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Still Sacred

A tiny Catholic church in Gaston County was forgotten for a time, but now it has become a testament to its founders and the faith they held dear.

by Alan Hodge

St. Joseph's Catholic Church near Mount Holly probably packs more history into a smaller space than any other house of worship in North Carolina. Founded in 1843, St. Joseph's claims to be the oldest original Catholic church building in the state and one of only two from that era still standing. While you're at it, add the fact that St. Joseph's was the first Catholic church built west of Raleigh and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Now factor in the sanctuary's diminutive size of about 40 feet long and 30 feet wide, and it's easy to see how this little bundle of boards and windows can hold its own with larger churches when it comes to history and heritage.

A place to worship

The roots of St. Joseph's can be found in the lure of gold. Back in the 1830s, folks were digging like gophers for the precious metal all along the Catawba River in what is now Gaston County. Some of the more successful excavations were owned by a devout French-Italian Catholic named Chevalier Riva De Finola, who often invited the families of Irish miners — the Lonergans, Duffeys, and Cahills — into his home for worship services. Priests came from the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, to hold services and traveled their circuit of both Carolinas on horseback.

In 1832, De Finola's golden fortunes along the Catawba turned to clay when a court-ordered injunction closed his mines. Perhaps mercury used in the processing of gold ore had fouled the river water. With his mines closed, De Finola left the area and returned to Europe, leaving the Irish families who had worshiped in his chapel looking for a place to hold services.

One of De Finola's friends and visitors while he lived in Gaston County was Bishop John England from Charleston. The bishop realized the miners' plight and in 1838 assigned Father T.J. Cronin to serve the small group of worshippers.

Not long after he arrived in Gaston County, Father Cronin began taking contributions to have a church built on six acres of land, which had been donated for that purpose by one of the Irish settlers named William Lonergan.

It was estimated that the cost for the church would be around \$400, and donations were solicited not only from the local families, but also from the entire Charleston Diocese. After about \$100 had been raised, Judge William Gaston of New Bern stepped in and helped with the financing. (Of course, Gaston is known for several other accomplishments, including his service on the State Supreme Court and as author of our official state song.) St. Joseph's Catholic Church — or as it was originally known, Saints Mary and Joseph Catholic Church — was finished in 1843 free of debt.

Even though he had been instrumental in founding St. Joseph's, Father Cronin did not get to see the project completed. In 1842 on a visit to Salisbury, he contracted yellow fever and died. He was buried in Salisbury, but his body was moved to St. Joseph's churchyard cemetery the next year.

Coming full circuit

Missionary priest Father J.J. O'Connell conducted the first Mass at the newly completed St. Joseph's. For the next year or so, he would stop by on his rounds and perform church services and other duties of his position.

In 1844, Father John Gifford came to St. Joseph's; he would later go on to become the bishop of Chicago. Other priests served the tiny parish throughout the mid-19th century: Father L.P. Connell (1861-1865), Father A.J. McNeil (1865-1870), and then Father O'Connell returned from 1870 to 1877.

O'Connell's association with St. Joseph's has an interesting twist. Not only was he the first priest to say Mass at St. Joseph's in 1843, he was also the last parish priest assigned to the church and said the last Mass there in that capacity.

During his second tenure at St. Joseph's, Father O'Connell bought a nearby tract of land from the Caldwell family, property that would later be acquired by Benedictine monks to become Belmont Abbey, which opened in 1876.

After Father O'Connell's departure, regular services ceased at St. Joseph's, and some of the parishioners began worshipping at Belmont Abbey. However, the diminutive church continued to offer Mass on special occasions.

For many decades St. Joseph's sat empty. At one time, around the turn of the 20th century, it was even used as a hay barn. Surrounded by weeds, shrubs, and underbrush, and with the roof caving in, the church needed restoration. Salvation came in 1974 when Francis Galligan of Gastonia headed up plans to repair the church. He oversaw restoration of the interior and roof with \$15,000 raised from donations by the Knights of Columbus, Belmont Abbey College, Sacred Heart College, Boy Scouts, and several individuals.

