

Assumption BVM Parish will celebrate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023.

To commemorate this event, the ABVM Parish Magazine will feature a series of four articles tracing the history of the parish from 1873 until the present day.

This is the first of these articles.

**(PART I 1681 – 1901)**



*ABVM Church circa 1900*

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN PENNSYLVANIA**  
**REACHING OUT TO THE PERIPHERIES**  
**THE MISSIONARY CHURCH IN PENNSYLVANIA (1649-1839)**

**INTRODUCTION**

From the earliest days of colonial America, missionaries traveled to the geographical peripheries of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware to minister to the small but growing number of Catholic immigrants. Reasons for immigrating were varied and depended on when and where the immigrants were from. Early immigrants were fleeing religious oppression, others war and famine. Later immigrants were seeking a better economic future as opportunities for them in Europe faded due to industrialization. Regardless of time and place, missionary priests followed and served Catholics wherever they were.

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PENNSYLVANIA**

Pennsylvania became an attractive destination for religious minorities seeking freedom to practice their faith. In 1681, King Charles II granted a land charter to William Penn, a Quaker, in North America to pay off debts he owed to Penn's father, Sir William Penn.<sup>1</sup>

Because Penn, the son, was an early advocate of democracy and religious freedom<sup>1</sup>, Pennsylvania was unique among all the colonies. Its Charter of Privileges recognized the rights of freedom of conscience and freedom to worship openly, regardless of faith.<sup>2</sup>

### **EARLY IMMIGRATION TO CHESTER COUNTY<sup>3</sup>**

Chester County once included all of present-day Delaware County and all the land west of the Octorara Creek. Lancaster County was formed in 1729, taking most of the land west of the Octorara Creek. Delaware County was formed in 1789.

Most of Chester County's earliest immigrants were Protestants seeking religious freedom. English settlers joined a small group of Swedish and Finnish settlers clustered near the Delaware River. English Quakers began arriving in increasing numbers throughout the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. By 1728, they had established over 21 meetings stretching from the Delaware River to Sadsbury in present-day Lancaster County. In present-day Chester County, they predominately settled in the eastern and central parts of the county. A small group of Irish Quakers established their own meeting in New Garden Township by 1715.

Welsh Quakers, Anglicans, and Baptists settled in an area known as the Welsh Tract as early as 1682. In present-day Chester County, East and West Whiteland, East and West Goshen, Willistown, Easttown, and Tredyffrin were considered part of the Welsh Tract. Another group of Welsh Baptists settled in what is now London Britain Township by 1701. Lowland Scottish Presbyterians—who had resettled in Ulster, Ireland, in the seventeenth century—began arriving in large numbers in Chester County by the late 1710s. The majority settled in the western townships that bordered present-day Lancaster County.

Persecuted religious minorities, like the Mennonites, began arriving in Chester County by the 1720s. The first known Mennonite congregation had formed in Coventry Township by 1724. The highest concentration of German immigration in Chester County occurred along the Schuylkill River in North, East and South Coventry; East and West Vincent; and East and West Pikeland.

## **EARLY CATHOLIC SETTLEMENTS IN PENNSYLVANIA<sup>4</sup>**

During the colonial period, there were three permanent centers of Catholicism in Pennsylvania. In central Pennsylvania, English Catholics settled in Conewago, about 10 miles east of Gettysburg, between 1720-1730. St. Joseph's parish in Old Philadelphia became another Catholic center and served the city as well as Chester and Delaware Counties and New Jersey. In 1741, Father Theodor Schneider, a Jesuit priest, came to the area and established a Catholic mission church in Goshenhoppen (Bally) in Berks County, about 25 miles from Valley Forge. The mission would be just the third of its kind in the 13 original colonies.<sup>5</sup> Before the Revolutionary War, most Catholic immigrants in Pennsylvania were German, English, or Irish. Germans were often tradesmen or artisans and emigrated as families. Many Irish immigrants in Chester County were tailors, weavers, and wool carders who worked in the cloth industry concentrated in the townships around West Chester.

