

# Our Story: 175 Years of Service

## St. Patrick Parish, Lowell, MA

*"To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under  
heaven."*

The writer of Ecclesiastes understood the human condition and the infinite wisdom of the Creator. Our lives are filled with moments of laughter and tears, love and anger, peace and conflict. We are made of feelings. It is the little moments of each day that make us who we are. The cycle of birth, childhood, maturity, marriage, adulthood, aging, and finally death is something we all share, and God is with us each step of the way. To guide us on our journey, he gives us his Church as our partner. It welcomes us in Baptism, feeds us in Communion, strengthens us in Confirmation, seals our vocation in Marriage and Orders, and strengthens us at time of need in Anointing. The parish then becomes integral to our lives and the story of who we are. The story of a parish is a witness to those who have gone before us and the legacy they have entrusted to us.

Using the words of Ecclesiastes, it is now our time to remember. It is right to look back and acknowledge the work and deeds of our ancestors. Their lives are a testament to their faith in God. Their struggles laid the foundation.

In an age of fast food, instant internet connection with anywhere in the world, and a society based on immediate gratification, the idea of reaching 175 years is a landmark event. Little did those first few pioneers realize what their labors would produce. Or maybe they did? We are people of faith. Those who laid the foundation stones in 1831 did not just do it for their own benefit, but for the next generation, and the next, and so on. Likewise, the work we do today isn't just for our own time, but for those to come after us.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their writings often end with the initials AMDG- Ad Multos Dei Gloriam. All that they did was for the greater glory of God. The work they began continues today, and we will pass it on to future generations. In this year of celebration we remember what was, we rejoice for the deeds of today, and renew our commitment to the faith of our fathers and a pledge to continue the tasks that have been handed down to us.

### A Time to be Born

*In the suburbs of Lowell, within a few rods of the canals, is a settlement, called by some, New Dublin, which occupies rather more than an acre of ground. It contains a population of not far from 500 Irish, who dwell in about 100 cabins, from 7 to 10 feet in height, built of slabs and rough boards; a fire-place made of stone, in one end, topped out with two or three flour barrels or lime casks. In a central situation is a school house, built in the same style as the dwelling-houses, turfed up to the eaves with a window in one end, and small holes in two sides for the admission of air and light. In this room are collected together perhaps 150 children."*

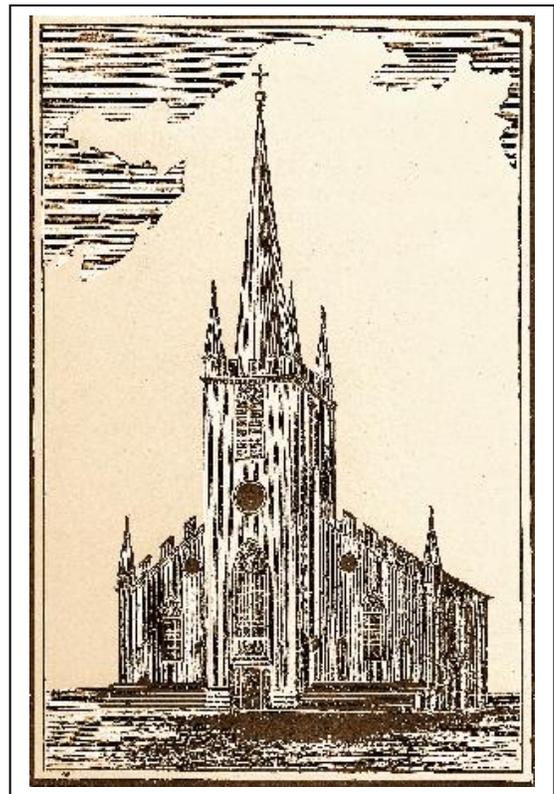
*Portsmouth N.H. Journal, 1831*

This was the first printed description of the Acre. Irish immigrants had been in the area for a number of years before that time working at places like the glassworks factory located in Chelmsford. In 1822 a band of Irish laborers led by County Tyrone-born Hugh Cumiskey formed one of the early work forces focusing on digging the canals and building the new mill city. They were invited to the city by Kirk Boott, the earliest of the managers of the new mill town soon to be called Lowell. Early on Bishop Fenwick of Boston was requested to have a priest visit the area for Mass and the sacraments. We know that Fenwick and Boott met on several occasions and shared a vision of building a church, each for his own reason. Fenwick's goals were spiritual in nature. According to *The Irish Catholic Genesis of Lowell* (George O'Dwyer, 1920) Boott was troubled by the increasing violence in the Camps. His Irish maid, a Mrs. Winters, told Boott that the only way to control the Irish was by getting a priest.

