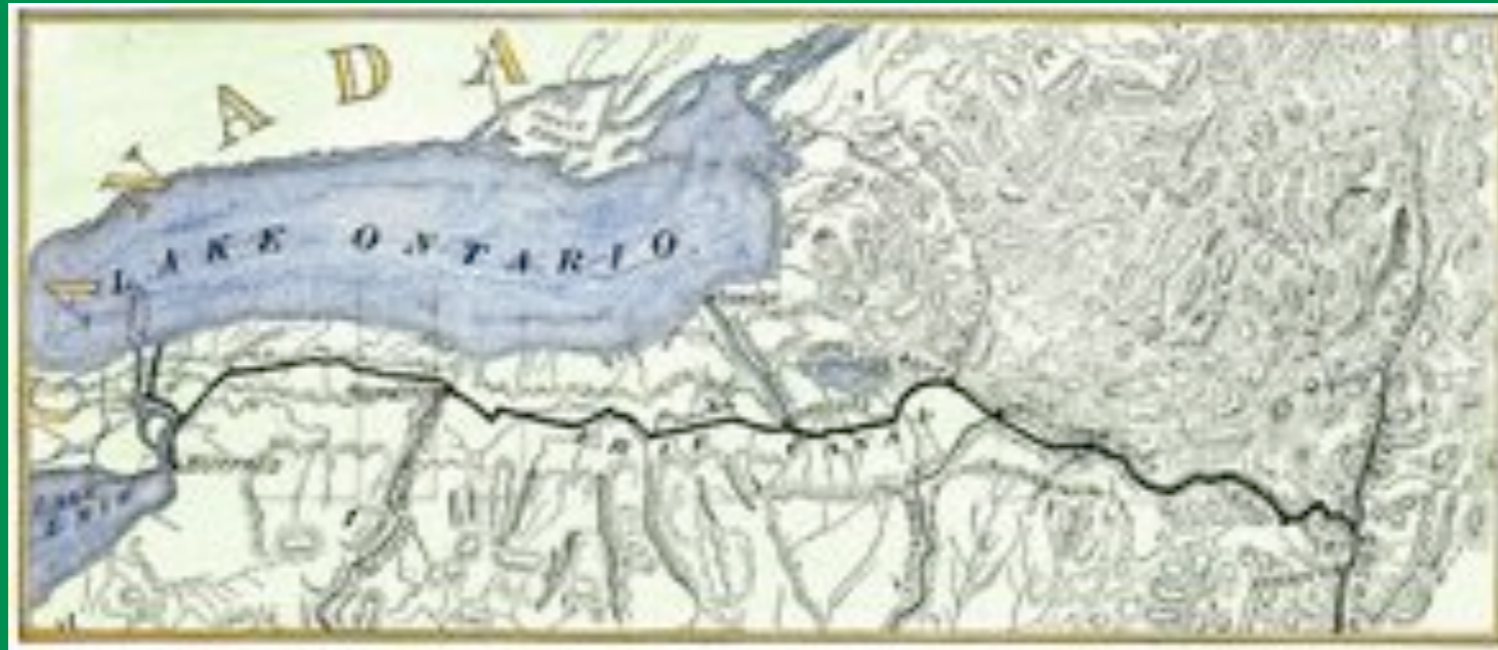
