

## THE CHURCH OF THE SACRED HEART 1874

Some stories simply do not begin at what would seem to be the beginning. The historical story of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Riverton is a perfect example of how, sometimes, the scene must be laid in advance of the opening in order to put things into their proper perspective. So let us, for the sake of the story, put aside for a while the official founding date of 1879, the better to understand what went into the actual organization of this church.

In a piece written by the Rev. J. F. Hendricks to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the church, which was celebrated on October 9, 1904, are these words: "Prior to the year eighteen hundred and seventy-three, the Catholics of Riverton and vicinity were accustomed to attend Mass at Riverside, Moorestown, and Camden. Though summer sun or wintry blast could not prevent these sturdy people from assisting at the Holy Sacrifice on Sunday, still the inconvenience of travel often turned their thoughts toward the hope and desire of one day having their own little house of worship which they could visit more often to pour out their petitions and prayers of thanksgiving at the feet of our Crucified Redeemer. This feeling was that which moved the Farleys, Burns, O'Neills, McKeones, and others to consult the Rev. Peter Jacetti, the Pastor of St. Joseph's Church, Riverside, and enlist his aid toward assembling the few Catholics of Riverton, with the view of building a church. The first meeting of these people was held in the home of Owen Farley, presided over by the Rev. Father Anselmn, O.M.C., who represented Father Jacetti. It was decided then to purchase a plot of land. In 1874, Mass was celebrated for the first time within what is now the Borough of Riverton, at the home of Edward McKeone on Main Street. From this time on Mass was said occasionally at the houses of Owen Farley, James O'Neill, and Michael McDonald.

It is interesting to note that many of the earliest members of the congregation of Sacred Heart were Irish Catholic immigrants who were on the household staffs of wealthy Philadelphians who owned large and elegantly-appointed homes along the river bank. Some of the names recorded as in attendance continually and most firmly dedicated to the work of the Lord during the early years are the Misses McCreely, Mrs. Catherine McLendon, Miss Lizzie Roe, and Miss Margaret Harty.

During this time, when services were being held in private homes, it was decided to make every effort to secure enough funds to buy a piece of land and build a chapel. Between the wish and the accomplishment, there was more than one stumbling block. The largest boulder was rolled aside by the intervention of a truly Christian man who acted according to the dictates of his conscience, despite the fact that it did not sit too well with his peers.

At long last the parishioners collected enough funds to buy a piece of land on Lippincott Avenue. However, when it became known that a Roman Catholic Church was to be erected on the site, some of the people who lived on the street took exception and petitioned the owner not to sell the property for that purpose. There might have been some other reason, but it is most likely that the action was taken not because of a church being the projected building, but because of the denomination of that church.

During this trying time, Mr. Lemuel Davis, a Presbyterian by faith, liberal-minded for his time, and courageous enough to practice what he believed despite the opinions of those who felt disinclined to have the Catholic congregation build their house of worship on the place they had chosen, not only spoke up and said he believed the more churches the better, he went one step further. What the Roman Catholic Christians could not purchase for money, he, in his generosity and determination to live up to his beliefs that all people are God's children, donated to them. His gift was a parcel of land on Fourth Street near Main, on which the first church was erected. (One has to suppose that Mr. Davis's action probably did not endear him to some of his friends and neighbors!)

Again quoting Father Hendricks on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Sacred Heart: "Though five and twenty years have passed and the Priest who accepted his (Mr. Davis') gift has gone to his eternal reward, we take this occasion to express our gratitude to Mr. Davis and to wish him length of days and happiness of years for this noble and Christian act."

Having overcome the first of the hurdles, the actual organization of the church was formalized in 1879. The cornerstone of the building, which was designated as a mission chapel, was laid on May 31, 1879, by the Rev. Peter Jacetti, O.M.C., who had oversight of the mission.

The building was dedicated to divine worship on July 6th of the same year by the Rt. Rev. M. A. Corrigan, Bishop of Newark. (Bishop Corrigan later became Archbishop of New York.)

This little chapel was quite small and, according to maps in use during the early eighteen eighties, it appears to have been wedged in on one side by a public school building and on the other by a pair of homes on the east side of Fourth Street between Howard and Main. During the first nine years, the worshipers were faithfully served by the Franciscan Fathers, among whom were Father Jacetti, Father Sharoun, Father Anselmn, and Father Francis Lehner.

After a while the church managed to take title to a large plot of ground, most probably in anticipation of the time when they would be able to put up a larger, more adequate structure. This lot measured a full half block and faced on Cinnaminson Street, between Fourth and Fifth Streets, just a stone's throw from the small chapel.

