

(Photo, dated May 23, 1926, shows (l to r) Mr. Linek, Major O'Flynn, Father Himmelreicher and Mr. Frank Himmelreicher on the occasion of the first celebration of Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes).

This year marks the 95th anniversary of the founding of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. In the next several weeks and months, I'll attempt to share the remarkable history of this Parish.

The Creation of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish

By: Donald V. Pupke, Jr.

Chapter 1

In a year when the Village of Malverne celebrates the centennial of its incorporation, Our Lady of Lourdes Parish celebrates the 95th anniversary of its founding. The history of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish is a story rooted in faith, prayer,

determination and courage. It's a story of perseverance in overcoming obstacles, prejudice and catastrophe.

In 1910, Malverne and Lakeview, then known as "Norwood" and "Schodack", were farming communities with approximately 40 families living a life that was largely unchanged since the first English and Dutch settlers arrived here in the mid-1600's. The land that would become the Westwood section, was dense forest with a few hardscrabble squatters living within a tough community known as Tigertown. The Long Island Railroad had arrived in 1892 but by 1910 there was still only one train into the City in the morning and one train returning home at night. Malverne was described, at that time, as being the most backwards, yet the most beautiful part of the County.

In 1912, real estate developers began to purchase some of the abandoned farms, transforming them into housing subdivisions, with beautiful, affordable homes, parks and gardens. The Village of Malverne was born. Throughout the next 15 years, the number of homes grew and the population increased to 1,000 people - with more than 200 homes being built in the next year and the population increasing every month.

By 1925, there were approximately 550 Catholics living in Malverne, Lakeview and North Lynbrook. The nearest church was St. Raymond's Parish in East Rockaway, over 2-1/2 miles away.

Malverne Catholics also attended Mass in Valley Stream, Franklin Square, Garden City and Hempstead.

Several of the Catholic families in Malverne sought to start a Parish of their own, or, alternatively, to have a mission church established in the Village to provide one Mass on Sunday. A survey was conducted, and the results were transmitted to the Right Reverend Thomas E. Molly, D.D., Bishop of the Brooklyn Diocese. At that time, the Diocese of Rockville Centre had not yet been created and Long Island fell within the boundaries of the Diocese of Brooklyn.

In March 1926, Bishop Molloy sent Father Benedict Himmelreicher to Malverne to determine whether a Parish should be established. A month later, Bishop Molloy appointed Father Himmelreicher pastor of the new Parish in Malverne. Father Himmelreicher requested the Bishop to name the Parish "Our Lady of Lourdes Church at Malverne".

The most pressing problem facing the new Pastor was to provide a place to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The new Parish sought to hold Mass, first in the Norwood Hook and Ladder Firehouse, and then in the Knights of Columbus Hall in Lynbrook. In each case, the Pastor's request was denied. Father Himmelreicher was not deterred. He immediately went to New York City and purchased a 40' x 80' tent. On Saturday May 22, 1926,

the tent was erected on property located at the intersection of Hempstead and Dogwood Avenues. On that day, Malverne finally had its first Catholic Church.

On Sunday May 23rd, 1926, a glorious Pentecost Sunday, Our Lady of Lourdes Parish of Malverne celebrated its first Mass and Eucharist. Forty local families were present and the tradition of weekly Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes was begun.

Chapter 2



Our Lady of Lourdes Church and Rectory, circa 1932. *Photo from the collection of the Malverne Historical and Preservation Society collection.*

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THE BUILDING OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES CHURCH

As noted in the first article in this series, Our Lady of Lourdes Parish officially began in April 1926 with the appointment of Father Benedict Himmelreicher as Pastor and the first Mass took place in a tent on Hempstead Avenue on May 23, 1926.

Following the initial Mass, Father Himmelreicher set his sights on finding a suitable location for the construction of the church, including an area for a rectory and (eventually) a school. The Diocese had initially purchased a plot of land, fronting on Hempstead Avenue, near Dogwood Avenue, but it was determined that the property was too small and not ideal for the church. Father Himmelreicher was offered the Wagg home on the corner of Wright Avenue and Sheehy Place (currently the OLL Church office) and after reviewing the entire area, he determined that the block between Wright Avenue and Park Boulevard was a perfect location for the Church, the Rectory and eventually the school. After some negotiation, the entire 240' x 240' block, including two homes, was purchased for approximately \$52,000.

