

# Remarkable effort rebuilt St. Mary's School



Aug 22, 1996

Tom  
Beardsley

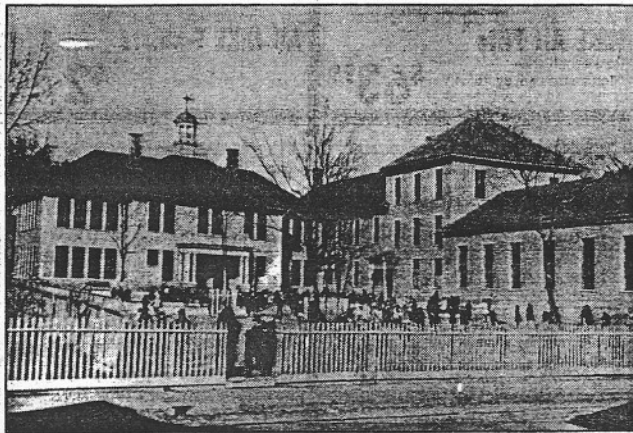
In 1990, Rose Dunham, 84, a staunch and proud Irish-American, recounted her Willimantic youth and the rivalry between the Irish and French-Canadian communities.

A small fence separated St. Mary's and St. Joseph's schools, and at recess St. Mary's students chanted "corn beef and cabbage make the Irish savage."

St. Joseph's students responded; "pea soup and Johnny cake make a Frenchman's belly ache."

Rosé was a student at St. Joseph's recently built (1907) brick school. Beyond the fence Rose's French-Canadian rivals studied at a school with a short but interesting history.

On Feb. 20, 1903, St. Mary's French-Canadian Roman Catholic parish and parochial school came into being. Students transferred from other schools, and in 1904 Phillipe LaPalme, Arthur LaBarge, Henry Martin, Carrie Dion, Olivina Bacon, and Hilda Trudeau were the parochial



St. Mary's parochial school and hall in 1919.

schools first graduates. Their schoolhouse dated back to the early years of the 19th century. It was originally built by the Baptists in the 1820s.

In 1857, the Irish-born members of St. Joseph's parish purchased the Baptists' wood-frame church and removed it from Main to Jackson Street. In 1872, just before construction began on St. Joseph's current edifice, the old church was moved again, to Valley Street to be utilized as St. Mary's, a parish hall of St. Joseph's to accommodate the growing French-Canadian population. An extension was added to the rear of the hall around 1876,

and became the home of St. Joseph's elementary school.

The building and adjacent land on Valley Street was left in the will of Florimond DeBruyker — St. Joseph's Belgian-born pastor from 1863 until 1902 — to be developed as a French-Canadian parish. St. Mary's Hall served as the place of worship until the new church was ready. In 1905 a two-story ell with bell tower was added and the ancient Baptist Church, the 1876 addition and new ell served as St. Mary's parochial school and hall.

In 1910, St. Mary's pastor, Monsignor Joseph Papillon

(1866-1965), inaugurated French language classes, and the foundations of the school's high reputation were laid.

A small fire in 1925 led to some remodeling, but on the night of Jan. 31, 1953, the school was destroyed by fire, leaving the community in a state of shock.

Over 200 firemen fought the fierce blaze, which began in the boiler room beneath the 1876 extension. Embers and sparks threatened houses on Maple Avenue and Jackson Street, and the Sisters of Charity in St. Joseph's Convent had to be evacuated. St. Mary's 540 pupils were relocated to Natchaug School and the Teacher's College.

The community responded with a remarkable effort which led to the complete rebuilding of the school within two years.

A building fund campaign was launched. Within 48 hours, school principal Father Roland Guilmette announced a \$10,000 contribution from Electromotive's Phillip Lauter Foundation, and \$5,000 from American Thread. The Franco-American Civic Social Club, in the old state armory building on the junction of Center Street and Temple Place, was the headquarters for fund-raising.

The city's major industries,

businesses and individuals gave generously. Scrap metal drives and bottle collections helped boost the fund to \$101,738.75, just three weeks after the fire.

On Oct. 11, 1953, the architectural firm of Dirienzio and Holmes were hired to design a new school building. The J.S. Nasin construction company began work in late 1953, and the school was completed by early 1955. The dedication ceremony was a grand affair.

The local political community were led by Mayor Florimond Bergeron, Donald Kramer, the chairman of the board of education, and first selectman Ralph Crossthwaite. Spiritual matters were attended to by Monsignor W. Arthur Routhier, pastor of St. Annes in Hartford, a Willimantic native, and the Rev. Bernard Flanagan, bishop of the Norwich diocese, and 50 area priests. The ceremony took place on Feb. 13, 1955, exactly 50 years to the day that St. Mary's new church was dedicated.

*Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.*

his digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.