

Steeple That Tell History

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If you pause for a moment in downtown Westfield and look around, you'll notice that church steeples fill the sky. It's almost impossible to go far without running into a cross or a statue of a saint, characteristics quite common to these buildings. These churches do more than simply serve as a center for worship, they also tell the history of various immigrant groups that came to Westfield, since most immigrant groups established churches soon after their arrival. With nearly twenty churches all grouped closely, Westfield's churches can serve as a key to understanding the ethnic history of the town, a point that Edward Janes and Roscoe Scott make in their book *Westfield Massachusetts, 1669-1969; the First Three Hundred Years*. The question not many people take the time to stop and ask is why are there so many churches, or more importantly, how did these churches come about?

When Westfield was originally separated from Springfield with the land grant of 1662, the town was told that it was to have a minister within its first three years (it is important to note that at this time, the General Court of Massachusetts required all towns to have an active minister). So, to understand Westfield and its history



requires the understanding of its churches, since it's first church, the First Congregational Church (on Broad Street, facing the green) had its roots almost as far back as Westfield itself. When looking into the ethnic makeup of Westfield through its immigrant populations, the most prominent, those being the Irish, Slovaks, Italians, Lithuanians, Puerto Ricans and Poles, all had an influence on the construction of a church to suit the religious beliefs they brought with them from their homeland culture. These churches serve as physical landmarks that describe the

people that came to inhabit the area. Looking at these buildings we see the history of various individuals coming together to make Westfield their home.

On Bartlett Street stands St. Mary's, a Catholic church originally constructed by the Irish. Plagued by famine in their home country, many Irish immigrants came to the United States (and specifically Westfield) where they worked on constructing the old canal. Nearly 1,000 individuals came between 1840 and 1850, with women primarily doing domestic work, and the men working in railways or factories. The town of Westfield at this time was strongly Protestant. Influenced by the growing Know-Nothing-Party, the anti-Catholic agenda was pushed in town, even through sermons. However, the Irish participation in the Civil War led to the end of this harsh split, and the Irish erected a church on the site of the present St. Mary's. Another Catholic group that came to Westfield were the Italians. Seeking an opportunity for wealth, many worked in the Lane Quarries. Catholicism dominated their lives, yet instead of establishing a church, they met on Sundays with their neighbors, and met in groups. They constructed the statue in front of St. Mary's. To this day their influence can be seen by the various pizzerias in town. Another group that ended up at St. Mary's church were the Puerto Ricans, who mainly labored in tobacco fields, most going home during the colder months. However a few stayed in Westfield, spread out unlike the other ethnic groups. This group dedicated much energy to the celebration of religious events, and after a few years of holding church at Holy Trinity Parish, the group drifted towards the established St. Mary's.



Walking past Main Street, red doors against the white building, known as St. Joseph's Polish National Church, represent the second largest ethnic group that came to Westfield. Consisting of a group of about 5,500, many Poles fled from the injustice of Russia and Austria. During this time, the Polish people faced high



oppression, and their Catholic church, a central aspect of their lives, came under attack. Coming to Westfield, many found jobs as factory workers. As the group established itself, they originally

founded the Holy trinity Polish Roman Catholic Church, and now it's St. Joseph's Polish National Church.

Parkside Academy, on Parkside Avenue, is the place of the former St. Casimir Parish. Suffering under the Russian Czar, Lithuanians left their homes and worked in the factories of Westfield, where they were overjoyed to not be persecuted for their Catholic faith. They established St. Casimir Parish. This church remained until 2003, when it was sold and converted into a school. After St. Casimir Parish was sold, many members went to St. Peter's Church, which can be seen on State Street. This church was originally established by the Slovaks who had been suffering under Hungary.



Hearing of Westfield after coming to the country, they founded the church that had its service in the Slovak language.

All of these histories contribute to the same idea: these people came to Westfield with their cultural practices and beliefs, and established themselves as part of the community by contributing to it. They made Westfield their home. The value of these “old places” (old when one considers when they were established), is that they serve as physical reminders of how far Westfield has come, and how diverse it is. They also challenge us to learn about the history of the place we live. It reminds me of the quote “Old places are like memories you can touch,” which is presented in Tom Mayes article on the importance of memory connected with Old Places. It's one thing to hear about history, but it's another to be able to constantly pass by a reminder of the past that is still in use. It helps show continuity, an aspect essential to a community. With fast paced society bringing forth constant change, consistency of the old buildings and their history offers orientation, as well as the idea that Westfield's past, present, and potential future are all linked. It also helps to remind those in the community of the identity of Westfield. Identity is multidimensional, something the various groups and churches help demonstrate about the town of Westfield.

Sources:

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