

— HISTORY —

# Father De Bruycker brought Belgium with him

What is the connection between one of the most beautiful, medieval cities in Europe and a small New England mill town? The link is a Roman Catholic priest named Father Florimond De Bruycker, who was born in Ghent, Belgium, in 1832. He arrived in Willimantic in 1863 and built St. Joseph's Church into one of the leading institutions in the Norwich Diocese. De Bruycker became one of the most significant and influential figures in 19th century Willimantic.

De Bruycker was educated in a Jesuit school in Ghent, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1856. He served as a curate in several parishes for four years, and then took a professorship at the American College at Louvain to prepare missionaries to go to the United States to serve its growing immigrant Roman Catholic population.

Bishop Martin J. Spalding, of Louisville, Ky., and Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere, of Detroit, founded the American College at Louvain

in 1857 with the encouragement and blessing of Pope Pius IX. The college's intent was to train young American priests to the highest standards Europe could offer. De Bruycker became aware of the many challenges facing Catholics in the predominantly Protestant United States, and in 1862 he volunteered to come to Connecticut and attend to that state's expanding French and German Catholic population. At the time, he was the only Catholic priest in the whole of Connecticut and Rhode Island who could speak English, French and German.

In May 1863, De Bruycker was appointed priest for the expanding Willimantic parish and its missions at Baltic, Coventry and Stafford Springs, to serve the immigrant Irish and the growing



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population of French-speaking immigrants from Quebec, arriving to work in northeastern Connecticut's textile mills.

Windham historian Allen Lincoln described De Bruycker as a "forcible character, a gifted organizer." Indeed his achievements between 1863 and his death almost 40 years later were outstanding.

His first accomplishment occurred in 1864. The local Irish and French Canadians had to bury their dead privately as the local Congregationalists, Baptists and Episcopalians refused to bury Catholics in the Willimantic and Windham cemeteries. Furthermore, local landowners refused to sell De Bruycker land for a cemetery in the borough limits. The nearest land De Bruycker could obtain was almost two miles from town — some 30 acres of an abandoned farm at the location known today as Club Road. It was named Cemetery Road before the building of St. Joseph's Living Center in 1988.

De Bruycker's next ambition was to build a new church. He worked hard to raise the funds for the building of St. Joseph's existing church edifice, which was completed in 1874 for a cost of \$80,000.

He subsequently organized a parochial school, a convent and a hospital, a temperance society, a baseball team and a cornet band. St. Joseph's convent and parochial school was built in 1878 for \$25,000. De Bruycker was the school's principal, and the teachers were six Dutch nuns from the convent, originally from Tilburg, Holland.

De Bruycker organized Windham's bicentennial celebrations in 1892 after competing Protestant factions had abandoned the project and he installed a statue of Christopher Columbus in the convent yard, which was a gift from the people of Ghent, Belgium.

The St. Joseph Parish split after De Bruycker's death in 1902 into French and Irish factions, but he

left land and money in his will for the building of St. Mary's Church and ensured that his cousin, Father Arthur De Bruycker, would be the new parish's first pastor.



The Rev. Florimond De  
Bruycker.

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