On November 2, 1975, St. Joseph's was rededicated by the Rev. Michael Begley, bishop of Charlotte, and the Rev. Abbot Jude Cleary, of Belmont Abbey. More than 250 folks attended the ceremony, a crowd indeed for such a tiny church. A few years later in 1979, St. Joseph's was named a National Historic Site by both the U.S. Department of the Interior and the State of North Carolina.

Unofficial guardian of the past

If there's anyone who knows every inch of St. Joseph's and its cemetery, it's Carl Heil of Charlotte. Since 1993, Heil has volunteered his time and his love of the past to keeping the story of St. Joseph's alive and well. "A year or so after I retired, I was looking for something to do," he says. "Me and the Lord decided this was it." He's especially proud

of the fact that the church is the original building on the original site. “It ain’t never changed, and it ain’t gonna change.”

A tour of St. Joseph’s with Heil as tour guide is like walking with a living encyclopedia of the 162-year-old church. He not only knows the facts, but also has a wealth of anecdotes to go along with them as well. One concerns a small gap in the stone wall surrounding the church. “The first priest had a mule that would walk over and kick the side of the building,” says Heil. “So a wall was built so that people could go through to the well and outhouse, but the mule couldn’t come in.”

St. Joseph’s little cemetery contains the graves of many of the first settlers in the area, as well as Father Cronin. Names on the tombstones reflect Irish heritage, and some include the county in Ireland where the person came from. An especially interesting marker is a memorial to four Lonergan brothers who were lost at sea on a voyage back to Ireland. Some of those resting in St. Joseph’s cemetery are unknown. “Not all the graves have stones,” Heil says. “In winter you can see the depressions in the ground” indicating several unmarked graves.

Several large holly trees are also growing in St. Joseph’s cemetery. One has a pair of initials and a date that appears to be 1882 carved in the trunk. Heil says in the old days, holly trees were sometimes planted on graves at Christmas.

A real treasure in the cemetery is a large statue of St. Joseph that had stood for 75 years at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Asheville before it was moved so a parking deck there could be enlarged. The statue arrived in Mount Holly in 2001 with the help of a lot of muscle. “We figured it might weigh about 600 pounds,” Heil says. “It turned out to be more than 1,600 pounds.”

A tranquil place

The church building itself is sheathed in white clapboards and is lined with eight 16-by-16-pane windows to let in the light. About 70 percent of the window glass is original, with color and bubble imperfections that give the windows special character. At the rear of the exterior is a small grotto with a statue of Saint Mary. “People tell me the grotto is a wonderful place,” says Heil. It becomes even more special when he relates the story behind it: The statue was given to the church by the late Mary Maude and Estelle Kerns for the safe return of their nephews Robert and Kenneth Williams when they left to take part in World War II. Both nephews made it safely home, although Kenneth was held as a POW for a time by the Germans.

Crossing the threshold into St. Joseph’s is like taking a step back in time. At the rear of the building, a small room served as accommodations for traveling priests, with a little bed and a couple of pieces of period furniture providing simple comfort. Two interesting photographs hang on a wall: one, taken around 1915, shows a group of parishioners with rakes and shovels; the other, dated 1900, is a funeral scene in the woods.

Flooring in the church is original planking, and visitors can see the ground below between cracks. Five large, hand-hewn timbers provide the support for the entire building. “When the church was used for a barn, the hay absorbed moisture and kept the boards from rotting,” says Heil.

A center aisle is flanked by original pews that can seat about 70 people. A balcony — added in 1848 to seat children — extends above the main floor. The main feature is at the front of the church at the end of the center aisle: a simple, carved wooden altar with the Latin inscription *Habemus Altare*, meaning “We have an altar.”

Although baseboard heat has replaced the potbellied stove that once gave a modicum of creature comfort to worshippers and there are two or three electric lights, the overall feeling inside the church is one of quiet, peace, and serenity. The air has a rich, earthy smell of well-seasoned wood. The tranquility here makes St. Joseph’s a hard place to leave.

“I just like to sit here and look at the light coming through the windows,” said Heil. “It’s quite nice.” So much so that for Heil, and a whole lot of other folks over the past 160 or so years, St. Joseph’s has been a place about as close to heaven on earth as you can get.

Alan Hodge writes from his home in Gastonia.