

History of Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church

Established 1874



One can hardly write about the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Milledgeville without acknowledging the threads of the Treanor and Cline families that are woven ever so snugly within the fabric of the early Catholic community in Baldwin County. For over a hundred and fifty years these families, the ancestors of internationally acclaimed author Flannery O'Connor, have been instrumental in the development and growth of the Catholic Church in Milledgeville. Yet today, the church is privileged to have an active parishioner who is a decedent of these families.

The first Catholic resident of Milledgeville was Hugh Donnelly Treanor, Flannery O'Connor's great-grandfather. Mr. Treanor owned and operated a gristmill located on the Oconee River just east of town. Remnants of the mill can still be seen when looking north from the bridge just east of town on the Sparta Road. It was in his room in the Newell Hotel, across the street from the Presbyterian Church where the Magnolia State Bank now stands, that the first Catholic Mass on record was celebrated in April 1845 by Reverend J.J. O'Connell. Documentation also shows that the O'Brien family was in attendance at the Mass.

Milledgeville was the state capital from 1807 to 1868. In 1861 Georgia seceded from the Union and placed their loyalty with the newly formed Confederacy. The ensuing Civil War was challenging to the people of Milledgeville. In 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, the state legislature voted to move the capital to Atlanta. This move proved to be a hardship on local businesses. The editor of the Union Recorder, in an editorial on March 25th 1871, encouraged the building of a Catholic church to encourage desirable immigrants to settle here. "Many of the best mechanics and most useful citizens from abroad are Catholic," he wrote.

Two years later, on March 30th 1873, a meeting of Milledgeville Catholics and other interested citizens was called with Flannery's grandfather, Peter James Cline, presiding, and A. J. Brody as secretary. The construction of a church was discussed and approved. The following month, according to the Union Recorder, advertisements for bids were issued and a firm from Augusta was awarded the contract.

The location of the church was determined, following the sale of one tract of land on Jefferson Street by William McKinley to Bishop Gross of Savannah. Then Mr. McKinley sold the corner lot on Hancock and Jefferson, where the Lafayette Hall [built in 1824 and destroyed by fire in 1858 or 1859] once stood, to George Hass who in turn sold it to Bishop Gross. Flannery's great-grandmother, Mrs. Hugh Donnelly Treanor, paid for the land. A bronze plaque on the cornerstone of the church is a permanent reminder that it was through her generosity and efforts that the church was erected.



But, before the church could be built, funds needed to be raised. In February 1873, Pope Pius IX appointed Father William H. Gross as Bishop of Savannah Dioceses, which turned out to be a blessing for the parishioners in Milledgeville. The Union Recorder of July 16 1873 reports his historic visit to Milledgeville for the purpose of addressing the community in hopes of raising funds to pay for the new church...*"There will be an excursion from Augusta to the city on Sunday the 20th. It will be under the auspices of the Catholics of Augusta and under the conduct of*

Father Wm. J. Hamilton. The party upon reaching the city will repair to the old Capitol building where there will be services by Bishop Goss. The proceeds of the excursion will be given to the Catholic church of this place”.

Dressed in a Nazarene blue robe with a broad cincture of crimson around his waist and a large gold crucifix suspended from his neck, Bishop Gross gave a very eloquent public address before approximately 500 citizens on the steps of the Statehouse. The details of the speech are unknown, but the effectiveness is well documented by the \$4,000 he raised for the construction of the church.

Construction started soon after the Bishop's visit and the following year (April 1874) the church was completed. A description in the Union Recorder said the interior of the new church was *“thirty by thirty feet with the ceiling twenty-one feet above the floor, curved with the angle of intersection with the walls and a gallery across the end nine feet wide.”* The Gothic windows, still in the building to this day, contain hand-made pressed glass from the windows of the elegant Lafayette Hall, where General Marquis de Lafayette stayed during his visit to Milledgeville in 1825.



The sanctuary was designed to hold around 150 people and the steeple rose some sixty feet in height. Could it have been a coincidence or a providential blessing...the total cost of construction was \$4,000, the exact amount raised by Bishop Gross the year before. In the June 3 1874 edition of the Union Recorder it was noted that Bishop Gross would return to Milledgeville on Sunday June 7th to dedicate the church as the Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church. An extra train would run from Macon with a round trip fair of \$1 for adults and 50¢ for children.

On February 8, 1875 the first wedding in the new church enjoined Peter J. Cline to Miss Katie Treanor. The first baptism was conducted by Father J. B. Langlois on March 26, 1876. He baptized Mary Elizabeth Magill, daughter of James and Mary Elizabeth Kerr Magill. Mr. Magill had come to Milledgeville to work on the construction of the new church and made Milledgeville his home. The first funeral in the new church was that of Mary Treanor, daughter of Hugh Treanor and Joanna Harty Treanor on April 10, 1876. In 1878, fifty-seven persons were listed as members of the parish and in that year the first Sacrament of Confirmation was administered by Bishop Gross.

The Reverend Robert F. Kennedy was the first resident priest assigned to the Milledgeville parish, serving from 1889 to 1904. During his assignment, Fr. Kennedy had the building extended to accommodate a larger sanctuary and sacristy.



