

Centenary Of St. Mary's Parish In Geneseo

First Catholic Church In Geneseo Erected In 1854 With Aid Of General Wadsworth

St. Mary's Church in Geneseo, celebrating its centennial on August 15, has a tradition of the faith which reaches back to the days of colonial America. Although the parish was founded as late as 1854, Catholics had settled in the area long before that date and they preserved the faith only at the cost of heroic effort and sacrifice.

During the years prior to the year 1854, the few Catholics who resided in the territory surrounding Geneseo assembled to worship in various places in and about the village. At certain times word was sent to the Catholics that a priest would come from some of the neighboring towns of Lima, Avon, or Mt. Morris. Then the news was circulated among the people to come to Mass and receive the Sacraments.

Mass and religious services were occasionally held in the Concert Hall of the town, at other times in the Court House, or the "Session House," as it was then called. Again, it was said in the houses of some of the citizens of the town. Greatly indeed did the townsfolk appreciate the honor, of having the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered up in their homes.

THE SAINTLY Bishop of Buffalo, the Rt. Rev. John Timon, D.D., visited Geneseo at different times, administering Confirmation.



REV. PETER JANKOWSKI
Pastor

mation, visiting the people, and preaching to them. Whenever the Bishop was expected, the carriage of that good and kind citizen, Gen. James S. Wadsworth, was sent to Avon to meet the train conveying the Bishop and bring him to the General's home, where he was entertained during his stay.

MANY PEOPLE were opposed to the idea of permitting the Catholics to use the Court House for religious services, but they continued using the building until they were ordered by the authorities of the town to discontinue the use of town buildings for Church services. Then the priest and the people, determined to hold their services, decided to use private dwellings. The priest would arrange an Altar either on a table or a bureau in some home. The home would be full of worshippers and those unable to enter would kneel on the grass outside, on the porch, or even on the sidewalk, wherever they could see the priest.

IT SEEMS that the above was the state of affairs when Gen. Wadsworth, who had been away to Europe for some time, returned. He was driving down Main Street one Sunday when he noticed a crowd of people kneeling in front of a house. He was told that the Catholic people, who had been driven out of the Court House, were holding services in private homes.

"It is a shame," said the General, "certainly they could do no harm to the building." He immediately called on the priest and told him he would give the Catholic people a lot upon which they could erect a Church. He would loan them \$500.00 to use in erecting a building, the amount could be paid back at their convenience.

The property for the first Catholic Church in Geneseo was deeded to the Rt. Rev. John Timon, D.D., of Buffalo, on August 19, 1851. (This was prior to the organization of the Diocese of Rochester and the Geneseo area was under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Buffalo.) After the donation of the land by Gen. Wadsworth, the Catholics erected a frame structure, 40 ft. by 60 ft. in size, on the South side of North Street. Rev. Frank McGuire was the priest who built this Church in 1854. The frame was raised on the 4th of July. The Church was dedicated in the fall of that year.

FATHER MCGUIRE also built churches at Mt. Morris and Lima, at about the same time. How long he served the people of Geneseo is not known, as there is no record. The first record of baptism or marriage is dated August 2, 1857. The priest in charge was Rev. John Ryan. He was succeeded by Rev. Bernard McColl and Rev. John Vahery, each of whom spent but a few months as pastor.

The Rev. Richard J. Storey was pastor from 1858 until the summer of 1861, when he was called to the rectory of St. Ann's Church at Homell. The Rev. Daniel Moore took charge

of Geneseo from Sept. 1862, to Feb. 1866. Rev. Edward McGowan spent the next two years here, when he was succeeded by the Rev. David O'Brien whose term was from 1869 to 1873. The Rev. Michael McMeagher came to Geneseo during the years 1874 to 1875. The Rev. John J. Donnelly was pastor from 1875 to 1881.

THE REV. FATHER MATTHIAS D. MUSSMAECHER served the parish as the first resident pastor during the years 1882 to 1889. He left a most favorable impression on both Catholics and non-Catholics. He lived opposite the first Church on the land which since then became the site upon which was built the present Church. Father Mussmaecher labored for nearly six years, during which time he did much good work in the upbuilding of the parish. He died in Rochester September 8, 1890. Father Mussmaecher, in turn, was succeeded by Rev. James A. Hickey, who came to Geneseo in the Spring of 1888.

