

The Church

The Roman Catholic Church was officially established in the United States by Pope Pius VI (1775-1799) in 1789. All thirteen states of the new nation were included under the first diocese, which was designated as the Diocese of Baltimore. The first bishop of the diocese was John Carroll, a prominent American cleric of Revolutionary times.

The Diocese of New York was established in 1808 and New Jersey, then sparsely populated with Catholic churches, became part of this newly-formed diocese. But it was difficult for the people in the Scotch Plains area to attend Mass because the Catholic churches were located miles away in the towns of Elizabeth and New Brunswick. In 1847, the Chapel of St. Mary's in Stony Hill, Watchung, was built.

As the population grew in New Jersey, the Diocese of Newark was established in 1853 under Pope Pius IX (1846-1878). Parishes were founded--Holy Trinity in Westfield; and St. Mary's and St. Bernard's, both in Plainfield.

The Catholics in Scotch Plains traveled to St. Bernard's and Holy Trinity to hear Mass. And others would climb the winding Bonnie Burne Road to St. Mary's Chapel in Stony Hill.

Attempts were made by the San Nicola di Bari Society to establish a Catholic parish in Scotch Plains in 1914 and again in 1925 when the society purchased six and one-half acres fronting Westfield Avenue from Emilio and Aquilina Ferrara for \$6,000. Requests for the formation of a parish failed repeatedly. The land was retained by the society, however, in hopes that a parish would one day be established.

In 1929, Scotch Plains was adopted as a mission by St. Bernard's. The first Mass was celebrated on December 11, 1929, by Father Joseph Kelly from the Plainfield parish. It was offered in the small second-floor auditorium of our School One building on Park Avenue. Only one Sunday Mass, at 9:00 a.m., was offered in the mission, and it was normally crowded. Many families continued to travel to the other area churches.

Many other priests followed Father Kelly, but the one I remember was Father Joseph Driscoll who joined St. Bernard's as associate pastor, and the Scotch Plains mission became his responsibility. When he arrived, he initiated Sunday school for the mission. There were sixty of us in 1946-1947 who either walked or took a bus to St. Bernard's School every Thursday. The program lasted only a year--it was the year of my Confirmation.

On Sundays, the priest and several nuns would arrive by car from Plainfield with their equipment. With the help of parishioners, they set up the altar on the stage. I can remember Betty McGinn faithfully putting the lovely lace cloths on the makeshift altar--doing this every Sunday. She was the daughter of our only doctor in town, and later became a nun.