

The deBruyckers arrive at St. Mary's

Part 2 of 2

On Jan. 1, 1905, a dedication ceremony officially opened St. Mary's new church on Valley Street. Willimantic's French Canadian community had officially organized St. Mary's parish in February 1903, shortly after the death of the Rev. Florimond

DeBruycker, the long-serving pastor of St. Joseph's Church.

The new parish members appointed his cousin, the Rev. Arthur DeBruycker as pastor and the Rev. Louis Baud from France as curate. In less than two years, DeBruycker put into action a plan for the spiritual instruction of

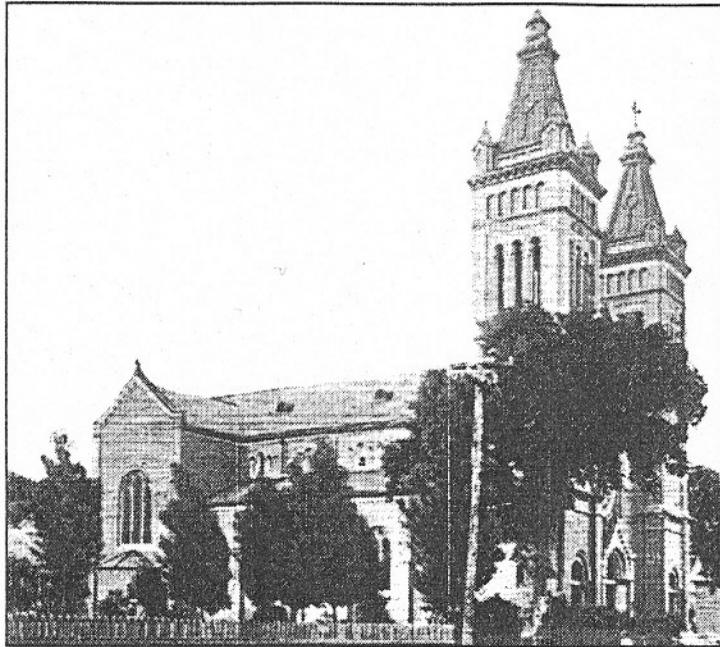
3,600 members of the St. Mary's parish and the religion and general education of several hundred children enrolled as pupils in St. Mary's school.



Tom Beardsley

The new parishioners moved a building formerly known as St. Joseph's Hall to the Valley Street site, and fitted up the schoolroom in its rear with a chapel to hold services during the new church's construction. They also remodeled one of the neighboring houses on this property as a rectory.

The new parish members built a large wooden schoolhouse on the lot between the rectory and St. Joseph's hall. The St. Mary's parish then purchased a three-story brick house on Maple Street, located at the rear of the new church, and remodeled it as a home for the Sisters of Charity who came to teach at the new school. This fine building was



St. Mary's Church shortly after it opened.

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once the residence of George Harrington, the city of Willimantic's first mayor in 1893.

The new church edifice was the centerpiece of St. Mary's Valley Street property. We can look back in time and view its interior, courtesy of a Willimantic Journal reporter who toured the church just before it officially opened.

On entering, he was highly impressed with the electric lighting system, which consisted of 350 globes on polished brass fixtures, placed in clusters on the columns, around the clearstory, in and about the sanctuary, and around the organ gallery.

The church's floors were made of maple, laid in narrow widths, and the vestibule's floor consisted of a mosaic with colored borders.

The walls were finished in plaster, but there were no plans to decorate them until the plaster had become thoroughly dried and hardened which it was thought

would take two or three years. However, the church's magnificent windows really caught the reporter's eye.

St. Mary's parishioners, and societies connected with the parish, contributed all the church's windows. The five in the sanctuary and those over the main altar were a gift from the local St. Jean Baptiste Society.

The society of St. Anne and local grocers Alphonse Chagnon, and Napoleon Bacon donated the windows on both sides of the church.

Other window donations came from Willimantic's health officer, Dr. J. A. Girouad, saloonkeepers Delphis Boucher and Alphonse L. Gelinas, undertaker David P. Comtois, Dr. C. H. Girard and the Moreau family. Joseph Mathieu, Delia Mathieu, Nelson Gilman, Joseph Mullen, Mrs. Theodore Potvin, Joseph Moison, Joseph LaClare, Joseph Gilman, Charles La Fleur, Charles De Villiers, Mrs. Lucien Cartier, Joseph Proux, Mrs. Cordelli, Phillip Cheney and Emma Moison also made generous donations towards the windows.

The society of the Children of St. Mary donated the round rose window above the organ gallery and Mrs. Alvina Blanchette, wife of baker J.O. Blanchette donated the small round window over the Blessed Virgin altar.

The window over the altar of St. Joseph was a gift of Marie Rose Blanchette and Gertrude Girouard donated the one at the shrine of St. Anthony. Emma Dubois, Pierre Fournier, Adelard Dumas and Valmour Dumas donated the vestibule windows. Fadlou Saba, a Syrian-born peddler, donated two large and valuable candlesticks.

The children of the parish donated the sanctuary lamp, which cost \$350, and the ladies of the Society of St. Anne gave church vestments costing \$500. Peter Mathieu donated Stations of the Cross, consisting of 14 pieces that cost \$600.

Many of the descendants of these French Canadians who helped establish the St. Mary's Parish still reside in the area. How many family members can you recognize?

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