and Mother Xavier Warde, serving the poor, visiting the sick, and teaching both children and adults. The number of Academy students and the increased faculty required for both schools rendered the original convent inadequate. In July 1880, the old building was razed and the Sisters moved to a rented house on William Street. On the 21st of December of the same year, the new convent and Academy was ready for occupancy.

The Sisters Teach in Saint Joseph's Parish

Saint Mary's continued as the center of Catholicism on Aquidneck Island for many years. Priests of Saint Mary's tended the needs of all on Aquidneck Island and in Jamestown. Portsmouth existed as a small mission where Mass was usually celebrated once a month in Saint Clement's chapel, which had been built in 1882. Saint Mark's, Jamestown, served only as a summer mission until a chapel was erected in 1891 on land donated by the Wilcoxes of Delaware.

The growing number of Catholics and subsequent demands on the priests and Sisters caused Bishop Hendricken to divide Saint Mary's parish in 1885. The northern part of Aquidneck Island became the territory assigned to the new

Saint Joseph's parish. The Sisters went each Sunday morning from Saint Mary's to teach Christian Doctrine in the new parish.

The Twentieth Century

With the beginning of the new century, the scope of the Sisters' ministry was broadened when on April 2, 1911 the parish of Saint Augustin was canonically established. The Reverend Father Martin Reddy, first pastor, built a church and a school. In 1912 the Sisters of Mercy opened a convent on Carroll Avenue with Sister Mary Borgia Hannah as the first superior. They provided a staff for the school, taught Christian Doctrine classes and began sodalities.

During the pastorate of Father Redihan, a convent on Harrison Avenue was purchased for the Sisters. Later they moved into another convent on Harrison Avenue. By the 1950's the latter convent became so dilapidated that a new convent was erected on Eastnor Road. When the Sisters withdrew from St. Augustin parish in 1970, the convent on Eastnor Road became the parish rectory.

There was further expansion of the Sisters' work with the opening, in 1914, of the Sunday school in Jamestown. Two Sisters traveled by ferry each Sunday to instruct the island children in Christian Doctrine. This apostolate continued for fifty-four years.

Mercy Home

The Sisters established Mercy Home and School in 1915, following the example of Mother Catherine McAuley whose first charitable work was a house for homeless girls and orphans. Sister Anastasia

Brown served as the first superior of Mercy Home. The resident orphan boys and girls received not only elementary and junior high school education, but were also instructed in music, manual arts, domestic science and needlecraft. The school grew so rapidly that six years after its establishment a nearby Newport estate "Castlewood" was purchased to enlarge the institution.

Mercy Home and School served the Aquidneck Island Community until May 1, 1941. The Home was closed as a result of the government's request for the land. However, the residents were welcomed into St. Aloysius Home in Greenville, an orphanage also staffed by the Sisters of Mercy.

A Catholic Women's College

It had long been the wish of the Sisters of Mercy in the Providence diocese to open a Catholic women's college in Rhode Island. This educational ideal evolved from the foundation begun in 1851 by the Sisters who established the first Catholic High School for girls in the state, Saint Xavier Academy, in Providence. The realization of this goal began when the General Assembly of Rhode Island took action on a bill introduced by Representative Edmund Flynn on March 6, 1934, granting a charter to the Sisters of Mercy for Salve Regina College. Without funds or property, the community demonstrated their faith in God and began to prepare Sisters to staff the College. Efforts were made to amass library materials to be utilized when the college became a reality.

On March 20, 1947, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Goelet presented their summer estate, "Ochre Court," to Bishop Francis P. Keough to be used for educational purposes. The Bishop had the deed transferred

to the Corporation of Salve Regina College. With the land and the building procured, the College opened its doors to a freshman class of fifty-eight students on September 21, 1947. Mother Mary Matthew Doyle, then Provincial of the Order, was the College's first President, and Sister Mary James O'Hare, former principal of Saint Xavier Academy, served as the first Dean.

Later in February of 1948, Mr. Goelet made a second gift of property, his stables, which became known as Mercy Hall. Another residence, Moore Hall, opened on April 1, 1951, a memorial gift from Attorney Cornelius C. Moore, better known as "Mr. Newport." During the 1960's Salve Regina College campus continued to expand with Miley Hall, a large modern dormitory, honoring Mother Mary Hilda Miley, second President of the College and O'Hare Academic Center, commemorating Sister Mary James O'Hare, the first Dean.

The Regional School

The dearth of Sisters, led to the closing of Saint Augustin's School in 1970. The following year, pressured by the financial limitations and a shortage of Sisters, the Regional School Board, directed by its president, Mr. Francis J. Boyle, together with the Sisters of Saint Joseph and the Sisters of Mercy, spearheaded the creation of Newport County Catholic Regional School. This institution received the support of six parishes on the island.[16] The elementary school housed in three buildings is staffed by Sisters of Saint Joseph, Sisters of Mercy and lay faculty. In 1979 it has an enrollment of over five hundred students.

Mercy Ministries

The Sisters of Mercy during the last one hundred twenty-five years have touched innumerable lives on Aquidneck Island. Salve Regina College has maintained its excellence as a liberal arts institution and provides opportunities for several graduate programs. The Newport County Catholic Regional School continues to provide leadership in Catholic School education in the diocese. The Sisters teach and coordinate Christian Doctrine classes in several parishes.[17] They also visit the sick and serve as Eucharistic Ministers both in the Churches and in the homes of the sick. The Sisters continue to be vital instruments of parish renewal and deeply involved in the religious and civic concerns of the Island.