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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH In the Colfax Area

Written by Edmund F. Molly, September 2001
Edited by Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist, May 2014

As we celebrate the 50 anniversary of the present Saint Dominic Church, we should pause for a brief moment and examine our roots.

The history of the Catholic Church in Colfax and the surrounding area began with the Gold Rush of 1849 and the construction of the trans-continental railroad.

In April of 1850, Joseph Sadoc Alemany (in Rome at the time) accepted the post of Bishop of California and arrived in San Francisco in December of that year. In the spring of 1851, he visited Nevada City, where he confirmed a class for Father John Shanahan who had been appointed as the first priest in the northern mines area of the state at St Peter Church in Nevada City, which was the seat until 1855.



Saint Dominic Mission Church, Iowa Hill

This Church was dismantled in mid 1920s after a devastating fire destroyed Iowa Hill

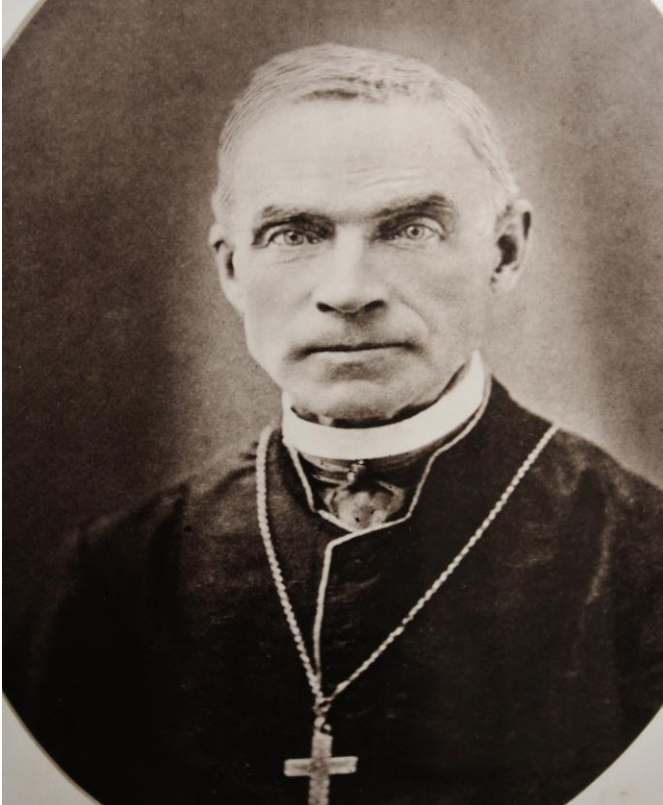
Perhaps the first services to be held in this area were in 1852 or 1853 when Father Shanahan stopped and held services in Illinoistown which was renamed Colfax in 1865 on his way over to hold services in the bustling town of Foresthill. There is no record of there ever having been a church in Illinoistown; however, it was a very important and thriving trading post which had been created in 1849 at the end of the long, dusty wagon trail from Sacramento, and which by 1853 had its own Post Office. The original Weinstock and other merchants from the Sacramento area all made frequent trips to there and thence by horse back or mule pack down into the American River canyon to peddle their wares to the hundreds of miners and prospectors who lined the canyon walls or were up on the ridges and along the river bottom searching for that precious metal.

Colfax was named after Schuyler Colfax, a six-term Indiana congressman who visited the area while on a political junket in the summer of 1865. The re-naming by Leland Stanford, one of the main players of the Central Pacific Railroad, was considered a politically astute move.

In early winter of 1853, Father Shanahan, because of illness, was relieved of his duties and returned to Boston. He was succeeded by a newly ordained priest from Belgium, a Father Peter L. Dayeart, who carried on through 1854. On July 16, 1855, Saint Peter Church in Nevada City burned to the ground. Since Father Dalton was away in Ireland at the time, his assistant Father John Griffin immediately planned to build a new church and named it Saints Peter and Paul after the patron saint of his native Kilkenny. It was dedicated by Bishop Alemany on June 16, 1856. However, Father Dalton had the church in Nevada City suppressed as a parish until 1868 and moved the parish to newly built Saint Patrick Church Grass Valley with Nevada Town (City) as a mission. At this time (1855), Fr. Dalton's mission included the counties of Nevada, Placer, Sierra, Plumas, Lassen, and a portion of El Dorado – and eastward to the Colorado River!