These plans were changed somewhat by the coming of Father MacKernan, Pastor of the Moorestown Parish from 1883 to 1887. Father MacKernan succeeded Father Jacetti in the leadership of the Riverton Mission. Under his direction more ground was purchased at Fourth and Linden Streets. This relocation of the site for the proposed larger church might very well have been deemed advisable because Riverton, which had in the early days been perceived as a four street town, was now rapidly growing toward Palmyra, and it would indeed be wiser to locate the new facility more centrally so that the Catholics of both Palmyra and Riverton would be best served.

Father MacKernan continued his work until 1891, when he was transferred to Sea Isle City. He was followed by Father Degnan, who served only a few months before he went to God. Father John McKloskey then took up the work with a ready and willing heart.

Father McKloskey straight away had plans drawn up for the proposed new edifice which would have a seating capacity of five hundred — a big step up from the small mission Chapel! The cornerstone was laid on August 6, 1892, by the Rt. Rev. Michael O'Farrell, and the sermon on this most auspicious occasion was preached by the Very Rev. James A. McFaul, who later would be named the Rt. Rev. Bishop of the Diocese of Trenton.



"Church of the Sacred Heart and Rectory as they appeared in 1908."

Father McCloskey lived in Beverly, as had all his predecessors, but said Mass in Riverton every Sunday. This continued until 1894 when he was promoted by Bishop

McFaul to the Chancellorship of the Diocese of Trenton, a position he held until his death in October, 1889.

After only three months of being under the guidance of Rev. M. J. Haggerty, D.D., the congregation welcomed the Rev. Simon B. Walsh, who came from St. Mary's in Gloucester to the pastorate of St. Joseph's in Beverly, thereby also becoming Pastor to the mission church.

1892 was a banner year! It was during this year that the frame church which faced on Fourth Street and Linden was built and with much rejoicing (and a heavy burden of financial indebtedness) another chapter in the life of Sacred Heart got under way. However, it remained as a mission under another parish.

For six years Father Walsh carried on the work and made great efforts to liquidate its debt. In 1899 he moved on to serve at St. Joseph's Church in High Bridge.

As one century ended and another began, Riverton continued to grow in numbers and so too, did the constituency at Sacred Heart. It was still functioning as a mission church, but the increasing numbers in attendance necessitated such frequent visits of a priest that the Rt. Rev. Bishop McFaul decided to separate it from Beverly and appoint Father J. F. Hendrick as first resident pastor of Riverton. It was Father Hendrick who started the building fund that permitted the building of a rectory. The members of the congregation responded with great generosity, and the parochial residence was built on the north lot adjoining the Church. This home, which faced Fourth Street, has since been removed.

Having accomplished one thing, the people turned their attention to the next, which was the renovation and embellishment of the existing facility. The exterior was repaired and much landscaping was done.

The interior of the church was adorned with new and magnificent windows and beautiful Stations of the Cross. Fresco paintings and candelabrum were added and a grand pipe organ was secured.

1904 marked the thirtieth year of Catholic worship in Riverton and the twenty-fifth year of Sacred Heart Church. (The first five years the worship was held in homes and the small chapel.) Quoting once more from the paper written by Father Hendricks for the Silver Jubilee: "The Catholics and Pastor of the Sacred Heart Church have reason to feel justly proud, on this twenty-fifth anniversary of the Parish, of the work accomplished. Their prayers and petitions should go up to the Almighty that the good work shall grow with time and brighten with the ripening years. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to thy Name give Glory."

As Riverton, Palmyra, and Cinnaminson continued to expand, so too did the membership at Sacred Heart. This increase in communicants caused the church to be ever vigilant in its efforts to offer more and more programs for the benefit of the membership. The names of Father Rigney, Father John McGrath, and later still Father John F. Welsh are remembered by those who attended during the nineteen twenties and the turbulent thirties.

Father Rigney began his ministry in 1914 and remained there until his death in August, 1934. His was a long and loving tenure. During those years two major building programs gave the parish its first Convent and first school building. This first school, located on Linden Avenue close by the church building, and the Convent on Thomas Avenue, were large undertakings indeed and represented an expenditure of \$100,000. It required great courage and faith to undertake such massive expansion programs during the height of the depression, but the needs of the Catholic community were manifest. The only way to do what needed to be done was to work at the task, and with this in mind, and ever dependent on the Lord to provide the guidance and inspiration, it was not only started, it was done.

During this period of time a Knights of Columbus Hall was also built at Elm Avenue and Broad Street. These buildings were but forerunners of larger achievements still to come.

Following the demise of Father Rigney in 1934, Father John J. McGrath continued the work and ministered to the faithful until his departure in May of 1937. For a few months Father John F. Thompson acted as administrator. His successor was Father John F. Welsh, who remained from June of 1937 until January of 1941, when Father Quinn arrived to begin his twenty-year ministry.