In Pennsylvania, German Jesuits were recruited to minister to German-speaking Catholics in Conewago and Lancaster; English Jesuits were recruited to minister to Catholics who had resettled in Philadelphia and in Delaware and Chester Counties. A mission church was established during the 1770s in Chester County at Doe Run (present-day Londonderry Township near Cochranville). In 1772, Father Matthew Sittsenperger was directed by the Superior of the Jesuit Maryland Province to purchase a 200-acre farm in Delaware near a stream named Coffee Run—southeast of present-day Hockessin off Delaware Route 48—to build a mission.<sup>6</sup>

**POST REVOLUTIONARY WAR PERIOD – RELIGIOUS LIBERTIES GUARANTEED,  
THE GREAT IRISH MIGRATION 1799-1890**

“...in 1789....it is estimated that there were 30,000 of the ancient Faith throughout the whole Republic. There were in the whole country but 35 priests to assist the Bishop. Of these only 19 (some say 22) were able or willing to attend the first Diocesan Synod which was held in Baltimore in 1791.”<sup>7</sup>

“In 1850 Catholics made up only five percent of the total U.S. population. By 1906, they made up seventeen percent of the total population—14 million out of 82 million people—and constituted the single largest religious denomination in the country.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite William Penn’s Charter of Liberties (1701) reaffirming religious toleration,<sup>9 10</sup> the British Crown still governed Pennsylvania, and Catholics were prohibited from holding public office and serving in the militia. Catholics were subject to hatred expressed in popular expressions, folktales, and songs.<sup>11</sup>

However, this would all change when, following independence from Great Britain after the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1789 to ratify the new Constitution. In 1791, the Constitution was amended by Congress to guarantee the free exercise of religion by all faiths—the First Amendment.<sup>12</sup> The First Amendment profoundly impacted immigration to the United States during the next 100 years. It removed a major obstacle faced by previous Catholic immigrants as they settled in the colonies. From 1799-1890, a tremendous wave of immigrants would reach America. This mass influx was driven by economic and political conditions and the devastating impact of the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1852.



## COFFEE RUN

In 1805, Bishop John Carroll assigned Father Patrick Kenny, an Irish immigrant, to oversee the mission at White Clay Creek (Coffee Run) and New Castle in Delaware as well as, in Pennsylvania, West Chester, Doe Run, Concord, and Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> From 1805 to 1818, he lived in Goshen, Pennsylvania, but prepared to purchase Coffee Run from the Jesuits. His friend, Anthony Hearn, financed this purchase and endowed a church to be built in West Chester. Once he acquired Coffee Run, Father Kenny moved there and began constructing lodging. Father Kenny also began a building program for his parishes, including New Castle, Delaware; West Chester; Ivy Mills; and Doe Run. Using money from the estate of Father Charles Whalen—an Irish Capuchin who was his predecessor in Delaware—Father Kenny built the first Catholic church in Wilmington, Delaware. Begun in 1816, this became St. Peter's Cathedral. In 1823, he replaced the existing log cabin church building on the Coffee Run property. It would become the first St. Mary of the Assumption Church and the forerunner of today's parish in Hockessin. Father Kenny served as pastor at Coffee Run from 1810 until his death in 1840.<sup>6</sup> <sup>13</sup>



*Photo (1972) of Father Kenny's residence, built circa 1820. The building was destroyed by a fire in 2010.*

## DOE RUN

The Doe Run Historic District is located in West Marlborough Township and East Fallowfield Township adjacent to the intersection of Routes 82 and 841. Since there was no church building in Doe Run, Father Kenny offered Mass at the Londonderry mission in the home of J. Dorat until 1818. The mission at Londonderry continued to grow, and a church building was constructed in 1838, followed by St. Malachi's in 1839. Catholics from the West Grove area attended Mass regularly at St. Malachi's at Doe Run, and many residents spoke of walking there on Sundays to attend Mass. The congregation at Doe Run was increased by the numerous Irish families who emigrated after the Potato Famine. Old tombstones in the cemetery at St. Malachi's (and ABVM's St. Mary's cemetery in West Grove) bear the names of deceased who were ancestors of ABVM parishioners.<sup>6</sup>