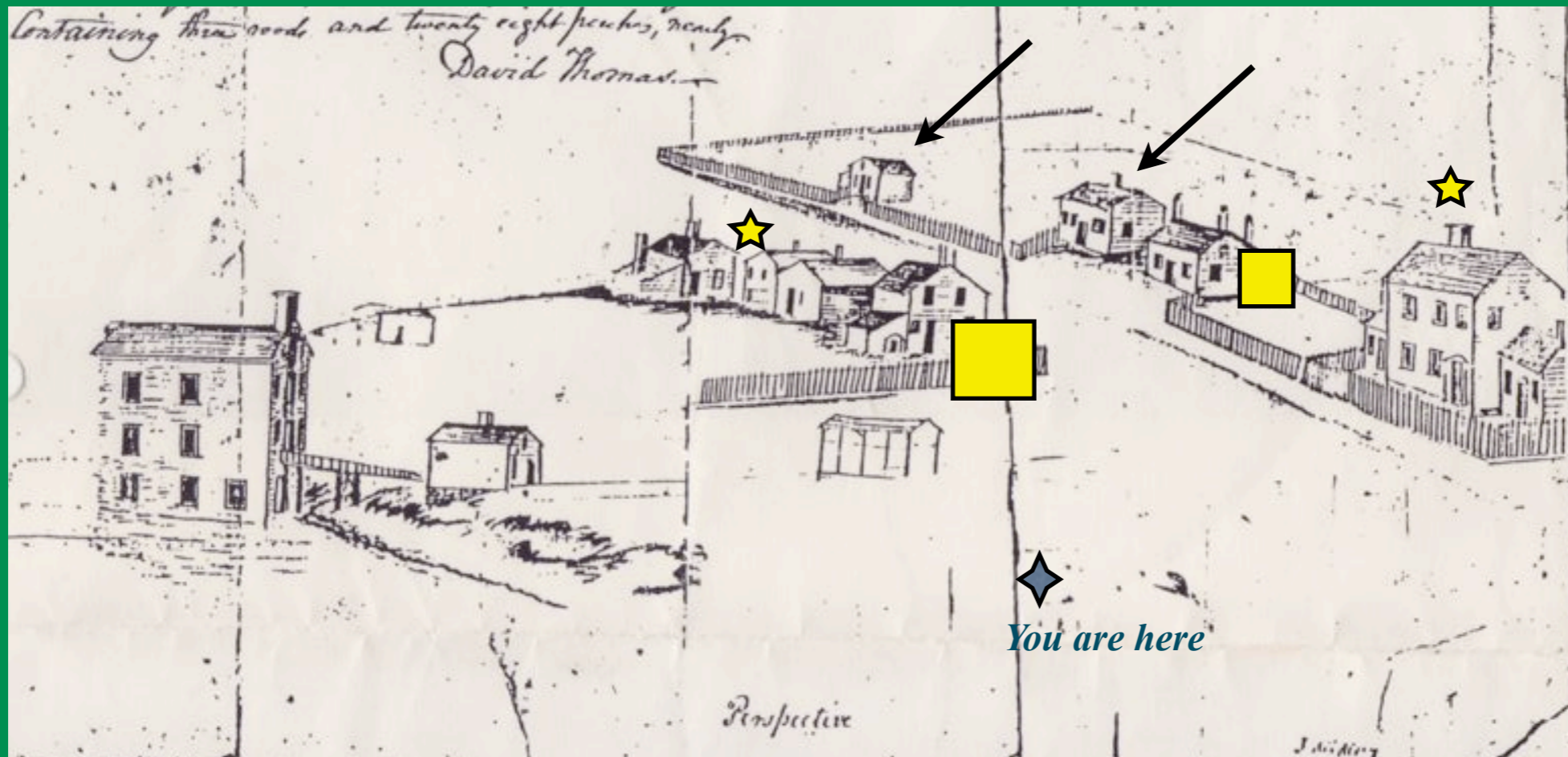


