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SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST PARISH, FOLSOM A PARISH THAT DEVELOPED AROUND THE RAILROAD

By Fr John Dwyer, printed February 26, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

Folsom has the unique distinction of being one of the earliest parishes to be established by Archbishop Alemany in the northern part of the state and yet probably one of the last to have a resident pastor. Both factors can be attributed to the coming of the railroad.

Talk of building railroads to assist in getting people and goods to the mines can be traced back as far as 1852. Actual construction of the first railroad line in California took place in 1855 when "Crazy Judah" as he was called completed the Sacramento Valley line between Sacramento and Folsom, a distance of 22 miles. Theodore Judah, only 28 years old when he arrived in Sacramento, saw that a line extending in its initial stages to the foothills of the Sierras would provide fast and easy transportation to the Comstock mines in the Washoe territory. It was the same Judah who was to bring about the actual start of the Central Pacific and who surveyed the line across the Sierras.

When the new railroad was completed in February 1856, Folsom became the terminus of the stage lines across the mountains and a chief transportation center for the mines. Livery stables for the horses and mules, blacksmith shops, eating establishments and, of course, an abundance of saloons soon cropped up.

The nearest priest was the pastor of St Rose in Sacramento, Father John Quinn, who saw the need for a house of worship and saw in the railroad a quick and easy means of transportation. It was he who in 1857 built St John the Baptist Church, which served as Folsom's only Catholic Church for a century.

Two years later, the Archbishop established Folsom as a separate parish and appointed Father Joseph Gallagher as the founding pastor. But neither Father Quinn nor Father Gallagher found it necessary to begin living the lonely life which was one of the greatest hardships of the pioneer priests; with the railroad running from door to door, why live separately?

When Father Gallagher was transferred in October, 1860 to Stockton there was no one for Folsom. So Father James Cassin, pastor of St Rose, took care of Folsom until the next pastor, another Gallagher, was appointed. On December 5, 1860, the Archbishop appointed Father Neal Gallagher the new pastor, again with residence in Sacramento. This young priest, on his way to Boston after his ordination from Carlow Seminary on April 29, 1860, was on board the steamer "Hibernia" when it caught fire. Father Gallagher was one of the last to leave the burning ship. Within a year after his arrival in the Sacramento-Folsom area, a terrible flood

once again brought out his disregard of self, for he could be found in a boat rowing through the flooded area bringing supplies and necessary provisions to the marooned houses of the district. But this kind of disregard of self caused an early illness, and the Archbishop felt it necessary to move him. He was sent in July 1863 to St Mary's College on Mission Street in San Francisco. But in February 1864, he was back again as pastor of Folsom. There is evidence that at this time Father Neal enlarged the original church. The illness did not go away. By September 6, 1867, Folsom had lost its pastor to death at the age of 38.

He was succeeded for one year by Father William Slattery, one of the brothers of Father Daniel Slattery of Marysville. However in 1870 he was succeeded by Father Francis Kelly who was to remain as pastor for seven years. When Father Kelly died two years later, he too was only 37 years of age.



**Original
St. John the Baptist Church
Folsom,
built around 1857**

Father Kelly was succeeded by Father John Leahy about whom very little is known. He remained in charge of Folsom for five years.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Interior of the Original St John Church in Folsom Today

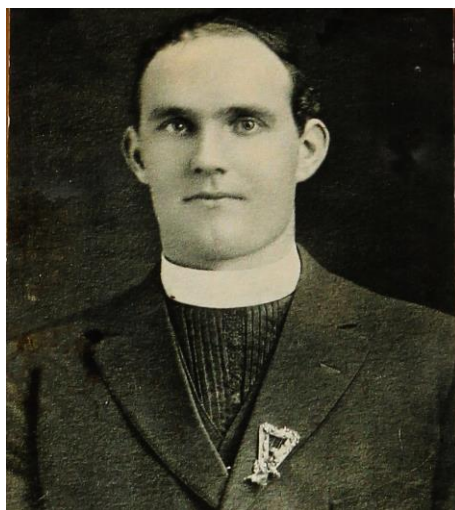
It wasn't until the short two year pastorate of Father Timothy Crowley that we get some idea of the extent of the Folsom parish. He listed in the baptismal register the communities included in the parish: Live Oak, Elk Grove, Galt, Courtland and Walnut Grove. In 1885, Father Michael Gualco, best remembered for his long years in Chico, became pastor of Folsom. It was during his years at Folsom that several changes took place that eventually affected the parish. In 1886 the boundary lines between the San Francisco Archdiocese and the old Diocese of Grass Valley were changed and the See of the diocese was transferred to Sacramento with Bishop Patrick Manogue as the new Bishop of Sacramento. Folsom, therefore, was no longer under San Francisco but now belonged to Sacramento.

In the following year the new Cathedral was finished in Sacramento and the property where St Rose stood was sold to the US Government for a new Post Office. Thus when Bishop Manogue transferred Father Gualco to Chico in 1889 and sent Father James Hunt as the new pastor, it was understood that he was to reside in the parish. Thus it was not until 1890 that this pioneer parish received its first resident priest.

We are told that Folsom was well known for two great social events annually, the St Patrick's Dance held by the Irish in the Odd Fellows Hall, and the rival Portuguese picnic held on Pentecost Sunday. A large parade wound its way from the church after Mass to the picnic grove where they were met by a special train from Sacramento bringing hundreds of other picnic-bound families with baskets packed with lunches. At 4 PM, when the train whistle blew, the picnic began to wind down. Both these events constituted the principal sources of funds for the support of the Folsom parish. In 1900 Father Hunt was succeeded by another priest of the old Grass Valley Diocese, Father Thomas Nugent. When Father Nugent was transferred in 1902 to Red Bluff, Bishop Grace, the new Bishop of Sacramento, felt that Folsom should no longer have a resident pastor. He transferred it to the jurisdiction of Placerville under whose care it remained for 15 years.

In 1917 Bishop Grace again restored Folsom as a parish and assigned Father Michael Cahir as the new resident pastor. It was at this time that the rectory was built. During the two years that Father Cahir was pastor, the great Influenza Pandemic swept across America and the world. While ministering faithfully to the parishioners who had caught the flu, Fr. Cahir contracted the dreaded disease and died from the flu on February 14, 1919. He was succeeded by Father John Ellis who remained for three years. The first resident pastor of long duration was Father Michael Hogan. The succeeding pastors, Patrick Cronin, William O'Toole, James Healy, Walter Albrecht, James O'Dea and William Kinane have had pastorates of such long duration that the six of them have covered half a century in the care of the Folsom parish.

In 1957, the anniversary of the building of the old church, a drive was held and a new church erected to take the place of the old one. Thus the parish of Folsom continues to thrive long after the railroad which brought it to life, the silver mines of Nevada, the Portuguese farms and all the other social changes of more than 120 years have come and gone. The faith in the hearts of the people still lives on.



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Father Michael Cahir died in 1919 From Influenza



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Second Church built across the Street from the First Church



Photo by John E Boll 2012

The Third St John the Baptist Church in East Folsom