FATHER HICKEY'S great work, the building of the present handsome Church edifice, is familiar to the people of Geneseo and stands as an enduring monument to his executive ability and indomitable will to overcome obstacles. The cornerstone of the present Church was laid on April 21, 1889. The ground, property on the corner of North Street, was purchased in 1880. The building cost about \$20,000. The dedication of the Church took place on Sunday, December 1, 1889.

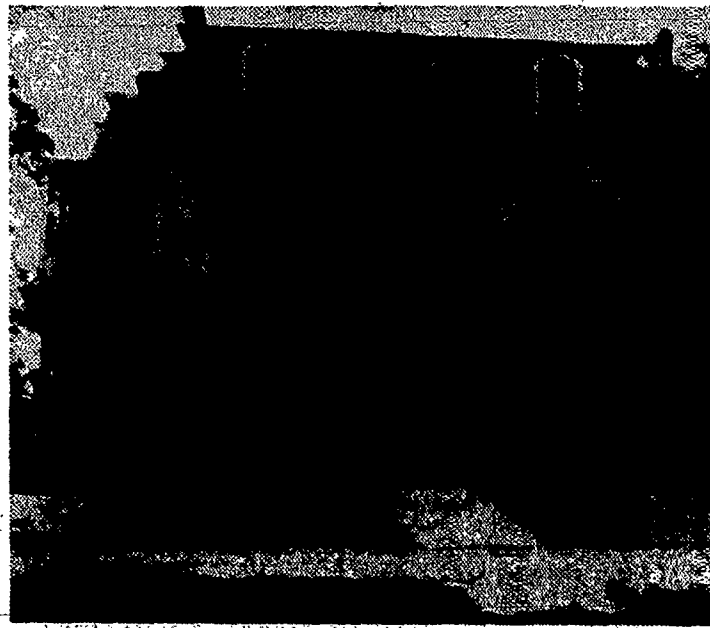
The edifice is built of brick with Medina foundation stones and trimmings. It is 60 ft. by 125 ft. The architecture is Gothic. The Church is surrounded by a spire and a graceful steeple on the Southwest, while a smaller turret adorns the Northwest. It looks out upon the Court House square, where stands the Court House, which thirty-five years prior to the erection of the Church was the place where the "pioneers of Catholicism" in Geneseo worshipped, and commands a view of the most beautiful part of the Geneseo Valley.

Ten years to the very month after Father Hickey came to Geneseo the entire debt was liquidated. In April, 1898, the last of the \$20,000 was paid. The old Church, in which the last Mass was said December 1, 1889, was, in 1903, repaired and remodeled to serve as a parish hall.

The old Church was in use for



St. Mary's parish Rectory, next to the church, overlooks village and is situated across from historic Geneseo's County Court House.



Geneseo Parish Center, recently acquired for meetings of parish societies, religious instructions and study groups. Located on Main St., it is convenient for social activities of the parish.

about thirty-five years, from 1854 to 1889. In it many received the true faith in Baptism, many a sorrowful heart was made happy in the Sacrament of Penance, many received for the first time "the Body and Blood of Christ" in Holy Communion, many a head was anointed with Holy Chrism at the hands of the Bishop, many young people knelt at the sanctuary gate and begged God's blessing on their wedded life, many a poor traveler whose hour glass had run its course was borne down those aisles to have the last sad rites pronounced over him should be inferred to await the call of the last trumpet.

FATHER HICKEY was then appointed pastor of Holy Apostles Church in Rochester on August 1, 1900. On August 8 of the same year, Rev. Arthur A. Hughes was appointed to the Geneseo parish.

Father Hughes, during the thirteen years of his pastorate at Geneseo, contributed much good to the community in general through his administration

and the service held on November 24, Thanksgiving Day. It was hoped to have the celebration on Sunday, but it was found that the octogenarian Bishop McQuaid was engaged on Sunday, that he could not be present. Then it happened that he was not engaged on Thanksgiving Day. He was persuaded to assist at the public exercises that day.

During the pastorate of Father Hughes he remodeled the old church into a parish hall which was used for many years, until it became unsafe structurally. The old church was razed in 1931. He also installed the new pipe organ which was dedicated on July 26, 1909. A program issued for the occasion showed that a special concert of music was presented by a triple quartet of Rochester singers, the choir of St. Mary's Church and organists Miss Helen J. Dwyer and Professor Charles Stupp. Father Hughes was transferred to Holy Rosary parish, Rochester, in 1914.

