

Part I of III: One Hundred Fifty Years of Catholicism
The First Half Century

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Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Catholicism in Mechanicville in reality means that we are celebrating the history of not one, but three parishes: St. Paul's, Assumption, and Assumption - St. Paul's. To begin with, that history extends back even further than 150 years, because we know that Mass was celebrated in John Short's barn on William St. in the 1830s. An Augustinian historian suggested a century ago that itinerant priests may have stopped occasionally at a "station" here as early as the 1820s, site unknown. Could they have been celebrating Mass in the "community church"- our village's first such edifice located on the current site of St. Luke's Episcopal Church- that prototypical harbinger of a later ecumenism which opened its doors to all denominations? Possibly, but documentation is lacking to support this. Catholic Directories do not mention Mechanicville until 1839, but they are sketchy at best, a fact which can be appreciated when considering that there were only a few Catholic churches in eastern New York north of New York City in the early 19th century and the Albany Catholic Diocese was not created until 1847.

The early history of Catholicism in Mechanicville is inextricably linked to the story of Irish immigration here. The rapid development of the local parish arose because of a sudden influx of "famine Irish" refugees who had fled Ireland in the face of horrific starvation which claimed 1.5 million lives, a human tragedy so appalling that wandering bands of displaced tenant farmers were reduced to eating grass like draught animals. What attracted some of those few souls fortunate enough to survive to come to Mechanicville? Possibly, work on the Champlain Canal, but more likely, jobs at the American Linen Thread Co., a firm with grist and saw mills located kitty-corner from Irish immigrant John Short's establishment on present-day William St. The company also operated an extensive thread factory near the mouth of the Tenendehowa Creek behind modern-day City Hall. Flax (widely cultivated in Ireland), was introduced to this area by Philip Schuyler in the 18th century. Between 1850 and the early 1880s, the company sold thread to linen cloth makers, shoemakers, and salmon fishermen, moving to Massachusetts at the latter time to be closer to its source of demand. The company's uniqueness was confirmed by the fact that it was the only establishment of its kind to display its wares at the American Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876.

In 1855, New York's first state census had noted that the forty immigrant men and boys working at the mill earned \$20 a month (when there was work), while the 65 women and girls so employed averaged a little over \$9 a month wages. Meager as these wages were, the 1850s would be considered flush times when the Depression of 1873-1877 reduced these earnings by more than fifty percent. Poverty-stricken immigrant families survived by hiring their daughters out as domestic servants who lived in wealthier local households. Although fewer than one percent of Saratoga County's population consisted of Irish immigrants,

almost forty percent of Mechanicville residents were Children of Erin. Relegated to living in hovels along the creek between the Champlain Canal (now Central Ave.) and the Tenenhowa-Hudson confluence on what was called “the Devil’s Half Acre,” these impoverished newcomers were barely tolerated in the host community.

John Rowlandson dismissed Mechanicville as “nothing but a settlement of Irish” in warnings he issued to fellow would-be Scotch emigrants in 1855. During the early 1850s, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (the “Know Nothings”), campaigned politically on a platform of excluding Irish immigrants from entering the United States while pledging never to vote for a Catholic political candidate. The same year that this group captured control of the legislature of Massachusetts and elected that state’s governor, a Mechanicville newspaper was warning readers that no real American could profess loyalty to his country unless he had “no contact with any foreign monarch, King, or Dictator.” Given the fact that the Pope was the temporal ruler of the Italian Papal States, the not-so-subtle implication of this message was that Catholics could not be good Americans. This would not be the last time that Irish Catholic loyalties would be called into question locally.

