

Local History



St. Mary's to turn 100

New Years Day next year marks the centenary of the dedication of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church on Valley Street. It was, wrote a contemporary observer, "one of the most commodious and beautiful churches in the state of Connecticut, and probably the finest owned by French speaking Roman Catholics in Connecticut."

The Right Rev. Bishop Tierney of Hartford conducted the dedication ceremony. An orchestra comprising of members of Willimantic's famed Tucker Orchestra, a number of musicians from Woonsocket, R.I. and several singers from Woonsocket assisted the regular Church Company with the music.

Architects designed the church in the Romanesque style, in order to preserve the cross of early Gothic architecture. A large gilded cross surmounted each of the church's impressive towers, and an imposing rose window separated the two towers. The exterior brick was buff in color, while the inside or lining was built of

Connecticut red brick. Carved stonework surmounted the church's long main entrance, and more than one million bricks were used in the church's construction.

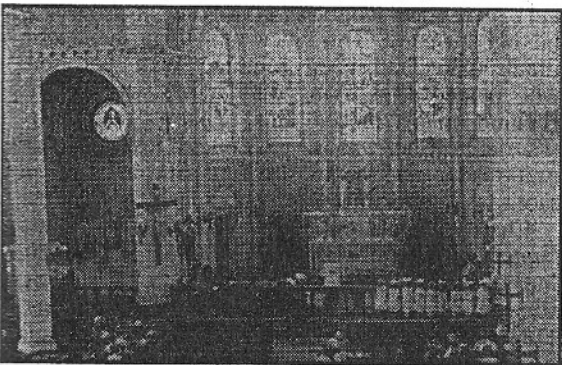


Tom Beardsley

The church's stonework consisted mainly of Munson granite trimmed with terra cotta. The building's supportive frames consist of hard pine, and the upper part of the towers including the spires was made of copper. Unfortunately, a serious storm in the mid-1950s damaged the spires, causing their removal and replacement.

The door at the front entrance was of solid oak with antique iron trimmings. One entrance at the east side of the transept and one entrance in the rear led to the altar

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The interior of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Willimantic, which marks its centenary on New Year's Day, 2004.

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boys' room and by a private passage to the vestry or robing room. There were four marble fonts, and the vestibule's west end contained the Baptistry. Iron stairways in the towers lead to the gallery.

Church officials allowed a Willimantic Journal reporter to view the interior, the day before the ceremony and he filed the following detailed description:

"All the woodwork inside of the church consists of oak and some of it is handsomely carved, especially the sanctuary railing and the massive brackets sup-

porting the organ gallery are hand carved. The organ gallery is located between the towers.

"The dimensions are about 20 X 36 foot. At present, there is a temporary organ of good size and power in the gallery but later a much finer and larger instrument will be installed.

"The main aisle of the church is wide, some 6 foot 4 inches, and the side aisles are each 5 feet wide. On the walls are the Stations of the Cross, 14 in number, harmonizing in shape and scheme with the general coloring, and each being an artistic piece of work made of stone composition.

The sanctuary is generous in proportion to the church, the main altar is handsomely carved, well decorated and handsomely proportioned. It is finished in light colors, as are the two side altars. In the left transept in an artistic niche is a small shrine, a statue of St. Anthony.

The large windows in the island at the rear of the sanctuary above the altar with the rose window in the facade and windows in the transepts and clearstory are all of beautiful designs in costly stained glass, flooding the interior with light."

Next week we will examine the church's original lighting, its floors, wall plaster and the many leading individuals in the city's French Canadian community who generously donated funds to get this magnificent Willimantic edifice built.

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