

The first settlers of Suffolk County came from Connecticut and Rhode Island as early as 1640. Some of the churches they built are still standing and their names still live in their numerous descendants through the County.

In the early part of the 19th century, other settlers came from other parts, they were chiefly Irish along with some Spanish and Portuguese. They worked on farms, or were fishermen. Their number was small and they were extremely poor. But they had what their more prosperous neighbors did not have..The True Faith. However, that fact, while it consoled them in their hardships, did not make their lives any easier, but perhaps, much harder as far as their neighbors were concerned. Of New England Puritan stock - they actually hated everything Catholic. This hatred, though softened to dislike, has not entirely disappeared in Suffolk County even to this day..1955.

Looked down upon, barely tolerated and even deprived of the essential helps of their Faith, this little Catholic group clung to it and taught it to their children. Priests in those first years seldom visited this part of Long Island, for their number was very few and they had all New York State and New Jersey to look after. Besides, travel was very difficult, and it was necessary to come by sloop or sailing vessel from Manhattan.

As the years passed, priests did occasionally come to this part of Long Island. As early as 1845, Mass was offered in the homes of Mr. Joseph Farrell, in Greenport, and John Connally, at Ashamomuck. This was to be the regular practice for quite a few years.

While missionary journeys were not actually required, it was the self-sacrificing zeal of Frs. McGuinness, Michael Murran, John McCarthy & Michael O'Neil which took them to these distant parts. Like that of St. Paul, their lives were filled with danger. Fr. McGuinnis was mobbed and stoned and Fr. McCarthy had to hide in the woods for protection.

Much of the survival of our faith on Long Island is owed under God to these great and heroic missionaries. The chief credit, as far as this part of Long Island is concerned, must be given to Fr. Joseph Brunemann, a Franciscan priest. Fr. Joseph, as he was known, was in charge of St. Boniface Church, Brooklyn. For nearly 10 years he and Fr. Crowley, (Huntington) were the only resident pastors in Suffolk County.

Fr. Joseph purchased the property and building for the first permanent church (&rectory) in Southold. Its purchase in 1863, caused much opposition and grave danger of bloodshed.

While property was bought by Bishop Laughlin for a church in Greenport as early as 1855, and some type of building erected, no regular parish was organized. Fr. McCarthy is recorded as having built this "pro-church" but Father Joseph called it by the name the parish church has borne since....ST. AGNES!

Though living here at times, Fr. McCarthy and later on Fr. O'Neil, who resided at Greenport for one year, also tended to the needs of all Catholics from Sag Harbor to Babylon. Mass would be said at Greenport only every three months or so. In 1860 the records show that Father Brunemann (resident Pastor of Sag Harbor) alone looked after the Catholics of this section of L.I. Over the next eight or nine years he came fairly often to Southold and Greenport. He baptized and performed marriages. At last, in May of 1868 Fr. John McKenna was made pastor of the church in Southold, becoming the first resident pastor of the North Shore of LI as far as Riverhead. Fr. Brunemann became pastor of St. Mary Star of the Sea, Rockaway, where he died in 1874, ending a glorious missionary career. The church in Southold was called St. Patrick's - thus declaring the nationality of most of the Catholics settled there. The same month that Fr. McKenna came to Southold he must have visited Greenport and perhaps Shelter Island. We have in our possession an old account book with the names of all the adult Catholics of these two places. There are 115 names. The greater number are Irish names. This fact is probably due to the extension of the railroad to Greenport. Many Irishmen worked on the construction of the road and then settled here with their family. That list of the pioneers of the Parish holds names still in this parish...their descendants to whom they handed down their Faith and Love for the Church. We can barely make out the neat but almost faded handwriting, yet we read such names as Cantlin, Cassidy, Grattan, Hayes, McGahey, Montgomery, Tuttle Shomber, Claudio and others still on our Parish list.

Father McKenna was in charge of the Catholics at Greenport for eight years, during which he zealously built up their religious life. All were supposed to give a certain amount each month or quarter, a record of which was kept faithfully by Fr. McKenna. Mass was now offered every third Sunday, instead of every few months, in the little chapel which was enlarged and which served for religious worship until the church was built. Later on it was known as St. Agnes Hall, and was only torn down when the present Hall was built. Fr. McKenna offered Mass at Southold and on certain Sundays at Cutchogue, until sometime in 1877, when Fr. McKenna became Pastor of St. Michael's, Church, Flushing.