REV. GEORGE T. JONES followed Father Hughes, in 1914. During his pastorate, Father Jones built the present rectory, in 1915, and moved the church from the church lot on North Street and from that built the present tenement house. He also acquired additional land for church purposes just north of the parish house.

Father Jones purchased the present St. Raphael's Church property at Piffard from the Piffard family to whom it had reverted after being abandoned by the former Presbyterian church society. He remodeled that building and rededicated it. The old church on the Piffard Hill was then abandoned and the present church has since been used. Father Jones was a chaplain in World War I, serving overseas until the end of the War. He died in Geneseo on October 1, 1924, and is buried in his home village of Seneca Falls.

Rev. J. Edward Bayer was assistant to Father Jones and later the Piffard and Retor churches were razed and Father Bayer was appointed resident pastor there. He was the first and only resident pastor in Retor. Upon the death of Father Jones, Father Bayer was appointed resident pastor at Geneseo and later Piffard and Retor were placed under the resident pastor at Leicester.

During his years at Geneseo, Father Bayer supervised the remodeling and redecoration of the church. The architects were McKinnin, Meade and White of New York City. Mr. Lawrence Grant White being a son-in-law of Mrs. Winthrop Chandler. They designed the large candle sticks on the High Altar which were made especially for St. Mary's Church.

The Crucifix and the four statues on and near the side altars were hand carved by the grandson of Anton Lang, who played the part of the Christ in the Passion Play of Oberammergau, Germany, and were shipped here during the time the church was being redecored. They were ordered by Mrs. Winthrop Chandler and were paid for by individual members of the parish. The work was done under the direction of the architect.

The dorsal, the curtain behind the altar, was made in New York for Mrs. Chandler and was donated to the church by the Chandler family. This piece was originally in three sections, one in the center and one on each side. The statue of St. Anthony, in the vestibule of the Church, was acquired by Mrs. Chandler in the Tyrol and she donated it to Father Bayer.

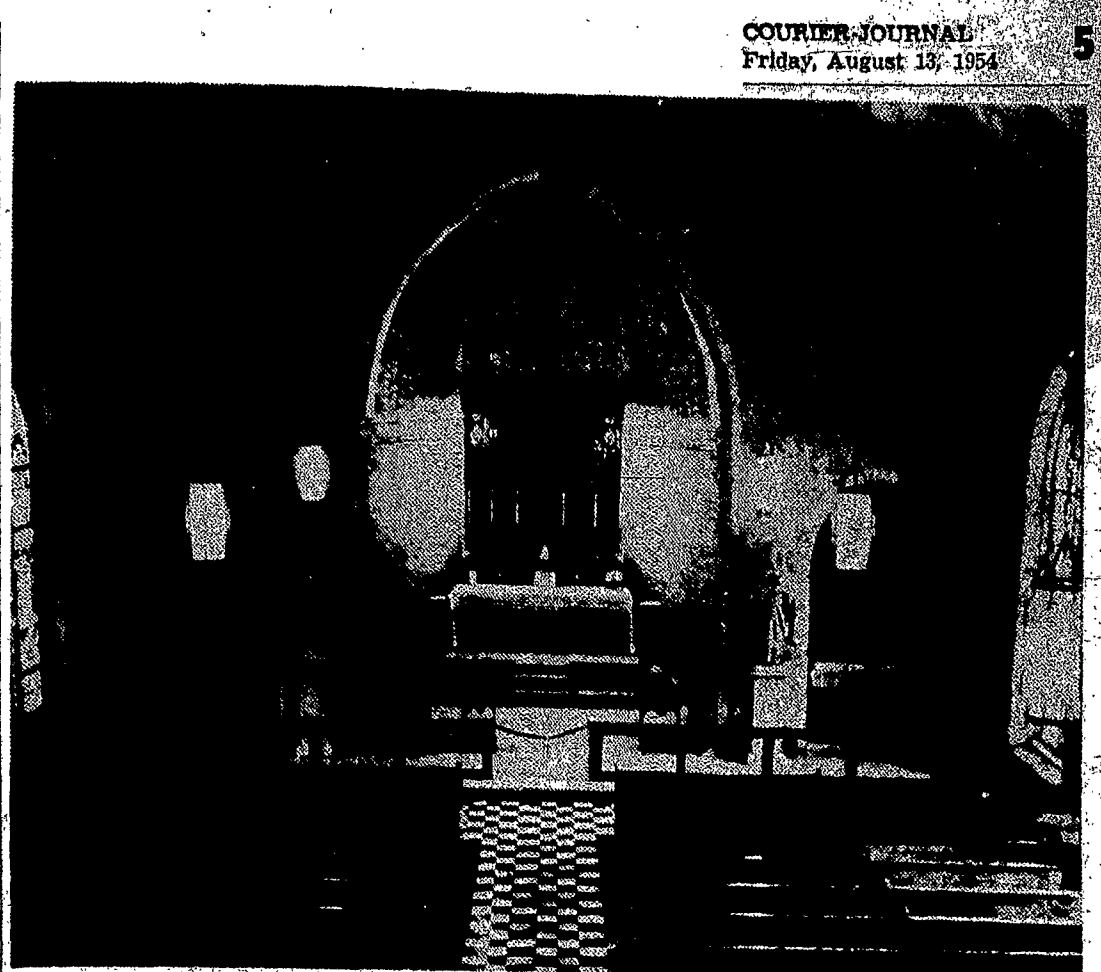
Father Bayer continued as pastor until July 24, 1928, when he lost his life while fishing in Carandagua Lake. Father Bayer is the only pastor buried in our cemetery.

