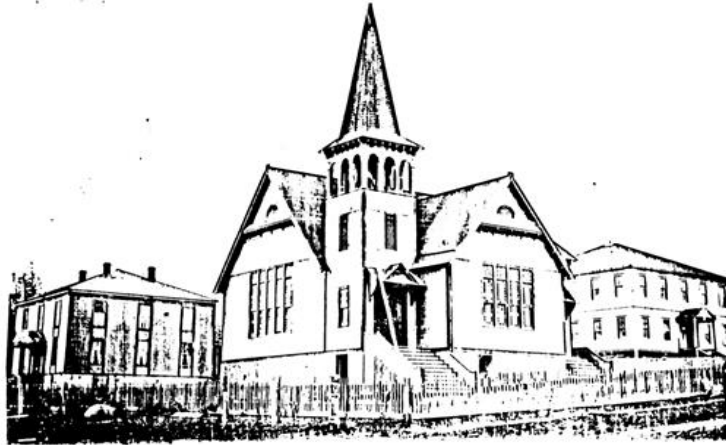


A History of St. Mary's Church



This history is in two parts, the first gives a brief background of St. Mary's Catholic Church before it became a Catholic Church. The second part is a brief history of the Catholic Church on Whidbey Island and includes the purchase of St. Mary's Church in 1934 and its subsequent history.

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH HISTORY

Early in January, 1866, Mrs. Daniel Pearson, accompanied by her teenaged son and daughter, prepared to board the steamship CONTINENTAL in New York Harbor to make the trip around the tip of South America to the Washington Territory. They would be part of the Second Mercer Expedition.

The First Mercer Expedition had sailed in 1864. Georgia and Josephine Pearson were members of that first group – they were called the “Mercer Girls”, and they came to teach school. Both sisters had jobs on Whidbey Island. They were chaperoned by their father, who had secured a job as the Lighthouse Keeper on Whidbey Island. He then sent for his wife and two teenagers.

Mrs. Pearson and the children sailed on January 17, and they arrived in San Francisco on April 24, 1866. In a few days, they were sailing north on a smaller ship, landing on May 31, at Port Townsend, the port of entry for the Washington Territory at that time. On June 1, they sailed by ferry to Whidbey Island, coming ashore at Ebey's Landing. As they climbed the bluff to their new home in the lighthouse, Flora Augusta Pearson, age 15, felt she was “one step from heaven.”

And so, the Pearson family and other pioneer families settled Central Whidbey Island on “land donations.” Flora Pearson worked with her father as Assistant Lighthouse Keeper for eleven years. On May 8, 1876, she was married to William B. Engle in Victoria, B.C. by the Reverend A. Russ, A Wesleyan minister.

They returned to Whidbey to take up residence on Hill Harmon, part of the Alexander Donation Claim.

In January, 1889, a committee was appointed to solicit money (\$1000) to build a church, and in June of 1889 they began building. The church was incorporated on July 24, 1889.

By October 5, 1889, the congregation was moving ahead to complete the tower. The church was officially dedicated as the First Congregational Church of Coupeville on January 26, 1890.

In the year 1890, there arrived in Coupeville a bell from the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, Maryland. It weighed 800 pounds, was made of "bell metal" – i.e. 80% copper, and 20% tin, and cost \$205.00. It was a gift to the church and was inscribed as follows:

"O Come, Let Us Worship"
Presented to the
First Congregational Church, Coupeville
by T.W. Calhoun & E.J. Hancock
1890

The Puget Sound Academy was an "Academy of College" under the auspices and management of the Congregational Church, but open to all people. It took the place of high school in the Puget Sound area. The academy was very popular after it opened in 1886. Students came from Seattle, Tacoma, Port Townsend, and other surrounding towns and cities. When the original school on Lower Main Street burned in 1896; it was rebuilt on land south of the new church. A dormitory was built east of the church. As high schools became more common in the cities and towns of Puget Sound, enrollment in the academy fell. It was eventually moved by the Congregational Confederation to Snohomish, but the academy, now known as the Whidbey Island Academy, a private school, continued into the 1900s.

