



Gathered Fragments

The Publication of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

Historia Fidei Lux

Vol. XI, No. 1, Spring 2000

Pennsylvania's Catholic Pioneers

By Blanche McGuire

Pennsylvania's earliest Catholic pioneers, though few in number, left a legacy rich in faith. Who were Pennsylvania's Catholics?

The first were Indians converted by French and later English missionaries in the 17th and early 18th centuries. More permanent Catholic settlers arrived from Europe when Penn's colony took root and became known for religious tolerance.

In Old Philadelphia, Catholics came from a variety of nations. Early settlers included English, Irish, Germans, Austrians, Italians, Canadians, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgians, French and Blacks.

On the Pennsylvania frontier, most Catholics were German, Irish or English. Most Germans immigrated to Philadelphia then moved westward. Many Irish and English Catholics fled to the Pennsylvania/Maryland frontier to escape Maryland's harsh penal codes enacted against Catholics after 1688.

Early Pennsylvania Catholics were primarily poor emigrant farmers. However, Church records do show a wide diversity ranging from aristocrats to indentured servants or slaves. Non-Catholics sometimes played a major role in Catholic life serving as baptismal sponsors and participants in interfaith marriages.

Where did Catholics live?

There were three early permanent centers of Catholicism in Pennsylvania.

One was a Catholic settlement at Conewago in central Pennsylvania. Conewago is four miles west of Hanover, 10 miles east of Gettysburg and just north of the Maryland border. Jesuit missionaries reportedly celebrated Conewago's first Mass at an Indian village atop a hill about 1719. Not long afterward, Irish and English Catholics

from Maryland settled in the Conewago area in the 1720s and 1730s. During the next century, Conewago missionaries ministered to Catholics throughout Central and Western Pennsylvania and Northern Maryland.

A second Catholic center was St Joseph's parish in Old Philadelphia. Father Joseph Greaton S.J. was the first pastor. St Joseph's boundaries stretched well beyond Philadelphia into Chester and Delaware counties and New Jersey.

The third Catholic center was in Berks County at Goshenhoppen. Known today as Bally, Goshenhoppen

is 45 miles northwest of Philadelphia and 25 miles from Valley Forge. As early as the 1720s, German Catholic emigrants came to Goshenhoppen from Philadelphia. Goshenhoppen's first permanent priest (Father Schneider) was assigned in 1741. The Goshenhoppen Mission served a wide circuit covering most of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Goshenhoppen's church records are the oldest in the 13 colonies.

What was it like to be Catholic in colonial Pennsylvania?

Compared to other colonies where

Continued on page 2.

Remembering Sr. Anna Mary Gibson, R.S.M.



With a sparkle in her eyes and a smile on her face, Sister Anna Mary Gibson was a woman filled with humility and a sense of duty. A native of Lawrenceville, she joined the Sisters of Mercy and professed vows in 1937. She served at St. Paul's Orphanage in Crafton and then taught in schools in the Pittsburgh, Greensburg and Puerto Rico dioceses.

In 1975, Sister Anna Mary changed careers, taking the position of archivist and historian at Mercy Hospital. During her tenure at Mercy, she authored the second volume of the two-volume series *Mercy Hospital: A Historical Review* and edited a booklet titled *Historical Sketches*. As the archivist, she scoured the hospital for historical documents and photographs, bringing them all together in the Mercy Hospital Archives. She organized, preserved and displayed

Continued on back page.

priests were persecuted and Catholic laity forbidden to vote or own property, Pennsylvania seemed a model of freedom. William Penn's Charter had a specific Law of Liberty and Conscience. Although Quakers dominated government, there was no tax support for any denomination or for religion generally. There was even, as Benjamin Franklin boasted, a house "for the Use of any Preacher of any religious Persuasion who might desire to say something to the People of Philadelphia."

Unfortunately for Catholics, Pennsylvania was still a colony of the British Empire. And, as a British colony, Pennsylvania's legislature enforced some, though not all, proscriptions against Catholics.