From Mission Station to St. Agnes Church: Aurora's Catholic Community, 1834-1874



In the summer of 1834, Andrew and Ann McGordon, then 33 and 32 years old, came to Aurora. Born in Ireland, they had met and married in Canada.

The Erie Canal (completed 1825) made Aurora, and other lakeside villages, busy shipping points for the produce of the region, such as apples, wool, wheat, and pigs. The Morgan brothers were just then moving the business center of Aurora from their father's store at the corner of Farmer St. (today Dublin Hill Rd.) and Main St. to its present location. There was plenty of work here.



The McGordons moved into one of the small houses indicated by arrows in this perspective view prepared in about 1820 as part of a land survey. David Thomas, the surveyor, drew his view from right about where you are standing.



When the McGordons arrived, the Inn had just been built on the empty lot in the center, and the Morgans' office building (today the Fargo) would have been under construction.



The house on the far right is still standing ("Jane Morgan's Little House"), as are two or three of the buildings in the center.

The McGordon family were the first Irish Catholics in Aurora, though soon joined by others. The nearest church was Holy Family in Auburn, which also sent a priest to the church in Seneca Falls. Most of Aurora's Catholic community made the long trip to Auburn by wagon, but some preferred the even longer trip to Seneca Falls, where Mass was celebrated every week.

This journey, arduous as it was, was sometimes easier than the trip to Auburn. The roads were often bad, and part of the trip to Seneca Falls could be by boat to Cayuga. There, travel by wagon resumed across the famous Long Bridge, then the longest in the Western Hemisphere.



It is agreed between William Deane, Luke Ellis & David Mitchell Commissioners of Highways for the Town of Ledyard of the one part, and Andrew Mc Gordon of the other part as follows -

Said Andrew agrees to open and uncover the sluice or stone arch bridge at the foot of Franklin hill as follows - he is to remove the earth from the top & put it on the south side in the road - he is to take out all the stone & put them out of the way at each ^{end of the old channel} end - he is to open the sluice ten feet wide clear through ^{rest, commencing 10 feet from the east end} and down as low as the present stone foundation wall - the length being 20 feet or more, beside excavating ^{sufficiently} ^{the first day & then put the} ^{for the work} ^{according to the plan best assessed}, the whole to be finished for the 1st day of July next - said Andrew is to be paid thirty dollars for said job - soon after it is finished - see some or dirt to be put on the ten feet left on the east end -

Witness our hands this 21st day of June 1848 -

Witness E. Mc Arms }
 Luke Ellis
 David Mitchell
 William Deane
 Andrew ^{his} X Mc Gordon
 mark



Witness our hands this 21st day of June 1848 -

Witness E. Mc Arms }
 Luke Ellis
 David Mitchell
 William Deane
 Andrew ^{his} X Mc Gordon
 mark

By 1848, the Village had grown into a busy center of trade. One of Andrew McGordon's work contracts, to repair the road at the north end of town, dates from that year. (Andrew, who accepted the contract with his mark, later learned to write.)