In 1913, they found it necessary to remove the tall spire and build a lower tower, one easier to maintain. The rebuilt steeple was completed in 1917.

Lights were connected to the Church and parsonage in December 1927.

On September 1, 1932, a special meeting was called to decide if they should rent their church, which was no longer being used for worship, to the Catholic Diocese of Seattle. They voted unanimously to rent the building for one year for \$100. The rent was later reduced to \$60 per year. The Catholics were obliged to pay for electric and water. This rental money was to be kept separate from the Methodist Congregational money. It was to be used to pay for the insurance on the building and to pay toward the mortgage on the church.

In June of 1934 the Congregational Community sold the church and dormitory to the Catholic Church for \$1500. And the new Catholic Church was named St. Mary's, and her pastor was Fr. John E. O'Brien

Catholic History:

The story of Catholics on Whidbey Island goes back to 1839 when several Indians went by canoe and on foot to a settlement at Cowlitz (now Toledo) where two missionaries, Father Francois W. Blanchet and Father Modesto Delmers had just arrived from the Province of Quebec.

Many years before, in the early 1800s, the Hudson Bay Company, The Northwest Company of Montreal, and John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company had all established trading posts in the old Oregon Territory. The Pacific Fur Company Post at Fort Astoria lasted only two years and the Hudson Bay Company absorbed the Northwest Company of Montreal. The Hudson Bay Company continued its role of maintaining trading posts. By agreement, after the War of 1812, the British Empire and the United States shared the Columbia River area called the Oregon Country. The British hoped to someday retain all lands north of the Columbia River.

After many years of living in this area, the French Canadian workers, many of whom had married Indian women and wanted to settle down and farm this area. They wanted a Catholic priest to minister to them and their families. One of these, Simon Bonaparte Plamondon, was born near Quebec, Canada in 1801. He had worked as a "voyageur" for the Hudson Bay Company, paddling large canoes up and down treacherous waterways for the fur industry. He had a farm at Cowlitz and was one of the men who petitioned Quebec to send a priest. As early as 1821, petitions were sent. Stories indicate that Simon Plamondon traveled 2000 miles to the Red River post to ask for a priest.

In March 1838, the Bishop of Quebec finally received word that the Hudson Bay Company, headquartered in England, would supply the priests' transportation provided the missions would be established NORTH of the Columbia River. And so, Fr. Francois W. Blanchet and Fr. Modeste Delmers were chosen.

Father Blanchet started from the Montreal area May 3, 1838. He was joined by Father Delmers at the Red River settlement on June 6. They left there on July 10. By canoe and on foot, they slowly moved westward across Lake Winnepeg, the Saskatchewan River to Fort Edmondton, the Athabasca River to Oregon Country. When they reached Fort Colville, Chiefs of five Indian tribes greeted them. Word had spread that the "Blackrobes" were coming. On Saturday, November 24, 1838, they reached Fort Vancouver. They had zigzagged across southern Canada for 5000 miles during six months. Now the real work of the priests was to begin.

On December 12, Father Blanchet left Fort Vancouver to move to the Cowlitz River area to establish a permanent mission, as were his instructions from the Bishop of Quebec. On Sunday, December 16, he arrived at Simon Planmondon's home at the Cowlitz settlement and celebrated Mass there.

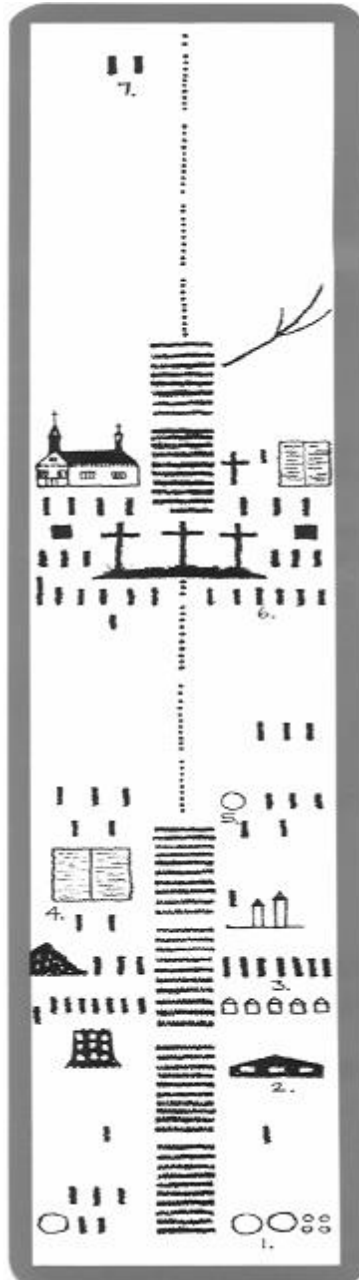
Upon hearing the "Blackrobes" had arrived at Cowlitz, many Indian tribes, including some from Whidbey Island, arrived to hear about the "Great Spirit." In seeking a plain and simple method of teaching the Indians, Father Blanchet devised a system that was notched on a stick of wood. This became known as

