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"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

The Early Catholic Church in Rhode Island



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

October 17, 1932

The Early Catholic Church in Rhode Island

THE first historical knowledge of the presence of Catholics in Rhode Island was during the Revolutionary War when the French troops came to Newport in July, 1780, and remained there until the summer of the following year. Previous to then, none of the colonists had any acquaintance with the church except a few of the seafaring men who had come to know about it on their frequent expeditions to the West Indies. But, the Rhode Island colonists had the privilege of coming into close contact with Roman Catholics when the French army of deliverance came to these shores to aid this nation in its struggle for independence. Many of these gay young Frenchmen were undoubtedly good Catholics for their priests had crossed the Atlantic with them and it is recorded that the State House was then used as a chapel and hospital where Mass was celebrated by the chaplains. When the distinguished French naval officer, Charles D'Arsac de Ternay, Admiral of the fleet that brought six thousand of his countrymen safely to these shores, died suddenly after his arrival in New-



port, he was laid to rest with the burial services of his own religious faith. His was probably the largest and most impressive funeral that had taken place in Newport up to that time—the procession, headed by chanting priests extended from the house on Washington Street, where he died, to Trinity Churchyard on Church Street.

Whether a few of the Newport residents became converted or some of the French soldiers and officers remained in the vicinity after the return of the fleet to France, there seems to be no definite record, but, it is certain that there were a few Catholics in Newport after the visit of the French. When the French residents fled from San Domingo and Guadeloupe in 1793, some of them came to Newport and Bristol and remained for several years. As early as 1811, the Rev. Dr. Matignon, an exiled French missionary, who was sent by Bishop Carroll to Boston in 1792, and the Right Rev. John De Cheverus, consecrated the first bishop of Boston in 1810, visited the town of Bristol, Rhode Island to celebrate Mass and baptize the children of the French-American Catholics residing there.

Providence was the next place in Rhode Island, after Newport and Bris-

tol, where a small colony of Catholics resided in 1813. The first service was held in an old wooden school-house that stood on Sheldon Street near Benefit Street but that structure was demolished in the "Great Gale of 1815". For thirteen years after that, Mass was celebrated in private homes and in other available places. On several occasions it was said in the old police station, in a building at the corner of Richmond and Pine Streets, and in the basement of a house that stood on Aborn Street, near Sabin.

At the request of Catholics in Providence and vicinity the Rev. Robert D. Woodley, who had been attached to the Boston diocese for a short period, was sent early in the year 1828 by Bishop Fenwick to look over the ground in Providence with a view to establishing himself as the pastor of a territory which should embrace the whole of the present Providence diocese and considerable more. Few as they were, local Catholics received Father Woodley with open arms. He was delighted with his reception and immediately wrote Bishop Fenwick that he thought he would have no difficulty in raising at once a thousand dollars towards building a church in Providence or in Pawtucket. He made

a complete inspection of his parish, which then included Taunton, and purchased some land and a small school building in Newport where he planned to hold services. In passing, it might be interesting to observe that this real estate purchase in Newport by Father Woodley on April 8, 1828, and approved by Bishop Fenwick, marked the first expenditure of money by Catholics for religious purposes in the State of Rhode Island.

At that time Father Woodley visited Newport every other week, saying Mass when in Providence in old Mechanics' Hall which stood on Market Square. He spent the rest of his time wandering about here and there where he found Catholics sufficiently interested to need or care for his ministrations. Thus it happens that traces of this pioneer priest can be found throughout the entire diocese of Providence and even in parts of Connecticut. Father Woodley enjoyed the support of a loyal and expanding group of members of his faith and he also had the interest and encouragement of the local press. A kindly spirit of goodwill animated the editor of the "Providence Patriot", William Simons, who welcomed and encouraged, in the columns of his publication, the efforts of Father

Woodley to raise funds for building the first Catholic Church in Providence. And, Mr. Simons' hope that the Catholics would be assisted by the wealthy citizens of the community in building an edifice for divine worship was realized sooner, perhaps, than he expected.

In August, 1828, David Wilkinson, Pawtucket manufacturer and brother-in-law of Samuel Slater, founder of the cotton spinning industry in America, gave a fine piece of land, one hundred and twenty-five feet square, to the Catholics of his community as a site on which to build a church. Mr. Wilkinson was probably motivated in making this generous gift by his desire to attract skilled labor to work in his industry, and to keep high the standard of morality among those whom he hired as operatives. This splendid and benevolent spirit of supplementing labor by the training of the mind and soul was not unknown in those days for Mr. Slater had previously founded a Sabbath school for his employees in Pawtucket, the first ever established in this country. Bishop Fenwick was delighted with the gift when he saw it on his visit to Providence shortly afterwards. The Bishop was accompanied on this trip by a young man, then a deacon,

and named Tyler, who later became the first Bishop of Hartford.

In order to build the first church in Pawtucket Father Woodley had to raise about \$1200, and he did this by taking up collections in Boston and by borrowing money from Bishop Fenwick. It was completed in the Autumn of 1829, and, according to an old account, it "looked well in its coat of white paint, with green doors and Venetian blinds". This church in Pawtucket was the first Catholic house of worship built in Rhode Island and the second piece of property owned by the Catholics in the state. But, Father Woodley was not particularly successful as a missionary. He spent three years of bitter disappointment and discouragement in these parts and finally, with creditors besetting him on every side, he departed and joined the Jesuits at Georgetown. He died at Port Tobacco, Maryland, in 1857.

The first Catholic church built in Providence was Sts. Peter and Paul's, on the site of part of the present cathedral. Mass was said in it for the first time on the second Sunday of Advent in 1837, by Father Corry who had succeeded Father Woodley in 1830. When Father Corry came to Providence there were not more than two

hundred Catholics in the town and the congregation did not own an inch of land. It was his ambition to buy a lot in a desirable section of the town, centrally located, and large enough for a church and a priests' house. It was two years before he could secure the lot he desired in a section near Winslow's Lane around which many Catholics lived. The land he purchased is now covered by the central aisle and sanctuary of the present cathedral. He paid \$1500 for it, \$800 down and the balance on mortgage, and he bought it through Francis Hye, one of the two naturalized Irishmen in Providence at the time.

The building of the church did not commence at once for local Catholics had little money with which to erect the structure. In 1832 Father Corry was sent to Taunton, and was succeeded by Father Connelley. He in turn was succeeded by Father Lee who started to build the foundation of the cathedral in 1835. After many months of delays and unexpected difficulties experienced during the pastorships of Fathers Lynch, McNamee and Miller, Father Corry again took charge of the congregation and the cathedral was completed. The first Sts. Peter and Paul's was practically finished inside

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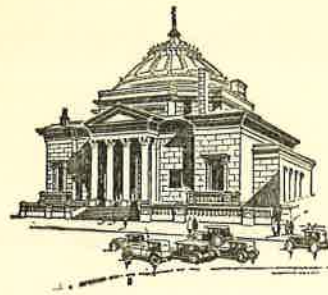
and out when it was dedicated on November 4, 1838, and it was estimated that the Providence congregation of Catholics then numbered about 1500 souls.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent
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86 South Main Street
Providence

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THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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