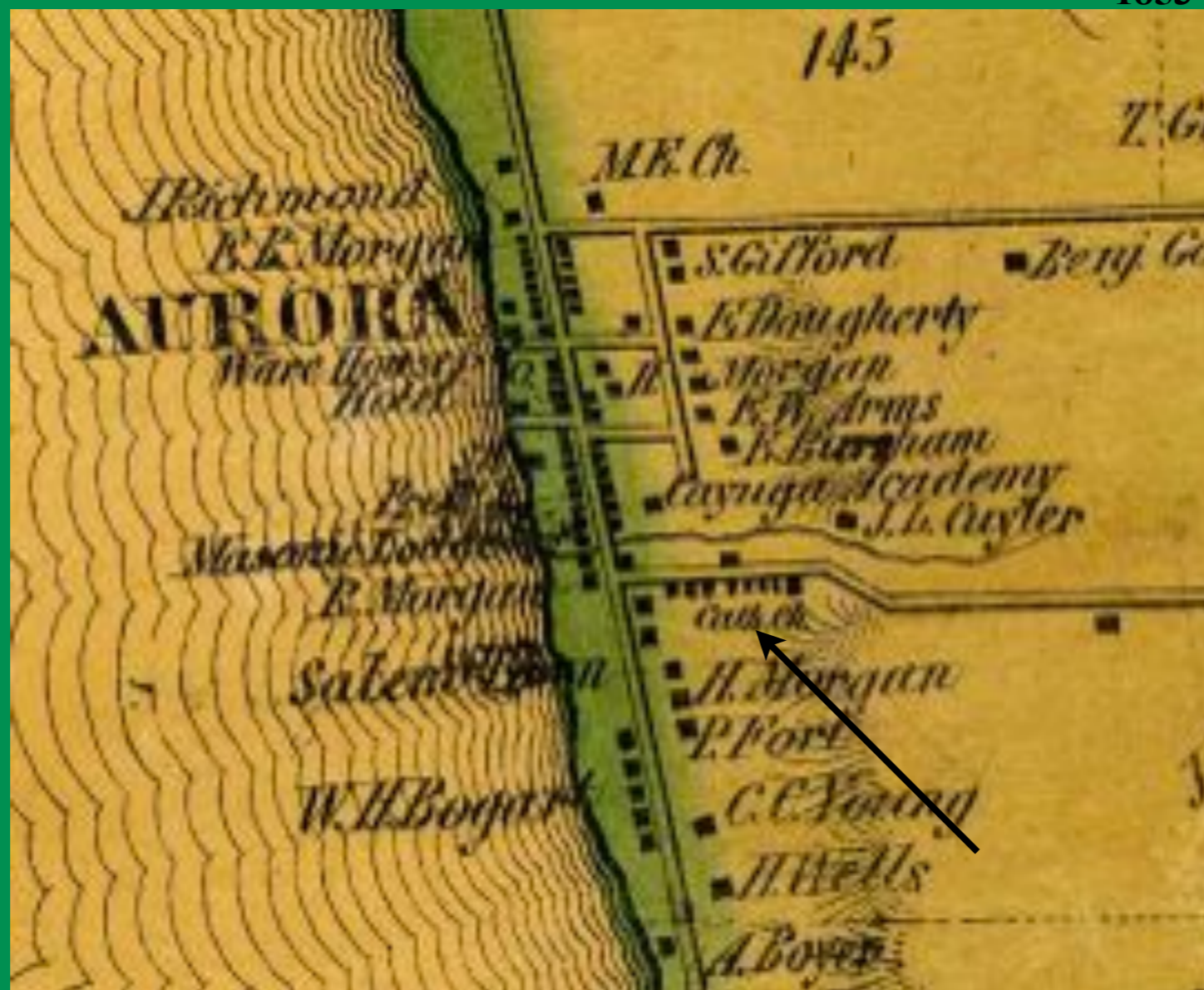
On Tuesday, January 26th, 1841, Fr. Buckley from Holy Family made the long trek from Auburn to celebrate Mass in Aurora, on the same occasion baptizing three of the McGordon children. This is remembered as the first Mass celebrated in Aurora.



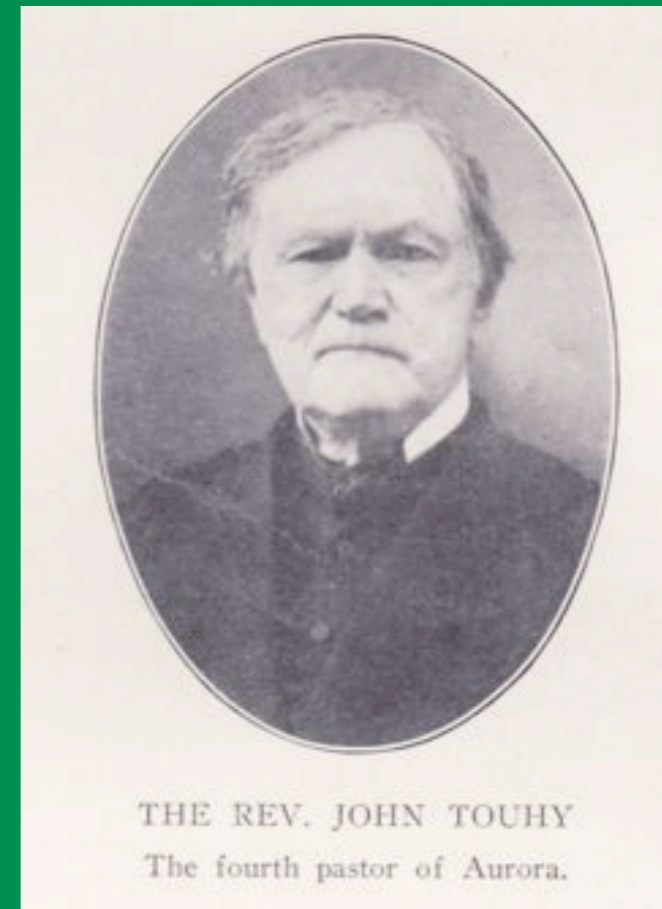
Richard Shea (1820-1903), born in Ireland, came to Aurora early in 1849. Some fifty years later, he wrote his recollections of the Christmas Mass of 1849, celebrated by Fr. O'Farrell from Seneca Falls in the McGordon home. He remembered the names of twenty who were there, but there were probably more. The offering amounted to nine dollars.