the "Catholic Ladder" or "Shahole Stick." This display of lines and dots, a history of religion from creation to the present, was later transferred to parchment and became widely used by other missionaries.

THE CATHOLIC LADDER

Rev. Father F.N. Blanchet made first use of this "Catholic Ladder" in July of 1842 at the Cowlitz Mission (also known as St. Francis Mission) in order to teach the Indians the main truths of the Catholic faith. Many copies of the ladder were made and presented to the Indian chiefs, thereafter it was in constant use among the Northwest Indians. A display featuring the Catholic Ladder stands on the grounds of St. Francis Mission. The 40 horizontal bars represent the 40 centuries B.C. The 33 dots represent the years of Christ's life on earth. The 18 bars represent the 18 centuries A.D. and the 42 dots represent the 42 succeeding years. Some examples of what the other symbols represent are: (1) Heaven, Angels, and the 6 days of Creation, (2) Noah's Ark, (3) the Ten Commandments, (4) Elizabeth and Zachary, (5) Star of Bethlehem, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, (6) The Twelve Apostles, (7) The Reverends Blanchet and Damers.

CELEBRATING 150 YEARS
St. Francis Mission
Toledo, Washington
1838-1988



Among these Whidbey Island Indian pilgrims, famished with hunger, and with bleeding feet, Chief Tslalakum of the tribe of Sowkamish Indians arrived with his men. This group received instruction in the Christian religion, learning various ceremonies and prayers and hymns, which the chief was to teach his people on his return to Whidbey.

The following year, a canoe with seven Indians and a woman, who was Chief Tslalakum's wife, arrived for further study. The Chief was ill but he wanted his people to study the beliefs of the "Blackrobes." These Indians invited Father Blanchet to come to Whidbey Island and work among their people.

And so, on May 28, 1840, Father Blanchet arrived at Chief Tslalakum's village, which seems to have been on the western shore near Ebey's Landing. Father Blanchet was warmly welcomed. When he began to instruct the Indians, he made the Sign of the Cross, only to see all the Indians join him in this visible prayer. He was also pleasantly surprised to have the people join him again in prayers and hymns well taught to them by the chief and his fellow pilgrims.

As the priest traveled around Whidbey Island during the following day, he was pleased to see that the other tribes and villages had also learned the basic teaching of Christianity from Chief Tslalakum's instructors. Many Indians were baptized during these days. At this time, too, a large wooden cross, some 24 feet in length, was brought to the gathering. It was placed upright in the ground and blessed by the priest. A piece of that cross is today encased in glass next to the Blockhouse in Coupeville. As a result of Father Blanchet's visit, "Whidbey" was then listed as one of the several missions in the Sound country.

In 1841, Father John Baptist Bolduc, who had been sent to help Father Blanchet and Father Delmers, visited Whidbey Island after a trip to present day Victoria. He found Chief Netlam teaching, conducting services, and using the Catholic Ladder continuously. Upon his return to Cowlitz, Father Bolduc requested that he be sent to Whidbey Island to establish a mission. This dream of Father Bolduc did not materialize, but the mission at Fort Victoria did. Father Bolduc and the few other priests made frequent trips throughout the Sound Area. While in Cowlitz, on December 5, 1842, Father Bolduc described an eruption of Mount St. Helen - "beginning about 3 o'clock p.m., and continuing for several days, killing the fish in a small river whose waters empty into the Cowlitz," (probably the Toutle River).

