

## **Most Holy Trinity Huntingdon, Pennsylvania**

Jesuit missionaries may have celebrated the first Catholic baptism in what is now Huntingdon County at the native village of Achsinnink (known as Onojutta to the Iroquois) in the first half of the eighteenth century, pre-dating the platting of the town of Huntingdon by William Smith in 1766. This fact would have troubled the young and fervent William Smith D.D., a prominent speculator, educator, Anglican priest and the provost of the University of Pennsylvania, active on the political scene as an agent of Thomas Penn and the proprietors. Smith was a product of his times, known in his early years for his strident dislike of Quakers and “papists,” often-published articles and broadsides against both to sustain colonial will in the fight against Catholic France. So strident were his feelings - until the upheavals of the Revolution at least - that Smith required his students to deny, under oath, “the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation” as condition for admittance to the nascent University of Pennsylvania. Smith also argued that Catholics should be prohibited from owning land in the province, a marked departure from the elder William Penn’s ethic of tolerance.

On March 25, 1766, William Smith acquired the 400-acre tract that would become the site of present-day Huntingdon from the Indian trader, soldier and land speculator George Croghan. The property complemented Smith’s many holdings throughout the Juniata Valley dating from as early as December 14, 1762. The Irish Croghan had purchased the land on the site of the Standing Stone in 1760 from his contemporary, the Indian trader Hugh Crawford. His rivals and enemies often accused the Dublin-born Croghan of being Catholic, a function of his nativity, rough demeanor and frequent association with French traders throughout the frontier.

In spite of Protestant political and cultural hegemony in early British America, Jesuits had established a small mission in the village of Conewago, in what is now, Adams County, as early as 1720. By 1768, the Conewago chapel was the hub of a Jesuit circuit that extended from the Shenandoah Valley to the headwaters of the Susquehanna River. Following the Revolutionary War – and Loyalist Smith’s well-timed re-embrace of William Penn’s ethic of religious freedom - Jesuit James Pellentz rode to Standing Stone from Conewago to minister to the Catholic faithful and scout a site for the permanent establishment of a parish. In 1784, Fr. Pellentz purchased property in what is now Huntingdon Borough for the development of a Catholic church.

Although accounts differ, historians suggest that the Catholic faithful built the first church in Huntingdon soon after the establishment of the county on September 20, 1787. The first Catholic edifice in Huntingdon was a modest log chapel located at the northwest corner of what is now Third Street and Penn Street. This site was purchased from Provost Smith, then in exile, on October 10, 1788 in the name of then Superior of the Missions, John Carroll, two years prior to his instillation as Bishop of the first Catholic diocese in the young United States. This agreement was the standard contract that Smith offered his clients, renting two lots (#27 and #28) in the town plat for the annual payment of “one Spanish milled piece of eight of fine silver” and the condition that the Church build a “substantial dwelling house “. . . with a good brick or stone chimney.”

In spite of the construction of the Church building, the Huntingdon faithful would have to wait years for a resident priest, relying on the itinerant priests, including the Irish Franciscan Fr. Peter Helborn, a pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War. Other early priests included a German Rev. Hilborn, the Englishman Fr. Hall, and the French Fr. Brosius, a close friend of former Russian prince Demetrius Gallitzin, the apostle to the Alleghenies.

The first burial of Catholics in Huntingdon took place in small family lots or in the churchyard of the original log chapel. Needing a consecrated cemetery, on August 1, 1792 “The Right Rev’d John Carroll Bishop of Baltimore” purchased a pair of lots (#174 and #175) at the southwest corner of Second Street and Church Street from the theologically reconstructed William Smith. Leaving aside his pre-Revolution sentiments, Smith states in the deed that his sale of land to the church was in:

Earnest desire to promote the Gospel of our common Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by whomsoever professed and taught for the advancement of vital religion and true practical Christianity, as well as in consideration of the sum of five shillings to me in hand . . . for the purpose of erecting a church chapel or place of worship for the same, and for a burying ground for the professors of the Catholic Religion.

In August 1794, representatives of Rev. Carroll purchased several more lots in Huntingdon, agreeing to the standard stipulations. Fr. Gallitzin and other priests traveling from the Catholic toehold of Conewago administered the first regular sacraments to Huntingdon faithful in 1795. That year, the elderly William Smith donated land to “each religious denomination represented in the population,” including the Presbyterian, German Calvinist, German Lutheran and Methodist Churches.

Some time after the turn of the eighteenth century, the small congregation built a new log chapel in the northeastern edge of town and rented the original building to the Parkerson family before its eventual sale to the developer William Orbison. In the intermediary times, the faithful celebrated mass in private homes, in open fields, as well as in public houses, including Dopps Tavern, then located at the corner of Seventh Street and Penn Street. Throughout this time, itinerant priests, including Fr. Gallitzin, attended to the community.