Aurora soon became a mission station with an assigned priest; the first was Fr. Quigley (serving 1851-1853). His successor was Fr. Nicholas Byrne, who served 1853-1855. Under his leadership, St. Michael's Church in Union Springs was built. Fr. Byrne began collections to build a church in Aurora as well. He began to rent a small house on Dublin Hill Rd. from Thomas Callan to serve as the congregation's place of worship. This would become St. Agnes' Church.

1853



Before Fr. Byrne's next assignment, the congregation was able to purchase the building from Thomas Callan for \$600. Payment, along with back rent, needed to be spread over several years.



THE REV. JOHN TOUHY
The fourth pastor of Aurora.

Fr. John Touhy (1856-1864), was born in County Clare, Ireland and studied for the priesthood in Paris. His assignment to Aurora took him not only to Union Springs but to mission stations throughout the towns of Aurelius, Springport, Ledyard, Scipio, Venice and Genoa.



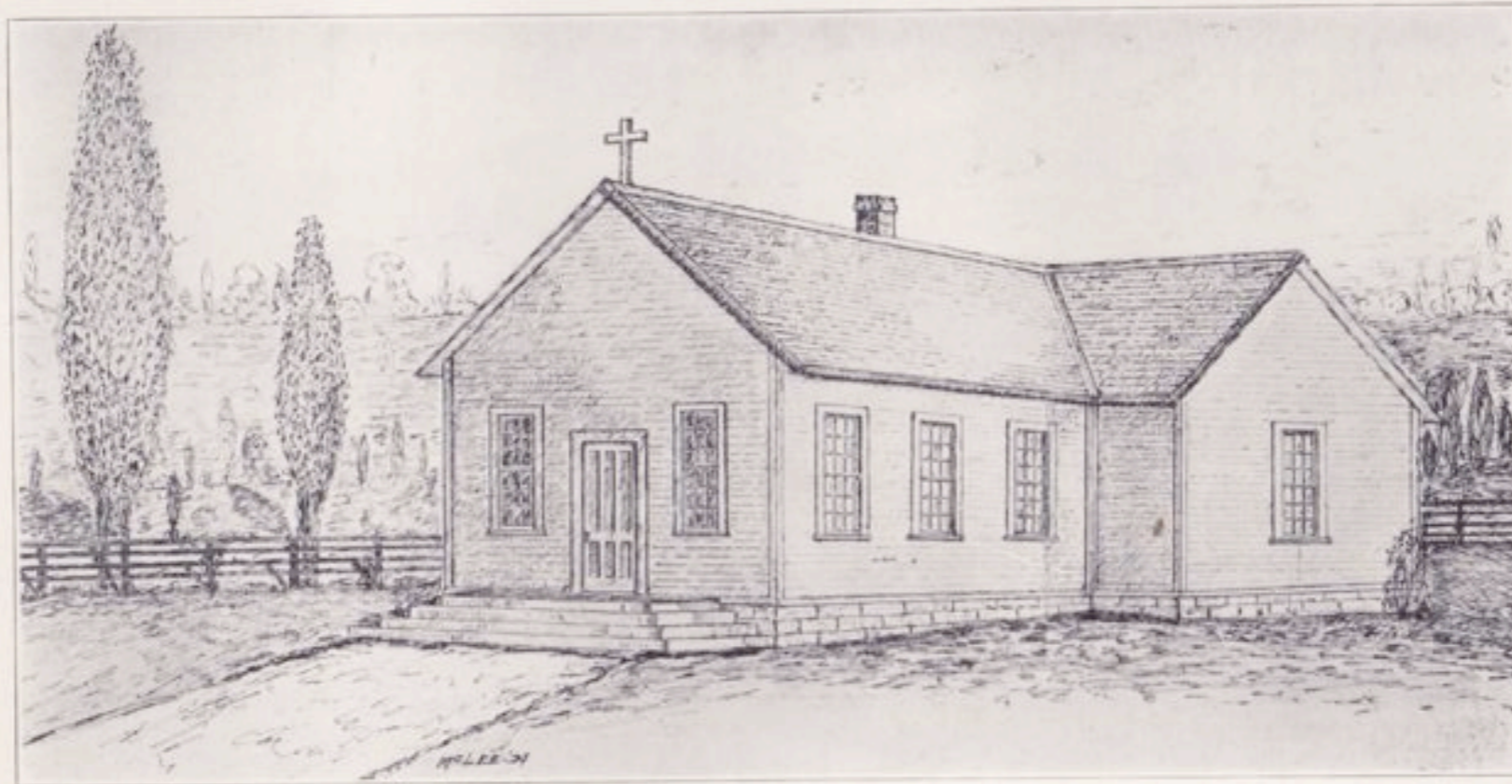
1859



Bishop John Timon

In 1859, Bishop John Timon of Buffalo visited Aurora. On the Saturday evening of his arrival, he spoke at Cayuga Academy; St. Agnes' Church was too small to hold all those eager to hear him. Among the audience was Edwin B. Morgan, who invited Bp. Timon to stay at his home, then brand new, for the night. On Sunday, Bp. Timon celebrated Mass at St. Agnes and confirmed the church's candidates. Following the service, Bp. Timon and Fr. Touhy were entertained for breakfast at the home of Patrick Kelly next door.