In the years after 1855, Fr. Dalton regularly visited Dutch Flat, Gold Run, Alta and Illinoistown on his way over to hold services in Foresthill and Michigan Bluff. Father Dalton is reported to have procured a place for worship for the City of Auburn, and this may be true as the Catholic Church in Auburn was destroyed in a fire that almost totally destroyed the city. The church was rebuilt the same year and was dedicated by Archbishop Alemany, assisted by Fathers Joseph and Hugh Gallagher. After that, Auburn became a mission of Folsom until it was elevated to parish status in 1886 as St. Theresa Parish with Father Luke Tormey as pastor.

In 1858, Father Dalton built Saint Joseph Church in the then booming town of Foresthill, and it was dedicated on June 29th of that year. It was elevated to parish status and dedicated by Bishop Eugene O'Connell of the new Vicariate of Marysville on July 14, 1861. Fr. Dalton also built a church in Iowa Hill, another boom town close to the present City of Colfax. It was dedicated June 10, 1860.



Bishop Eugene O'Connell

As a matter of interest, we have a copy of the deed to the parcel of land on which Saint Dominic Church and cemetery were built. "In a deed dated May 10, 1860 for a payment of \$10.00, a Mr. J.P. Hansen of the Town of Iowa Hill, deeded to the Most Reverend Joseph Sadoc Alemany, Archbishop of San Francisco, all rights, title and interest in a certain parcel of land, being in the Town of Iowa Hill and situated on the hill known as Banjo Hill."

Iowa Hill had suffered a number of fires over the years, but a fire in 1820 destroyed almost the entire town. The church, which had been built set-back in the front central portion of the tract, suffered only very minor damage. With the town virtually erased, the mission was suppressed and the church was dismantled in 1921.

The rugged bell from that church, which had been purchased by Irish immigrants was later used at the Saint Thomas/Saint Dominic church on Oak Street near Culver in Colfax. When atop the church in Iowa Hill, it was reported that as it tolled to summon the faithful to service, it could be heard in Auburn and as far away as Chicago Park. The bell was discovered in a dark corner of the basement of the present rectory in 1988 and was installed out front during the face lift in 1989.

In 1861, Bishop Eugene O'Connell was installed in Marysville by Archbishop Alemany as Vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate of Marysville. Grass Valley was now included in the Vicariate. The first church to be elevated to parish status was Saint Joseph in Forest Hill. It was dedicated on July 14 by Bishop O'Connell with Father Francis Blake as pastor. He assumed responsibility for the missions of Iowa Hill, Colfax and Michigan Bluff. Father Blake was a new young priest who had come along with Bishop O'Connell when he returned from Ireland where he had gone to his old seminary in quest of needed priests for his far flung vicariate. However, Father Blake was not up to the rigors of the assignment and was replaced by Father George Rigby in November of 1862. For some reason, Father Rigby was transferred to Virginia City in July of 1863 and so for the time being, Saint Joseph Church was left without a pastor. The bishop prevailed upon Father Largan, pastor of St Patrick Church in Placerville, to fill in until such time as the bishop could find a replacement for the post. Father Largan is reported to have come faithfully until the winter of 1863.

In a letter to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Paris, Bishop O'Connell informed the society that the churches of both Foresthill and Shasta had been destroyed by high winds. I can find no record of it, but Saint Joseph in Foresthill must have been rebuilt immediately. Still, the bishop had no ready replacement for the post. Father James Callan, a young priest who had been his assistant at the cathedral since 1862, knowing the bishop's distress, volunteered for the post. While the bishop was reluctant to lose him, but relented and Father Callan became the pastor of Foresthill until 1868 and assumed responsibility for the missions of Iowa Hill, Michigan Bluff, Dutch Flat, Alta and Colfax. In order to accommodate the vast number of people over so great an area, it was necessary for Father Callan to seek help and thus we find Fathers Dennis Nugent, Patrick O'Reilly, Thomas Petit, and Patrick O'Kane helping out until 1868.

At this time there was considerable opposition to having a Catholic Church in Colfax. And so, as with the railroad camps, Masses were said in private homes. As the congregation grew, Masses were held in the dining room of J. Sutton's Hotel – elsewhere known as J. Sutton's Rooming House and Saloon.