In the late 1950's it was once again deemed necessary to examine the size of the available buildings, in comparison to the population. The school was overcrowded and the Church itself was oftentimes overfilled. In time land was acquired across Fourth Street, opposite the Church.

A new school began to rise, and before long was finished and operational. It included a large auditorium with a stage, a gymnasium for physical education work and ample class rooms, well laid out and designed to permit the teacher to instruct and the pupils to learn in a much more comfortable and efficient manner. This project forced the construction of a new church building to be put aside for a while, but in 1963 a building program was instituted to enable the congregation to put up a new and much larger place of worship. (In the meantime, the Cinnaminson Catholic Community had begun their building program also, which resulted in the construction of Saint Charles Borromeo Church.)

Sadly, Father Quinn did not have an opportunity to share in the joy of constructing the new Church. The much loved and respected man passed away on May 20, 1962. Father David Delzell, his assistant, took over until the arrival of Father Hughes in 1963.

The old frame Church, after seventy years of use, was closed in December of 1963.

The new church at Fourth and Linden Avenue, began to rise. During the period of construction Mass was celebrated in the school auditorium.

At Eastertime, 1965, the new church was opened for worship and Sacred Heart had moved forward still another step into the future, keeping pace with the development of the area whose spiritual needs were given over to its care.

These spiritual needs are tended to in many different ways by the church. There are, of course, Masses offered all through the week and on Sunday, so that the opportunity to worship is scheduled often enough to permit the faithful to come to the church at a time which is convenient no matter what their work or home commitments might be. The young people of the parish have many projects centered in the Church and are encouraged to make good and ample use of the physical plant for all good and authorized activities.

For study purposes, the C.C.D. classes are well established and well attended providing youngsters primarily, but not exclusively, an opportunity to be instructed in the basic doctrine of the Church as well as receiving support in their efforts to develop the strength and commitment to the Christian life which will fortify them to deal with the challenges they will continually meet as they mature and function more and more in the every day world with its uncertainties and temptations.

The Sacred Heart School was discontinued in June, 1976, because of diminished attendance, population shifts and the prohibitive cost of maintaining the parochial education program. The community is far richer for the fact that it served so well for an extended time.

Father Joseph Hughes can look back over his thirteen years with the church and mark many changes. There was the transition to the language of the land in the Mass, the introduction of music, and the establishment of the Cinnaminson Church which reduced the membership at Sacred Heart somewhat. There have been many births, Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, weddings and funerals, plus holidays with their special observances through the years. He and his flock with him have passed these years together, working and praying, petitioning and offering thanks.

In 1976 it is good to look back over the years and give thanks to the Catholic community in Riverton, Palmyra and Cinnaminson. They have shown us all how strong mortal man can be in his faith when his life is centered in God and he gives over to the Almighty his talents to be used according to His will. Many of the members of Sacred Heart have given unstintingly of themselves in public service at all community levels and have been active in civic affairs. The Cinnaminson-Palmyra-Riverton Council of Churches has benefited in earlier years from the service of Mr. Leo McGary, past vice-president.

The children who have passed through the parochial school system are numbered in the thousands and each one has taken into the world not only a fine academic background but, perhaps more to the point, the knowledge that within the frame-work of life on all its levels the Lord requires of man that he follow the Christian precepts.

Even the buildings have served in a most extraordinary fashion. The small chapel, after it had served as a house of worship, was deconsecrated and turned over to the Borough of Riverton in 1896. At this time Riverton had outgrown its school facilities and the chapel was reworked and served as Kindergarten for a period of time. Later still a room was added to the chapel to enable it to house more children, but in time, even expanded in this fashion, the growth of Riverton required the Township to build a larger brick school building in 1910.

The chapel was not through serving. In 1910 it was moved to 609 Main Street and joined to another former church property, the old Parish House of Christ Episcopal Church. These two buildings served as the Post Office for Riverton until the present Post

Office was constructed about 1937. The Chapel-Parish House then became the offices of a local newspaper, the **New Era**. Still later, after the **New Era** ceased publication (about 1964-65), the much-moved, long-serving structure was shifted over some twenty or thirty yards, where it still stands occupied as a shoemaker's shop, still sturdy and useful after all these years!

No one can see into the years ahead. Nor, probably, would the discreet person choose to even if the choice were offered. But at Sacred Heart, as in all churches, where the hearts and hands of man are offered to the Lord for whatever purposes He requires of them, the times still to come will be filled to overflowing with all the joys and sorrows to which the human estate is heir.

And with it all, whatever we do in our striving to live as God's children we can say, even as Father Hendricks charged his flock to do, "Not to us O Lord, not to us, but to Thy Name, give glory."