REV. MICHAEL A. HYNES was appointed administrator and he acted in that capacity until Rev. Stephen J. Byrne was appointed pastor, in 1929. Father Byrne, who was in great demand as a speaker, will be remembered for his kindness, zeal, and Christian charity. Father Byrne remained in charge until his death, after a lingering illness, in 1937. He was buried in Seneca Falls.

FATHER DOERBECKER installed the new heating plant in the church and made repairs on the rectory. During his administration the church debt was entirely liquidated. Father Doerbecker was succeeded by Rev. G. Stuart Hogan. Father Hogan was pastor from 1941 to 1950, when he was transferred to Waverly.

FATHER HOGAN was very much interested in the youth of the parish and was very active in the religious training of the children, taking advantage of the released time granted at about the time he was pastor. Father Hogan continued the improvement and repairs of the church properties. He was succeeded by Rev. Peter T. Jankowski, in 1950.

FATHER JANKOWSKI had the church completely redecored in 1951. New vestments were purchased. In 1953, the McKinnin home on Main Street was purchased, and entirely redecored for use as a parish center. The Center has served not only as a focal point for social gatherings, but is also being used for religious instruction. The num-



Recently redecored interior of St. Mary's Church, showing statues carved by famous Oberammergau artist and altar drapery prepared especially for the Geneseo church.

ber of active Catholic families and the attendance at Masses, daily and Sunday, are the highest in church history.

The first recorded baptism in St. Mary's Church was on August 2, 1857, Thomas Walsh, the father of Mrs. Evelyn Walsh Quirk.

The first marriage in the new church was that of Michael J. Scully and Susan E. McCoy, April 8, 1890. The families of both Mr. and Mrs. Scully were among the first families in the Geneseo parish.

Mr. Fred A. Quirk, appointed a trustee in 1918, succeeded Michael J. Scully who resigned in 1918 after having served as trustee for twenty-five years. The two cover a span of over 60 years.

The church properties consist of the church proper, the rectory, the tenement house on North Street, and the vacant lot on the south side of North Street where the old church stood and the Parish Center on Main Street. St. Mary's Cemetery was acquired in three parcels, the last one of nine acres, making fifteen in all.

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THE PASTOR AND PARISHIONERS of today are grateful for the heritage that is theirs from the hundred years of labor and sacrifice. Before the Catholics had a church in Geneseo, many walked to Mount Morris for Mass. Later, the people came walking from Piffard and Leicester to Geneseo's church. This vibrant faith that was preserved

by such valiant priests and people of previous years is the treasured possession of Geneseo's present day Catholics. Only the records of heaven can truly evaluate the relationship of each soul to God but if external give us a hint of the unseen spiritual world, we are confident that God is pleased with the historic parish and people of St. Mary's in Geneseo.



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