The purchase of the spacious Wagg home was a stroke of luck because it was ideally suited for a Rectory and could easily be enlarged and improved. In addition, the Parish had a

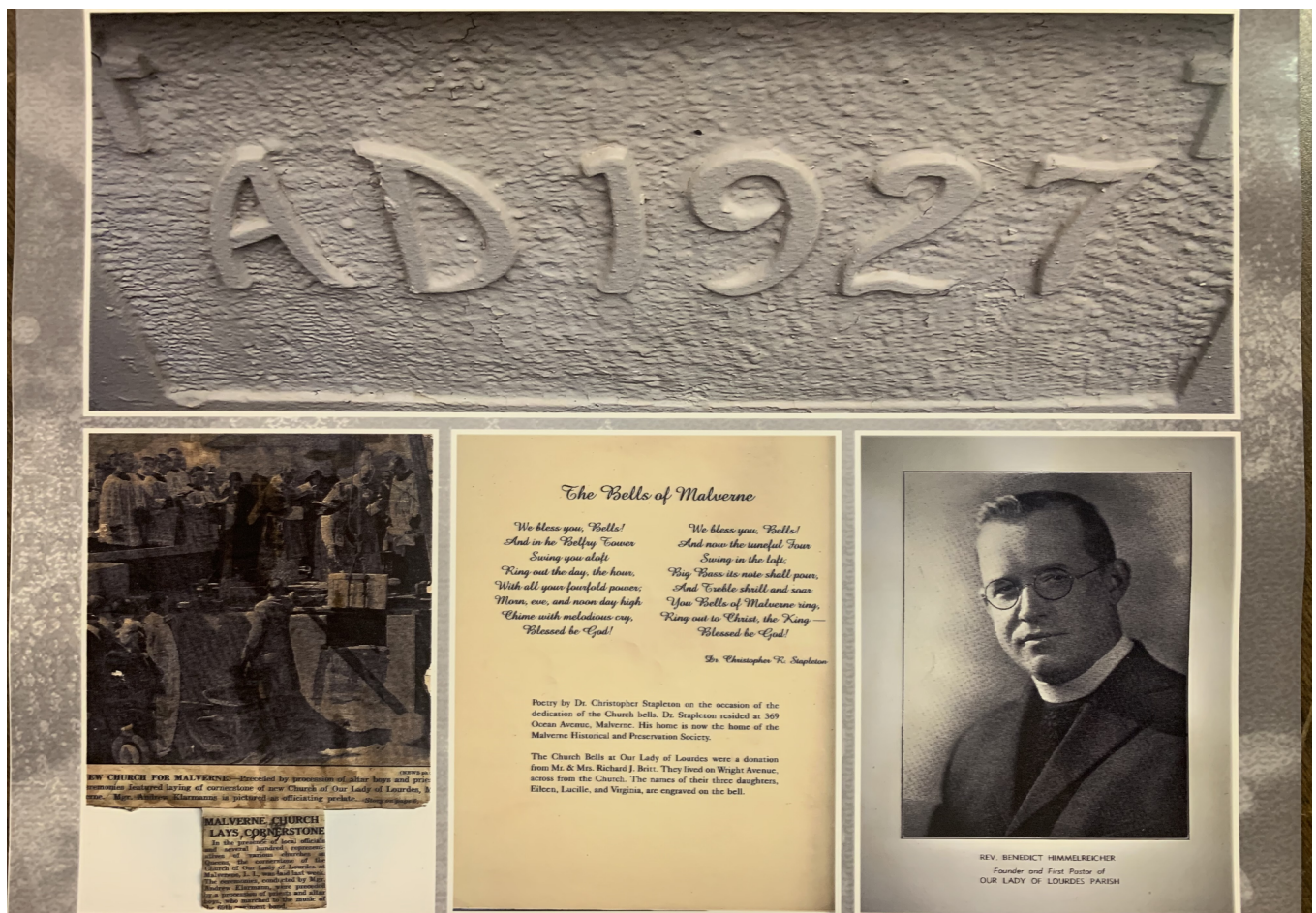
Rectory ready immediately and it saved the estimated \$35,000 cost of constructing a new building.