In November 1844, word arrived that Father Blanchet had been named Bishop of Oregon Country. After Father Blanchet was consecrated as Bishop in Montreal, he traveled to Rome. There, Pope Gregory XVI reorganized the Oregon Country, naming Bishop Francois Blanchet as Archbishop. He also created the Diocese of Walla Walla, establishing Father Augustin M. Blanchet (Father Blanchet's brother) as Bishop, and the Diocese of Vancouver Island with Father Delmers as its Bishop.

During this period, Great Britain and United States had signed an agreement making the border between Canada and U.S. at the 49th parallel. People began to pour into the area, especially the Willamette Valley. A provisional government was formed by Oregon settlers. When gold was discovered in California in 1849, many settlers moved south. During all this time, Simon Plamondon stayed on his farm in Cowlitz. After 1850, settlers began to move north of the Columbia River between Fort Vancouver and Puget Sound. In 1851, the first attempt at starting a provisional government began at the Cowlitz landing. Simon Plamondon was one of the original signers of the petition to Congress for a Territorial Government. On March 2, 1853, a bill was signed creating the Washington Territory.

Before white settlers came to Whidbey Island, there were several visits made to the Island. The first was made in June, 1792, by Master Joseph Whidbey, under Captain George Vancouver's command. The next recording of white visitors is the account just read of the Catholic missionaries. The next recording is June 1, 1841, when a Captain Wilkes of the U. S. Exploring Expedition sailed into Penn Cove. Capt. Wilkes confirmed the facts as recorded by the missionaries. Capt. Wilkes felt the priests were doing good work among the Indians, teaching them to live peaceably together, and to cultivate the soil.

In 1845, a Thomas W. Glasgow made an attempt to settle Whidbey Island. But it was in 1850 that Isaac W. Ebey took advantage of the Oregon Donation Land Law, which included all the old Oregon Territory and thus included Whidbey Island. Mr. Ebey filed a Donation Claim on October 15, 1850, and so began the settling of white people on Whidbey Island. As the years went by, families, like the Daniel Pearson family, arrived to settle and eventually setup churches and schools. During these many years, the Indians continued to be served in their religion by the priests from Victoria and later from Port Townsend. They arrived by canoe at Ebey's Landing to great cheers and welcoming feasts. Slowly, the Indians and their customs died away. They had accepted the white men (called Boston men) with grace and humor. Some fighting occurred during the years among the Indians especially when the Northern Haidah Indians from the Queen Charlotte Islands made raids. The Whidbey Island Indians continued to play a part in Island life well into the present century.

During these years, the Catholic families on Whidbey Island found their nearest church in Port Townsend. They went by ferry on Sundays to participate in the Celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass. As often as possible, usually once a month, the priest tried to come to Fort Casey to say Mass. Dominican Sister M. Francina, describes her early years in this way:

"As children, going to Mass on Sunday from Fort Casey, on a government boat to Port Townsend was the lark and great event of the week. Many a stormy day we were locked in the cabin with containers in front of us. The winds would toss the waves at times over the smoke stack. Landing at Fort Casey was the most difficult. One Sunday the waves were such that the family did not return until Wednesday at 3 p.m. My brother and I were home to take care of my two little sisters ages 2 and 4, and all the livestock. On Monday, Mrs. Reuble's brother, Lawrence, came to help us with the milking."

An Army Chaplain, Rev. G. Fox, S. J. offered the 1918 Christmas Midnight Mass at Sister Francina's home during which one of her sisters received her first Holy Communion. Father Karl Kline was pastor in Port Townsend during World War I. Both he and Mr. Reuble were detained at Fort Casey because they were born in Germany.

As the years went by, a priest named John E. O'Brien became very interested in Whidbey Island. He deplored the fact there was no permanent Catholic church there. He came as often as possible from Everett to celebrate Mass at the Liberty League Hall in San de Fuca. As he approached retirement age, he convinced Bishop O'Dea to let him start a parish on Whidbey Island. His first Mass as pastor was on July 3, 1937, at the Liberty League Hall. It was he who, with a great deal of prodding from "Grandma" Reuble, approached the Congregational members about renting their church on the hill. Thus on Sunday, October 23, 1932, Mass was celebrated for the first time in the newly named St. Mary's Church.

