

## HISTORY OF ST. STEPHEN

Prior to the founding of "Old St. Joseph's" Church in 1732, the early history of the Catholic Church in Philadelphia is rather obscure. Catholics living in the Pennsylvania colony were administered to by priests traveling from New York to Maryland. It was not until 1708 that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated in the houses of some of the colonists. The Catholic population was small and did not increase rapidly until the year 1755, when a group of nearly five hundred Acadians settled in Philadelphia. This led to the founding of "Old St. Mary's" Church at 244 S. Fourth Street. It was the main Roman Catholic house of worship during the Revolutionary period, and was the site of the first public religious service in commemoration of the Declaration of Independence. At this time, Nicetown was a remote village in suburban Philadelphia, consisting of only a few houses. In the "Catholic Herald & Visitor" of 1863, there is mention of the ruins of an old chapel. There in 1729, Elizabeth McGawley, an Irish lady who had brought over a number of tenantry, attended Mass. Almost within sight of the present day church, stood the mansion of one Dr. John Michael Browne, a native of Ireland, who came from the West Indies in 1742 and purchased a large property in the vicinity of Nicetown Lane (Luzerne St.). Dr. Browne's residence served as a convenient center for Catholics living in Frankford, Germantown, and the area of Nicetown. Divine services were held at his house by the priests from St. Joseph's, and by clergy traveling to and from Philadelphia, until the death of Dr. Browne in 1750.

Another early chapel was the house of Paul Miller who had been sexton of "Old St. Joseph's" Church. It was located on land once owned by Dr. Browne, near what is today 8th & Hunting Park Avenue. Mass was celebrated in this chapel until 1780, when Paul Miller moved from the area and the house passed into other hands.

In 1796 there were only four parishes in the City of Philadelphia: St. Joseph, St. Mary, Holy Trinity and St. Augustine. It was not until 1808 that Philadelphia was created a diocese. Its territory included all of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and part of New Jersey. In 1830, Bishop Francis Kenrick was consecrated third Bishop of Philadelphia, and it was under his administration that Philadelphia began to take its rightful place among the great dioceses of the nation. He ushered in a great era of church building. Bishop Kenrick created six new

parishes in the first ten years of his administration, and twelve more in the following decade. Of the twenty-two new parishes, the Church of St. Stephen in Nicetown was ninth in order of establishment.

Although Mass was celebrated in the Chapels of Nicetown for more than a century prior to 1843, it was not until that year that St. Stephen's was formally established. On September 21, 1843 the cornerstone of the Church was blessed by Bishop Kenrick. Anthony Rufner, a prominent Catholic in Nicetown, donated the land for a new church, a rectory, and a cemetery at Barr and Clinton Streets (now Lycoming and Elser Streets). The vacant lot that is there to this day is all that remains of the cemetery and the site of the original St. Stephen Church.

On New Years Day, 1844, the new church was dedicated under the invocation of St. Stephen by the Very Reverend Fr. Maller, C.M., who was rector of the Theological Seminary then located at 18th and Race Streets.

For the first six months in 1844, St. Stephen had no resident priest. Mass was said on the last Sunday of each month by Fr. Forrestal or Fr. Loughran of St. Michael's Parish. Fr. Hugh Lane served as pastor from June to November, 1844.

In that year there arose throughout the nation a movement of anti-Catholic sentiment. A group, calling themselves Nativists or "Know Nothings", characterized themselves by hatred of Catholics, and Irish Catholics in particular. Philadelphia was the scene of the most violent rioting against the Catholic Church. St. Michael's and St. Augustine's were burned, along with a number of Catholic houses. The army had to be called out to restore order. The men of St. Stephen's were prompted to arm themselves and protect their church day and night until the fury of the bigotry died down.

For the first year of its existence, St. Stephen's parish was really a mission. It was placed under the administration of the Vincentians, and late in 1844, Rev. Alexander Frasi, C.M. was appointed pastor. During his two years at St. Stephen's the parish took on a more permanent character and an identity of its own. In 1846, Fr. Frasi was succeeded by Fr. M. Domenec, who served as pastor until 1851. Of the first five priests serving in a pastoral capacity, Fr. Domenec was the most outstanding because of his love for the Catholics of Nicetown and his deep interest in their welfare.

When St. Stephen's was established in 1843, the boundaries extended from Germantown and East Falls to the west and north, and parts of Frankford to the east. Three parishes were founded from the original St. Stephen's: St. Joachim's in Frankford in 1845; St. Vincent's in Germantown in 1851; St. Bridget's in East Falls in 1853. The foun-

ding of so many parishes from the infant parish of St. Stephen in so short a time had a great effect on the finances of the parish, and the poverty of the parishioners presented tremendous difficulties for the early pastors.

In 1854 the State Legislature passed an act which consolidated the city and county of Philadelphia. Among the districts joined to the city was Northern Liberties, which took in Tioga, Rising Sun, and Nicetown. Although the consolidation was beginning to affect slightly the growth of St. Stephen's, its full force would not be effective until many years later. By 1868 the parish was beginning to show evidence of progress and growth.