On July 4, 1926, a flag raising was held on the site of the new church. The flagpole was donated by Mr. Frank C. Druding, the honor guard were members of New York's famous "Fighting 69th" Infantry, the flag was donated by members of the St. Mary's Council Knights of Columbus in Lynbrook.

On September 5, 1926 Mass was celebrated in the Rectory on Wright Avenue because the weather had become too cold and unpredictable to continue to use the tent. Parishioners packed both Masses – 8:30 and 10:30 am – and they stood in every available inch of the house. Mass continued in the Rectory until the Church was completed.

In January 1927, Father Himmelreicher appointed a committee to assume the task of overseeing the construction of the Church and for raising funds for its construction. The committee engaged an architect named Alfred F. Meisner of Jamaica, Queens, after reviewing his "Spanish Mission" design for the Our Lady of Lourdes Church. The construction contract was awarded to Garrett Vinter of Lynbrook and site preparation and construction began almost immediately. The cost of construction was estimated to be \$85,000.

On Sunday May 1, 1927, the cornerstone was laid for the new church. On Christmas Eve 1927, Midnight Mass was celebrated in the new Church basement, even though the main portion of the Church would not be completed for several more months. Our Lady of Lourdes Church was finally dedicated with a solemn High Mass on May 13, 1928, with the Right Reverend Thomas E. Molloy, D.D., Bishop of the Diocese of Brooklyn Presiding.





This is a reproduction of the architect's drawing of the new church of Our Lady of Lourdes, the cornerstone of which is to be laid, next Sunday, at three o'clock, in the presence of hundreds who will come from five villages along the South Shore. It is of Spanish mission type, unique among edifices on the island, and, when built and furnished, will cost about 100,000.

CATHOLICS OF FIVE VILLAGES TO SEE CORNERSTONE LAID

Big Demonstration Scheduled for Exercises, Next Sunday at Melverne

One year exactly from the date of his appointment as the first priest for the newly created parish of Our Lady of Lourdes, at Malverne, Father Benedict Himmelreicher, will witness on Sunday next, the laying of the cornerstone of the edifice that is to rise in that village, in Wright Avenue, two blocks east of the Hempstead Turnpike.

It promises to be an event of no little importance, on the South Shore, for, according to program, hundreds of Catholics from the surrounding villages have promised to attend, and the services will be marked by benediction in the open air. The time set is three o'clock in the afternoon.

In addition to the visiting clergy, there will be delegations from the Holy Name Society

of the parish, St. Mary's Council, Knights of Columbus, taking in Lynbrook, East Rockaway and Valley Stream, and Holy Redeemer Council of Freeport. A feature will be the appearance of a guard of honor, consisting of officers of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment from New York.

Monsignor Andrew Klarmann, rector of the Church of St. Thomas, at Woodhaven, and old friend and instructor of Father Himmelreicher, will officiate at the services. He will be assisted by the Rev. Augustus Wetzel, of St. Barbara's Church, Brooklyn, as deacon; Rev. Joseph Ansbros, of St. Gabriel's, East Elmhurst, as sub-deacon, and Rev. Joseph Goeller, rector of St. Claire's, Rosedale, as master of ceremonies. The sermon will be preached by the Rev. John Mulz, assistant at the Church of the Miraculous Medal, Brooklyn.

The lay speaker for the occasion will be William Stratton, Jr., president of the Village of Malverne.

The Day's Program

Here is the program as prepared by the parish officials:

- 1—Processional - "The Priests' March."
- 2—Flag Raising - "The Star Spangled Banner."

Chapter 3



Our Lady of Lourdes Parish – The Early Years

Following the Dedication of the Church building in May 1928, the growth of the spiritual community was exponential. Throughout the late 1920's and into the 1930's the Parish population mirrored the substantial growth of the Malverne community.

In 1926, the Long Island Railroad electrified the West Hempstead Branch and began offering increased train service to Malverne. The Village suddenly became a very desirable “bedroom” suburb for commuters and for first- and second-generation Americans looking to leave the crowded New

York City neighborhoods. At one point “Ripley’s Believe it or Not” noted that Malverne was the fastest growing suburb in the nation.

In response to this growth, the Parish began offering three Masses every Sunday beginning 1929. In 1930 Father Himmelreicher received help when the Diocese appointed Reverend Edward Connolly as an Assistant Pastor. In addition, some Masses were conducted by priests from the Passionist Monastery in Jamaica, Queens.

