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# Catholicism in Chelmsford

By George A. Parkhurst

Roman Catholicism was virtually unknown in Chelmsford until about the middle of the 19th century. Now it is the largest religion in town.

Until the founding of St. John's Parish in 1893, all Catholics in Westford, Carlisle, Tyngsboro and Dunstable, as well as Chelmsford, were included in St. Patrick's Parish in Lowell. This meant a long journey by horse and carriage, or, more likely on foot, to attend Mass.

In 1860, the 30-odd Catholic families of Chelmsford, along with another 20 from the surrounding towns, seized upon an opportunity that suddenly arose.

One of their members, John Morrison of Westford, while hauling a load of produce to market in Lowell in 1859 or 1860, saw that workmen were beginning to tear down the old Second Congregational Meeting House on Middlesex Street at Baldwin Street (near where Alexander's Market is today). The building had been vacant for about 25 years.

He convinced the workmen that he and his associates might like to buy it. An auction was arranged and Morrison, acting secretly for the Catholics of North Chelmsford, was the successful bidder, at \$400.



Thinking that he wanted it for a barn at his home, the Brick Tavern near Long Sought For Pond in Westford, people laughed at the thought of moving it so far. But, moving it even a mile and half up Middlesex Street to Church Street was a major undertaking.

The dedicated men of the area put in many evenings, using horses to pull it on log rollers a few yards at a time. It was a slow process.

There had been no site procured for the new church. So, the committee went to Thomas Adams, the owner of the considerable property in that area and, after lengthy negotiations, purchased the lot for a nominal sum.

The church remained a mission of St. Patrick's until Archbishop Williams established the new Parish of St. John the Evangelist on Jan. 1, 1893. All of Chelmsford was included in this Parish.

By 1921, a movement was started to organize a mission of St. John's in Chelmsford Center. The first service was attended by less than 100 parishioners in Odd Fellows Hall, which was made available by the owner, Patrick Haley. (Odd Fellows Hall was on the second floor of what is now the First Bank Building in Central Square.)

Less than four years later, in May, 1924, land was purchased on North Road at the corner of Fletcher Street and the stucco Spanish Mission-style church was erected.

Seven years later, in 1931, St. Mary's was established as an independent parish. The church soon became too small for the rapidly growing number of communicants so the building was torn down and the adjacent house, that had been used by the priests and the caretaker, was moved to Fletcher Street and has since been razed to make room for the offices in Village Square.

The present beautiful brick building was completed in 1962.

*George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.*