By the following year, 1860, St. Agnes' original building was paid off, and was already proving small for the rapidly growing congregation. Fr. Touhy arranged for the church to be remodeled and enlarged. The building was turned so that its gable end faced the street, and a wing was built on the back. The total cost for St. Agnes, including the original six hundred dollars, came to \$1126.28, representing sacrificial gifts from some 67 individuals or families.



ST. AGNES' CHURCH
The first Catholic Church in Aurora.

The dedication of the remodeled St. Agnes' Church was a wonderful occasion.

Larry Hickey (1822-1892) and others long remembered the joy of the day.



An incident deserving of something more than passing notice in connection with the remodeling of St. Agnes' Church, and one still fresh in the minds of some of the older Catholics of Aurora, indicative of the simplicity, the sincerity and the sublimity of the faith of the early parishioners, took place when the cross was erected over St. Agnes' Church. This last stroke of the workmen was left until the congregation was present, and when the symbol of man's redemption was placed on high for the first time in Aurora, the members of the congregation, with moistened eyes, cheered and shouted in exultation. All nature too, seemed pleased with the completion of God's temple, humble though that temple was, for the autumn morning was one of God's fairest, and the very hills and ravines to the east and the north and the south reverberated the cheers and shouts of exultation coming to them from the happy group at St. Agnes' Church.¹

"Some Cross Bearers of the Finger Lakes Region," 1925

This little church, whose congregation also included families from Scipio, King Ferry and Genoa, sent fifty-six soldiers to the Civil War, ten of whom did not return.