In March 1935, the Our Lady of Lourdes Parish community was stunned by the sudden and unexpected death of Father Himmelreicher. His considerable contribution to the creation of the Parish and to the Malverne community cannot be overstated. His death, at the height of the Great Depression – a time of great spiritual need – left the Parishioners shocked and in need. The Diocese recognized the importance of the Lourdes Parish and it acted quickly to appoint Reverend David J. Lynch as the new Pastor on July 1, 1935.

Father Lynch served the Lourdes community for 9 years. During his tenure, he accomplished a great many things, the most important, however, was the creation of a strategic plan for the construction of a Parish school. The creation of Our Lady of Lourdes School will be the subject of our next installment in this series.

History of Malverne (continued)

CATHOLIC CHURCH IS WELL UNDER WAY

**Corner Stone of New Edifice
at Malverne to Be Placed
on Sunday**

GROWTH OF PROJECT

**First Mass Celebrated Last
May — Edifice Will Cost
About \$100,000**

Displaying marked business ability; in addition to his priestly qualities, Father Benedict Himmelreicher has made the dream of a suitable Catholic church for Malverne a realization. With the Very Reverend Monsignor Andrew Klarman, of Woodhaven, officiating, the cornerstone of Our Lady of Lourdes new church will be laid next Sunday at 3 o'clock.

Benediction will be given in the open. This is unusual, special permission having been obtained from Bishop Malloy by Father Himmelreicher. The Rev. Augustus Wetzel will act as deacon, the Rev. Joseph Ansboro, sub-deacon and the Rev. Joseph Goeller, Master of Ceremonies.

The Rev. John M. Mulz, assistant pastor of the Church of the Miraculous Medal, Brooklyn, will preach the sermon. Representing the village will be William J. Stratton, village president, who will make an address.

The new edifice will be a worthy tribute to Father Himmelreicher who founded the parish last May. In addition to the co-operation of his parishioners he had the enthusiastic support of a host of friends in Queens and Brooklyn, some of whom have taken up their residence in Malverne because of their friendship for him.

The first Mass of the parish was celebrated, May 23 last, which incidently, was the date on which Father Himmelreicher celebrated his first High Mass as a priest some years ago.

TO LAY CORNER STONE OF CATHOLIC CHURCH



REV. BENEDICT HIMMELREICHER

Mass was said in a tent on Hempstead Avenue on a plot adjoining the home of Paul Lindner. This plot was purchased as the original church site for \$10,000 cash. Realizing that a rectory was needed Father Himmelreicher purchased a block of property on which there are two houses for \$51,700. He fitted up the lower floor as a chapel, using the upper part for living quarters. The other house is at present rented. Services were started in the new chapel the latter part of August.

The cost of the new church, which is Spanish Mission type, 50 feet in width by 100 feet in depth, with a seating capacity of 532, will be \$100,000, of which \$15,000 will be spent on furnishings.

In the towering steeple, provision has been made for a set of three bells. The interior will be finished in oak, with a heavy beamed ceiling.

As soon as possible services will be held in the basement of the new church, the parish having already outgrown the chapel.

Friendly rivalry exists among the various church societies each trying to outdo the other securing funds to cover the cost of construction. The builder is Garrett Winter, of Lynbrook, and the architect, Alfred Meissner, of Jamaica.

The new church is one that every resident of Malverne may well be proud of, for it will add dignity and charm to the section.

Chapter 4

THE BELLS OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES

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In 1928 Mr. and Mrs. Richard Britt of Malverne donated the bells at Our Lady of Lourdes Church. The bells cost \$3,000, an exceedingly generous sum, at a time when a home could be purchased for nearly the same amount. The bells began ringing and have continued to ring for the past 93 years.

