

Massachusetts Bay Colony's Ban on Catholicism

*Excerpt from Celebrating our Parish, 70 Years of Our Catholic Community,
Saint Mary of the Hills, Boylston, Massachusetts*

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Although Boylston's early history begins with Shrewsbury, the early history of Catholic worship in Boylston is intertwined with that of neighboring town of West Boylston, Clinton, and Worcester. While Catholicism is a wonderful and integral part of Massachusetts culture today and according to the 2010 religion census Massachusetts had become one of the most Catholic states in the nation, this was not always the case.

According to the Historical Sketch of the Archdiocese of Boston,

"During the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries Catholicism was illegal in Massachusetts."

On May 26, 1647, a penal law was enacted by the General Court to ban Jesuit Catholic priests from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, an area settled by Pilgrims (Separatists) and Puritans (Congregationalists) fleeing religious persecution by the Church of England. This anti-priest law, forbade priests to even reside in the colony under penalty of imprisonment or execution.

Religious Equality

It was not until 1780, that Massachusetts provided a bill of rights guaranteeing "equal protection of the law" to all religious denominations. It further stated that all state officials swear that they were not subject to the authority of any "foreign prince, person, prelate, state, or potentate." Since all Protestants still assumed that Catholics were subject to both pope and prelate, this clause automatically excluded Catholics from holding public office in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts until 1821, when the test was finally removed.

So, it is not surprising that there is very little history of Catholics in the 1700s when the area later known as Boylston was settled. However, there was a mention of a Phillip Larkin, a Roman Catholic from County Wexford, Ireland, who about 1720 had settled into the area referred to as Six Nations where he married Mary Harris in 1721/22. The Six Nations area included what would today be parts of Lancaster and Boylston. Although Larkin was Roman Catholic, it is recorded that

"He was married in the Congregational Church, and his children were all baptized into that denomination."

It was his son Edmund who settled on land that is now Boylston. Records indicate that later in life, Phillip moved to Poolesville, Montgomery County, Maryland and died there in 1862. Records differ as to whether he went to seek renewal of his Catholic faith or refuge from the King.

Strife Abroad brings Catholics Into Area

It was not until the 1825s when Irish laborers were brought into the area to help build the Blackstone Canal and subsequently, the Boston and Worcester Railroad, connecting Worcester and Providence that any significant number of Catholics would appear in Central Massachusetts. Historical evidence indicates this first influx of Irishmen to the area were fairly well-to-do and literate. The area was part of the Diocese of Boston which had been created in 1808. In 1834, the then Bishop Benedict Joseph Fenwick of Boston sent Reverend James Fitton who was assigned to Springfield, as a missionary priest to Worcester to minister to the new growing Catholic community in Central Massachusetts. Reverend Fitton began by offering a monthly mass in one of the local homes. In 1836, the number of faithful had increased to a point where a monthly visit to the Worcester County area by the priest was insufficient. A small church was erected on Temple Street under the designation of Christ Church, and Reverend Fitton became its first resident pastor in 1845.

Across the ocean, between 1845-49, the trials on Ireland's tenant farmers would have a direct impact on life in Boylston, Massachusetts. The Irish farmers experienced what history records as 'The Great Potato Famine,' a time where a water blight and the fungus called Phytophthora infectant spread rapidly ruining one-half of their potato crop the first year and finally three quarters in the subsequent years. This devastation of their main subsistence crop resulted in about one million deaths from starvation and related causes, forcing thousands of their countrymen to leave their homeland for greener pastures. For many New England would be a point of refuge.

The Irish along with French Canadians offered a great Catholic influx to the New England landscape. The French Canadians were primarily farmers and laborers who migrated south seeking work in the growing industrial areas with the onset of the American Industrial Revolution. These early Catholics had immigrated from their homeland to farm and work in the cotton mill in the Sawyers Mills area and the mills in northwest section of town. Located on the Nashua River, the Sawyers mill complex of manufacturing plants, farms, stores and schools, offered opportunities for the immigrants seeking a better life.

