

# “Catholicity is the same age as the city (Atlanta)”: Msgr. Joseph E. Moylan

In a booklet he wrote for the fiftieth anniversary of the 1873 dedication of the present Church of the Immaculate Conception in Atlanta, Monsignor Joseph E. Moylan pointed out that Atlanta's Catholic church and the city itself developed simultaneously.

According to Moylan, the rough little town that had been “Terminus” and, later, “Marthasville” became “Atlanta” in 1847,

the same year Bishop Ignatius A. Reynolds of Charleston bought a one-acre lot on Central Avenue from Terrence Doonan. This property, which cost \$300, was earmarked “for the use and benefit of a Catholic Church to be erected in the aforesaid town of Atlanta”.

The following year (1848), Daniel McSchreffrey deeded another lot to Bishop

Reynolds; this time, likely in exchange for the one bought from Doonan. This site, on Central Avenue and Hunter Street (now Central Avenue and Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) is where the Church of the Immaculate Conception stands today. When the

Diocese of Savannah was carved out of the Charleston Diocese in 1850, this and other properties became part of the new diocese.



Rita H. DeLorme

Among the first Catholics in Atlanta were probably Irishmen brought in to work on the railroads. Before the first Catholic church (simply called “the Catholic church”) was built in 1848, these early Catholics and members of other denominations attended services in a building that was a school house during the week. Father Peter Whelan may have

come occasionally from the Catholic settlement at Locust Grove to say Mass, while Fathers Barry (later bishop) and Duggan of Augusta; Birmingham of Edgefield, S.C.; Shannahan of Macon and J.F. O'Neill, Sr. of Savannah visited Atlanta Catholics monthly.

*The Archdiocese of Atlanta, a History* notes that sacramental records of the mission of “The Catholic Church of Atlanta” began in 1846, adding that these records “show that Father John Barry performed all of the early baptisms and therefore should be considered the first priest at Immaculate Conception from 1846-1849. He was followed by Father John Francis Shannahan and Father Jeremiah F. O'Neill, Jr.”

Prominent among members of the emerging Catholic congregation was the same “Terrence Doonan” mentioned earlier. Father John Barry performed the first Catholic baptism recorded in Atlanta in 1846 at Doonan's home. In 1848, Bishop Reynolds of Charleston administered Confirmation there. Father Barry formally entrusted the first book of records of the parish that became Immaculate Conception to Terrence Doonan, to keep under lock and key until a pastor was appointed.

Described variously as an engineer and as a wealthy railroad official, Terrence Doonan asked Bishop Francis X. Gartland to assign a resident pastor to Atlanta and offered to pay all costs involved, including living expenses of the priest. On February 13, 1851, Bishop Gartland appointed Reverend Jeremiah F. O'Neill, Jr. as first pastor of Immaculate Conception.

Van Buren Colley, historian of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, declared: “With the arrival of the family of Terrence Doonan, it seems that Catholicity in Atlanta had

at last gained a solid foothold.” Helping to maintain this foothold were Doonan and other early Atlanta Catholics. Doonan's wife, Ellen Barry, may have been related to Bishop Barry. Both Father James A. Doonan, SJ, president of Georgetown University from 1882-1888, and Father John Doonan, SJ, of Spring Hill College were descendants of the couple.

Confirming Monsignor Moylan's statement that Atlanta's Catholic church and the city itself developed at the same time was an article by June Blackwell in the September 30, 1950, issue of *The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association of Georgia*. In this article, Blackwell speculated that the Catholic Church might be the oldest property holder in Atlanta. Citing information from deed records of the Atlanta Title Company (formerly the

Atlanta Title and Trust Company), Blackwell noted that the deeding of property to the church by Terrence Doonan occurred the same year Atlanta received its name.

Blackwell went on to enumerate further properties obtained by the Catholic Church in Atlanta through the years, concluding that “the growth of the Church and its activities would have been gratifying to men who more than a hundred years ago paid \$300 for an acre of land in a raw and muddy little railroad town ‘for the use and benefit of the Catholic Church.’”

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