

## **The life of a church that became a cathedral**

In 1851, the only priest in Fall River, Father Edward Murphy, who was pastor of the only parish in Fall River, determined that the city needed a Catholic church big enough to hold the growing number of Catholics who were arriving in the city, drawn there by work in the booming textile mills. There were at that time about 12,000 people living in Fall River, and well over a thousand were registered in the one Catholic parish.

An Irish immigrant himself, Fr. Murphy took the bold step of contacting an architect in New York and asked him to design a church that could accommodate 1,200 worshippers. Without ever coming to Fall River, Patrick Keeley prepared plans for a church on the scale that Fr. Murphy requested. Keeley was the most famous Catholic architect of the day, and his drawing called for a building, with galleries as the pastor requested, that would have the style of an Early English Gothic structure (twelfth century).

Over the next three years, St. Mary's took shape, enclosing the little chapel of St. John the Baptist (1836), which had been serving the local Catholic community and was now inside the rising new structure. The chapel would eventually be cut in two and removed to the lawn next to the church at Second and Spring streets. Eventually, a fire of "suspicious origin" destroyed that chapel in 1856

Many of the workers whose families would attend Mass at the new church took a hand in assisting in the construction of the church after their day's work in the mills. Never did it cross their minds that this building would one day be a cathedral. Although dedicated in December 1855, the structure was not completed until 1856 and was thenceforth known as St. Mary of the Assumption. Its floor plan was four times that of the little chapel and the nave reached a height of ninety feet. The steeple was added in 1858, reaching one hundred and ninety feet into the sky.

The formal consecration of St. Mary's took place in September 1901 with a with celebration that lasted for three days. Three years later the diocese of Fall River was created by Pope Pius X, with St. Mary's being designated as the cathedral.

When the building was finished, it was majestic; with galleries over both side aisles and a choir loft, the new church could seat upwards of 2,000. But it was very plain. The windows had plain glass, there was no organ, the great carved crucifix did not exist, there were no chapels, and there was no bell in the tower. And there was no bishop's chair (cathedra), because the church did not become the cathedral of the Fall River diocese until 1904. What it did have was a mortgage. The refinements in the church's physical appointments would come over the course of generations, making it an even more beautiful place to carry out its role as cathedral.

St. Mary's is now 166 years old. It has been home not simply to the parish community but, as mother church, the home to Catholics from the borders of Rhode Island to the tip of Cape Cod, and from Tiverton to North Easton. All householders understand that their homes need to be repaired and updated every so often. The same is true of this spiritual home, where the windows, the roof, the steeple, the chapels and crypt all need fixing. The building is still handsome but its needs are urgent.