



# THE HISTORY OF MAINE IN THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

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## CHAPTER SIX: Early Maine Catholic History

On July 29, 1853, Blessed Pope Pius IX created the Diocese of Portland, then comprising the states of New Hampshire and Maine (excluding the Madawaska region). The origins of the Catholic community in what is now Maine date much earlier than the middle of the 19th century however. In the summer of 1604, Pierre du Guast Sieur de Monts, a Huguenot, founded a mixed colony of about 80 French Catholics and Protestants on Ste. Croix Island (also known as Dochet's Island) in the Ste. Croix River, not far from present-day Calais. This site was abandoned the following year after about half of the inhabitants, including the priest on the expedition, died during the harsh winter of 1604-1605. Further French settlements followed on Mount Desert Island in 1613, at Castine in 1633, and at Augusta on the Kennebec River in 1646. Blessed François Montmorency Laval, vicar apostolic of New France since 1658, reported that some 200 baptisms took place at the Assumption Mission in Augusta between 1660 and 1663, a true testimony to the dedication of the Jesuit missionaries who served there and along all the major rivers of what is now the state of Maine.

Missionary activity continued throughout the 17th and early 18th century despite growing hostilities between France and England over control of the region. This armed conflict was punctuated by attacks on English settlements and Native American villages. In one of the most famous attacks, English forces destroyed the village at Norridgewock on August 23, 1724, killing scores of Native Americans, including their chiefs and Father Sebastian Rasle, SJ, their devoted missionary for decades.

During the American Revolution, the scattered Native American communities in Maine were periodically visited by chaplains of the French Navy allied with the rebel cause. By 1785, Loyalist settlers from New England forced Acadian farmers in New Brunswick off their lands, causing them to flee into the Madawaska territory in Aroostook County above the Great Falls on the St. John River, planting the roots of what would become a string of parishes on both sides of the St. John River Valley. In 1789, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, the first bishop in the newly-formed United States of America, sent the French refugee priest Jean-Louis de Cheverus to serve the Native Americans at Indian Island and to found what would become St. Patrick Parish in Newcastle. Parishes in North Whitefield, Eastport, Machias, and Portland followed in close succession to serve growing numbers of immigrants from Ireland. Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston founded a utopian Catholic farming community at Benedicta in 1833 with the hope of even establishing a college there. During the 1850's, anti-Catholic prejudice led to the burning of the churches in Bath and Lewiston and to the tarring and feathering of Father John Bapst, S.J., by a mob in Ellsworth.

In this climate, the Reverend Henry B. Coskery, Vicar General of Baltimore, declined to accept the appointment as first Bishop of Portland in 1853. It was not until 1855 that the diocese's first bishop, David W. Bacon (1855-1875) of Brooklyn, arrived in Portland at night, dressed as a layman in order to avoid a riot. During Bishop Bacon's tenure, the first Catholic schools were established in Portland, Bangor, and North Whitefield. After a halt due to the Civil War and the destruction wrought by the Great Fire of Portland in 1866, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, its chapel, and the Cathedral Residence were finally opened in 1869. In 1870, jurisdiction for the Madawaska territory, which had become part of Maine through the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842, was finally transferred from the Diocese of St. John, New Brunswick, to the Diocese of Portland.

**Portland's second bishop, James Augustine Healy (1875-1900)**, was born in Macon, Georgia, the eldest son of an Irish immigrant cotton planter, Michael Healy and his wife, Mary Eliza Clark, a mulatto slave. James Healy was ordained as the nation's first African-American bishop on June 2, 1875, in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland. During his tenure, he oversaw the founding of parishes and schools for the growing number of Irish and French-Canadian immigrants. During his 25 years as Bishop of Portland, Bishop Healy founded 33 parishes, 22 schools, 18 convents, and a small number of hospitals and orphanages. Bishop Healy is remembered in particular as the bishop of children and of the poor.

In 1901, Bishop Healy was succeeded by **Bishop William H. O'Connell (1900-1906) as third Bishop of Portland**. During his tenure, tensions broke out between the French-speaking and English-speaking clergy and laity, tensions which marked the reign of his successor. Bishop O'Connell is remembered for negotiating a very successful diplomatic mission to Japan on behalf of the Holy See. Within a month of his return from Japan in 1906, he was named Archbishop of Boston.