At this point, several histories have different versions. One has it that a Mrs. Catherine McCarthy spearheaded the drive to get a church built, and bought a home, supposedly for her brother, but deeded it to Archbishop Alemany and that a carpenter was hired to remove the dividing walls and create a large room in which pews were installed. However, it is well documented that a Daniel B Shepard and his wife Ellen, who also conducted the first private school there around 1863, deeded the house to the archbishop and along with a hired carpenter, parishioner with help from Father Lorgan, pastor of Foresthill, converted the house into a small church which at the time was adequate. Father Callan said the first Mass there and Archbishop Alemany confirmed the first class there. Father Callan, pastor of Foresthill (1864-1869) and Father Meagher, who succeeded him, held regular Masses there for years.

Several histories credit Father Mevel as being the first to celebrate Mass in Colfax, but this I believe is in error. Father Mevel was a French priest who had been ordained in 1865 and first served in Gold Hill, Nevada. Father Mevel then filled in for an ailing Father Crinnian at Oroville from 1866 through most of 1868 when he was assigned by the bishop as the pastor of "The Railroad Parish" and he moved to Foresthill with Father Daniel Meagher. It is probable that he did say Masses for the Catholics in the railroad camp as well as those camps along the tracks up to the summit. However, it would appear that Father Callan had said Masses in Colfax several years earlier. As the tracks reached the summit in 1869, Father Mevel moved to Truckee and then later to Reno, where he built the first Catholic Church. When he left Reno, it is believed that he went back to Haiti from where he had originally come.

Shortly after Father Meagher became pastor of Foresthill, he held a benefit in Colfax and made \$300 towards a small rectory for the church (now, the home of Teresa Hilbert of our parish). Father Meagher was succeeded by Father Andrew O'Connell in November of 1872. He then became pastor of Saints Peter & Paul church in Nevada City and assumed the mission churches of the lower railroad parish when Father Mevel moved to Truckee.

From the *Dutch Flat Forum* of 18 January 1876: "There will be a mission at the Catholic Church, Dutch Flat on Sunday, Jan. 16 at 10:00 o'clock a.m. Preaching at 7 p.m. by Rev. Father Marr. (Meagher)." A plot map of the town of Dutch Flat, dated 1871, shows the Catholic Church in Dutch Flat as having been located on Clark Street about half a block off Sacramento Street, but I have been unable to learn anything about it other than it and the school had been "torched" by a "Crazy" Charley Wedgewood in 1898, and was never rebuilt. The property on which the church was located was sold by the diocese to its present owner.

In 1876, Bishop O'Connell visited the hill country and confirmed in Foresthill, Iowa Hill and Colfax. In 1877, a group of Passionist Fathers, at the request of Bishop O'Connell, gave missions and evangelized in Colfax, Foresthill Iowa Hill, Alta, and Dutch Flat as well as other areas in the vast diocese.

When the Central Pacific tracks reached Camp 20 in mid-summer of 1865, it was a bustling camp for the drive to push the tracks up over the High Sierra. Now, with a good road to the camp, most of the businesses in Illinoistown moved up and Camp 20 became the Town of Colfax. The town site was surveyed and lots sold like hot cakes...homes and businesses went up everywhere.

Father O'Connell continued on as pastor in Foresthill and served the missions of Colfax, Iowa Hill and Michigan Bluff until he was succeeded by Father William Maloney in March of 1876. It was under his guidance that the drive to construct a new church to replace the now too small Saint John of the Cross Church, (the converted residence of the Shepard home) on the same piece of property on Oak Street near Culver, (now the home of the Warren Johnson family).

The fund drive was a very spirited one since the one who produced the greatest amount would get to name the church. A Mr. Thomas Kingston, followed closely by a Thomas Conley, were the biggest money contributors and the church was named Saint Thomas in their honor. Before the fund drive was completed, in February 1879, Father Maloney was succeeded by Father Thomas Petit, who was pastor at the completion of the fund drive and the church in 1880.

The Catholic Directory of 1873 gives a good idea of the area served by the pastor of Saint Joseph in Foresthill: Colfax was served once a month; Dutch Flat, once a month; Horseshoe Bar, once a month; Iowa Hill, once a month; Lowell Hill, every second month; Michigan Bluff, once a month; Smith's Ranch or Yankee Jim's, occasionally.