The community of Catholics in the dominantly Protestant town was small during the first decades of its existence, contending with not only a lack of priests and facilities, but also active discrimination. In response to the Thanksgiving 1814 sermon delivered by a Huntingdon minister at Hartslog that denounced “popery” and questioned the loyalty of Catholics to the United States – echoing a 1755 Smith sermon - Rev. Gallitzin published his *Defense of Catholic Principles*, one of several widely circulated tracts written in defense of the Church. In his conclusion, he implores the minister and his listeners to “Hush into silence your prejudices; listen and adore; humble yourself with St. Paul into the very dust; pray for light, and you shall see it brighter than the dazzling ray's of the mid-day sun.”

In spite of such a luminous defense, the community languished in the face of active prejudice until the 1820s with the arrival of the charismatic Irish priest named Lanigan and active ministering of Bedford's Fr. Heyden. With their work, and the influx of Irish Catholic turnpike and canal workers, the mission church quickly grew into a parish. In the 1820s, the Church was a constant in the uncertain and geographically unstable lives of Catholic immigrants. Catholics in nineteenth-century Protestant America often clustered together throughout the cycles of life, living in spatially-discrete communities defined by their immigrant character and social class. The Church was a relief from hardships of the working class life led by most American Catholics at the time.

Most Holy Trinity parish was established in 1826 within the Diocese of Philadelphia. The visit of second Bishop of Philadelphia Henry Conwell to Huntingdon to deliver the sacrament of Confirmation in August 1827 at Dopp's Tavern began the active planning for the development of the new church edifice. The small community soon advertised for bids “for the building and finishing of a brick Catholic Church,” to be submitted for review by January 1, 1828. Working under the direction of Rev. John O'Reilly, contractors completed the church in September 1828. The newly built church was:

Brick, solid and substantial, 62 x 35 feet, including a sanctuary, built in the form of an offset with a small vestry room on the left which is also used as a confessional . . . it has a front gallery, supported by 4 columns, which together with the nave numbers 57 pews. The height of the ceiling from the floor is 25 feet. The whole is tastefully executed, for the most part, according to the Gothic style of architecture. It is but just to remark that this church, as well as many others recently erected, had been raised principally by the generosity of poor Irishmen working on the Canal.

Encouraged by the canal operators and contractors who sought a mitigating influence to the rough aspects of shanty life, the canal workers were central to the establishment and construction of Most Holy Trinity. In addition to raising funds from their wages, the cannalers often applied their skills as

stonemasons and earthmovers in the actual construction of churches, rectories, and other institutions; their work is likely reflected in the craftsmanship visible on the core of the church.

The church was blessed by auxiliary Bishop Francis Kendrick in the presence of Bishop Conwell on July 4, 1830 before a large crowd that celebrated both the blessing, Independence Day and opening of the Pennsylvania Canal. Yet, with the blessing, the small community began a period of decline and the cannalers and their families moved on to the west. By 1833, a new priest, Patrick Leavy, celebrated mass at the church only once a month. By 1835, the mass was held only once every two months, taking its place as one stop on Fr. Leavy's vast circuit maintained out of Lewistown.

Not until the survey and construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad in the late 1840s did the Catholic population of Huntingdon again increase. During the intervening years, Fr. James Bradley and Patrick Prendergast ministered to the faithful. In 1847, Prendergast brought the 130-member Huntingdon parish into the new mission of Hollidaysburg, just as surveyors were confirming the route of the Pennsylvania Railroad mainline and its subsidiary, the Huntingdon and Broad Top Railroad, through the town.

The second wave of Irish laborers and their families again buoyed the parish, allowing for two celebrations of the mass per month for the first time in its history and allowing Most Holy Trinity to assume its own mission status by 1851. The opening of the Broad Top coalfield drew Catholic workers and miners into the county. By the late 1850s, the parish at last celebrated mass on each Sunday of the month, requiring the first resident pastor, the Rev. Peter M. Doyle, who served as pastor until the outbreak of the Civil War.

By 1863, the Broad Top parish had grown large enough to split off from the Huntingdon mission under the care of Doyle's replacement, Peter Hughes, who was in turn succeeded by Rev. S. Wall and later, O. P. Gallagher. The church was refurnished by Fr. Gallagher, who also constructed the rectory adjacent to the church, testament to the relative strength of the parish at the time. A series of short-lived appointments followed before Rev. Martin Murphy provided some stability to the ministry, building up the parish and establishing the new cemetery by 1873 in a town then booming in economic growth and development. The cemetery developed on consecrated, or sacred, ground - a space as having a distinct identity, reflected in the arrangement, markers, and processes of burial.