The story of building the first Catholic church here has been recited many times over, but though it may be familiar to many people, it bears repeating . An important misconception should be cleared up immediately, however. Although the historical sketch of the parish written by Fr. T.C. Middleton in 1908 states that Catholic Directories listed it as “St. Mary’s,” not “St. Paul’s,” from 1852 until 1873, contemporaneous local newspapers and census records used the designation “St. Paul’s” exclusively, an indication that the Directories were based upon faulty information. If ever one person earned the title “pillar of the Church,” it would be John Short. This Irish immigrant began farming in Halfmoon in 1829, but then moved to Mechanicville in 1834. Here, he took up residence on the Champlain Canal near the Fairbanks and Bullen Company’s grist mill, opening a store/saloon/hotel at the current site of the B&D Tavern to accommodate travelers who had begun wending their way through town when the artificial waterway was completed in the late 1820s. Various listed in censuses as “landlord,” “saloon-keeper,” or “grocer,” Short not only donated the land on which the current church stands, but he also hired and supervised the six men who built it, paying Michael Farrell, Gerald Mahony, Charles McCarthy, Asa Devoe, Hugh Griffen and Richard Moore their wages out of his own pocket. He donated another \$100 and personally raised \$1,200 more from fellow immigrants to defray the cost of building materials. In all, the expense to build the church, erected over a two-year period, was estimated at \$5,000, plus labor. Yet, as early as 1855, the local census enumerator listed its value at \$20,000, making it by far the most prominent church building in the area. Certainly, it provided a more permanent place of worship for the growing congregation than Mr. Short’s barn where missionaries had conducted services during the previous two decades. Although its tower would later require significant repairs, the

building's structural integrity has withstood the vicissitudes of time and weather for 150 years, not bad for a church erected by immigrants who had no access to architects or trained engineers.

While early census records may exaggerate the building's capacity by listing its seating at 800, these same records indicate that there were 700 weekly communicants, a reasonable figure when we realize that the parish drew from a much wider area than Mechanicville. The lone priest stationed here in the early years typically said Mass at 10:00 a.m. on Sundays, conducted Sunday School at 2:00 p.m., and held Vespers at 4:00 p.m., adding Stations of the Cross on Lenten Fridays at 8:00 p.m. The first few years of its existence found St. Paul's being served by diocesan priests stationed elsewhere, and parish registers do not begin until 1857 when the first Baptism was posted on December 6. More than a year would pass before the first marriage was recorded in January, 1858. Certainly, these sacraments had been performed here at an earlier date, but any sacramental registries kept by missionaries Anthony Farley and Peter Havermans (stationed in Watervliet and Troy respectively) prior to 1857 have not been preserved. Fr. Thomas Kyle, Mechanicville's first Augustinian, arrived in 1857. He was succeeded by Fathers J.T. McDermott, George Meagher, and Louis Edge over the course of the next three years as the Villanova-based religious order began establishing its missionary roots in the Albany Diocese.

Of the fourteen pastors who served here in the parish's first half century, Fr. Philip Izzo and Fr. Arthur McCranor had the greatest impact. Fr. Izzo was unusual in that he served two terms as pastor (1867-76 and 1879-81), the intervening years being taken up with his development of the Stillwater "mission" into St. Peter's Parish. Fr. Izzo was responsible for erecting St. Paul's church tower in 1869, the cost of the 125 foot steeple nearly equaling the expense of building the original church two decades earlier. In 1871, stained glass windows were installed, thanks to the generosity of Michael and John Short and 250 other donors who helped to defray the costs. A native of Italy, Fr. Izzo introduced viniculture locally and brewed his own sacramental wine, a vintage that Fr. Middleton rated "a passable catawba." The missionary and his fellow countryman, assistant pastor, Fr. Nazzareno Proposta, were trailblazers of sorts, having emigrated to the United States decades before the great waves of Italians that began arriving in the 1890s. Apparently physically robust, Fr. Izzo succeeded in fending off a would-be attacker who tried to abscond with the \$365 Christmas Eve Mass collection in 1872. Notably, Catholics were the only local congregation that religiously observed Christmas at this time. Protestant denominations believed that such celebrations were out of tune with the austere religious ethos they had introduced during the Reformation.

Fr. Izzo purchased the old Episcopal Church in Stillwater for \$1,500 in 1873 to serve the large number of immigrants living there who had come from Limerick and Waterford counties in Ireland, most of whom worked for the

Saratoga Paper Co., a predecessor of the larger mills which would be established in Mechanicville in the 1880s. This church building, built by the Stillwater Masonic Order in 1797, served St. Peter's congregation until a new church was blessed by Bishop McNeirney on April 4, 1893. Following his second term at St. Paul's, Fr. Izzo returned home in 1881, serving as a priest in the Naples area until his death on October 2, 1888. Little is known about his colleague, Fr. Proposta.