*Saint Malachi's is the first permanent church built to serve the Doe Run (Londonderry) Mission in 1838.*

*The simple church building resembles a Quaker meeting house. The church is located at 76 St. Malachi Road, Cochranville. It is currently a mission church of Our Lady of Consolation in Parkesburg.*



**FATHER JAMES F. KELLY AND ASSUMPTION BVM**

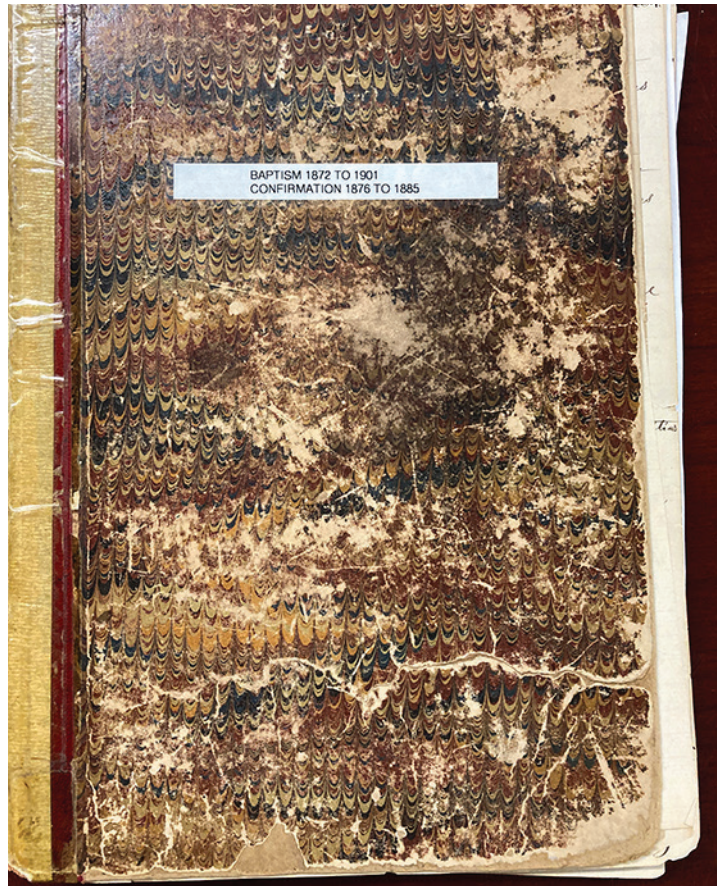


**Father James F. Kelly**

*“For it was the Catholic Church, more than any other organization, that made a concerted effort to welcome the new Catholic immigrants. Catholic citizens helped them find jobs and homes; sisters (nuns) taught their children English in Catholic schools; priests tried to protect their political interests and shield them from a sometimes hostile Protestant environment; the local church religious festivals and social events. It is important to stress that for immigrants, the neighborhood Catholic church was not just a church; it was the focal point of a whole community, a whole way of life.”<sup>8</sup>*

The Catholic population in Chester County began to grow as Irish immigrants found jobs and settled along the route of the newly constructed Philadelphia and Baltimore Central railroad that ran through West Grove.<sup>14</sup> In 1871, Bishop James Wood of the Philadelphia diocese sent James F. Kelly first to Ivy Mills, then, in 1872, to Kennett Square (Old St. Patrick's), where his ministry reached to the Maryland line. Moving from town to town, Father Kelly established parishes and built churches. He also offered Mass in New London and Kelton homes. In West Grove, the town hall served as the church building.