The first priest to visit the area was Father Mahoney, who came monthly to Lowell, and reported to Fenwick about the growing numbers. These new people were a curiosity to the Yankee population. A mill girl of the period wrote that she had a headache for a week after witnessing the constant sitting, standing, kneeling of the Catholics during a Mass celebrated by Fenwick on one of his visits. In May of 1831 a small riot took place in the Acre between Yankees and the Irish. During the construction of the church a group of Yankees entered the Acre decrying the Irish presence. The newspapers of the time made it a point to say that many of these rioters did not represent the view of the majority of the Yankee population. Within the small community leadership roles emerged and the Irish had the church completed for its dedication on July 3, 1831.

### CATHOLIC CHURCH AT LOWELL

*This church, under the patronage of St. Patrick, was dedicated on the 3rd inst. by the Right Reverend Bishop of Boston, [Fenwick] to the service of the Christian God. The building is of wood; its structure is of Gothic. The tower supports a gilded globe, surmounted by a large gilded*



*cross. The external appearance of the church arrests the eye of the beholder, and immediately produces a conviction of*

*neatness and regularity. The interior is in keeping with the exterior. As a building, it constitutes an ornament to the rapidly increasing town of Lowell; as a church, it will not be deficient in its contribution to the formation of the moral and religious character of the place. The congregation, under the pastoral charge of the Rev. J. Mahoney, consists of nearly a thousand souls. The number of persons, however, that were present at the Dedication must have amounted to 2 and 3 thousand persons-among whom are included upwards of a 100 of the congregation of Boston who traveled 25 miles to be present on this occasion. The church was excessively crowded; the day was unusually warm. At the conclusion of the mass, the Bishop gave the Apostolic Benediction:*

*It is with pleasure we have to observe the orderly deportment of such of our dissenting brethren as witnessed the Dedication and attended both Mass and Vespers. May it prove to be a happy day to all who never before had an inclination or opportunity to be present on a similar occasion! May Lowell enroll it among the happiest days of her history!*

*U.S. Catholic Miscellany, July 23, 1831*

Through the notes of Bishop Fenwick, we learn that the little wooden structure, even at its dedication, did not meet the needs of the growing community. Soon "subscriptions" were being made for wood to build additions to the new church and pews. But we also learn that the community was either not willing or able to pay for such additions. Work began and had to be stopped several times until the funds were raised. Their numbers grew steadily, and with it they formed a neighborhood with their own social networks. Within the Paddy Camps, as it was called, there were West Indies Goods shopkeepers, tailors, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and every type of trade to aid the growing community. Certainly the Irish were part of the labor force digging the canals. Records do not record exact numbers but there are numerous entries of cause of death listed as "drowning," "crushed by fall," "heat exhaustion," and "killed by machine" to remind us of their working conditions. Irish women are not mentioned often in early records, but again, records indicate that they were quickly used in the mills and many also took on the job of "housekeeper" for the wealthier Yankee community.

There are a few accounts of conditions within the early Acre. One account mentions that pigs roaming the streets had become a problem and there was a movement to keep the animals penned. Houses were made of whatever material was available and were often overcrowded. Sanitary conditions led to many deaths of typhus and cholera whose outbreaks are frequently mentioned. By 1832 a Catholic Burial Ground (later referred to as St. Patrick's) began burying the dead. Many of the early slate markers list the county of birth with Cork and Tyrone being listed frequently.

Father James McDermott assumed the role of Pastor in 1837 and with him came a unique period in Lowell. Public schools for the Irish were established and paid with public funds. McDermott recognized the need for education and the need for the Irish to keep to their faith, many of them left Ireland because of the restrictions placed upon them by the English. This relationship continued for a number of years until politics and personalities clashed. However, the Irish children were now receiving education and becoming leaders within their own community.

Catholics from all the surrounding communities and as far as Nashua, NH came weekly to Lowell for Mass and instruction. By 1842 St. Peter's was added as Lowell's second parish. Numerous other parishes within Lowell, Chelmsford, Billerica, and Tewksbury had their beginnings from the work begun at St. Patrick's.