Father O'Brien set out immediately to buy the church. Bishop O'Dea died. It was almost a year before a new bishop, Gerald Shaughnessy, was installed, and a few months more before the papers were ready for the sale. Thus, on June 7, 1934, the seal was set on the deed of this church on the hill, transferring it from the Congregational Community to the Catholic Diocese of Seattle. The sale included the church building and the dormitory east of the church.

On January 1, 1933, Father O'Brien baptized the first baby in St. Mary's Church. Previously, babies were taken to Port Townsend to be baptized.

Father O'Brien moved into the basement of the church and worked hard to keep his new parish going financially even as Rev. Lindsay did during the early years when the church was first built. There were few Catholic families on the island. It has been quoted as 5 families, or 8 families, or 10 families, plus a few Indians. These Indians tried to support Father O'Brien, and feed him, too. He was most popular with all who met him – even the Protestant shopkeepers who gave him credit until he could pay his bills.

In the 1930's, the ladies of the parish formed an Altar Society with Mrs. Anne Clark as its first President. They worked toward the upkeep of the Church, cleaning the church and Father O'Brien's apartment in the dormitory building. In addition, they had Saturday evening card parties in the basement to raise money. This was frowned on by some of the area residents, but was well attended by other residents, many not Catholic. The ladies also had food sales, a yearly bazaar, and rummage sales.

In 1936, there was a very bad wind storm which struck Coupeville about twenty minutes after Mass ended at St. Mary's Church. Everyone had left the building when the wind suddenly came up. It blew in the large window on the south side and destroyed many wooden chairs. The damage was so great that the huge window was not rebuilt, but two smaller windows were put into the wall. It may have been at this time that the Congregational "choir loft" at the front on the south side was removed. The "loft" was a small area five steps above the floor. It held a small piano and eight chairs. The back area of the church had sliding doors. It was here that the religious education classes were first held. The organ was placed back there for the choir's use. The north entrance, under the bell tower, was blocked off and used as the Confessional. Pews were purchased from a West Seattle Church. Father O'Brien also brought in two statues, one of Jesus and one of His Mother Mary. The church was heated by a wood stove in the basement. The spot where the stove was, as well as the marks in the hardwood floors from chopping wood, are still visible.

Religion classes were held in the summer. The children were taught by nuns who came from Seattle and Everett for those few weeks of teaching.

In January 1938, Father O'Brien joined other Coupeville men as a charter member of the Lions Club. In May of 1941, he united Mary Sullivan and John Vanderzicht in marriage in a warmly remembered "small family wedding," the first wedding at St. Mary's. In June 1941, Annabelle Zylstra married "Bud" Berry in the first "big wedding" at St. Mary's Church. Mrs. Berry had been the first Holland Happening Queen in 1938.

Father O'Brien was a very busy man during these years. In addition to buying the Church, he built a mission church in Langley in 1939 and called it St. Hubert's. From 1936, he celebrated Mass regularly at the Jackson home in Oak Harbor. Finally, in 1939, a mission church was begun in Oak Harbor and named St. Augustine's.

While presiding at the funeral of Margaret Hughes Clark, on a cold and blustery day, Father O'Brien caught a cold, which developed into pneumonia. He never really recovered. He was transferred to Seattle in 1941 to be replaced by Rev. Robert Logan as administrator. Father O'Brien died on June 10, 1942, and Father Logan became the second pastor of St. Mary's Church.

The United States Navy started an air base outside of Oak Harbor in 1942, and the Island population grew, most especially in Oak Harbor. Rev. Cornelius Harrington became pastor in 1947, and was pastor for five years. He purchased an army theatre building from Fort Ebey, and had it moved to Oak Harbor to serve as St. Augustine Mission. On April 8, 1951, St. Augustine's was elevated to parish status. Father Harrington, as had the other pastors, continued to live in the dormitory building behind the church. It was cold and drafty, and he spent much time visiting his parishioners.

