

## The History of St. Thomas the Apostle The First Fifty Years

The following is from a small book commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Thomas the Apostle.

THE YEAR was 1902, the month was July, the day was the 9th.

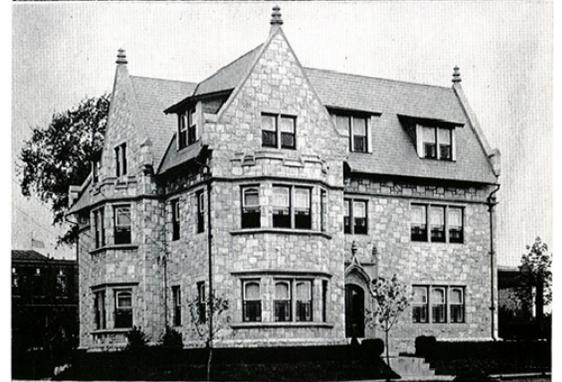
This date will never be forgotten as it was on this day that His Excellency, the Most Reverend John J. Monaghan, Bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington, had purchased the property, near Fourth Street and Grant Avenue, as the site for a new Catholic Church and initiated the erection thereon of a combined church and school to be named in honor of the patron saint of the first Bishop of Wilmington, Most Reverend Thomas A. Becker. The cornerstone was laid on May 24, 1903, by Bishop Monaghan, assisted by Vicar-General John A. Lyons and a large group of priests.

The ceremonies began with a processional from the home of the Little Sisters of the Poor to a large wooden cross on the Church site where it was determined that the altar would be erected. After blessing this particular spot, the Bishop then consecrated and laid the cornerstone. Following this he blessed the foundation and then bestowed the Papal Blessing on all those present at the ceremony. The sermon was delivered by the Reverend Francis T. McCarthy, S.J., while the musical program was under the direction of Professor James Curran.

On June 30, 1903, the Reverend John J. Connelly, then Chancellor of the Diocese and Assistant Pastor of Saint Paul's Church, was appointed as first Pastor of Saint Thomas. The initial reward of his Pastorate occurred in September of 1903 with the arrival of four Franciscan Sisters from Glen Riddle who opened the Mission School of Saint Thomas. Sister Mary Matilda was in charge and Sisters Mary Dagaberta, Mary Arthur and Mary Gonzalez assisted with the teaching. The school opened on September 8 with 218 children in attendance.

Under the patient guidance of Father Connelly the far-flung membership of the parish was gathered and molded into a thriving unit. The Holy Name Society and the Blessed Virgin Sodality were formed immediately as they are the real backbone of a successful church. The love and esteem the parishioners had for their beloved pastor was shown by their response to his appeal for the necessary funds for a new Church and Rectory. In 1910 the first steps were taken for the development and improvement of the Church property, ground was broken for the rectory building and, upon its completion in 1911, the priests entered their new home. Built of Avondale Granite and comprising some eighteen rooms, it is a familiar sight to all of our parishioners. In this venture we again see the wonderful foresight of Father Connelly as he caused the erection of this structure with the knowledge that Saint Thomas would grow and therefore would necessitate more priests to administer to its needs.

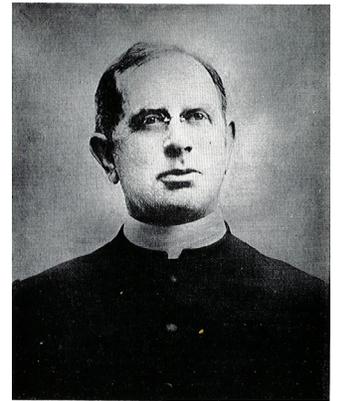
In the late teens and early twenties, Father Connelly witnessed the development into residential sections of some of the vacant fields of the parish. In fact, 1918 saw the development of Union Park Gardens, part of Elsmere, Brack-Ex, Roselle, Price's Corner and the Cedars, extending the parish boundaries by leaps and bounds. To guide and influence the growing parish Father Connelly was ably assisted by Reverend Martin Ryan for three years, Reverend John Brady for one year, and the Reverend John J. Lynch (present Pastor of Christ Our King Parish) for fifteen years.



TOP – Original Church and School, now the old gym.  
BOTTOM – The brand new rectory in 1911.

To further the interests of the Church, Father Connelly had initiated a fund-raising campaign that realized some \$80,000; the building at Fourth and Union Streets and the adjoining lot; a building lot at Third and Union Streets and one at the corner of Third and Bancroft Parkway (Grant Avenue).

On February 20, 1925, the parish, Diocese, and city of Wilmington were grieved to learn of the sudden death of Father Connelly. The pastoral duties were carried on by Father John J. Lynch until May, at which time the Most Reverend John J. Monaghan appointed the Reverend John N. Dougherty as Pastor.



