

Researching Catholic Ancestors

Class 1: The History of Catholics in America

Rhonda R. McClure, Senior Genealogist, rmclure@nehgs.org

Catholicism as a religious denomination traces centuries back in Europe. It was brought from Europe to North America in the 16th and 17th centuries. From the moment Christopher Columbus found himself on the shores of the islands in the Caribbean, Catholicism began its own immigration to North America—though it would not be until the 1540 that a mission would be established in what became the United States of America.

Earliest Catholic Missions

It is not surprising that since Columbus' voyages had been financed by the Spanish monarchy, that it would be Spain that planted the first Catholic flag, so to speak, with the establishment of a church, a diocese, and a bishop on the island of Puerto Rico by 1513. Through the explorations of Columbus and subsequent Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors – think soldiers of fortune), such as Hernándo Cortés who traveled to what is present day Mexico in 1519 that Spanish exploration and establishments began to open the way for Catholic missionaries. With Cortés' conquest of the Aztec empire—which took place February 1519 to 13 August 1521—the way was opened for the colonization of the southern lands of what would become the United States.

Spanish Catholic Colonization

By the 1530s, Spain began sending priests of the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustian orders to Mexico. It would not be long before those of the Jesuit order will be following suit. Not surprisingly the priests were often traveling with the *conquistadores* and their fellow soldiers on other expeditions. They assisted in the establishment of settlements and also ensured that the missions were founded along the way. The missionary priests often chose to build their missions near the settled indigenous communities. Because the missionaries accompanied the various expeditions, they found themselves bound to the Spanish and the Portuguese governments and military.

When France established French settlements along the coasts of Florida and Georgia—most notably, St. Augustine in Florida in 1564—this prompted Spain to found their own settlements and missions. After all, with each settlement, the expeditionary forces were not just looking to spread their religious beliefs. The goals were to find riches to help grow Spain's coffers, and thus their strength as a country; to expand the reach of Spain's control, and to take Christianity to those they encountered—the priority of the goals was in this order.

By 1598, eight Franciscan priests traveling with the expedition of Juan de Oñate, crossed into what is present-day El Paso, Texas. Consider for a moment that this was nine years before the founding of Jamestown, Virginia by England, and twenty-two years before the sailing of the Mayflower. In 1691, Franciscan friars once again traveled with an expedition, this time under the leadership of Domingo Terán de los Rios, would make their mark on what is today San Antonio, Texas.

As they continued working their way west, between the years 1769 and 1833, the Franciscans found twenty-one religious outposts in what is present-day California, with the backing of the military forces of the Spanish Empire. In addition to the religious outposts, settlements were formed for those civilian settlers and soldiers who had traveled with the missionaries.

French Catholic Colonization

While France had laid claim to St. Augustine in Florida in the 1500s, it would be expansion of the French settlements and missionary endeavors from their settlements in Canada that would see them enter the lands within the boundaries of the present United States with forts, trading posts and missions.

From the moment that Samuel de Champlain settled at *Pointe du Quebec* (present day Quebec City) in 1608, growth for France in Canada and the northern lands of the United States would grow tremendously. Unlike the attitudes of many of the explorers, and conquerors, of either Spanish or French connections, Champlain understood the importance of peaceful relations with the indigenous tribes. He negotiated an alliance with the Montagnais, the Algonquian, and the Wendat (better known to most as the Huron).

Of course, with alliances come responsibilities—including agreeing to support those indigenous tribes in warfare. As such, Champlain was forced to declare war on the Iroquois. As a result of the French siding with the Montagnais, the Algonquian, and the Huron in that war, the Iroquois would become sworn enemies of the French.

However, by the end of the 17th century, the lands under the control of *Nouvelle France* (New France) were not limited to what was then French Canada (Quebec, Montreal, and Trois-Rivières), but also Newfoundland, Hudson's Bay, part of Maine and Illinois (including the Great Lakes area) and today's Louisiana. In fact, during the colonization of these lands by the French, much of those lands in the Midwest of the United States was known as *Pays des Illinois* (Illinois Country).

While it was the Franciscans who were spreading the Catholic word for the Spanish, it would be the Jesuits who were serving as missionaries through the vast lands under *Nouvelle France*. Fortunately for historians and genealogists there is a 73-volume publication known as *The Jesuit Relations* that covers the travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries throughout *Nouvelle France* dating from 1610 to 1791. Though the original records were primarily in French, Latin, and sometimes Italian, the published volumes include the text both in the original language as well as an English translation.