The parish grew steadily in the next quarter century under the direction of a series of priests on four-year appointments, swelling again with the Irish and Italian workers who reconstructed the Pennsylvania Railroad through town from 1890 - 1892. During this era, the Rev. Patrick J. Hawe directed construction of a new steeple in 1893. A contemporary account notes:

The steeple is 13 x 13 x 100 feet high. The brick walls will be 22 inches thick up to the cornice of the building, and 18 inches above that. There will be a vestibule in the tower leading into the church and the second story of the tower will be used for an organ. The windows in the front of the building will be stained glass. The work is expected to cost \$1,500.

The steeple represents the growth of the church coincident with the growth of the town, and marks the beginning of yet another influx of foreign-born Catholic workers into the county, to work in the new manufacturing facilities, brickyards, coalmines and on the reconstruction of the mainline railroad. The expansion of the Pennsylvania Railroad system led to the establishment of the Diocese of Altoona at the turn of the century, headed by Bishop Eugene Garvey. The first diocesan priest from Altoona was Rev. Peter Fox, who had come from the railroad town of Renovo, where he had established the first parish high school in Pennsylvania.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, Most Holy Trinity was led by a series of Irish-born priests, including Fr. Fox, Fr. Keenoy, Fr. Jerome McQuillan and Fr. John O'Donnell, before stabilizing with the arrival of Fr. James Tolan. Fr. Tolan, the longest serving priest in parish history, arrived in 1912. That year, Fr. Tolan led the establishment and construction of a new church in Mt. Union that would evolve into St. Catherine parish. Prior to 1921, with the separation of St. Catherine, Fr. Tolan ministered

to Most Holy Trinity as well as the mission churches in Mount Union and Shade Gap. Fr. Tolan led the parish until his reassignment to Tyrone in 1930.

Paulist Fr. Edmund Cain, who had shared in the ministry at the reformatory, succeeded Fr. Tolan. Fr. Lambert Beiter joined Fr. Cain in 1937. Fr. Cain, known as soft spoken and sophisticated transfer from New York City, led the parish until his replacement in 1947 by Fr. John J. Burkhardt, who was in turn succeeded by Rev. John Crowley in 1951. During Rev. Crowley's tenure, the parish grew, supported in part by many families moving into Huntingdon from other areas during the years of post-war prosperity. The influx of new families prompted Fr. Crowley to commission construction of the social hall, kitchen and classrooms in 1956. The 179 parish families mourned Fr. Crowley's passing in 1961.

In 1961, the parish came under the care of Fr. Francis Ackerson, who grappled with the need for more space to serve his growing congregation. Under his direction, the church doubled in actual size with the construction of a sympathetic rear addition, and yet it still strained to contain a parish population had grown to 253 families by 1965. To help minister to the growing congregation, Fr. Ackerson invited the Mother Seton Sisters of Charity to Huntingdon in 1967, purchasing a convent for their use at the corner of Fifth and Mifflin Streets. In 1970, Fr. Ackerson was reassigned and succeeded by Fr. John O'Toole.

The church continued its growth during the pastorate of Fr. O'Toole, blossoming from 284 families in 1971 to 360 families in 1978, a period of change within the larger Church as the reforms of the Second Vatican council took hold. With Fr. O'Toole's retirement in 1980, then-Monsignor Ackerson briefly returned to minister to a very different parish than the one he left a decade earlier. Monsignor Ackerson was again reassigned in 1983, succeeded by Fr. John Orlando, whose full embrace of the ethic of Vatican II brought the Cursillo movement to Most Holy Trinity, among other renewal programs. Fr. David Arsenault joined Fr. Orlando in 1984 as associate pastor and minister to Juniata College until his 1994 reassignment. Fr. David Lockard assumed pastoral duties with the retirement of Fr. Orlando in 1988, assisted by Sr. Jane Miller of the Carmelite Community of the Word, successors to the Sisters of Charity.

The parish continued to grow, and the parish council established by Fr. Lockard quickly identified the need to improve the parish facilities. Construction of the existing church complex began in spring 1994 with the demolition of the rectory and annex, which was added to the original church in 1962. The first mass was celebrated in the new worship space on January 21, 1995, and Bishop Adamec dedicated the new edifice on March 26 of that year. With Fr. Lockard's reassignment in 2000, Fr. Arsenault returned to a parish of 473 families strengthened by the process of rebuilding the church and building on the tradition of nearly 175 years of sacramental celebration in the oldest faith community in Huntingdon and the oldest parish in the diocese.