Rev. John J. Connelly – First Pastor

For the next year Father Dougherty studied the crowded conditions existing in the school and church and came to the conclusion that the only means of alleviating the condition was the erection of a new church and the using of the present one for classrooms. The decision was announced and carried in the December 5, 1926, issue of the Sunday Star as follows: "Announcement by Reverend John N. Dougherty, Pastor of Saint Thomas Church at Fourth Street and Grant Avenue of the erection of a new church for that parish marks an important step in the progress of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington."



Rev. John N. Dougherty  
Second Pastor

January, 1927, saw the breaking of the ground for the new church and it was noted that the edifice would seat 850 people and would cost some \$250,000. The cornerstone was laid on May 15, 1927, by His Excellency, the Most Reverend Edmond J. FitzMaurice, D.D., assisted by Vicar General John J. Dougherty and the Very Reverend J. Francis Tucker and the Pastor, John N. Dougherty. Ceremonial addresses were delivered by United States Senator Thomas F. Bayard, Mayor George W.K. Forrest and also John S. Rossell.

Nine months later, February 19, 1928, the newspapers carried the announcement of the formal opening of the new Saint Thomas Church with a Solemn High Mass at 11 A.M. Father John J. Dougherty was celebrant, assisted by Father Michael McGarry, assistant pastor, as deacon; and Father Anscar as sub-deacon. During the Mass, a special music program was rendered under the direction of Professor James Curran, who, 25 years ago when the parish was formed, was in charge of the musical program at its dedication. At the evening service, the Stations of the Cross were blessed and erected. Reverend William McLaughlin, O.S.F.S., of Salesianum and a former pupil of Saint Thomas, delivered the sermon.

The new church was designed by Gleeson and Mulrooney of Philadelphia. (Mr. Mulrooney was a former student of Saint Thomas.) The structure, built by John E. Healy & Sons, is made of beautiful Avondale Granite in the English Gothic design, 135 feet deep, 66 feet wide at the front and 78 feet wide at the back. From floor to ceiling measured 52 feet. The 106 feet tower, designed as the dominating point of the facade, is located at the corner of Fourth Street and Bancroft Parkway and commands a view of the entire western section of Wilmington.

The main altar of the old church was re-erected in the new church in memory of His Excellency, Thomas A. Becker, first Bishop of the Wilmington Diocese, and the altar rail was erected in memory of Father Connelly, our first Pastor. Some time later, two side altars, imported from Italy, were erected. Over the main altar was installed a beautiful stained-glass window depicting the Crucifixion of Our Lord, and in the choir loft another stained-glass window, known as the Saint Cecilia window, was installed. On February 26, 1928, the statue of Saint Therese of Lisieux (a memorial to Marie Connor) was moved from the old church to the new and one week later, on March 4, a delegation of parishioners from Saint Anthony's Church moved the statue of Saint Michael and Saint Lucy from Saint Thomas' old church to their newly erected church. This impressive transfer ceremony was in charge of the Very Reverend J. Francis Tucker.

Our new church was dedicated on April 29, 1928, by His Excellency, the Most Reverend Edmund J. FitzMaurice, D.D., assisted by Father John Dougherty. The High Mass was celebrated by Reverend William McLaughlin, O.S.F.S., and the sermon was delivered by the Reverend John F. Vanston. This dedication marked a new era of the church as during the next ten years, under the very able leadership of Father Dougherty, the parish enjoyed a growth, that didn't make new stories, but that did enrich the spiritual lives of each and every member.



On Sunday, June 5, 1938, a recital was held in the church to observe the installation of a new Dine organ by M. P. Moller, Inc., of Hagerstown, Maryland, at a cost of \$10,000. The console has three manuals (Choir, Great, Swell) and a pedal (Great Choir) keyboard on which is available a set of 21 Deagan Cathedral Chimes. The organ is made up of 1,448 pipes and the entire structure is protected by two temperature-proof chambers. At this opening recital, Dr. Charles M. Courboin, the eminent Belgian-American organist, presented a program which included selections from Hardel, Schubert, Bach, Franck and Widor. Among the notables present were Governor Richard C. McMullen and Lieutenant-Governor Edward W. Cooch.

In September, 1941, a bell was installed in the church tower and became an integral part of the daily parish life. This bell had been presented to the parish 21 years before by the Union Volunteer Fire Company when they disbanded. At that time the old frame and steel tower had been erected in the church yard and, for many years, its tolling called the people to Mass and the children to school. Before being placed in the new church tower it was remodeled, refinished and new clappers installed.

A project that taxed the ingenuity of Father Dougherty was the building of a new convent. Since their arrival at Saint Thomas in 1903 the Sisters had lived in Saint Paul's Convent for one year; 220 Union Street for one year; 2105 West Fifth Street from 1905 to 1911. At this time the priests moved into their new rectory on Bancroft Parkway and so the Sisters then received a permanent home in the old rectory building on Third Street, a ten room structure. They moved into this building on the feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle, December 21, 1911.