Soon after the closing of the Irish schools, Father McDermott bought a former Methodist church, which was relocated on Suffolk Street and opened as Saint Mary's Church. This was a dark period for the entire Irish community. Famine Irish were coming to Lowell seeking labor, and along with it seeking support. Political factions around the country were decidedly anti-Irish and anti-Catholic. But the omniscient one had his own plan and in 1848, sent the first of what would be called the O'Brien Dynasty.

### A Time to Plant

Little did Father John O'Brien realize when he arrived in Lowell in 1848, the impact that he, and those who would follow him, would have on the mill city of Lowell, Massachusetts. Father John was a man of vision. It was the time of massive Irish immigration with each newcomer seeking employment and a new life. The good pastor understood the balance that was needed for these people who were caught between two worlds, the need to retain their own identity as Irish men and women, and that of identifying themselves as Americans. It was during his pastorship that the Irish became an active and prominent factor in Lowell's population.



Father John O'Brien was born in Ballina, Co. Tipperary, along the River Shannon. He was trained for the priesthood at Maynooth and came to America after his ordination. He served in Virginia and Newburyport, Mass. before coming to Lowell.

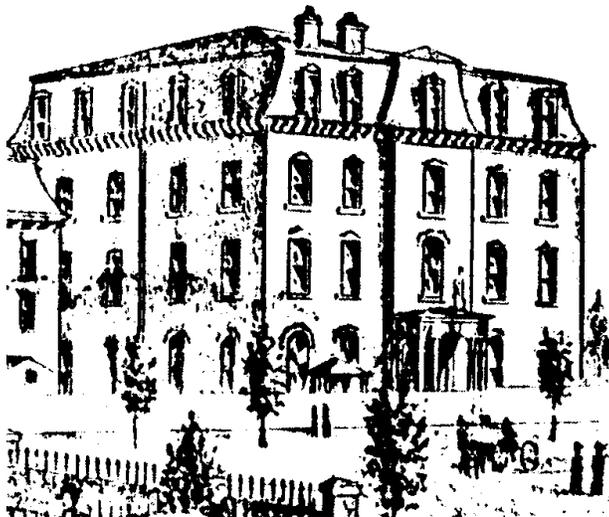
His assignment to Lowell was a rather strategic move on the part of Archbishop Fitzpatrick. Lowell had already proven itself a dilemma for the Archbishop. There had been outbursts of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish demonstrations in the past. The Irish themselves, within the city, had not helped the matter. There were periodic outbursts of violence within the Irish community, often based on rivalries between

counties back in Ireland. These were well-noted by the journalist of the period and the observant Yankee population who sometimes criticized the happenings within the Acre.

When Father John O'Brien arrived, he found Father McDermott, the pastor of St. Mary's, just two blocks away, and a broken, physically and spiritually, St. Patrick's. Another pastor, Fr. Hilary Tucker, had even gone so far as to request a leave of absence from the Bishop. Rather than counting on the negatives, Father John focused on the positive factors he had going for him. Now that many of the dissenters were either at St. Peter's or St. Mary's, the Irish who were coming to St. Patrick's were looking for leadership. They found that in Father John O'Brien and his older brother, father Timothy O'Brien, who was to join him in 1851. Though older than his brother, Father Timothy was the more personable and the more vocal of the two. It was through their combined talents that the growing Irish numbers would find identity in an increasingly anti-Irish Lowell.

Since the two brothers were not part of the earlier struggles between the two factions they could move easily between the circles. The O'Briens immediately made their presence known by attending functions at St. Peter's and St. Mary's, thus ensuring the dominance of St. Patrick's as maintaining the title of "Mother Church" of the Lowell area.

Barely a St. Patrick's Day went by when toasts were not given to the Fathers O'Brien and all the work with which they were credited. Their job of instilling religious zeal to a group who faced the task of providing for their own immediate needs was not easy. Their own example served as the best teacher, and together the O'Briens formed St. Patrick's in the image they had envisioned. In 1855, Timothy O'Brien, Father John's brother who joined him a few years later, suffered from a bout of pneumonia and died. The local paper



wrote of his passing and of the work he did, something not done for many Irish at this time. His funeral took place within the massive granite structure he and his brother had erected to replace the outgrown wooden church. Building such a large edifice was an obvious comment to the greater community that the Irish were here to stay.