Catholics were excluded from public office. A Pennsylvania law of 1705 mandated that anyone holding office under Crown and Proprieties must:

"Solemnly swear and sincerely profess and testify that in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper there is no transubstantiation of the elements into the body and blood of Christ at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever and that the invocation or adoration of the Virgin Mary or any other saint and the Sacrifice of the Mass as they are now used in the Church of Rome are superstitious and idolatrous."

British law also proscribed public worship for Catholics.

In Old Philadelphia, Catholics directly challenged this restriction. As early as 1708, Governor Logan reported complaints to William Penn about the public celebration of the Mass. Father Greaton, Philadelphia's first permanent pastor, bought property in Willing's Alley on Walnut St and built a small public chapel called St Joseph's. To avoid notice, he designed the chapel to look like the Quaker almshouse next door. This ploy failed.

The lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania called his Provincial Council into session in 1734 and said "He was under no small concern to hear that a house, lately built in Walnut Street, had been set apart for the exercise of the Roman Catholic religion." He wanted to know if the chapel violated English law. Provincial Council

ruled that Penn's Law of Liberty of Conscience took precedence over English law and declared that "it was not in a position to disallow the Catholics use of the edifice on Walnut Street as a public church." For a time, St Joseph's became the only place in the British Empire where Mass was publicly celebrated. When protestors tried to burn the church, friendly Quakers came to the rescue.

A few years later, a Catholic chapel was built at Goshenhoppen. This church also had difficulties with local authorities but was given fair treatment by the colonial government.

During the Feast of Corpus Christi, Goshenhoppen Catholics celebrated in a traditional European fashion with a procession inside the and possibly outside the church.

Non-Catholic neighbors mistook the celebration for a military drill and complained to Governor James Hamilton. "As all our Protestant inhabitants are very uneasy at the behavior of some of the Roman Catholics who are very numerous in this county we

The real story of Pennsylvania's Catholics began long ago in wilderness cabins and Old Philadelphia. It began with families who opened their homes as Mass Houses and who kept faith in spite of test oaths and taxes and protests from civil authorities. We will forever be in their debt.

thought it our duty to inform Your Honour to enable us, by some legal authority, to disarm, or otherwise disable the Papists."

Philadelphia authorities found this complaint without warrant.

Mass Houses were another way to escape restrictions against public worship. Queen Anne's law from 1703 said that Mass could be held in a chapel that was part of a dwelling house.

The chapel built at Conewago in 1741 looked like a three-room farmhouse to conform to Queen Anne's

law. On the frontier, this chapel escaped the controversies that surrounded St Joseph's and Goshenhoppen.

Mass houses in private residences also became staples in Catholic Pennsylvania. One such house belonged to the affluent Willcox family in Delaware County. As early as 1720, Mass was celebrated in the family oratory. Every week, family members, relatives, friends, workmen and servants prepared the altar and attended Mass.

Another Mass House was owned by Christian Henrich, a German immigrant who lived at Spitzenberg in Berks County. Henrich's one-and-a-half-story stone house was used as a chapel by the priests who traveled from the Goshenhoppen area to serve the people in the northern part of their parish. The Holy Bible was kept in a hollow, or hole, in the corner of one wall. Many weddings and baptisms in the Goshenhoppen records were performed there.

The lives of Pennsylvania Catholics became more difficult during the French and Indian War. Fearing that Catholic settlers would ally themselves with Catholic France, the Pennsylvania government passed laws excluding Catholics from militia service and enacting special taxes. One such law read: "No Papist or reputed Papist shall be allowed or admitted to give his vote or be chosen an officer of the militia within any of the districts within these provinces"

Furthermore, "every male Papist or reputed Papist (on account of his exemption from performing military duty) between the age of 17 and 55 must pay the sum of 20 shillings."

To identify these Papists, a census was taken which showed 1,364 Catholics in Pennsylvania, of whom 948 were of German origin and 416 Irish.

For local Catholics to be suspected of treason when their own homes and lives were at risk must have been difficult. Residents of Berks and Northampton Counties suffered terribly from Indian raids on isolated farm-

Catholic Pioneers in Pennsylvania

Continued from Page 2

houses, and Catholic settlers died along with their Protestant neighbors.

Not surprisingly, Catholics were well represented in the fight for American independence when the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775.

