

## Civic involvement is cornerstone at Auburn parish

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

AUBURN — When Father Thomas A. Maher celebrated his first Mass as the first pastor of St. Mary Parish in August, 1868, his congregation consisted of just one man and two women.

From such inauspicious beginnings, St. Mary Parish has grown in its 125 years to be Auburn's largest parish.

The parish currently has 2,695 registered families, according to Rosemary Barron, who has been the parish's secretary since 1940.

And whereas that first Mass was held in a rented house at 34 State St., the parish now boasts an imposing neo-Gothic church that drew praises for its beauty when it was dedicated April 29, 1877 — as it does to this day.

St. Mary Parish traces its roots back to Auburn's first parish, Holy Family, which was established in 1834. By 1868, the number of Catholics in Auburn had grown large enough to warrant a second parish. St. Mary of the Assumption Parish was officially organized August 15, 1868.

The congregation grew so rapidly that Father Maher bought land at the corner of Clark and Green streets, and erected a wooden structure that became known as the "Shanty Church." That building was blessed October 10, 1868.

In 1869, Father Maher was transferred to another parish, and Father Myles J. Loughlin was appointed pastor, a post he would hold until 1877.

During Father Loughlin's tenure, additional land was purchased, and construction of the current edifice was begun. The cornerstone for the church was laid in 1870 and, for five years, the basement of the new building was used for Masses.

Father Loughlin retired due to ill health in 1877, shortly before the April, 1877, dedication of the church.

Father William Mulheron succeeded Father Loughlin as pastor, remaining in that position from 1877-1913. Father Mulheron refurbished the church, and built a new convent, rectory and school. The debt the parish had accrued for construction in its early years was finally cleared in 1921 under Father William Payne, who served as the parish's pastor from 1913 to 1925.

Father Payne also oversaw redecoration of the church, and began raising money to purchase bells. The "bells of St. Mary's" were installed in 1926, just a year after Father Mulheron's death, under the pastorate of Father John McGrath, pastor from 1925-32.

Monsignor William E. Cowan fol-

lowed Father McGrath as pastor in 1932. Despite financial problems caused by the Great Depression, he was able to begin needed repairs of the church and the construction of a new school building to replace the one built in 1881. Ironically, he died on Sept. 5, 1961, the day before the opening of the new school at 17 Clymer St.

Barron noted that Monsignor Cowan also participated in civic and charitable activities, serving on a number of boards of directors in the community. In 1955, Monsignor Cowan was named Auburn's Man of the Year.

In addition, Monsignor Cowan promoted ecumenism, taking part in a 1947 interfaith rally in Auburn.

That ecumenical spirit continued under Monsignor Cuffney, pastor of the parish from 1961-79, who hosted a May 15, 1966, ecumenical service — the first in an Auburn Catholic Church.

Monsignor Cowan was succeeded by Monsignor Cuffney, who first arrived at the parish in 1958 to serve as administrator for three years while Monsignor Cowan remained pastor. Monsignor Cuffney was officially named pastor in 1961.