Fr. Arthur McCranor became well-known as an inveterate defender of Irish Catholic honor throughout the area while appearing in many local pulpits during his pastorate in the 1880s. For many years, the local press had enjoyed pillorying the foibles of the denizens of Mechanicville's "Dublin Row." Stereotyping Irish Catholics as alcoholics, local editors reminded readers of the group's Civil War era anti-draft riots as well as their strident support of violence-prone labor organizations like the Molly Maguires in the 1870s. They suggested that Irish determination to establish their own parochial schools to protect their children from being proselytized by Protestant teachers who controlled the public systems was "un-American."

Countering such anti-Catholic, anti-Irish bias, Fr. McCranor caused a sensation throughout the area when he spoke at St. Bernard's in Cohoes in 1884 on "The Heroic Character of the Irish People," a speech so celebrated that he was implored to repeat it in many other venues. Three months later, the Mechanicville clergyman thrilled an audience in Stillwater with his speech on "The Military Record of Irish Soldiers in Europe and America." Local editor (and active Methodist) Farrington Mead reported that the priest received "thunderous applause and rounds of cheers" for pointing out that while some of their fellow immigrants may have been violently opposing the military draft in 1863, thousands of poor Irish served heroically in the Civil War, taking the places of wealthier Americans who were able to buy their way out of military service by hiring substitutes. Given the willingness of the Stillwater Town Board to heavily tax its property holders to pay for military substitutes in the latter stages of the Civil War, Fr. McCranor's audience knew whereof he spoke. He also took a leading role in promoting the formation of a local chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and organized the first successful Catholic festival. A predecessor's attempt to sponsor such a get-together had failed because, the local press recorded, "persons in humble circumstances" could not support such activities. Unfortunately, Fr. McCranor's tenure was cut short by his unexpected death on May 15, 1886, but he had made his mark both with his parishioners and with the wider community.

The growth of the Irish-Catholic parish in the last two decades of the 19th century paralleled the development of the community at large due to the railroad and paper industry expansion here. Prior to 1887, confirmation classes had been held only sporadically, but beginning in that year, the sacrament was administered at regular three-year intervals to increasingly larger numbers of

candidates. And, while the local press began suggesting that St. Paul's might be interested in finding a larger church to serve its burgeoning community, the parish was busy establishing a number of sodalities, among them the Confraternity of Sts. Augustine and Monica (1883), Children's Temperance (1886), Altar Society (1893), Rosary and Sacred Heart (1894), Children of Mary (1902), and the Holy Name Society (1906).

Religion and public affairs intersected again in the 1890s when the virulently anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic American Protective Association gained prominence for a time. Newspaperman Farrington Mead charged that a large percentage of Republican elected officials throughout New York State were secret members of the A.P.A., a charge that must not have endeared Mead to his fellow Protestants in the community. For their part, local Hibernians were undaunted and continued to conduct their annual parades and picnics. An interesting shift of focus was noted in 1897 when the A. O. H.'s major annual celebrations were rescheduled from the Fourth of July to St. Patrick's Day. That same year, Fr. John Fahey's appearance as the public school's Baccalaureate speaker marked an increased toleration of Catholicism in the local community. In July, editor Mead noted that the First Annual Catholic Picnic and Dance had been a resounding success. The following year, the parish's growing identification with patriotic themes was marked by a special parish flag-raising ceremony to show support for the American troops fighting against Spanish forces in the Philippines and Cuba in the Spanish-American War.

When Fr. Daniel Sullivan succeeded Fr. Fahey as pastor in 1902, he took over an established religious community now serving a burgeoning mill town. At its origin, St. Paul's had served Catholics from Stillwater, Schaghticoke, the unincorporated village of Mechanicville, Halfmoon, and such ineluctably named nearby hamlets as Pig Street, Slab City, and Graball as "an old-time country mission." Fifty years later, almost all of these locales had founded their own parishes, yet St. Paul's membership continued to grow even though its constituency was now limited to Mechanicville and its environs. It did not take Fr. Sullivan long to realize that his growing flock would require a larger church to fulfill its mission. He would also discover that his parish's needs would extend far beyond those involving physical space. The sudden influx of thousands of Italian and Lithuanian Catholic immigrants on the local scene was about reshape the parish in unanticipated and unprecedented ways.