

## **Voices from the Past**

“After Easter 1814, an elderly Irish priest, Rev. Matthew O’Brien, who had temporarily taken over charge of the church at Salem, Massachusetts, journeyed to New York to raise funds (for the church) ... From New York Fr. O’Brien wrote a letter to Bishop Carroll (Bishop of Baltimore) detailing the progress of a church in Providence.

*‘A building at Providence has been rented and formed into a church by a few Catholics who are there. A mere grain of mustard seed only eighteen months ago is now rapidly starting up, and, watered by the amiable and laborious Bishop, will soon become a tree.’*

Bishop Cheverus, the first bishop of Boston, visited Providence once a month during this time period performing a small number of baptisms and confirmations.

***-From Catholicism in Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence, 1780-1886 by Robert W. Hayman, Diocese of Providence, 1982***

“New England and the nation in the 1830’s were caught up in what historian George Rogers calls the ‘Transportation Revolution’ and immigrant Irish laborers were important participants in that economic upheaval. They provided much of the unskilled manpower that spun a web of turnpikes, canals, and railroads linking mid- nineteenth century America. In Rhode Island, Irish workers were involved in building the Blackstone Canal (1825-26) and participated to a much greater degree in the construction of the railroad from Boston to Providence. Wages on such projects were often low, working and living conditions were incredibly bad, and fevers and sickness of all kinds are prevalent.

“It was quite common for laborers to remain where they were when the route was completed, either ‘squatting’ on vacant land or securing cheap rentals in the area ... The old Irish community in Fox point, near the railroad’s terminus, seems to date from this time; a rise of land in that neighborhood was soon “Corky Hill.”

***-From Catholicism in Rhode Island, the Formative Era, by Patrick T. Conley and Matthew J. Smith***

“In the early fifties what is now the thickly populated section of Providence was a sparsely settled portion of the town of Cranston. ..

The few Catholic families in the area attended services at Sts. Peter and Paul’s parish church. In 1857 the number of Catholic families was sufficiently large to warrant the purchase of the old framed church from the South Baptist congregation. ... It was then a mission church only, attended by priests from the church of Sts. Peter and Paul. In June, 1959, St. Bernard’s became a separate parish. Father Bernard Byron David Diman Coit, a convert to the Catholic faith was its first pastor. ...

“There are many traditions handed down in families to the present of the apostolic zeal and piety of this pioneer pastor of the parish. It was the day when the Know-Nothing party was active and none knew better how to combat the pernicious influences of narrowness and bigotry better than Father Coit, who appreciated so deeply the gift of faith.”

***-From the Golden Jubilee History of Parish and Souvenir Program, 1859 - 1909***

“The first Sunday School was organized by Father Coit and consisted of 51 members. The present Sunday School numbers about 850 children. The first parish congregation numbered a few hundred souls. St. Michael’s to-day has a membership of more than 6,000 souls, a remarkable increase even for a period of half a century. The marvelous growth may well be likened to the abundant increase from the tiny mustard seed, which we read of in the holy scriptures. Although the smallest of seeds, yet when it attains its development, it becomes a very large tree. “

***-From the Golden Jubilee program, 1909***

”The Church of St. Michael the Archangel, Oxford Street, Providence, R.I. is an imposing brick building, constructed in the Anglo-Norman Gothic style of architecture. The material used is a rough, red brick with red sandstone trimmings, which suit the severe lines of this type of architecture. ...

“The façade assumes a massive appearance from the strong lines of the tower, forty feet square, which dominates it. This tower gives a general character of solidity to a building of unusually rugged proportions. ...

“St. Michael’s is a devotional church: ... With this view in mind, walls, ceilings, arches, columns, are treated with an aim to produce a happy effect of light and shade calculated to give a religious atmosphere. A dimly lighted church is more likely to inspire religious feeling than a gaudily lighted church ablaze with unsightly electric light. The noise and contentions of the world should be forgotten at the church door, in order that the mind may be free for recollection, and fully able to enter into the religious duty which brings it there. The architectural features and artistic finish should be helpful to the soul and tend to inspire religious sentiment. ...”

