

Sacred Heart – Saint James Parish Brief History

The history of the Catholic community in Groton begins in the late 19th century. Prior to 1855, Catholic Masses were celebrated in private homes by mission priests. Shortly thereafter, a mission church was established in South Groton, now known as Ayer. By 1870, the Catholic parish in Groton, including parishioners from Groton (including Ayer), Pepperell, Townsend, Littleton, Harvard and Shirley, had increased to approximately three thousand people and now required a mission priest to come to town to say Mass in an abandoned public schoolhouse.

On September 27, 1904, the former Groton School Episcopal chapel, donated to the parish by Mr. Amory Gardner, was moved on log rollers over a bridge on Pleasant Street to its current site on the corner of Main and West (formally Fagot) Streets. The church was consecrated on October 8, 1905. It was used as a mission church by priests from Ayer until Rev. Charles Finnegan was appointed pastor in January, 1907.

In 1927, the pastor of Sacred Heart Church, Rev. Edward Mitchell planned and assisted in building a mission church in West Groton to accommodate the growing number of Catholics in the area. They had been using the West Groton town hall for Masses. The land for the church was donated by Mrs. Ellen Fallon. Plans were drawn by William Colleary of Boston. Stones were used from a Townsend quarry and the nearby Blood Farm. A Stevens pipe organ was donated by the Congregational Church in Groton and is still in use today. The St. James Church was dedicated in June, 1929.

In 1945, Archbishop Cushing decided that the St. James Church should become an independent parish. Rev. Francis Egan was the first pastor of the church, now separate from Sacred Heart.

Over the next fifty-seven years, both churches have seen many changes. In 1966, Sacred Heart Church, under Pastor Rev. William Carroll, purchased additional land from the Hemenway estate and built the parking lot. A basement was added which made space for a kitchen, bathrooms and meeting room. In 1973, facilities were modernized. When St. Joseph's built their new church in Pepperell, they donated their original pews to Sacred Heart. Reverend Thomas Navian added the "crying room" for families with small children. The interior and exterior of both churches have had renovations and maintenance done to preserve the history and functionality of the buildings. Since 2000, steps, roofs and steeple have been repaired, and a fresh coat of paint applied.

We have come full circle in 2003 as St. James and Sacred Heart are reunited. On 1 April 2003 Bishop Richard Lennon completed the canonical merge of the once-separate parishes. Now **Sacred Heart- Saint James parish** has finally reunited and ready to move into the future. The town continues to grow as does the united parish. Catholic Groton has evolved and changes have been made to accommodate it. It is time again to see how best to reach the next level in this long and interesting history of the Catholic Community in Groton.

*****Source – SHSJ Strategic Planning committee Final Report *****