

OUR HISTORY

South Carolina, a colony of the British empire, was settled in 1670 by the Lords Proprietors, English supporters of the restored King Charles II.¹ The original Protestant British settlers were soon joined by French Huguenots, also Protestants. The colony's laws were British laws dating from the Reformation which privileged Protestantism and forbade Catholicism. British authorities feared hostilities from Catholic Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and Catholic French colony in the North. As a result, any Catholic in South Carolina was wise to keep his religion a secret. The United States Constitution in effect in 1789, following the War for Independence, finally granted religious liberty to all – including Catholics. A new South Carolina constitution followed in 1790. This document abolished liabilities against Catholics making it possible to publicly organize a Catholic community known legally as 'the Roman Catholic Congregation of Charleston'. This community became known as St. Mary's and is known as the Mother Church of Catholicism in the Carolinas and Georgia. The church structure was designed by James Hoban, an Irish architect and original member of the vestry. Hoban went on to design the White House in Washington, DC at the request of President George Washington.²

French, Irish, Spanish, German, Italian, and Spanish Catholics, among others, formed the Catholic community, elected vestry members, and hired a priest. The vestry claimed authority to do so because they were the legal incorporators and were legally known as 'the Roman Catholic Community.'³ So many refugees from Europe settled in Charleston that the vestry appointed wardens for each 'nationality, the largest of which were French, including those from French Caribbean colonies.⁴ These refugees included mixed race and enslaved people who joined whites in the small Catholic church on Hasell Street. The French refugees begged the archbishop for a

¹ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina, a History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

² Stuart D. McLaurin, *James Hoban, Designer and Builder of the White House* (Washington, DC: The White House Historical association, 2021).

³ Only after Bishop John England built the Cathedral of St. Finbar and St. John the Baptist did the original Roman Catholic church become known as St. Mary's. The additional appellation 'of the Annunciation' was added sometime in the late 19th or 20th century.

⁴ Richard C. Madden, *Catholics in South Carolina: a Record*, foreword by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (New York: University Press and America, 1985). The stream of French refugees began in 1789 and abated in 1815 with the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte the restoration of the French monarchy. French refugees from colonies in the Caribbean joined other French refugees, notably from 1791 when the wealthy colony Saint-Domingue rebelled and became the republic of Haiti in 1804. See Winston Babb, "French Refugees From Saint Domingue to the Southern United States: 1791-1810", University of Virginia PhD dissertation, 1954; Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influence* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010); Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: the Aftershocks of History* (New York: Picador/Henry Hold, 2012).

pastor who could preach and hear confessions in their own language. In 1812 Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore sent newly ordained royalist French priest Joseph de Picot de Limoëlan, Chevalier de Clorivière as the lawfully appointed pastor. The republican Irish dominated vestry rebelled and created a scandal when some terrorists threatened the French pastor's life, in part because they hated his politics and religious rigor. Archbishop Leonard Neale declared interdict and closed the church. The schism was only resolved when Rome appointed Irish-born Fr. John England the first bishop of Charleston, a see comprising North and South Carolina and Georgia. When the still rebellious vestry refused to turn over the sacramental registers the bishop closed the first church and built a second Catholic church on Broad Street, The Cathedral of St. Finbar and St. John the Baptist. When the Catholic church on Hasell Street was allowed to reopen it was named St. Mary's. By the twentieth century the name 'St. Mary of the Annunciation' was in common use, possibly to distinguish it from St. Mary of the Sea on Sullivan's Island, which became Stella Maris.

The parish and vestry became predominantly French by the 1840s. Irish Catholics moved to the Cathedral and to St. Patrick's on St. Philips Street. Charleston artist Charles Fraser noted that one could still hear French spoken on the streets of Charleston as late as the 1840s. Officers of the French charitable society were nearly all members of St. Mary's Church. As late as 1860s some Saint-Dominguan refugees in Charleston still hoped to regain some of their property lost in the Haitian revolution of 1804.

Charleston has suffered fire, hurricane, war, and earthquake. The fire of 1839 damaged St. Mary's and neighboring Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue, a historically important Jewish congregation.⁵ The Fire of 1861 spared St. Mary's Church: but later in the Civil War Union

⁵ "The Roman Catholic Congregation of Charleston" and Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim were incorporated on the same day in 1793. Each faith community has remained at the same location since that date.

forces bombarded Charleston for 587 days.⁶ The organ and some gravestones were destroyed, and cannon marks are still visible on the walls. The church structure suffered minor damage from the Earthquake of 1886, the Sea Island Hurricane of 1893, and Hurricane Hugo of 1989.

After the Civil War St. Mary's sponsored a short-lived school on St. Philip's Street. By the 1880s St. Mary's was a prominent music venue. The *Charleston News and Courier* newspaper regularly reviewed music at Sunday Mass and special musical benefits. Madame Blanche Hermine Petit Barbot, an internationally known musician, directed the choir and played organ. Her performances at Christmas and Easter attracted audiences beyond the parish. She founded the Charleston Music Association, the nucleus of today's well-known Charleston tradition of music.