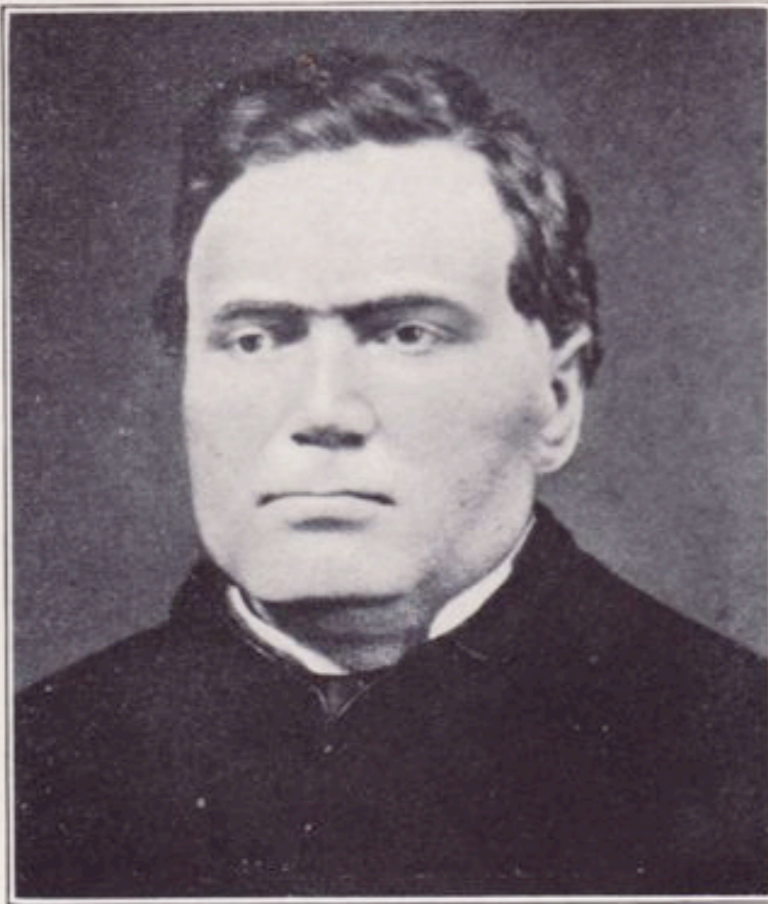
RICHARD MURPHY

Fr. Bernard McCool, born in County Donegal, served in Aurora from 1864-1870. He was remembered as “wise, modest and sympathetic,” and was also an energetic builder of churches. St. Bernard’s in Scipio (1866), St. Mary of the Lake (1868; now known as Our Lady of the Lake) in King Ferry, and St. Joseph’s in Cayuga (1869) all date to Fr. McCool’s pastorate.

The first trustees of St. Agnes’ Church were Richard Murphy (1824-1888) and Martin Maloney, Sr. (1829-1918). They would continue in these roles through the transition to St. Patrick’s Church.



MARTIN MALONEY, SR.



THE REV. BERNARD McCOOL
The fifth pastor of Aurora.

In 1870, looking toward Aurora's future, Fr. McCool purchased a lot at the foot of Dublin Hill Rd. from Edwin B. Morgan, and soon the adjacent smaller lot as well. This would become the site of St. Patrick's church.

When it was no longer needed, the old St. Agnes building was moved "downtown," behind Andrew McGordon's house, now on this side of the street. It would have stood behind the Post Office and old District School #6 just beyond. The building was destroyed in the fire of 1919.



This early history is drawn from from "Some Cross Bearers of the Finger Lakes Region," by Rev. Bernard Leo Heffernan (1925). The book is still in print.

Linda Schwab, Village Historian, warmly thanks Patricia Bianconi and other members of St. Patrick's Church for making this history come alive. The St. Patrick's windows included in the display honor the early members of this church community.