In 1883, Rev. William McLoughlin was named pastor of St. Stephen's. On his arrival he found that the little church in Nicetown was entirely too small for the growing congregation, and was badly in need of repairs. Fr. McLoughlin saw the necessity to build a larger edifice on a better site. With the growth of the city moving northward, and Broad St. becoming the main thoroughfare of the City of Philadelphia, he purchased the land at Broad and Butler Streets where the present church buildings are located, and work was immediately begun.

On October 19, 1884, the cornerstone of the basement church was blessed by Archbishop Ryan. In the same year Fr. McLoughlin built the pastoral residence north of the church. The completion of the basement chapel in the summer of 1885 saw the closing of the old church at Barr & Clinton Sts. In 1889 he began the construction of the convent and the school, completed in 1890. The convent and school were placed in charge of the Sisters of St. Joseph, with Rev. Mother M. Arsenia as Superior.

The new church, a purely Gothic style of architecture, is cruciform in shape, and is built entirely of brown stone with Indiana limestone trimmings. It has two circular towers, each terminating in a spire, 270 and 300 ft. high, respectively. Construction was completed in 1896 and it was formally dedicated by Archbishop Ryan on November 15 of the same year.

Fr. McLoughlin served as Pastor of St. Stephen's for 27 years. He was much loved by the parishioners for his tireless work and dedication to them. On September 5, 1910, Fr. McLoughlin died on board the steamship, California, while traveling to Ireland. He was buried at sea. On October 21, 1911, the monument, presently standing on the lawn in front of the church, was erected in his memory. The plot of land beneath the monument is also the final resting place of four former pastors of the parish.

Fr. McLoughlin was succeeded by Rev. John F. McQuade, 1910-1919; Rev. Msgr. Michael J. Rafferty, 1919-1923; Rev. Msgr. Joseph A. McCullough, 1923-1932. In 1929, Msgr. McCullough had the interior of the upper church entirely renovated and reconstructed. In recent years, minor alterations have taken place, such as the rearrangement of pews. Msgr. McCullough died in December 1932 and was succeeded in January 1933 by Rt. Rev. William McNally. Msgr. McNally was a former rector of Roman Catholic High School and Assistant Superintendent of Schools. It was during his administration that St. Stephen's celebrated its centennial in 1943.

In 1944, Msgr. McNally was succeeded as pastor by Most Rev. J. Carroll McCormick. Bishop McCormick was much loved by the parishioners of St. Stephen's, as he showed a great friendliness to the priests, sisters, children, and all the parishioners during his administration. He had the rectory completely renovated, as well as the lower church. Legend has it that the rectory elevator was installed after prompting from a winded Cardinal Dougherty, exhausted from climbing the stairs while being given a tour by his nephew, Bishop McCormick. The Bishop would frequently visit the school and was always ready to answer the many questions the children would ask. He served for 16 years as Pastor of St. Stephen's and Auxiliary Bishop of Philadelphia. In June 1960, Bishop McCormick was appointed head of the Diocese of Altoona, and was later named Bishop of Scranton.

Bishop McCormick was succeeded by Msgr. Henry A. McCarty who served for seven years as Pastor of the parish. In 1967, Rt. Rev. Charles B. Mynaugh became Pastor and remained until 1973. He was also Director of Communications for the Archdiocese. In 1973 Rev. William Tallon was named Pastor. He served for eight years. In 1980 his successor was Rev. James Gormley, who held the office till 1988.

Rev. Charles Kennedy came to St. Stephen's in 1988 and has been Pastor until he was transferred in June of 1992 after serving the Parish for the last four and a half years. The parishioners wish him the best in his new assignment. In 1992, we welcomed Rev. James Matteo who had been appointed as administrator of St. Stephen's. In the short time that Fr. Matteo has been with us, he has shown a great deal of enthusiasm and a very positive outlook toward the future of the parish.

During the century and a half of its existence, many outstanding and dedicated priests have resided at St. Stephen's rectory. We are honored to count among them the present Archbishop of New Orleans, the Most Reverend Francis B. Schulte. Before being elevated to the Episcopacy, Msgr. Schulte lived at St. Stephen's and celebrated Sunday Mass here for several years, while serving as Superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The 1960's saw the decline of urban areas. Commensurately, membership in St. Stephen declined, as did that of many other inner-city parishes. By the 1970's the enrollment at the parish school had drastically decreased, as did the attendance at Sunday Mass. Between 1970 and 1990, the total registered Catholic population decreased by 66<sup>0/0</sup>. At the time of closing, there were 255 students attending the parish school, of whom 71<sup>0/0</sup> were not Catholic. Three Masses were celebrated on Sunday, in addition to a Saturday evening Mass at 5:00 PM. The Mass at 10:00 AM was in Spanish to accomodate an increasing number of Hispanic parishioners.