As the years rolled by the number of Sisters at Saint Thomas increased and, even though both Father Connelly and Father Dougherty increased the facilities of the Convent, it was deemed inadequate to properly administer to the Sisters' needs. With a display of his wonderful foresight, Father Dougherty had been planning and accumulating funds from 1930 to 1941 for a new convent. It was in 1941 that he decided to build in spite of the unsettled world condition. All through the spring and summer months he and Thomas Mulrooney, the architect, planned the layouts and costs. Their intention was to use Avondale Granite similar to that used in both the church and rectory but conditions necessitated the abandonment of this plan and stone from the Mount Airy Quarries in North Carolina was obtained. The general building contract was awarded to John E. Healy & Son, Inc.

The ground for the new Convent was broken on the feast of the Little Flower, October 3, 1941, by the Reverend Edward A. McAteer, assistant pastor, in the absence of Father Dougherty, who was ill. The morning of a hot day in July, 1942, saw the laying of the cornerstone and we are pleased to repeat the lines from the *Wilmington Morning News* of July 20, 1942, as follows:

*"More than 500 persons turned out in spite of the heat, yesterday to attend the colorful! cornerstone laying ceremonies at Saint] Thomas' Convent , Third Street and Bayard Avenue, when the new structure was blessed by the Most Reverend Dr. Edmund J. FitzMaurice, Bishop of Wilmington. Following ancient ritual, the Bishop lead a procession of attending clergy, acolytes, and altar boys around the exterior of the convent and through its corridors. In laying the stone, the Bishop used the same engraved silver trowel which he used in similar exercises for the Church building about ten years ago."*



The new convent, erected at a cost of some \$70,000, is a three-story Tudor-Gothic structure. Besides providing ample quarters for the Sisters, it has a community room, dining room, kitchen, two parlors, and a chapel with a liturgical altar (a gift of the B.V.S.) and a free-standing tabernacle. The stained glass windows, a gift of the Holy Name Society, the children, and some of the parishioners, depict the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, patron of the Order. The pews in the chapel are a gift of Mr. Farren and the furnishings on the first floor of the convent were made possible by Sister Mary Wilhelmina, who suggested that the inheritance left to her by her parents be used for that particular accomplishment.



The years 1941 to 1944 saw the world torn by armed conflict and we, as countless other parishes, were called upon for young men and women by the government.

In 1941, Father John Dougherty was in failing health and so he directed that his plans and ideas be furthered under the capable direction of Reverend Edward A. McAteer, assistant pastor.

In 1944, the remaining windows of the church, which were plain frosted glass, were replaced by stained-glass windows. In order to accomplish this tremendous task, Father McAteer called upon Father Michael Dougherty and Father Herbert Rimlinger for their able assistance; an appeal was made to the parishioners and the response was so tremendous that all 32 small windows and 10 large windows needed to complete the church, were obtained with no difficulty. The magnificent

window over the main altar and the Saint Cecilia window in the choir had been installed when the new church was erected.

It is with a great deal of pride that we sum up the many fine accomplishments during the Pastorate of Father Dougherty: a new church was built and paid for, as well as a new convent; the installation of a new organ in the church; the spending of some \$26,000 for the renovation of the old church into classrooms to accommodate the needs of the growing parish, and the saving of a considerable sum of money in bonds in the Farmers Bank toward the building of a new school.



Monsignor Patrick A. Brennan, Third Pastor

The Reverend Patrick A. Brennan, former pastor of St. Joseph's on the Brandywine, succeeded Father Dougherty at Saint Thomas on July 29, 1945. Father Brennan immediately delved into many projects but to our sorrow his health broke down after one and one-half years and his remaining days were spent in a great deal of pain. He passed on on November 25, 1950.

However, during Father Brennan's short pastorate, he completely renovated the rectory. This job entailed rewiring, painting, plastering, installation of oil heat and a hot water burner. Following this project came the redecorating of the church and also the addition of two classrooms on the third floor of the school.

A drive was started for the necessary money to accomplish the construction of the needed classrooms but this drive was not as successful as were the previous ones. Nevertheless, the parish was able to pay off its debts, using some of the money left by Father Dougherty.

Of all the outstanding characteristics of Father Brennan, one can say that the most outstanding was charity -he could never say "no" to any demand made on him. He was generous to a fault but never held malice to those whom he knew were taking advantage of his kindness. His love of the school children was boundless, a fact substantiated by his almost daily appearance in the school yard with them.

