

History of the Parish of St. Joseph, Salem, Massachusetts

Introduction

The cruciform plan of the International Style (former) St. Joseph Church,¹³⁵ Lafayette Street was designed by Boston architect James O'Shaunessey and completed in 1949. This was the third church built by St. Joseph's Parish on Lafayette Street. Established on May 17, 1873, the Parish of St. Joseph was a community of French-Canadians, who had begun their migration to Salem around 1860. The three churches built on Lafayette Street were the focal point of a complex of parish buildings that always included a rectory, school(s) and a convent, built and modified from 1886 onward.

Until the 1880s, the Parish of St. Joseph had built no church of its own. In 1881, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston (RCAB) purchased a property on Lafayette Street for the Parish of St. Joseph, which planned to erect a French Roman Catholic church on the site. The first St. Joseph Church, Salem opened for services in 1884.¹ Constructed in wood, the church was Gothic revival style. Soon the growing French Canadian community needed more space. The next St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church to occupy the site was a monumental brick Romanesque revival building with tall stone twin towers, constructed in 1911. Three years later, this second church was destroyed during the Great Salem Fire of June 25, 1914. It was finally replaced in 1949 with the present white brick and steel structure, which for decades was a landmark for the local Roman Catholic community, until closed in August 2004.

Early History of French Catholics in Salem

In 1651 the first French Catholic, Jesuit priest the Rev. Gabriel Drullites visited Naumkeag (Salem) from France, as the guest of Governor John Endicott. Further contacts occurred between 1755 and 1766, when about one hundred and fifty French Catholics moved from Acadia (Nova Scotia) to Salem. But the political and social conditions for Roman Catholics in Massachusetts were still difficult, so after a short stay most returned to Canada. Nevertheless a small community of Catholics had remained in Salem, and on May 6, 1790, led by the Rev. John Thayer they celebrated mass for the first time.

Beginning around 1860, a new wave of French Canadians reached Salem. Many had been farmers, but in Salem hundreds of French-Canadians found employment at the Naumkeag Steam and Cotton Mill (1847-1947). The cotton mill was located on Naumkeag Street, adjoining Prince and Harbor Streets. Large numbers of these French-speaking workers and their families occupied the brick tenement buildings in the mill district. The area became known as "La Pointe" a French enclave within Salem itself.

The Immaculate Conception Church basement served as a place of worship for St. Joseph parishioners, before they could afford to build their own.² The Rev. Matthew Harkins led the parishioners. Although Rev. Harkins was English-speaking, he was also fluent in French and held the first French mass in 1872, and once every week subsequently. In 1873 the Rev. George Talbot was appointed as the first pastor of this

¹ Lorraine St. Pierre, Saint Joseph Parish: One Hundred Years of Progress: 1873- 1973. Unpublished manuscript.

² Immaculate Conception Church (1850) on Hawthorne Boulevard and Derby Streets formed the first parish in Salem.

French Canadian community. There were about ninety French families in Salem at this time.

Founding the Parish of St. Joseph

The Parish of St. Joseph first purchased the old Protestant Seaman's Bethel Church (1827) on Herbert Street near the Phillips School. Under the Rev. Harkins, they adapted the building for Catholic services. But the parish was keen to buy land and build its own church that could serve the burgeoning French-Canadian community. A deed dated August 26, 1881 shows that George Luscomb sold a sizable parcel of land on Lafayette Street for \$6,500 to John J. Williams, who was the first Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston.³ Parishioners and clergy began the process of building their church and it opened for services in March 1884.⁴ This wooden church with its Gothic revival forms had a square tower fifty feet in height on the north end of the façade. Between 1890 and 1906, a tripartite, gabled porch was added to the facade.⁵ The basement chapel was dedicated to our Lady of Lourdes.

In April 1886, John J. Williams (RCAB) bought Charles Elwell's property located on Lafayette Street immediately north of the newly built St. Joseph's Church. Although this was only the second purchase in the area, St. Joseph's parish was beginning a process of gradually acquiring most of the property bounded by Lafayette, Harbor, Salem and Dow Streets. The Elwell property was bought for use as a parochial residence for the pastorate. Map evidence suggests that the two-story, rectangular Elwell residence with its two-story rear wing may have been adapted for use by the parish. (Further research would be needed to verify this).⁶ The Rev. Joseph Gadoury was appointed pastor in 1887 and remained in this position for seventeen years, accomplishing a great deal. The Rev. Gadoury was responsible for the purchase of an excellent organ for the church. Deeds show he was actively buying land in 1892 and 1893. By 1897, his name appears on at least five buildings in the block.⁷ According to the Mme. St. Pierre's parish history, Rev. Gadoury purchased 15,000 square feet, which meant the parish now owned much of the city block, with the exception of a short interior by-way (Harbor Court), still owned by the City of Salem.⁸ In 1889, the parish consisted of 5000 congregants and a strong emphasis was placed on preserving French Canadian culture. The Society of St. Jean the Baptist, opened on Sept. 27, 1882 was formed for this purpose, and met in a house on Prince Street. The local newspaper "Le Courier de Salem," founded on June 9 1894 carried parish news, all published in French.

In 1892, St. Joseph parish constructed their first school on Salem Street. The parcel of land at the corner of Salem and Harbor streets was acquired in 1889. W. D Dennis is the Salem architect credited with drawing up plans for the four-story brick building. The plan for St. Joseph's School (1892) allowed separate entrances for boys and

³ Hopkins Atlas (1874) shows the George Luscomb estate prior to the building of the first St. Joseph Church (1885).