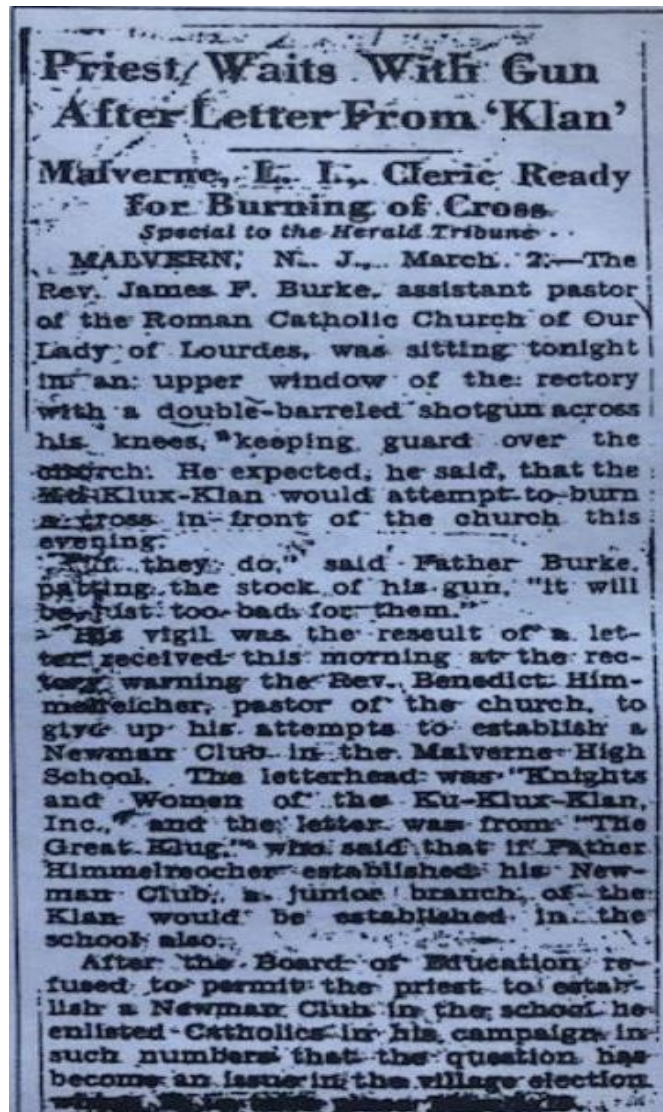
Christopher Stapleton, a Malverne resident and Parishioner, who was also the Head of the English Department at New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn, was so moved by the sound of the bells that he wrote a poem about them.

The Bells of Malverne

***We bless you, bells!
And in the Belfry Tower
Swing you aloft.
Ring out the day, the hour.
With all your fourfold power:
Atorn eve and noonday high
Chime with melodious cry.
Blessed be God!***

***We bless you bells!
And now the tuneful Four
Swing in the loft:
Big Bass its note shall pour,
And treble shill and soar.
You, Bells of Malverne ring.
Ring out in Christ the King.
Blessed be God!***

Chapter 5



FIGHTING THE KKK AND ANTI-CATHOLIC PREJUDICE

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It's difficult for us to understand today the prejudice and bigotry faced by the original members of Our Lady of Lourdes

Parish in the 1920's. At that time Catholics on Long Island were transitioning from a minority to the majority religion. Despite their increasing population, the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church on Long Island was met with significant opposition, prejudice and bigotry. Our Lady of Lourdes Parish was no exception.

Groups, such as the resurgent Ku Klux Klan, were devoted to rooting out Catholic social and political gains and influences. Anti-Catholic laws were passed, including laws prohibiting the use of sacramental wine during the Eucharist and communion. The patriotism of Catholics was being questioned and Catholics were accused of being loyal only to Rome and to the Pope, not to America or its values.

The Parishes fought back against this anti-Catholic sentiment with groups such as the Knights of Columbus and the Holy Name Society taking prominent roles in fighting the bigotry and demonstrating the patriotism of the Parishioners.

Two local examples illustrate the prejudice and hatred encountered by our earliest Parishioners:

First, in 1926, R. Mabel Robinson who lived at 70 Chestnut Street, Lynbrook, decided to become a founding member of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. Her decision was met with threats from the Ku Klux Klan which burned a cross on the empty lot next to her home. Despite the danger, Mrs. Robinson remained a member of the Lourdes community.

Second, in 1935, Father Himmelreicher sought to establish a Catholic Club at Malverne High School. After hearing of this, the Ku Klux Klan sent a threatening letter to the Rectory and let it be known that they intended to burn a cross in front of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Parishioners and Priests responded to the threat by force. The above article details the fact that Father Burke, the Associate Pastor, planned to sit in the upper window of the Rectory with a double-barreled shotgun across his lap to “keep guard over the Church” and to let the KKK know that their racism and bigotry was not welcome in the Lourdes and the Malverne community. The Klan members never appeared.