Father Petit was succeeded by Father Michael Dillon in February of 1881 and he in turn was followed by Father Michael O'Reilly in December of 1882. Father Daniel Meagher returned in May of 1892 and served until September of 1898. Father Dennis Horgan followed until 1900 and he was followed by Father Gerald Stack. By 1903, the population of Foresthill had dwindled to around 700 people and the congregation barely merited a resident priest let alone support one. However, the Catholic School in Foresthill continued on for several years after Bishop Grace suppressed the parish and sent Father Stack to Colfax where he served and tended to the mission in Iowa Hill until his death in Colfax in 1906.

In the meantime, Foresthill became a mission of Saint Teresa Church in Auburn, which had been a mission of Folsom but had been elevated to parish status in 1886 with Father Luke Tormey as its first pastor. In the fall of 1895, Father Theodore Van Schie became pastor of Saint Teresa Church until 1904. With the suppression of Saint Joseph in Foresthill, Saint Teresa assumed responsibility for its missions in Colfax, Iowa Hill and Michigan Bluff.

In October of 1894, Father Vereker became pastor of Saint Teresa Parish and began a 35+ year tenure of service to the Auburn community. In December 1911, Saint Teresa Church was replaced by the new church of Saint Joseph with Father Vereker the pastor until 1940.



On December 6 of 1929 Saint Thomas Church in Colfax was elevated to a parish with Father Thomas Molyneux as pastor. In 1930 it became Saint Dominic Church. Father Molyneux is said to have lived part time in Colfax, but those who succeeded him, for the most part, lived in Auburn. Father Molyneux was followed by Father Frank McEnaney (1931-1933), Father Michael Hynes (1934-1938), and Father Cornelius O'Connor (1938-1945).

At that time, Southern Pacific had local trains that happily arrived from the west in time for the 10 am Mass and returned shortly after noon. There are still a few of the old timers who remember both Father Hynes and Father

St Dominic Church, Colfax
Formerly Known as St Thomas Church, Built 1880, Became
St Dominic Church in 1927 and used until 1951

O'Connor coming up from Auburn, accompanied by several of the sisters who taught the children their catechism lessons and prepared them for First Holy Communion and confirmation. The people of Saint Dominic Church owe a great debt of gratitude to the Sisters of Mercy who long before we were elevated to parish status, came to Colfax to prepare our

children for their First Communion and confirmation. They continued this until just a few years ago, when Sister Ellen Philbin retired.

Father O'Connor was succeeded by Father John Vaughn (1945-1952). It was under Father Vaughn that the all too small old church on Oak near Culver was replaced by our present Saint Dominic Church at Oak and Auburn Streets. As with the fund drive for the first church, this too was spirited. While I can find no records, old timers tell me that Mrs. Celia Bertolli who worked for over a half century at the drug store on Main Street and knew everybody, was far and away the greatest fund raiser for the new church. Work on the church was started in late 1950 and the church was dedicated by Bishop Robert J. Armstrong on September 2, 1951.

The present rectory was completed in late 1952 and a rented house about a block away on Auburn Street served as the rectory until the rectory was completed. The hall was constructed the following year, mostly by parishioner labor.

Father Vaughn was followed by Father Thomas Boland (1952-1957). Father Edward Farrell succeeded Father Boland (1957-59). Father Farrell sadly was killed in an automobile accident. Father William Walsh (1959-70) followed and in turn, Father Patrick Coffey (1970-89).

Father Coffey's health began to fail in the fall and winter of 1986 and by early 1987 he was no longer able to function. Since Bishop Francis Quinn had no immediate replacement, Ed Molloy, acting as parish coordinator, took care of parish facilities until the first of July. If he was unable to locate a priest for the weekend Masses by Friday noon, he would call the Chancery Office and they would provide a priest who would hear confessions, confer baptism if needed, and of course, say the three weekend Masses. Happily, on July 1, Father Vincent O'Reilly, back from his sabbatical leave, was appointed administrator. The first of the year (1988) saw Father William Peters, SJ assume the administrator's position as the bishop had more urgent need for Father O'Reilly elsewhere. Father Peters was a wonderful man but was very frail. Along about mid-May, he must have had a premonition that he should be replaced. He called Bishop Quinn and requested that he be relieved.