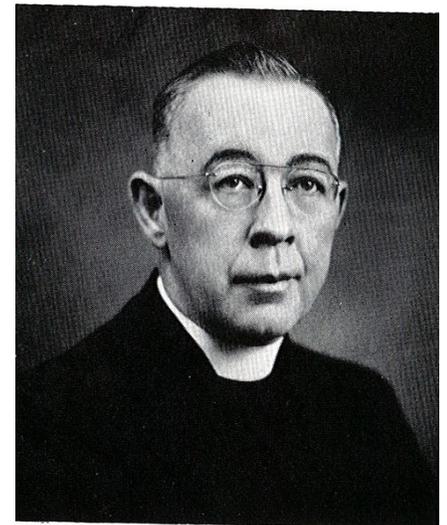
The sickness that deprived us of our very beloved Pastor occurred one snowy day. It was after assisting Father McAteer distribute Holy Communion at a Knights of Columbus Communion Breakfast that Father Brennan complained of poor circulation in his legs and feet. From that day on his health deteriorated and for the next two years he was virtually bedfast.

The passing of Father Brennan was a very severe blow to the parish for he had all the qualities that endeared him to the people and we feel sure that if God had spared him for a few more years, his pastorate would have been one of our most glorious memories.

On May 23, 1952, His Excellency, the Bishop, appointed Reverend Edward A. McAteer as Pastor to succeed Monsignor Brennan.

Of the many projects facing the new Pastor is that of a new school to replace the present structure which has become so very inadequate over the 50 years past. Designed to accommodate 350 pupils when erected, it becomes nigh on to impossible to accommodate the present enrollment of 600. As a result it has become necessary to turn away over 100 children which may mean that their basic character development in moral principles may be retarded.

The ground for a new school has been purchased on Woodlawn Avenue about one and one-half blocks from the convent. Despite the fact that the present unsettled condition in labor and management makes our situation very discouraging, we are, God willing, going to keep our promise to build a new school just as soon as we have sufficient funds, - let this be a goal of utmost importance to all of us. A new school will give us a complete plant - a church, school, convent, and rectory -and one that will be a monument to the people of Saint Thomas Parish who have worked so fervently during the past 50 years.



Rev. Edward A. McAteer  
Fourth Pastor



Blessed Virgin Society - 1953

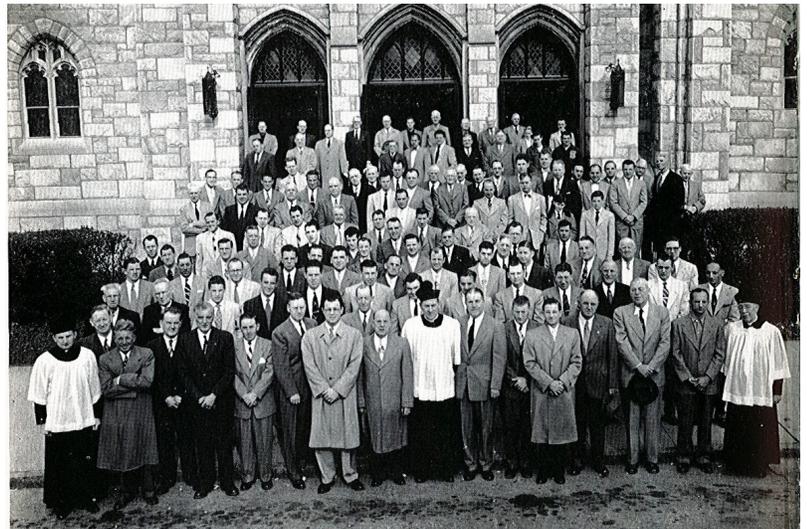
Also, under Father McAteer's guidance and due to his unflinching zeal, contributions to the Orphans and Seminary increased from 400 to 600 percent.

Able assisting Father McAteer in bringing the parish societies of a cultural, social and religious nature to their present flourishing position were: Reverend Hubert J. Rimlinger, J.C.D., present Pastor of Our Mother of Sorrows Parish, Centreville, Maryland; Reverend John P. McLoughlin, assistant at Saint Elizabeth's Parish, Wilmington; and the present assistants at Saint Thomas, Reverend Bernard Loughrey, and Reverend Gregory Peckos. The parish can proudly point to its Holy Name Society, Blessed Virgin Sodality, Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic

Youth Organization of Junior and Senior levels, Cub Packs and Boy Scouts.

While taking care of the material organization of the parish, Father McAteer has not neglected the spiritual needs of his people. Shortly after his pastorate began, the Passionate Fathers conducted a Mission for the men and women, the first to be held at Saint Thomas in fifteen years. Devotions in honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal are held each Sunday evening. Each year, also, arrangements are made for priests of one of the religious orders to conduct a parish retreat.

As we close this story of our first fifty years, it is hoped that each and every member of the parish is as proud of the material and spiritual accomplishments as are the pastor and his assistants who have worked endlessly-toward this end.



Holy Name Society - 1953