***-From the dedication program, October 3, 1915***

“Last year, at the Bishop’s request, a professional firm was hired to give an estimate of the value of all our church property. Upon leaving, these men observed that St. Michael’s Church was the most genuine church as to integrity of material that they had seen in all the East. This was not always appreciated, because St. Michael’s Church had always

been a bit too dark. This situation was remedied in two ways. The interior was done over in softer, yet lighter colors to bring out the true beauty of the structure and its paintings. Secondly, a new modern lighting system was installed in the church.”

**-From 1859-1959 One Hundred Years, St. Michael's Parish**

“St Michael's Church stands as a sign of hope to all who see it in the South Providence neighborhood – a center of Christian Love and care for the poor. The church as stood as a sign of stability and faith in recent troubled year. Now changes have begun. It is a time of rebuilding and rejuvenation, the decline is being reversed. Many new homes are being built and many older homes are being renovated in the parish.

“St. Michael's has always been an immigrant parish, caring for predominately Irish immigrants in its early years and now for the new wave of immigrants from South and Central America, Southeast Asia, Africa and Haiti.....

“The church building was constructed between 1890 and 1915 and is listed on the National Register of Places. ...

“The windows are stained glass from the ecclesiastical studios of John Hardiman of London, England. ... The great South window over the front entrance represents St. Michael crushing the dragon, the triumph of good over evil.

“The figure of St. Michael depicted in the window has looked on the parish entrusted to his care for over one hundred years. ...

“The altars of St. Michael's are executed in Sienna marble from the famous “old convent quarries” from Pietrasanta, Italy by McBride Studios of New York and Italy. The various colors of the Sienna marble, yellow, silver, grey and gold, carved and inlaid with Venetian glass, mosaics and iridescent mother of pearl, harmonizing with the general color scheme of the church.

“St. Michael's contains precious and irreplaceable and stonework which ranks this building among the most historic and beautiful in the state. The building is valued at over thirty million dollars, occupies an entire city block and dominates the local skyline ....

“In 1988, we undertook a study of the church and rectory to determine the required repair work. The rectory is in strong condition ...but the church needs significant work soon. At the present rate of deterioration, we have only two or three years before the structure of the building will be affected. .... To complete this important task and to establishment an endowment for future maintenance, we must raised \$2,500,000.”

**-From Window to the Future, The Campaign to Restore St. Michael's Church in Providence, 1991**

“Fifteen or twenty years ago, some people thought that this parish was on its last legs; that it would not be long before the parish would have to close its door and drift into the memory and history of the Diocese of Providence. Just the opposite! Instead, it is growing by leaps and bounds. Life now is different than in the past years when some of us grew up here in the 1950’s. Yet, it is a life just as vibrant and faith filled as ever.”

***-From St. Michael’s program: “One Hundred Thirty Years” 1859-1989***

“It is now almost five years since we started the restoration of the church building. At times it seems like fifty! All in all, the restoration is going well. The church looks wonderful, it is clean and waterproof. The whole exterior has been done. It has new roofs and all new glass on the outer stained glass windows. The woodwork was been painted and the doors have been rebuilt. All the copper work on the building, except the louvers, is new the building has been repaired with the best available materials and workmanship.”

***-From St. Michael’s program: “One Hundred Thirty Years” 1859-1989***

*On the beginnings of team ministry:* “Fr. William Tanguay, who joined the team in 1974 and remained until 1983, remarked that over the years the parish has gradually become more involved in decision making and searches for team members.” Spending time together on team days or retreats builds a real intimacy among members,” recalled Rev. Tanguay. Traditionally, priests have been the ‘bosses’ in the parish, Rev. Tanguay said, “Team members had to learn to see lay people and religious as equals. This stepping back can take a lot of work.”

***-From St. Michael’s program: “One Hundred Thirty Years” 1859-1989***

St. Michael’s, the View from 1989: “At this point in time we must look to and plan for the future of St. Michael’s parish, a future that we feel is rich in hope and challenged by service. We hear many encouraging statements about South Providence. ‘This will be the place to live in five years,’ or ‘South Providence is really turning around’. No one knows what the future holds but we see signs of rebirth and renewal in our neighborhood. We see that empty lots now have new houses on them and abandoned homes are being renovated and restored. St. Michael’s, one of the most stable institutions in the neighborhood, is part of this renewal.

“As of this writing, we have over forty programs designed to meet the spiritual, social, neighborhood, economic and social justice issues.”

***-From St. Michael’s program: “One Hundred Thirty Years” 1859-1989***