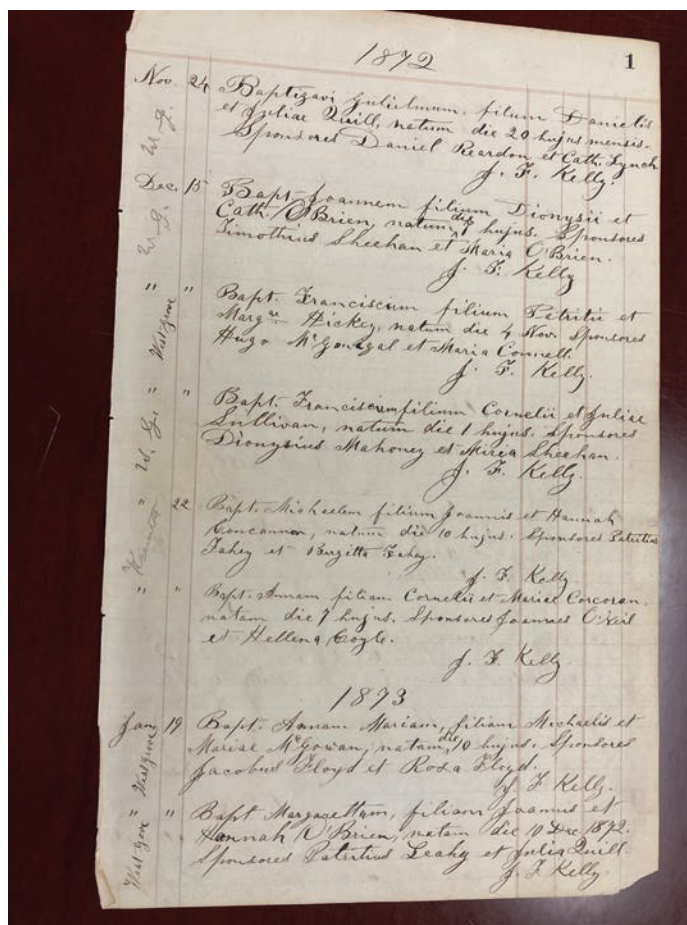
In 1872, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia purchased property from Joseph and Mira Pyle, and Bishop Woods appointed Father Kelly, pastor of St. Patrick's, to build the new church in West Grove. Also in 1872, the first baptisms were recorded in the parish baptismal record.<sup>6</sup>



*Record of Baptisms & Confirmations*

*Source – ABVM Parish Archives*

# The Missionary Church



First page of baptismal record (includes baptisms performed at West Grove and Kennett Square)

The first entry (in Latin) is translated: "I baptized William son of Daniel and Julia Quill, born on the 20th day of this month sponsors Daniel Reardon and Cath. Lynch – J.F. Kelly"

Source – ABVM Parish Archives



On Sunday, September 13, 1873, ground was broken for the West Grove church building; Bishop Wood laid the cornerstone. The first Mass was celebrated in February 1874, even as final work on the interior was being completed. The interior decorations were made by an artist, John Bonner. Pews made of walnut, formerly part of Old St. Mary's Church in Philadelphia, were installed in the Assumption BVM Church. On June 18, 1876, the church building was dedicated by (now) Archbishop Wood.<sup>6</sup>

### **CHURCH DEDICATION AT WEST GROVE – 6/19/1876**

*“The Catholic Church (St. Mary’s) at West Grove was dedicated yesterday morning by Archbishop Wood of Philadelphia. The services were of a very interesting as well as impressive character and were witnessed by a large audience, the house being filled even to the standing room in the aisles and hall. After the regular dedicatory service of the church building was over, the altar was also dedicated in the manner prescribed in the rubrics; high mass was celebrated by the Bishop’s assistant. The choir rendered the chant “Lord Have Mercy” in a very creditable manner....The remarks of the Bishop were of a very practical character....*

*After the discourse of the Bishop, Father Kelly, the pastor of the church, presented a class of over two hundred...for confirmation....*