⁴ Lorraine St. Pierre, Saint Joseph Parish 1873-1973. The Illustrated History of Salem and Environs however claims that the church opened in April, 1885.

⁵ Illustration in St. Pierre, Saint Joseph Parish, Sanborn Co. maps 1890 & 1906.

⁶ Sanborn Insurance. Map (1890) and Richardson Atlas (1897).

⁷ Richardson Atlas 1897

⁸ Richardson Atlas 1897. St. Pierre, Saint Joseph Parish 1873-1973. 6. At a later date, the city donated Harbor Court to the parish for use as a playground.

girls. By 1906 (Sanborn Insurance Map) the small wood frame convent was built on the northeast side of the block, next to the new wood frame school on Harbor Street. A door connected the convent to the school, as a way of providing some privacy for the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) of Montreal and 125 young female boarders. Sisters of St. Chretienne arrived from France in 1903 and replaced the Grey nuns, who had given 25 years of service to the parish of St. Joseph.

When the Rev. Joseph Gadoury died in 1904, he left a generous legacy of \$37,427.73, to be used for educational purposes. The Sanborn Map (1906) shows the complex of parochial schools and the convent, grouped around Harbor Court. The pastor, the Rev. George A. Rainville was appointed to St. Joseph's and oversaw the building of a new rectory, which may have been the brick building that appears at the corner of Dow and Lafayette streets in the 1911 Walker Atlas. At this time the old wooden church was moved to Salem Street (exact location unknown).⁹

The new Romanesque revival St. Joseph Church (1911) was a monumental brick building, flanked on either side by twin stone towers (each 185 ft high). A large cement statue of St. Joseph stood on the peak of the center gable. The Walker Atlas 1911 shows the footprint of St. Joseph Church (1911) and the St. Joseph Educational Institute, which comprises the Convent St. Joseph and St. Joseph's School. On the same map, a building on the corner of Lafayette and Dow is identified as premises for the Catholic Bishop of Boston and a new unidentified building is located on Salem Street directly east of the new church.¹⁰

After the Great Fire (1914)

The Great Salem Fire on June 25, 1914 gutted this entire block including the new church of St. Joseph that was barely three years old. Burnt segments of the outer walls and façade were left standing. Some parishioners were placed in "tent villages" for weeks as nearby houses and tenements were also destroyed. The same fire consumed the Naumkeag Steam and Cotton Mill, where many of the parishioners had been employed. After the fire, the parish of St. Joseph slowly began to rebuild and the scale of the block changed. The basement of the charred church was remodeled to accommodate church services. Classrooms were constructed on the roof of the basement behind the remaining charred façade with the shortened stubs of the towers remaining. Money was raised for a new rectory built on the corner Lafayette and Harbor Street in 1917 (cornerstone). Schools were rebuilt under the leadership of Father P.H. Grenier. In 1921 a new high school replaced the former four-story school completed in 1892 and lost in the fire. This new St. Joseph's School (1921) was built on the corner on Harbor and Salem Streets. In 1925 another brick parochial school was finished on Dow Street near the intersection with Lafayette Street. In the same year the Sisters of the Assumption arrived from Canada to staff the schools. Prior to 1957, and presumably soon after the fire, a brick convent was built on Harbor Street toward the middle of the block

St. Joseph Church (1948)

In 1948, the pastor the Rev. Father Arthur O. Mercier, under orders from Cardinal Cushing, set out to supervise the building of a new church. Boston architect James J.

⁹ St. Pierre, Saint Joseph Parish, 6.

¹⁰ Walker Atlas 1911.

O'Shaunessey was chosen to design another monumental structure.¹¹ He built a scale model to help raise money for the ambitious project whose final cost was nearly half a million dollars. Rev. Father Mercier worked in close consultation with the architect. On May 15, 1949 the cornerstone was laid. The cruciform massing of the new modern St. Joseph Church with its tall metal spire projecting from the roof, made it visible for miles.

A New Convent

In 1962 a larger, modern two-story brick convent was designed by Fontaine and Del Sesto, architects from Rhode Island. The convent of St. Joseph was designed to replace the former brick convent at this location and to serve as new housing for the Sisters of the Assumption. In the same year, 1962, architect Oliver W. Fontaine designed St. Anne Roman Catholic Parochial School in Hyde Park, Boston.¹² By 1973 the parish of St. Joseph included 2,200 families and its properties occupied most of the block bounded by Lafayette, Harbor, Salem and Dow Streets.

Recent Changes

On December 29, 1982 the Salem, Mass., Evening News reported the demolition of Ecole St. Joseph (1925), the parish parochial school on Lafayette and Dow Streets. The parish was unable to maintain the school, although they continued to operate an elementary school in an adjoining building. What survive today are St. Joseph's Church (1948), St. Joseph's Rectory (1917), St. Joseph's Convent (1962), and St. Joseph's School (1921) on the corner of Salem and Harbor Streets. Recently closed, they are the historic assets of a French Canadian community that left Canada during the Industrial Age, and established and maintained their culture in Salem.

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¹¹ John James O'Shaunessey, 92 State St. Boston. O'Shaunessey was listed in City Directories: 1828-1934 and 1948/49-1956. Fine Arts Library, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA.

¹² Oliver Fontaine was the son of architect W.F. Fontaine (1878-1938) who had designed a variety of religious buildings.

Walker Atlas, 1911.