During Father T. James McNamara tenure (1932-1939), Nuns from Mount deSales in Macon began coming on Sundays to sing in the choir and help with Sunday school. Father McNamara also directed the construction of the present rectory in the mid 1930's. Also during his tenure a donation by Mrs. Y.A. Little, in memory of her husband, allowed for the purchase of the Crucifix that hangs above the altar.



The church continued to grow despite WWI and WWII, with a membership nearing two hundred. From 1949 to 1956, Father John Downy Toomey served as pastor of Sacred Heart and under his leadership, in September 1951 a Catholic school was opened in an old white house down the street from the church and was administered by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Mother Celeste Marie was principal. She and two other nuns taught classes from kindergarten through sixth grade. The school was opened for only five years; closing in 1956 due to reassignment of the nuns.



Father Toomey was a popular priest who among other noteworthy accomplishments directed the construction of the parish hall, which is now known as the Flannery O'Conner Hall. Thanks to bequests from Mrs. Roberta Horne Little and Miss Gertrude Treanor, Father Toomey was able purchase a Moller pipe organ to bring much appreciated accompaniment to the choir. The organ is still in use today.



In 1957, the Savannah Diocese was subdivided, putting the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in the Diocese of Atlanta. To this day the church is the most southern parish in the now Archdioceses of Atlanta.

During the pastorate of Father Dullea (1971-1975), the most extensive improvements and additions were made to the church since it was built, in preparation of the centennial celebration. \$50,000 was invested to redecorate the church with new carpet, curtains, pews and chandeliers. All the exterior woodwork was painted and the front doors were returned to their natural finish. The interior of the church was given a fresh coat of paint. The projects costs were supplemented by the proceeds from the sale of property left to the church by Mrs. Mary McAdams. On November 3, 1974, Archbishop Thomas A. Donnellan re-dedicated the newly renovated church followed by a mass celebrated by Bishop Raymond Lessard of Savannah and a number of priests who had served the parish over the previous years.

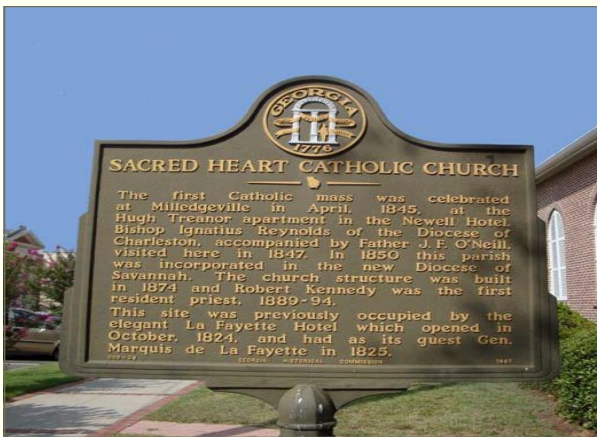
Father Hugh Marren, (1985-1991) oversaw the construction of a new Religious Education Building. Dedicated on September 10, 1989, Aquinas Hall was built on the spot where the old "White House" stood that had served as the Sunday School building for a number of years.



Under Fr. Michael McWhorter's (1996-2009) oversight, a complete exterior and interior restoration of the church. Extensive work was done to repair and preserve the brickwork on the side of the church, a new roof was installed, and the steeple was renovated and all the wooden trim was repaired and painted. During this time, the interior of the church also underwent much needed repairs and restoration with new plaster and paint on the walls and ceiling. The old pressed glass windows, once in the Lafayette Hall, were carefully re-caulked and secured in the original wooden window frames. Much research was

done and care was taken to preserve the historical integrity of the church.

Also during this time, through an anonymous donation, Fr. Michael purchased a computerized bell system from Belltron, an Italian based company. The sounds from the speakers installed in the bell tower are so real that upon hearing the bells, he began getting calls from parishioners volunteering to ring the bells. The system contains over 900 hymns and can be programmed to coincide with the liturgical calendar. The Westminster bells sound every hour and half hour.



Listed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 6, 1972, the church is as close to its original condition as can be achieved. Today, the quaint little brick church on the corner of Hancock and North Jefferson is the spiritual home to some 350 Catholic families and is one of the stops on the Convention and Visitor Bureau's Trolley tour of historical places around Milledgeville. Father Young Nguyen, the new pastor appointed 2009, welcomes all visitors at daily and weekend Masses.

Information for this article was gathered from a history written by the late Margret A. Uhler and Dorris Neligan, a Literary Guide to Flannery O'Connor's Georgia by Sarah Gordon, Graig Amason and Marcelina Martin, the archives of the Union Recorder, the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the Sacred Heart Catholic Church.



Photo presumed to have been taken prior to 1932 due to the absence of the Crucifix.



Same view as above taken September 2009



Date of photo unknown. However, in the photo, it is noted that the sacristy has added to the building and the rectory has not yet been built. So, one would assume that the photo was taken between the 1890 and 1894.



The rectory and the Parish House were built under Fr. McNamara in 1935.



Sacred Heart Catholic Chruch (1874 - 2009)