By the 1700s, lands under the control of *Nouvelle France* spread down to the Gulf of Mexico and westward to the present states of Wyoming and Montana, and southerly until they came in contact with the Spanish in parts of Texas and New Mexico and Colorado. Likewise, their reach among the Canadian provinces was somewhat into present day Alberta. And throughout could be found the mission churches and outposts of the Jesuit missionaries.

Colonial Period

By the time the first sparks of the American Revolution could be seen in 1775, the Catholics who had come to the England's American Colonies were predominantly emigrating from England, Germany, and France. It is also estimated with these groups came 10,000 Irish Catholics.

The majority of the Catholics coming to the American Colonies were settling in either Maryland or Pennsylvania. Maryland had been established as a non-denominational colony, open to those of all faiths, which appealed to the Catholics who were often persecuted in other colonies. In 1700 roughly 3,000 people in Maryland were Catholic, which was approximately ten percent of the colony's population. By 1756 that number had climbed to about 7,000, showing a slow growth. However, within the next nine years the number of Catholics in Maryland would practically triple, reaching 20,000 in 1765.

Maryland would certainly have its growing pains. After the original charter in 1632 that declared the colony non-denominational, the Puritans would get their way in 1650 with the repealing of the Act of Toleration in Maryland. Eight years later the Act would be reinstated and then was eventually repealed again in 1689.

Maryland boasts the first Catholic bishop in the United States—John Carroll. The Carrolls of Maryland were a well-known and respected family. Among John's relatives, he had an older brother Daniel who signed both the Articles of Confederation as well as the U.S. Constitution. Meanwhile he had a cousin, Charles, who is among the Founding Fathers and was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. John traveled to Liège, Belgium to join the Jesuit seminary and was formally professed a Jesuit priest in 1771. John had joined the very order responsible for the massive growth of missions for *Nouvelle France*. However, just two years later, Pope Clement XIV would abolish the Jesuit order, known as the Society of Jesus, under pressure from the royal courts of Portugal, France and Spain.

John Carroll returned to the family plantation in Maryland, where the laws prohibited the establishment of a Catholic parish. However, he worked as a missionary in both Maryland and Virginia and in 1774 he built a small chapel on the grounds of the family plantation called St. John The Evangelist.

Though Pennsylvania did not have the earlier Catholics by 1756 there were 3,000 Catholics residing amongst the population. Their numbers would double over the next nine years to 6,000 in 1765.

Royal Proclamation of 1763

Begun in 1754 in North America, the British and the French took sides and were each supported by the various Native American tribes. Two years into this North American war, England declared war on France officially and this led to the Seven Years' War in Europe.

Those who have read James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* or seen the movie, know that Cooper's characters were set in 1757 in the French and Indian War.

Once the English win, concessions are made by the French, including lands in Canada that will become Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Meanwhile in the colonies, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 results in the relinquishment of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. In acknowledgement of their part, the British set aside the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains as hunting grounds for the tribes who helped the English. Likewise, the English forbid the American colonies from granting any lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Of course, there are already some settlements of whites west of the mountains by this time.

Because of the loss of lands by the French at the end of the French and Indian war, all of those missions that were in the areas of the *Pays des Illinois* (Illinois Country) on down to Lower Louisiana were transferred from the Diocese of Quebec to the Diocese of Santiago de Cuba. After all, the results of the efforts of the Jesuit missionaries had resulted in many settlements of Catholics who still required guidance, supplies and support. Spain, with its missions in Mexico and the two Floridas, was the closest. Of the big three colonizing countries it was also the only other Catholic one.

1800s

Before getting into many of the various immigrant groups who would begin to make the United States their home, and while out of chronological order, there is one more major connection to Mexico to be discussed that transpires over much of the first half of the 19th century.

In 1821, the northern boundary of Mexico actually included all of the following states (going from most western):

- California
- Nevada
- Utah
- Arizona
- Part of Colorado
- New Mexico
- Southwestern corner of Kansas

- Panhandle of Oklahoma
- Texas

In 1833, the southern portion of Arizona and the southwestern corner of New Mexico was lost. Then between 1836 and 1845, Mexico would lose the eastern half of New Mexico, all of Texas, the southwestern corner of Kansas, panhandle of Oklahoma, and the eastern half of their part of Colorado. Finally, as a result of the Mexican American War in 1848, the western half of Colorado and New Mexico along with the states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada and California would become part of the lands owned by the United States, with the border between the United States and Mexico becoming what is today. This did not stop the efforts of the Catholic missionaries in these areas though.