It was during the 1940's also that the expanding Coupeville School District used the basement of St. Mary's Church for its kindergarten classes.

On Columbus Day, 1962, another bad windstorm blew its way through Coupeville. This storm also damaged St. Mary's Church, especially the bell tower. It was declared unsafe. Father William Dell, the pastor at that time, closed the entrance because of the damage to the bell tower and the deterioration of the outside steps. The steps were removed as well. In 1972, St. Mary's Catholic Church was placed in the National Register of Historic Places.

As the United States was approaching its Bicentennial, Rev. Raymond Heffernan and his parishioners decided to restore the church. An addition built onto the back for a sacristy and a confessional. The biggest and greatest restoration however, was the rebuilding of the bell tower. It was determined that it should be rebuilt as it had looked in 1890. The Parkhurst and Lange Company undertook this task with loving care. Many people were involved in the historic studies, especially regarding the Celtic type cross

on the top of the high spire. Tom Quinn was determined this cross would be made correctly. He had only old drawings and pictures to study and he studied them well.

A fact sheet was obtained from the McShane Bell Foundry, the manufacturer of the original bell, who were still in business. The original bell is still in the bell tower. It is rung each Sunday morning and during funerals.

The newspapers loved taking pictures of the spire being built, being lifted into place, and finally, the Church being rededicated on May 30, 1976, by Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, Archbishop of Seattle.

Starting in the 1950's, as St. Augustine's Church in Oak Harbor grew in size and number of parishioners, St. Mary's Church in Coupeville took on a mission status. Because of the population shift, many activities were then held at St. Augustine's Church.

Coming into the new millennium, we have grown. Many of our new parishioners are young couples with young children and so we have seen our sacramental and religious education programs grow.

To accommodate all these newcomers, St. Mary's built a lovely new building. We now have six classrooms on the lower floor, and a lovely gathering room above with a full kitchen, where we continue our Sunday celebration after Mass with a friendly cup of coffee. Our gathering place also has a closed circuit television for overflow Mass attendees.

We now have weekday Mass, religious education on all levels; volunteer Eucharistic Ministers for the hospital, nursing home and for shut-ins; and a secretary to assist with the administration and maintenance. We have had the services of several retired priests who have chosen Whidbey Island as their retirement homes.

Now those of us, who helped bury a time capsule in 1989 as we celebrated our 100 year anniversary, are awaiting another addition to the story of St. Mary's Church. We will remember and celebrate our history even more when the capsule is opened in 2039.

CLOSING NOTES

1. Flora Augusta Pearson Engle died on March 7, 1935. She is buried in Sunnyside Cemetery, outside Coupeville.
2. Simon Bonaparte Plamondon continued to live in Cowlitz until 1900. He had survived three wives before his death at age 100. He is buried in St. Francis Xavier Mission Cemetery in Toledo. You can find his grave today with a Canadian flag and an American flag flying over it.
3. Father John E. O'Brien died on June 10, 1942. He is not forgotten, however. The Oak Harbor chapter of the Knights of Columbus is known as the Father John WE. O'Brien Chapter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This narrative is possible only due to the help of many people who generously shared their remembrances and family history with me. I am grateful to the following:

Betty Engstrom who shared her Grandmother's (Flora A. P. Engle) diary.

Mickey Clark, Tom Quinn, Helen Fisher, Sister Francina, Myrtle McDonald, and so many other "historians" for their memory work.

Rev. Raymond Heffernan, Rev. George McLean, and the *Progress Catholic Newspaper* for Catholic history.

Peggy McCormick, Shirley Akins, Therese Saia, Bill Clark, Betty Shea, Monica McDonald, and so many other Parishioners of St. Mary's Church for their help.

George A. Kellogg, *History of Whidbey Island*.

Jimmie Jean Cook, *A particular friend, Penn's Cove*.

A History of St. Francis Xavier Mission. Toledo, Washington 1838 - 1988.

Whidbey News Times newspaper.

And to all the friendly citizens of Whidbey Island who graciously came to our "history researching" luncheon in May 1988.