Some of the best-known Catholics in the Revolution came from St Joseph's parish in Philadelphia. Colonel Stephen Moylan was Washington's aide-de-camp, cavalry leader, and head of Commissary Department. Commodore John Barry was the father of the American Navy.

Ordinary Catholics also served the American cause as evidenced by the records of a few Goshenhoppen Catholics.

On Aug. 7, 1777, Christopher Eckenroth of Lynn Township, Northampton County, subscribed to the "Oath of Allegiance and Fidelity to the State of Pennsylvania." Other subscribers on the same day were his brother George and his brother-in-law Frederick Lutz.

During the Revolutionary War, Christopher served in 1778 as a Corporal in Captain Matthias Probst's 6th Company, 3rd Battalion of the Northampton County militia. This was the same unit in which his brother George served as Private 6th Class and his brother-in-law, Frederick Lutz, served as Sergeant.

Catholic army chaplains and Jesuit missionaries ministered to Catholic Americans and French in the General Hospital in Allentown. At war's end, a Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated in Philadelphia.

For Pennsylvania's Catholic pioneers and those elsewhere, the new

United States forever ended the days of test oaths, discriminatory taxes and restrictions on public worship. The First Amendment to the Constitution in 1789 stated unequivocally that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

And the new American church now had its own Bishop, John Carroll in Baltimore.

After the Revolution, Pennsylvania's Catholics prospered. Catholic schools and vocations grew. The laity supported their Church with cash donations, labor, land grants and bequests. Descendants of the early Goshenhoppen and Conewago settlers and new emigrants pushed westward over the Alleghenies, establishing new centers of Catholicity including Prince Gallitzin's Loretto, Greensburg, Butler County, Brownsville and Pittsburgh.

Over the next century, as immigration grew, Pennsylvania's Catholics surged into the national consciousness, entered politics, began to work in mines and mills and built the railroads. While they still faced discrimination in employment and society, their status improved with each decade.

However, the record shows that the real story of Pennsylvania's Catholics began long before in wilderness cabins and Old Philadelphia. It began with families who opened their homes as Mass Houses or who kept their faith in spite of test oaths and taxes and protests from civil authorities. Today's Catholics will forever be in their debt both as a public church and as individuals whose ancestors gave us a heritage of faith that continues to this day.

Sister Anna Mary

Continued from Page 1

this material, and she was the main reference source for information about Mercy Hospital. In 1990, she left Mercy Hospital to accept a similar position at Carlow College.

Sister Anna Mary was an active participant of any group to which she belonged. From 1985 until her death, she was a member of the Board of Directors for the Catholic Historical Society. She was a promoter of the Society and convinced many active individuals to join the Board, including myself. She also was a member of the Coalition for Archival and Records Professionals of Western Pennsylvania, and within that group she was known as a dynamic and energetic individual. She was actively involved in several committees at the Motherhouse, including designing the new chapel.

First and foremost, though, was the sense of humor that was at the basis of Sr. Anna Mary's personality. Her eyes would twinkle and she would let out a slight chuckle when someone would tease her — and then she would immediately tease that person right back. She could communicate with the old and the young — and she made wonderful cookies!

Sister Anna Mary Gibson, age 79, a Sister of Mercy for 62 years, died Dec. 27, 1999. The members of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania will always fondly remember her.

— Kathleen M. Washy
Archivist, Mercy Hospital

Your Dues Make Our Work Possible

With thanks for your past support, we ask your membership renewal for 1999.

Sustaining Member \$25
Individual Member \$10

Institutional Member \$15
Individual Vowed Religious \$5

Additional donations help the society to complete research, publishing and preservation projects in local Church history. Send check to Catholic Historical Society of Western Pa., Synod Hall, 125 North Craig Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-1510.

Historical Society Board of Directors

Blanche McGuire, President
Anthony P. Joseph, Vice President
Father James Garvey, Secretary
Paul Demilio, Treasurer
Mike Aquilina
Msgr. Russell Duker
John Farmerie
Robert Fenimore
Regina Kelly
Father David Kriss
Robert and Mary Lloyd
Kathleen M. Washy