Meanwhile, in the newly minted United States of America in 1800, there was a single diocese that contained all of the official states within the country and that was comprised of 50,000 members. By 1860, with the establishment of additional states to the west and some immigration, there were no 44 dioceses with more than two million members.

Between 1861 and 1865, the United States of America was tested within its own borders as the Union and the Confederacy face off in the Civil War. Once the Union was restored, missionary efforts were focusing on the various indigenous peoples to the west of the Mississippi, though this time the Catholic missionary efforts were being threatened by similar efforts amongst many of the various Protestant denominations, who themselves were forming missionary organizations to reach out to the Native Americans along with sending their missionaries to Asian countries.

Irish Immigrants

Though there had been some Irish immigrating to the colonies in the early period of the United States, the Irish Famine caused a major influx of Irish who emigrated to avoid starvation in their own country. While one million Irish would perish between 1845 and 1852 either from starvation or hunger-related disease, another 1.8 million would get on ships bound for North America. Sadly, many of those on the ships would never see the shores of North America. The horrific conditions aboard the ships, sometimes referred to as “Coffin Ships” would take their toll on the passengers.

Regardless, the arrival of so many poor, unskilled Irish, most of whom were Catholic, marked the beginning of a major migration of Catholics. Their lack of skills, lack of money, and Papist leanings would not endear them to those who already resided in the United States.

While there had been some division and distrust of the earlier arriving Irish Catholics, Protestant preachers often espoused the “evils” of the Catholics, making the religious and ethnic prejudice erupt even further. In 1834, a woman named Rebecca Theresa Reed of Charlestown, Massachusetts had “escaped” the Ursuline Convent there and was sharing stories of the horrors of her captivity within the convent for two

years. Her story would eventually be published under the title *Six Months in a Convent* in 1835, selling 10,000 copies in its first week of printing. To further stoke the flames, on August 10, 1834, preachers in Charlestown and elsewhere gave sermons on the evils of Catholicism. In Charlestown, Lyman Beecher on that day preached the sermon “The Devil and the Pope in Rome.”

As a result of the various sermons all on roughly the same topic on the same day, rioters attacked the Convent and several Irish Americans’ homes in Charlestown on August 11, 1834. The rioters at the convent invaded it, with some donning the nuns’ clothing while others set fire to rooms within the convent. Meanwhile those Irish Americans’ homes in Charlestown were also burned down. In the end all but one of the alleged arsonists was acquitted by a jury.

While this certainly seems the height of hostility, when the Famine Irish began to arrive those hostilities intensified into a bitter hostility that saw a major increase in the rioting and church burnings as well as armed skirmishes. And when it came to seeking jobs, the unskilled Irish often found signs that said “Help Wanted, No Irish Need Apply” on establishments as well as similar verbiage in job listings in newspapers.

This treatment was not limited to Massachusetts or New England. Bishop John Hughes, who served as bishop in New York City in the 1840s and 1850s, oversaw the New York Diocese that included 200,000 Catholics. This Diocese originally included the entire state of New York as well as part of New Jersey.

Bishop Hughes was known for sticking up for his flock. In one situation he went against New York’s Public School Society which was using a book titled *The Irish Heart* as a textbook within the city schools’ curriculum. This book was derogatory in how it depicted the Irish and Bishop Hughes wanted the book removed. It was during his fight over the book that he saw just who within the political sphere was on the side of the Catholics—information he would use to ensure those individuals were re-elected. Bishop Hughes was elevated to Archbishop in 1850 and was present at the laying of the cornerstone for St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. His entire sermon was published in *The New York Times* and he did not pull any punches. Some of his comments during the sermon were noted and commented on in *The New York Times*.

Though the Irish immigrants spoke English, they felt more comfortable with Irish priests in their churches. Though they had connections back to those times in Ireland when Irish Gaelic was spoken, it had been outlawed by England. As a result of their speaking English, the Irish parish churches in America were seen to be very American, rather than ethnically linked to their homelands.