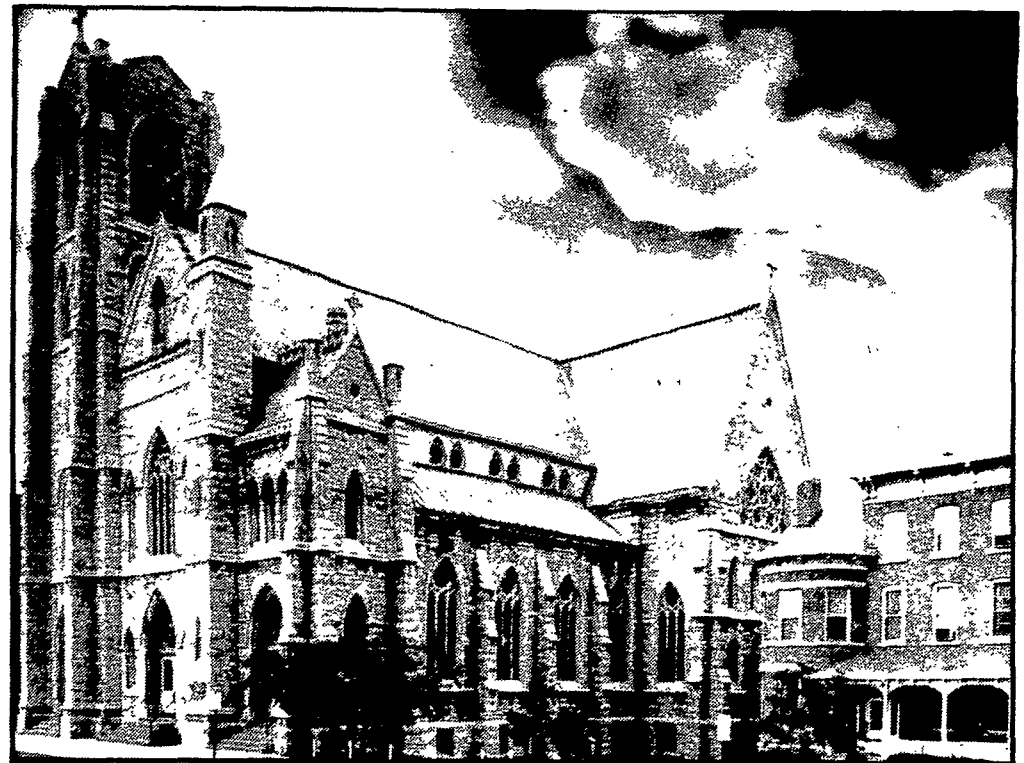
Under Monsignor Cuffney, the parish initiated the changes called for by the Second Vatican Council, Barron noted.

Monsignor Cuffney and the parish also had to contend with urban renewal in 1975, which led to the demolition of the old Clark Street school building, the rectory garage and part of the church's parking lot.

Father Edward Zimmer, pastor of the parish from 1979-92, continued the pattern of civic involvement when he succeeded Monsignor Cuffney to the pastorate in 1979. During his 13 years in Auburn, Father Zimmer served as chaplain of the fire department, was president of the cemetery board and of the United Way, and was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

**Name:** St. Mary Church  
**Location:** 15 Clark St., Auburn  
**Date founded:** Aug. 15, 1868  
**No. of families:** 2,695  
**Significant historical dates:** first Mass on Aug. 15, 1868; current church dedicated, April 29, 1877; new school opened at 17 Clymer St. on Sept. 5, 1961.

**Special celebration:** Bishop Dennis W. Hickey celebrated a special anniversary Mass on Aug. 15, 1993, the feast of St. Mary.



File photo  
Auburn's St. Mary Church, dedicated in April of 1877, features a neo-Gothic design. The 'bells of Saint Mary's' were added in 1926.

That involvement extended to the parishioners, Father Zimmer said.

"The spirit of St. Mary's is one of involvement — and not just at the parish," Father Zimmer commented. "I really stand in awe of those people's devotion to good causes."

The current pastor, Father Robert J. Schrader, has only served at the parish since June 30, 1992. During that time he has had to contend with a burglary and fire in the rectory, and the sudden and unexpected death of his parochial vicar, Father Patrick G. Sullivan.

Under Father Schrader, however, the

parish remains actively involved in a variety of ministries, including a food pantry and the the Wounded Healers' Bereavement Support Group.

Current parish groups include the Catholic Youth Organization, the St. Martha Society, the choir, the Rosary and Scapular Society and the Holy Name Society.

In an interview published Aug. 15 in the Syracuse *Herald American*, Father Schrader said of the parish, "I think (people) find it a good place to come to fill their needs. We try to make it a place where people are welcome."

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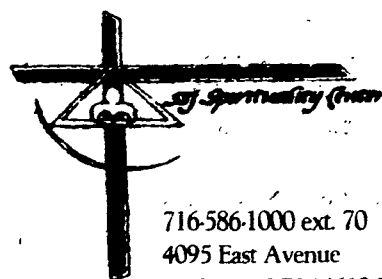
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