Father John's work had to continue and he would have a number of years remaining at St. Patrick's before his death in 1879. Father Michael O'Brien, a nephew of John and Timothy, came to assist his uncle. It was during this time that many properties were built and support societies were formed. The number of Irish grew as well. The Girls' School had added an academy for boarders. Its reputation spread far obtaining students from many areas. The Xaverian Brothers were brought in to teach the boys. The Working Girls

Home was added for those young women who wanted a secure place to room while working at the mills. The crowning glory to Father Michael's pastorship was the consecration of the church in 1874, a title not given to many churches.

The idea of service was still foremost at St. Patrick's. There was a temperance society, an aid society for the poor, and social groups for women, men, and families. Upon the death of Michael O'Brien in 1900, a cousin, Father William O'Brien, carried on the O'Brien dynasty. It was under his pastorship in which the church suffered severe fire damage and its subsequent rise from the ashes to its rededication in 1906. Father William was also responsible for the restructuring of St. Patrick Cemetery and the building of St. Bridget Chapel where he was laid to rest in 1921.

In front of the church under the granite slab engraved with a Celtic cross, lie the remains of three of the Fathers O'Brien. The parish still lives in their shadow of service and loyalty. Though the numbers of the community are smaller than they once were, and the buildings do not stretch as far as they once did, St. Patrick's is as much a community devoted to loyalty and service to God and man as it ever was.

Father Timothy O'Brien was man driven by a goal. In order for the Irish to reach their fullest potential and to take on leadership for themselves education was essential. He continually petitioned different orders to open a school for the children of the Acre. In 1852, five Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur arrived in Lowell. Promised a place to live and a schoolhouse they found nothing had been prepared for their arrival. The annals of the Sisters give a detailed account of the community. The first years are also written in French, reflecting the Order's origins. They tell of the first day going out into the neighborhood ringing a bell to call the girls to class. Over three hundred students showed up! The Lowell Mission had begun.

#### A Time to Dance

If there is one name which stands out in early education, it is that of Mother Desiree. Known for her compassion for the poor, the story of her never turning away a beggar from the convent door was well known. When questioned by a Sister why she was depriving the convent of food, only to give it to beggars at the gate, Mother Desiree replied that you never knew if it was Christ at the door. It was Mother Desiree who saw young children wandering the neighborhood and immediately began a sort of pre-school to watch over them. It was Mother Desiree who sent her Sisters out to help the ill in their home and presented the idea of much needed hospital to Father John. It was Mother Desiree who started plans for expanding the small parish school into a girls' academy that would teach Latin, Greek, Physics, far beyond the typical girls' school of the period. It was Desiree who brought chickens and cows and gardens onto the property to help feed the community and needy. At her funeral in 1879, the cortege stretched for over a mile as she was laid to rest in St. Patrick Cemetery.

Life was not easy for the little community. An eye witness account of the earliest years still exists. One reflection tells of one attack upon the little community by members of a nativist group known as the "Know-Nothings." The author/Sister records the following:

*Just at dusk one quiet evening the ominous peel sounded forth from the belfry. Fear and consternation were in many hearts but trustful prayers in the little convent. The self-constituted defenders stood with arms uplifted ready to hurl their missiles at the first assailant. Yes the Know Nothings were approaching the church, but they had not counted sufficiently on Irish loyalty and vim. When just within sight of St Patrick's they were attacked by some strong-armed Irish men and women, - Yes women for these lead the attack. The march became a melee and the street*

was completely filled with the motley crowd. They reached the bridge that spans the canal just within sight of the convent. There was a halt, a splash and a ringing cheer- a sinewy matron unable to restrain her indignation had seized upon one of the leaders of the gang and flung him over the railing, floundering into the waters below. The rest of the gang made the best of their way out of the mob and although the Sisters were still in a state of anxiety yet the attitude of the assailants grew less and less threatening.