*The meeting lasted four hours, and will long be remembered by the congregation and citizens of West Grove, as being the largest and most interesting ever congregated here.”*

*Source – ABVM Parish Archives. Possibly a column from the Daily Local News, which is the source of other news articles in the parish archives.*

The Missionary Church



*Interior of ABVM Church circa 1900*

*Source – ABVM Parish Archives*



The following years continued to be a very busy time for Father Kelly. In 1874, Father Kelly, his mother Joanna Kelly, and his brother John had moved from Kennett Square to a house on Prospect Street in West Grove. Even after he became pastor of ABVM, Father Kelly continued missionary work at Oxford and Kennett Square until 1893. While Father Kelly was diligent in implementing a program of physical improvements to the parish, he worked just as hard promoting and nourishing the growth of a vibrant community both in the parish and in the borough of West Grove. During his pastorate, picnics, church suppers, musical performances, and many other activities provided recreational and social outlets for the growing parish.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to purely social events, societies—such as the Total Abstinence Society—were formed to educate parishioners (especially men) about the dangers of alcoholism and to promote the benefits of a lifestyle of abstinence.

*Announcement for Total Abstinence Society – 1884*

*“Total Abstinence Society (T.A.B.)*

*Founded: October 1883*

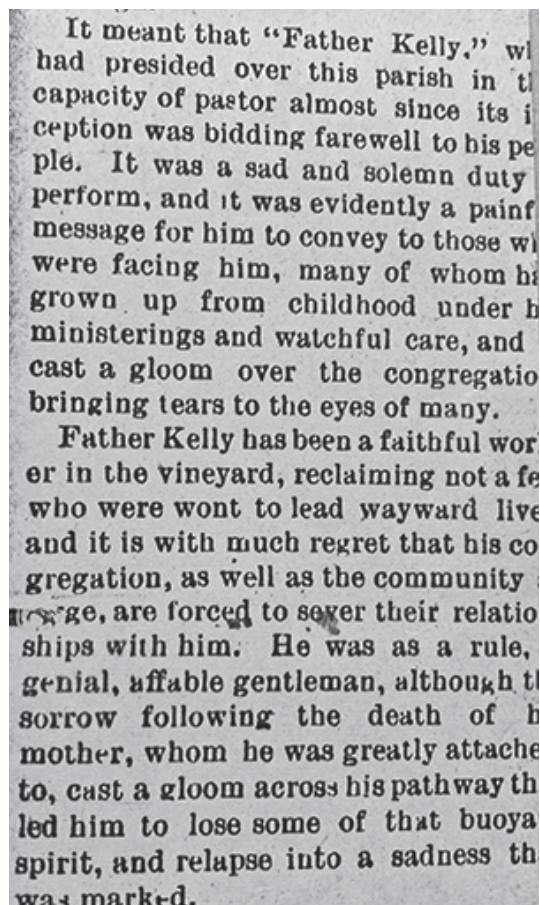
*Pastor: Father Kelly*

*The Total Abstinence Society was formed under the direction of Father Kelly, starting with a group of 15 young men, who met in the basement of the church.*

*The society celebrated its first anniversary on September 30, 1884 with a meeting in the public hall of the town. Many non-Catholics attended including some Friends (Quakers). At this meeting 38 ladies enrolled themselves and organized the St. Mary’s Ladies T.A.B. Society.”*

*Source – ABVM Parish Archives. A typed transcription of a parish announcement about the Total Abstinence Society. The original source is unknown.*

## FATHER KELLY LEAVES ASSUMPTION BVM



It meant that "Father Kelly," who had presided over this parish in the capacity of pastor almost since its inception was bidding farewell to his people. It was a sad and solemn duty to perform, and it was evidently a painful message for him to convey to those who were facing him, many of whom had grown up from childhood under his ministrings and watchful care, and cast a gloom over the congregation bringing tears to the eyes of many.