To their dismay, these individuals found the area lacking Catholic churches. According to the History of Springfield Diocese by Reverend McCoy, these faithful Catholics would gather on Sundays at one of the homes to recite the Rosary, make the Stations of the Cross in front of a set of pictures, read books of piety, and sing hymns as had been the custom in their homeland. Their differences in language, made it necessary to have two weekly gatherings, one for each cultural group. In 1845, with the Irish and French Canadians then numbering 35 families, united their efforts and pledged to generously support a minister of God.

Roman Catholic Mass in Private Homes

Reverend Matthew W. Gibson, who was born in Hexham, England on May 5, 1817 and immigrated to the United States in 1832, was ordained August 1, 1841. On April 6, 1845, he accepted Bishop Fenwick's request to oversee the mission of Saint John's Church in Worcester, Massachusetts. Additionally, Reverend Gibson took on the pastoral care of the mission work and souls in the surrounding towns of Central Massachusetts. With the rapid increase in Catholics in this area and the unification of the Irish and French Canadians to support a priest, one was assigned to celebrate Mass for the populace in the West Boylston area once a month. The History of the Catholic Church in The New England States: Diocese of Springfield by Reverend J.J. McCoy, 1899, indicates the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated for the first time in West Boylston in 1846 by Reverend George Reardon, pastor of Springfield, Diocese of Boston, Massachusetts. The home of this first Mass was not recorded. Thereafter the local people celebrated Mass in private homes once a month with Reverend Gibson, serving the Irish and Reverend Philip Sacchi of the Society of Jesuits, serving the French Canadians.

The homes of Felix Nugent on French Hill, West Boylston, Massachusetts and that of Jean Richard on Beaman Street, West Boylston, were made the chapel when missionary priests came to West Boylston.

Felix Nugent, an immigrant from Monaghan, County Ulster, Ireland had arrived through New York on April 28, 1845 and became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America, filing his petition for citizenship on May 19, 1851 at Boston, Massachusetts. In 1850, Felix and his family were living in a West Boylston home with 11 other Irish born adults living in the residence; many of whom were factory workers in the local Sawyers Mills. By 1855, Felix and his wife, Margaret had three young children and 16 other Irish adults were then residing with them. With this many adults in the household, it is easy to see why a Mass would be well attended!



HOME OF FELIX NUGENT
Served as Chapel for Missionary Priests to Celebrate Mass
for the Expanding Catholic Population of Boylston, West Boylston and Clinton
Digital Commonwealth Photograph Collection

Between 1855 and 1860 Felix and his family had moved to Clinton where he became a grocer and built a home on South Main Street. He went on to play a significant role in the development of Saint John's Roman Catholic parish in Clinton, Massachusetts.

Jean Pepin Richard Jr. was baptized in Saint-Ours, Quebec, Canada on July 5, 1825 and immigrated to the United States of America via Burlington, Vermont in September 1838. On September 2, 1850 he filed his intention to become a naturalized citizen of the United States, stating he had been in Sterling and West Boylston for the last three years.



HOME OF JEAN RICHARD
Served as Chapel for Missionary Priests to Celebrate Mass
for the Expanding Catholic Population Boylston, West Boylston and Clinton
Beaman Street, West Boylston, Massachusetts
Digital Commonwealth Photograph Collection

He married Matilda Flagg (Richer dit Lafleche) on March 12, 1847 of West Boylston, Massachusetts. They remained in West Boylston where he was a cordwainer, raising nine children. In 1860, his household had 36 individuals residing together. These were several French-Canadian families including that of Mary Christmas, the sister of John Roberts, the first Boylston man to lose his life in the Civil War.

Through the support of the Irish and French Canadians and the assistance of Reverend Megneault, Reverend Gibson was then able to begin to offer mass twice a month. One supported by the Irish Catholics and the second supported by the French-Canadian Catholics. With Mass celebrated in private homes in West Boylston, Boylston Catholics were now able to travel there to attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and to receive the Sacraments.