Father Dermot Dwyer had just retired as pastor of Saint Thomas Church in Oroville and Bishop Quinn sent him to be the "temporary" administrator of Saint Dominic Parish. Since June 1, 1988, Father Dwyer has been our shepherd.

Unhappily, Father Peters' premonition was right. He passed away quietly saying his rosary in the Mother House of the Sisters of Mercy in Auburn on June 16, 1988.

Within the first week, a group of the more active parishioners got together for a planning session on what they, the parishioners, felt were the most needed improvements to the parish plant. Within the first week, priority #1 was underway – air conditioning the church along with new heating equipment. The contractor did a real priority job for us and within a week, the air conditioning and a new heating plant were installed in the church.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

St Dominic Church, Colfax

Then, prior to Father Dwyer leaving on vacation, a commercial painting contractor was retained to do all the high work while parishioners washed and painted the lower portion of the church. The church, which had been a dark drab color, was redone in a brighter color and the gold trim accents around the windows and doors was added. The oak pews were then taken out, two at a time, and were stripped and refinished by the son of one of our parishioners.

Our beautiful stained glass windows were added, making our little church one of the most beautiful in the diocese. With the interior completed, the exterior was completely redone, making the church handicapped accessible and with considerably more room for people to congregate and socialize. The historic bell from the old Iowa Hill church was mounted out front on stanchions. David Lassilla, the local funeral director, had the bronze plaque made for it. Our parking lot at the time was mostly unusable, being 4 to 5 feet lower than at present and was for the most part a huge weed patch and fire hazard. The property had once been the home of a Mrs. Scanlan, who deeded the house and lot to the church sometime in the 1960's. Our thanks to Mr. Scott Miles of R.J. Miles & Co. who donated hundreds of cubic yards of fill dirt and then rough graded it to its present level. Before the rains came that fall, the lot was paved and striped so we have one of the nicest and also biggest parking lots in town.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Interior of St Dominic Church

In the meantime, mostly with parish volunteers, our hall was enlarged, a new heating system as well as air conditioning was installed. The kitchen was upgraded and a separate dish-washing room was also installed as were acoustic ceilings.

While all these wonderful improvements in the physical plant were taking place, more importantly was the growth in the spiritual life of the parish as a good many parishioner-instituted programs were put in place. Our CCD program which had a student body of 12 to 15 children grew remarkably with a staff of well trained teachers and aides. In short order we were really hurting for space, holding classes in the dining room and living room of the rectory, several classes in the parish hall, the sacristy, choir loft, the church body and wherever we could accommodate them. Happily, Father Michael Dillon who was in the process of building the new Saints Peter and Paul Church in Rocklin donated a 45 foot modular building to us that had been used as CCD classrooms until his permanent building was completed. With all parish labor, this was set on a foundation, an additional 30 feet was added, a new roof that covered the 75 foot long porch with handicap accessibility and then partitioned off to create five classrooms.

Friday evenings at 7 pm, devotions include fifteen decades of the rosary, followed by the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and Commemoration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. On First

Fridays, Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament are added. Daily, after the 8 am Mass, the rosary is recited and every Wednesday there is exposition of the Blessed Sacrament until noon.

And to all this, add an active Ladies Guild, Knights of Columbus and an active youth group.

On Thanksgiving Day 1990 an image appeared on the church wall. The image appears each year from mid-October to mid-February.

The City of Colfax is currently experiencing growth in the city and the surrounding areas with new homes and businesses, downtown renewal projects and school expansion underway. Saint Dominic parish is enjoying growing attendance and support as well.

Editor's Note: Succession of Pastors since this Article was First Printed in 2001

Succeeding Father Dermot Dwyer in 2003 was Father Bill Kinane who served as pastor until his retirement in 2008. He was succeeded by Father Ambrose Ugwuegbu until 2011. Father Tom Seabridge then served as pastor 2011 - 2013 and now Father Wladyslaw Borkowski is the parish administrator of St Dominic Parish.

Saint Dominic Parish has had a long and rich history spanning from the Gold Rush days of the 1850s to the beginning of the twenty-first century. We wish the parishioners of this thriving mountain parish every blessing from the Lord as they journey together in faith into the future.