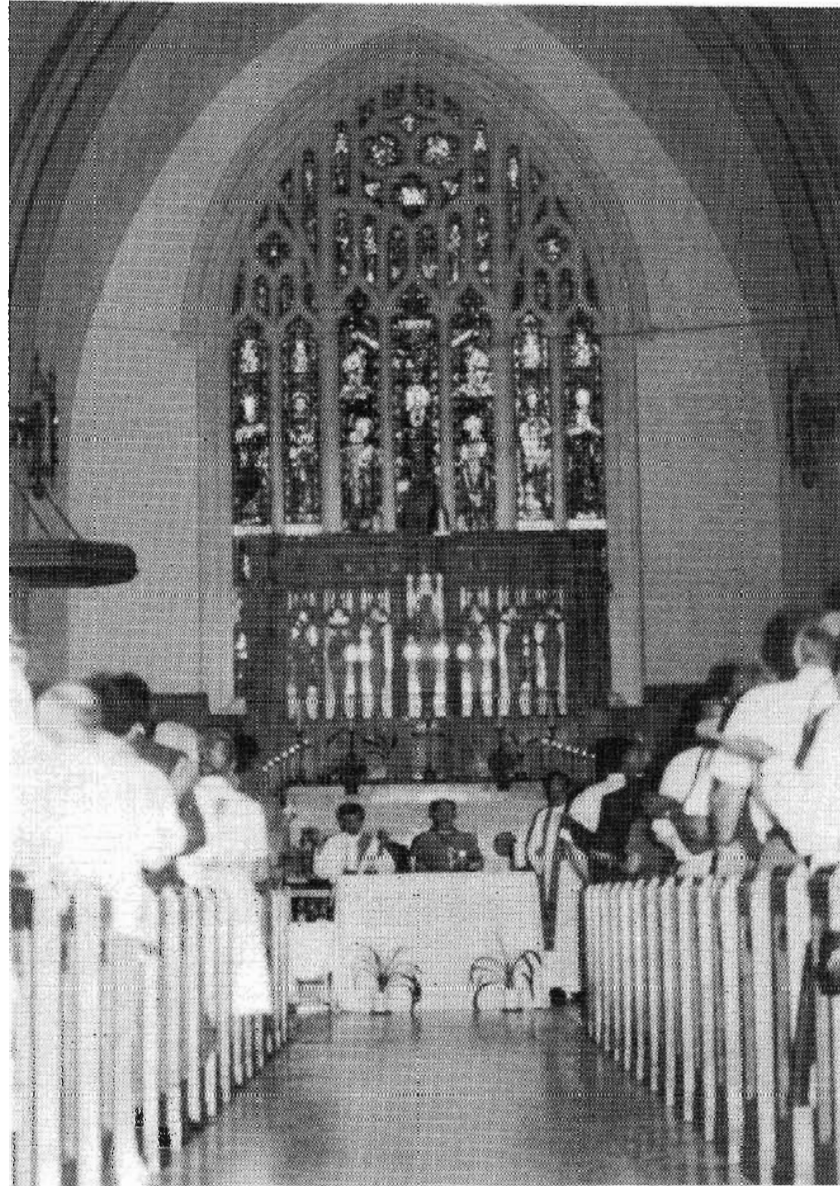
St. Stephen's Parish had always been a traditional Catholic Parish, providing spiritual nourishment to all people regardless of race or ethnic origin. It was a multi-cultural parish. Its people represented every race: Black, White, Hispanic and Asian, and it truly represented the universal Church in the sharing of the one true Catholic faith. Although our numbers had diminished in recent years, the faith and fervor of the parishioners had not. There was always a keen interest in the various ministries and parish committees. In addition to the Choir, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, and ushers, there were regularly scheduled activities: the Golden Age Group, The Legion of Mary, the Spanish Embajadores, the Trip Committee and the Social Justice Committee.

Cardinal Bevilacqua called the parishes of North Philadelphia together to plan for the future in light of declining membership and decreased revenues. As a result of the planning process, Holy Child Parish and Holy Souls Parish recommended that their Parishes, as well as St. Stephen should be closed and a new Parish, Our Lady of Hope, should be formed using the facilities of both Holy Child and Holy Souls. St. Stephen countered with two proposals to keep our Parish open. The Cardinal accepted the proposal of Holy Souls and Holy Child. A Farewell Mass for former parishioners was held on June 13, 1993. At the final Sunday Mass on June 27, 1993, Fr. Matteo delivered a beautiful sermon which spoke to the hearts of the grief-stricken congregation. After that final Sunday Mass, Robert Butler and Michael Finnegan, Jr. climbed high into the south bell tower and Michael Finnegan rang one somber peal upon the church bell. St. Stephen ceased to exist as a Parish on June 30, 1993.

A church is not stone and mortar but a community of worshipers. Wherever two or three gather to worship under the bannerhead of St. Stephen, then the Church of St. Stephen will continue its Journey in Faith. At the reunion Mass and dinner-dance on September 26, 1993 at St. William's Parish, the sons and daughters of St. Stephen's

Church gathered from as far away as California and Canada. The community of faith which formed in the homes of Nicetown before America was born shall never die. Long Live St. Stephen's Church!

(History edited from the St. Stephen 100th Anniversary Book of 1943 and updated by Richard Kienast and Robert A. Butler.)



**June 27, 1993**  
**The Last Mass**