The early Parishioners repeatedly overcame obstacles and found the strength to affirm their faith despite obstacles and danger. Their resolve and faith is a continuing inspiration.

A SIDELIGHT ON PARISH HISTORY

When our parish was started in 1926 not everyone was pleased. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the site where the church was to be built. This was not the only encounter with the Klan. In 1935 Father Himmelreicher wanted to start a Newman Club in Malverne High School. The school board objected, and the Klan entered the controversy. A letter was sent from the "Office of the Great Klud" in Brooklyn to "Rev. Benedict Himmelreicher, Lady of Lourdes Church, Malverne, N.Y." (Note the omission of the word "Our.") It said, "My dear Sir:—

"I have read in the Press of your attitude in regards to the Newman Club in the School at Malverne. I wish to state that if such a Club is started, this organization will start a Junior Klan Unit there also, and we will use every effort to show up the political and evil practices of your church.

"If you wish a fight, we are ready to give you one.

"Yours for Potestantism,"

At the bottom was the scribbled signature of the Secretary.

In those days the Klan was not the small lunatic fringe group it is today. It was a large lunatic fringe group, with a lot of political influence.

It is important to remember incidents of bigotry like this because they fit into a pattern that recurs in American history. It is also important to remember that not all non-Catholics shared it. The excerpt from an earlier history reprinted in the March issue mentioned that Protestants, Jews, and even Masons participated in fund raising events for our parish when it was started.

I learned of the cross-burning while I was growing up in the parish, but people outside the parish would not have heard of it. Similarly, when my sister moved to Islip she learned that the nearest Catholic church is in East Islip because in the 19th century local officials blocked the construction of a Catholic church. On the other hand, when the parish was established in East Islip its first building was provided by the local Protestant Episcopal church.

Numerous incidents like these, and others, more serious ones, led Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. to say to Msgr. John Tracy

Chapter 6

THE HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES PARISH CREATION OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES SCHOOL



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Following Pastor Himmelreicher's untimely death in March 1935, Reverend David J. Lynch was appointed as the Pastor. During Father Lynch's tenure (1935-1944), the young Parish endured the end of the Great Depression and the first 2+ years of World War II. Despite these difficulties, the Parish continued to grow and it

continued to pay down its debts, laying the groundwork for the goal of building a new school building.

On January 14, 1944, Reverend Thomas Sheehy was appointed the new Pastor and Tom Moran was appointed Sexton of the Parish. Two years later, on January 20, 1946, the Church's mortgage was satisfied and the ceremony of burning the mortgage was held - which also marked the opening of the campaign to raise funds to erect the Our Lady of Lourdes School.

The Holy Name Society conducted the school fund drive, in conjunction with the ladies of the Altar Society. The fundraising was conducted door-to-door. There were bazaars, raffles, journal ads and numerous other fundraising devices. Within 5 years, their efforts swelled the coffers of the school fund and construction was ready to proceed.

Ground was broken for the school on February 11, 1952, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, and the cornerstone was laid on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1952. Construction was difficult, in part, because water was struck when

digging the foundation and, in part, because the steel girders were unavailable due to a nationwide strike by steel workers.

The doors were opened to students on September 14, 1953, and the school was officially dedicated by Archbishop Thomas E. Molloy on October 18, 1953. Three hundred students in grades 1-6 were initially admitted, with 7th grade added in 1954 and 8th grade added in 1955.

Tuition was free.

The Dominican Sisters of Amityville, agreed to staff the new grammar school. Sister Mary Benedict was appointed Principal. She was also a 3rd grade teacher and the Convent Superior. In 1959 Sister Loretta Joseph replaced Sister Mary Benedict as Principal. The convent building is now the Priest's residence.

In 1965, a third floor was added onto the school to keep up with the ever-expanding student enrollment. In 1965-66, Sister Mary Elyse was Principal. Sister Mary Rosalita was appointed in 1966. By the early 1970's the school had a maximum enrollment of 900 students. As the number of teaching Sisters diminished, they

were replaced by lay teachers and the Sisters of Saint Domenic formally withdrew from the school in 1974.