*Pioneer History, 1877.*

The troubles eventually subsided and the Know-Nothings faded into history. The Rule for the Sisters did not allow them to teach boys. In 1882, a school for boys was opened by the Xaverian Brothers. An account by a Xaverian tells us "the Lowell boys were the wildest of the wild." (*Men and Deeds, 1930*) An instruction of the brothers stated, "If you think a boy is bad, and let him know it, he will prove to you that you are right." Within a few years the work of the Brothers was well known throughout the City. A cadet band and marching corps rehearsed on the streets. The Brothers' students were soon to take on the role of teachers, doctors, politicians, police and firemen of the City. To better focus their work, the grade school classes were handed over to the Sisters and the Brothers operated Keith Academy until its closing in the 1970s.

The 1950s was also a period of change and question of the future for the neighborhood, school and church community. The last Annals kept by the Sisters relates that the on the last day of school of 1957, the principal rode out to Saint Patrick's Cemetery and knelt at the grave of Mother Desiree. There she reflected on the work the Sisters had accomplished and prayed for the future of the Acre. Faith is a powerful mover and nearly 50 years later the work of the dozens of religious women, men, and students continues at Saint Patrick's serving the needs of those who come seeking to learn.

#### **A Time to Tear Down, and a Time to Build Up**

Sister Josephine was up at her usual time that January 11<sup>th</sup> morning in 1904, but something was amiss. The red glow coming in through the window meant one thing- fire. By morning light the church was in ruins. The crowds who had been staring for hours watched as the steeple came crashing down. Now relic hunters sifted through the debris seeking souvenirs of the tragedy. Father William O'Brien openly wept along with his parish family.

Within two years, during the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the church, one of the grandest celebrations Lowell ever witnessed took place. For three days the local papers' headlines made note of the phoenix rising from the ashes. The structure of the granite 1854 thirteenth century Romanesque styled church, in the style of famed architect Patrick Keely, remained intact. The roof was raised and replaced along with the tower, rising 200 feet into the air. A set of 13 chimes, made by the Meneely Brothers of New York, was raised into the tower. Each bell was given a name inscribed into the metal and then baptized before being raised to ring out to God. The new windows told the story of the 15 mysteries of the rosary. In the rear of the church the largest window showed Patrick teaching the chieftains. Murals depicting the miracles of Christ line the walls over the arches. Famed artist Gustav Kinkelin of Munich took six months to complete the task. Lowell born Archbishop (soon to be named Cardinal) O'Connell delivered the homily in which he said:

*"The faith and devotion of those that are dead- the noble line of pastors of this church, and the people who worshipped here- gave the strong impulse which has brought us, their children of today, into the fruition which we enjoy. The very beauties of this majestic temple are but reminders to us of our indebtedness to our fathers who labored, and who died here, an indebtedness which we can cancel in only one way, by fidelity to all the high principles*

*of our holy faith, which we may profess without aught of the hindrances so common to them.*

*Dedication Sermon, Nov. 18, 1906.*

#### **A Time to Scatter Stones, and a Time to Gather Them**

The world changed very quickly after that. There were wonders of technology like electricity, women received the right to vote, and vaccines alleviated the fear of Polio. There was also the War to End All Wars, atomic weapons, and super highways that lead people away from their roots. The neighborhood changed. The tight knit community of school, home, and church slowly dissolved as tenements were replaced with a new federal housing project. Better education meant better jobs which meant new homes in the suburbs. Like some of the old-timers, parish buildings like the Ladies Home, which had its roots in the 1800s as a home for girls, showed signs of age. It made sense for them to be torn down. Notre Dame Academy had been moved to Tyngsboro. There were a series of "new" people replacing the Irish over the generations. Accents changed, food in grocery stores took on the flavor of the population of the streets. Strangers became neighbors. The towering green spire of St. Pats was matched with the golden dome of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. Saint Patrick's gothic design was harmonized with the Romanesque grace of St Jean Baptiste. Just as it was a hundred years before those seeking jobs, this time from Puerto Rico, came to the Acre. By 1970s lines of saffron robed Buddhist monks would walk past the church and nod in respect of the Divine.

Through it all, Saint Patrick's has remained steadfast in its mission of service to God's people. Patrick was first and foremost a missionary. The spirit he imbued to those first Irish was carried here to the heart of the Acre and has been passed on for over 175 years. At Mass, we stretch out our hands as an act of receiving Christ into our hearts and lives in Communion. Hands. Calloused hands of workers, wrinkled hands of those who have seen much. Hands of every shade: white, yellow, black, brown,; praying hands, open hands, hands reaching out in service to those who need.

*To everything there is a season, a time to....  
remember, rejoice, renew*