Germany Catholics

Many Protestant Germans arrived during the 1700s—so many arrived in Pennsylvania that colonial Pennsylvania was concerned that the German government might try to claim the colony for the Germans. However, during the 100 years of 1820-1920, 1.7 million Germans would immigrate to the United States.

The majority of these individuals were Catholic and between 1820 and 1880, the German Catholics represented the second largest Catholic immigrant group.

Unlike how the Famine Irish were received and treated, the German Catholic immigrants were treated more kindly, in part because when they arrived, they were not in such a poverty-stricken state as the Famine Irish had been. These Germans were in an improved financial state—perhaps not rich, but not dirt poor either. They also brought with them their vocational skills; the abilities to work as carpenters, bakers, brewers, and tailors.

Also, unlike the Irish who focused predominantly on the settling in the cities in the east where Protestants were well established, in such areas as New England and New York, the German Catholics focused on a more western area. They would settle within the cities of Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, as well as within the triangle made by these three cities as the corners.

Additionally, whereas the Irish Catholics had issues with their Protestant compatriots within America, the German Catholics were more successful at building positive relations with the Protestants who had likewise emigrated from Germany. Unfortunately, the rancor experienced between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants back in Ireland traveled with them to America and they were unable to garner support even from their own countrymen.

Because German immigrants still spoke German the need for German priests increased in the U.S. as the number of German Catholics did. While mass was said in Latin, the day-to-day interactions within the community and with their priests would have been done in German. In 1843, there were 50 German priests to serve the 300,000 Catholic German Americans. By 1869, these numbers had ballooned. There were 1,169 German priests to serve more than 1 million German American Catholics.

African American Catholics

The African American connection to the Catholic church can be traced back to those enslaved individuals in Maryland who were baptized by their Catholic planter owners. As slave owners migrated from Maryland to Kentucky in the start of the 19th century, the signs of that migration could be seen in:

- A significant Catholic African American community in Nelson County, Kentucky
- The regular baptism of the enslaved in Mobile, Alabama
- A Catholic community of “free people of color” in New Orleans

African American Catholics were predominantly treated by the members of their faith in much the same way as those who were members of other Protestant faiths—they were often mistreated. In fact, up until the 1830s, the Jesuits in Maryland owned slaves. Some of the younger Jesuit members did want to see the

freeing of those enslaved. Unfortunately, instead of freeing them, a large number of them were sold to raise money for educational enterprises in 1837-1838.

This group is commonly referred to as the GU272, because they were the 272 enslaved individuals owned by the Jesuits of Maryland who were sold to Southern plantations to raise the monies required in the building of Georgetown University. Today there is a project to not only identify each one of them and to learn their stories, but to search for their descendants.

The Conversion of the Native Americans

After the end of the Civil War and the election of Ulysses S. Grant, the president would work to eliminate corrupt Indian agents who were in charge of the various reservations in 1868. The “Peace Policy” with the tribes was intended to make things better for the Native Americans by replacing those corrupt agents with Christian missionaries of many denominations, whom Grant believed were morally superior.

In his volume, *American Indians/American Presidents, A History* by Clifford Trafzer, he described what really happened:

“In reality the [peace] policy rested on the belief that Americans had the right to dispossess Native peoples of their lands, take away freedoms, and send them to reservations, where missionaries would teach them how to farm, read and write, wear Euro-American clothing, and embrace Christianity. If Indians refused to move to reservations, they would be forced off their homelands by soldiers.”

While originally begun with the Indian Civilization Act Fund of March 3, 1819, and continued with the 1868 Peace Policy, ultimately there would be more than 523 government-funded, and often church-run, Indian Boarding Schools across the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Grant was encouraging all the various religious denominations to assist with these schools, and missionary organizations ran these schools and evangelized to indigenous populations throughout the United States. As a result, the Catholic missionaries were feeling threatened by the insurgence of Protestant missionary organizations. In the past, the Catholic missionaries had in many places been the only religious individuals interacting with the Native Americans.

By 1900, it is estimated that 20,000 native children were in the boarding schools throughout the United States. That number would triple by 1925, with 60,889 children in the boarding schools.

