



1909-2009

The early history of the Catholic community in the Durham area is unclear due to conflicts in the sources. However, it seems that around 1867 a Mrs. Shepherd of Raleigh gave a tract of land a few miles north of Hillsborough to be used for a Catholic community. A group of people from Pennsylvania moved to this land and founded St. Catherine's Mission. These may have been the first Catholics in the area. It appears that another mission, St. Bernard's, was established in Hillsborough area around 1876.

According to Robert M. Watson in "A religious profile of Durham, North Carolina, 1880-1930," a Mrs. James Lawrence of Philadelphia, who moved here in 1871, was the first Catholic to reside in Durham. Mr. James Lawrence was a mechanic and inventor employed by the W. T. Blackwell tobacco company; it is not clear if he was Catholic. By 1879, there were said to be 18 Catholics living in the city.

Around 1878 or 1880, some of the families residing in Hillsborough moved to Durham. Fathers Mark Gross and James B. White would come from Raleigh to meet their needs, at first every six months, later every three months. Mass was celebrated in homes of members. Duke history professor Dr. William K. Boyd recorded the tradition that the first Catholic Mass in the city was held in the parlor of a staunch Presbyterian and that the priest was his guest.

By 1887, the congregation was large enough to rent a hall on Corcoran Street where Mass was celebrated. About this time, Mr. William T. O'Brien became a leader in the congregation. O'Brien was a mechanic from Lynchburg, Va., employed by the Bonsack Cigarette Machine Company. He was sent to Durham in the early 1880s to manage the Bonsack machine at the W. Duke & Sons tobacco factory. James B. Duke hired him away from Bonsack and O'Brien was made superintendent of the Duke factory in 1897. In the tobacco-based economy of Durham, this would have made him a prominent figure.

In 1901, Father Michael Irwin of Raleigh took charge of the Durham mission, visiting more frequently than previous priests had done. Under his leadership, the congregation rented a hall on Main Street, near Church Street. In it they placed pews, altar, sacristy, confessional and other furnishings to make it the first true church, though still rented.

Timeline

- **1905** Mr. William T. O'Brien gave the church a site on Chapel Hill Street which consisted of three large lots. He also contributed at least some of the funds for the building.
- **1906** January 14. Bishop Leo Haid, O.S.B., Abbot of Belmont Abbey and Apostolic Vicar for North Carolina, presided at the Mass of dedication. The O'Brien's had wanted to name the church after St. Joseph; however, there was already a church by that name in the city, so the name Immaculate Conception was chosen instead. Mr. O'Brien died two weeks after the consecration. A tradition holds that his funeral was the first service in the new church following the dedication, but this is questionable. O'Brien died on Saturday, January 27, 1906. His funeral mass was held at the church Monday, January 29. According to a notice in the *Durham Morning Herald* for Sunday, January 28, services were to be held in the church that day "as usual" suggesting that a regular schedule of worship had been established.
- **1906** Father William F. O'Brien arrived in Durham to become the first resident pastor of Immaculate Conception, effective September 23. He was to remain pastor here and at the surrounding missions in Chapel Hill, Hillsboro, Roxboro, Oxford and Halifax until 1951. The congregation at the time numbered about 106 members. The population of Durham at the time was about 30,000. According to *The Official Catholic Directory* for 1906, there were approximately 4800 Catholics in the state that year.
- **1909** The Sisters of Saint Dominic arrived from Newburg, New York, under whom was begun the first parochial school with an enrollment of nine pupils. The school was called St. Mary School. The School was established in the little Rectory now located behind the Church. At the first year's end twenty three children were in attendance.
- **1913** A second school building was added as the result of generous offerings made by mission-minded Catholics and friends from various parts of the Country. This was a Convent-School combination, the Sisters living on the second floor, and a four room school on the first floor. This building was located at 806 West Chapel Hill Street.
- **1940** With a gift of \$25,000. made by the Catholic Extension Society through the agency of the Most Reverend William O'Brien, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, a handsome and substantial building was procured and renovated. Thus arose the third parish School. St. Mary's School was renamed St. William's School and moved to 406 West Chapel Hill Street.
- **1951** St. William's School was again renamed, this time to Immaculata, and the school moved to its present building on Burch Avenue.
- **1951** Monsignor O'Brien retired from active administrative work. He was pastor from 1906-1951.
- **1954** A new Convent was built as a residence for the Sisters of Saint Dominic at 725 Burch Avenue.
- **1956** A new church was built and dedicated
- **1960** Rev. William F. O'Brien, founder of Immaculata Catholic School, died on March 24th.
- **1993** A need for more space for both the parish and the school led to the Olive tree building campaign. Construction on the building began in early 1994.
- **2004** Construction of the Emily Krzyzewski Family Center begins on land given by the parish. School and parish use space.
- **2009** Today 384 students attend Immaculata Catholic School. The student population includes 74% Catholic, 21% non-Catholic, 60% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 16% African American and 6% multi racial. Students have come from Korea, Malaysia, Africa, and South and Central America to be a part of the Immaculata Way of Life.