Antebellum clergy of St. Mary's played an important part in the intellectual life of the Church. Fr. James A. Corcoran, born in Charleston, edited the *United States Catholic Miscellany*, the first Catholic newspaper in the United States. Corcoran also edited the collected works of Bishop John England under the direction of Bishop Ignatius Reynolds. Corcoran, who received his training at the Pontifical College in Rome, later was appointed Theologian of the first Vatican Council in 1870, then was appointed to the Catholic seminary in Overbrook, Pennsylvania. His students later donated the image of the Assumption which adorns St. Mary's ceiling.⁷

Fr. Augustine Hewit, a convert, assisted Fr. Corcoran on the Bishop England editorial project. He later joined Fr. Isaac Hecker and others in founding the Paulist Fathers, the first community of Catholic priests in the United States.

⁶ In contrast, the epic Siege of Stalingrad during World War II lasted 199 days.

⁷ David C.R. Heisser, "Corcoran, James Andrew," Walter Edgar, ed. *The South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2006):227.

These men, with Bishop Patrick Lynch, had wide intellectual acquaintances in the United States and Europe, including Orestes Brownson, a convert and prominent American Catholic apologist, and John Henry Cardinal Newman, a convert to Catholicism and founder of the Oxford Movement.

FOUNDING AND EARLY DAYS

The First Mass Celebrated in Charleston

Because of the laws proscribing Catholicism in the colonial period, few Roman Catholics dared to publicly acknowledge their religion. Yet in 1786 a ship with an Italian priest aboard put into Charleston harbor and celebrated Mass in a private home for about a dozen people. In addition to the sacraments, this gathering allowed isolated Catholics to meet like-minded souls and to form a community.

Founding of the Roman Catholic Community which became St. Mary's Church

In 1788 Fr. John Carroll, Apostolic Prefect of the United States, later Bishop, and Archbishop of Baltimore, sent Dublin priest Fr. Matthew Ryan to Charleston. He rented a house on Hasell Street which had been used as a chapel for the Countess of Huntington's Methodists, a more rigorous community than that of John and Charles Wesley's Methodist community.

Illness forced Fr. Ryan to seek a healthier climate. Bishop Carroll then sent Fr. Thomas Keating to the Charleston mission. Fr. Keating had a public ministry, for example, he attended a condemned man on the scaffold, an event so unusual it was reported in the newspaper. He facilitated the purchase of the Hasell Street site and the act of incorporation by the trustees – an

act which was to bedevil the community for decades. Charleston's climate proved too much for Fr. Keating; he sought a relief in Philadelphia and died in 1793.

Émigris from the French Revolution sought refuge in Atlantic and Gulf port cities, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans. The French in Charleston created a more cosmopolitan society: balls, musicals, coffee houses, dancing masters, French language teachers, a girls' school, and a free mixed race Catholic element in Charleston's Protestant and white and enslaved culture. Émigris were Catholic, monarchists, republicans, slaveowners, businesspeople, and begged the Archbishop for a French speaking pastor.⁸ Among the émigris were Admiral Francois Joseph Paul de Grasse and his family; de Grasse was the French commander who blockaded British General Cornwallis at Yorktown, thus ensuring victory in the War for Independence.

Irish-born Fr. Simon Felix Gallagher followed Fr. Keating. Gallagher founded the Hibernian Society and taught at the College of Charleston. He was also frequently absent from his duties which incurred the Archbishop's censure. To replace Gallagher and provide a priest for the growing French community Archbishop Carroll sent newly ordained Fr. Joseph Pierre Picot de Limoëlan, Chevalier de Clorivière in 1812. The 40-year-old priest was a grizzled royalist soldier and counter-revolutionary in France; and Christmas Eve, 1800, attempted to assassinate Napoleon Bonaparte

Gallagher refused to leave Charleston and appealed to Rome for reinstatement. Public scandal and ecclesiastical schism resulted. As the new pastor Clorivière incurred the wrath of vestry, and slaveholders, when he formed a catechism class for enslaved people. Anti-monarchists tried to

⁸ Nicholas M. Butler, *Votaries of Apollo: The Saint Cecilia Society and the Patronage of Concert Music in Charleston, South Carolina, 1766 – 1820* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

kidnap the French priest; failing that an assassin tried to murder him as he celebrated Mass. Archbishop Leonard Neale placed the church under interdict which meant all sacraments were forbidden. The rebellious vestry kept the doors open, while Fr. Clorivière celebrated Mass and the sacraments in a private chapel. Archbishop Ambrose Marechal sent Jesuit fathers Benedict Fenwick and James Wallace to restore order in Charleston. Fr Clorivière accepted the post of chaplain to the Visitation Monastery in Washington, DC where he is revered as a second founder. He died in 1826. Fr. Fenwick became president of Georgetown College (later Georgetown University) and Bishop of Boston. Fr. Wallace left the Jesuit order in 1820 and taught mathematics at the South Carolina College (later University of South Carolina). Anti-Catholic bigotry forced him to leave his teaching post. When he died in 1851 his estate went to establish a male orphan asylum in Charleston.

The Charleston Schism was so serious that in 1820 Rome finally Irish-born Fr. John England to form a new diocese in 1820.⁹

Pastors of St. Mary's Church

Stet.

⁹ Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John England, First Bishop of Charleston, 1766 – 1842* (New York: The America Press, 1927); Suzanne Krebsbach, "The Assassin Limoëlan: Political and Religious Conflict in South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 120:2 (XX)