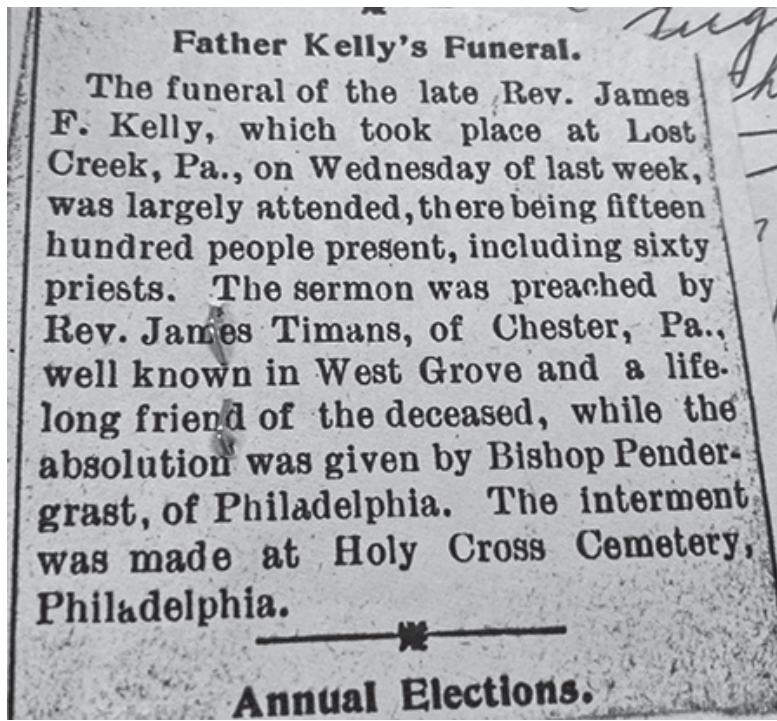
Father Kelly has been a faithful worker in the vineyard, reclaiming not a few who were wont to lead wayward lives, and it is with much regret that his congregation, as well as the community at large, are forced to sever their relationships with him. He was as a rule, genial, affable gentleman, although the sorrow following the death of his mother, whom he was greatly attached to, cast a gloom across his pathway that led him to lose some of that buoyant spirit, and relapse into a sadness that was marked.

*"I am to take charge of another parish." These were the words Father Kelly used when he broke the news to his parishioners in 1901 that he had been reassigned to another parish and would be leaving ABVM in less than a week.*

This newspaper clipping (a section of a longer article not included here), conveys the sadness and sense of loss felt by the parish as they realized that the only pastor many of them had known—a shepherd who had cared for his spiritual flock with devotion and kindness—would soon be gone from their lives. According to the article, some parishioners even wrote letters to the bishop, pleading that the bishop reconsider his decision and allow Father to continue his work at ABVM.

*Source – Possibly a column from the Daily Local News which is the source of other news articles in the parish archives.*

Following his long and fruitful assignment at ABVM, Father Kelly left for his new parish at Lost Creek in Schuylkill County. Two years later, on January 2, 1903, Father Kelly died. A special train was chartered from Philadelphia to carry West Grove mourners and others to the site of the funeral in Lost Creek. The following newspaper article conveys the affection and respect felt by so many people for the first pastor of Assumption BVM.<sup>6</sup>



*Father Kelly's Funeral*

*Source – ABVM Parish Archives. Possibly a column from the Daily Local News, which is the source of other news articles in the parish archives.*

The Missionary Church

**ABVM TIMELINE 1872 – 1902**

1872 Land purchased for ABVM Church

1873 ABVM Church Groundbreaking

1874 First Mass celebrated in ABVM Church

1876 ABVM Church Dedication

1880 Ground acquired for St. Mary's Cemetery

1889 Church Organ Installed (a Gift from Parishioners)

1893 Construction Debt for Church Construction Satisfied. (Total Construction cost: \$14,750)

1898 Church Bell Dedicated

1902 ABVM Rectory Completed

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