Of course, when the Peace Policy was first put in place and various religious organizations were being put in charge of these boarding schools, they included, but were not limited to:

- Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions
- Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church

- American Missionary Association (Congregational)

The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions was created in 1874 by J. Roosevelt Bayley, Archbishop of Baltimore “for the protection and promotion of Catholic Indian mission interests in the United States of America,” as described by the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Though likely assigned earlier, as published in the 1882 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* the Catholics were listed as having been assigned to the following Indian Agencies:

- Washington Territory: Tulalip and Colville
- Oregon: Grande Ronde and Umatilla
- Montana: Flathead
- Dakota: Standing Rock and Devil’s Lake

Polish Immigrants

The earliest of the Polish Catholic immigrants established the town of Panna Marya (“Village of Our Lady”) in central Texas and was founded by, among others, Peter Kiolbassa, who at the time was an 18-year-old native of the town of Swib. In 1863 he visited Chicago while on furlough from the Union Army (he had enlisted in the Texas Cavalry on the Confederate side, been captured, and switched sides). In Chicago he found a Polish American Catholic community that was struggling to form its first Polish parish there.

Kiolbassa, with help from a Polish priest from Panna Marya and some leading Chicago Poles, would establish the Society of St. Stanislaus Kostka, a religious and fraternal organization that carried the name of a 16th century Polish Jesuit novice, in 1864. By 1918, within the Archdiocese of Chicago, there existed 35 Polish parishes.

Between 1870 and 1920, close to two million Polish immigrants arrived in the United States. The majority of them were Catholic. Many of them had been forced out of their country as a result of agrarian losses (other countries that politically controlled the area in which the Polish lived took away millions of acres of land from the Poles who owned it). In addition, there was the general industrialization of Europe which was changing the ways that people made money.

Once in the United States, Polish Catholics often took jobs in some of the most dangerous types of work including steel mills, coal mines, and meatpacking plants. Not surprisingly, therefore, they chose to settle in the more industrial cities or those that had coal mines and other enterprises where they could find work, including:

- Baltimore, Md.

- Buffalo, N.Y.
- Milwaukee, Wisc.
- Pittsburgh, Penn.
- Scranton, Penn.

Italian Immigrants

As the Italians began to immigrate in large numbers to the United States, they found themselves scorned by Irish and German American priests if the Italians settled in those parishes. In some instances, the priests of those parishes would require the Italians to hold a separate mass in the church basements.

In 1887, Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, bishop of Piacenza, Italy established the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, which was charged with preserving “the Catholic faith in the hearts of our countrymen who have emigrated and to lead them as far as possible to achieve their moral, civil, and economic well-being.”

Frances Xavier Cabrini, better known as Mother Cabrini, was the Superior General of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which she and seven other women founded in November of 1880 in Italy. Mother Cabrini’s goal was to take her missionary efforts to the Far East, specifically China. However, by 1889, her good works had come to the attention of Bishop Scalabini as well as Pope Leo XIII and she was encouraged to turn her attentions to the west, instead of the east.

With that Mother Cabrini brought the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the United States and with her sisters opened convents in:

- Archdiocese of Chicago
- Archdiocese of Denver
- Archdiocese of Los Angeles
- Archdiocese of Newark
- Archdiocese of Seattle
- Diocese of Brooklyn
- Dioceses of Scranton

In 1892 the sisters established Columbus Hospital in New York City, which was perhaps better known as Cabrini Medical Center, until it ceased to operate in 2008.

Mother Cabrini and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were tasked with serving Italian immigrants in the United States. Mother Cabrini dedicated her life in the U.S. to this as well as establishing hospitals, orphanages, and schools across not only the U.S. but also in South America.

One of the ways in which Italian Catholicism differed from those of other ethnic immigrants was in the way their beliefs and practices reflected their origins and their immigrant experience. This differed from the Irish, for example, who invested great authority in the priesthood. The Italian Americans focused more on:

- Devotion to family
- And to those who shared in common:
 - Values of the Old World
 - Ordeal of immigrant passage
 - Crowded tenement life
- Patron saints were also very much a part of the family structure

As with the other ethnic Catholics, defined by the fact that they did not speak English, the variety of Catholic Directories and often city directories will include the ethnicity of any church that speaks something other than English when listing the Catholic churches within a Diocese or within a city.

Conclusion

Presently, Catholics represent 50% of the Christian faiths practiced in America and can be found in every state. They tend to have larger communities within certain states where heavy ethnic groups and large urban areas are found.

Though not always accepted upon arrival to the American Colonies and then the United States of America, they persevered. Throughout the 1800s especially, they often dealt with hostilities from the Protestants in many states. As of 2018, 23% of the U.S. population identified as Catholic.

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