

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church

Parish History

The Mount Carmel area of Hamden began to be settled around 1735. It was settled in the traditional way of New England towns: by Congregationalists who had moved north from New Haven seeking better farmland. They founded Mount Carmel Congregational Church, and they named the area Mount Carmel because they thought Sleeping Giant resembled the Mount Carmel of Scripture.

In the late 1820s, the first Irish immigrants arrived in the area. They came to work as laborers on the Farmington Canal, which was opened in 1828. Many of them liked the area and decided to settle here and so brought their families over to join them.

We know that in 1852 there were five Catholic families living in the town of Hamden. In that year, the first Mass in Hamden was celebrated by Fr. Matthew Hart, who was a curate in St. Mary's Church in New Haven. Fr. Hart celebrated that first Mass in the house which stands across the street from the current rectory.

In 1856, the pastor of St. Mary's Church purchased a building from the Axle Company to be used as a church. It was situated where the north parking lot is now. During those years, priests would come from St. Mary's Church in New Haven or Holy Trinity Church in Wallingford to offer Mass.

In 1869, a formal parish was established and named St. Mary's Church. The parish, then, consisted of all of Hamden and most of North Haven. Soon after, a plot of land was purchased on Whitney Avenue to be used as a parish cemetery, also called St. Mary's.

In 1891, a new stone church was built – situated where the shrine to Our Lady of Mount Carmel is today – and renamed Our Lady of Mount Carmel to fit the name given the area by the early Congregationalists. Fr. Hugh Mallon was the first resident pastor of the parish and a few years later organized the Highwood section of Hamden and founded the parish of St. John the Baptist in 1893.

The second pastor of the parish was Fr. William Dullard, who served from 1895 to 1911.

In the late 1800s, Italian immigrants began to move into the Highwood section of town and also settle in the Centerville area. In 1919, St. Ann's parish was founded to serve these Italian immigrants. A few years later in 1922, part of the North Haven area was cut off to begin St. Barnabas parish. Fr. Edward Downes was pastor during these years from 1911 to 1921.

From 1921 to 1932, Fr. Francis May was pastor and in 1928 founded St. Rita Church in Spring Glen.

The fifth pastor of the parish was Fr. William Downey from 1932 to 1938. Both Fr. May and Fr. Downey had been professors at St. Thomas Seminary before becoming pastors at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In 1938, Fr. Downey moved down the road to become pastor of St. Rita Church and was succeeded by Fr. James McCormick who remained as pastor until 1944.

From 1944 to 1954, Msgr. William Daly was pastor and witnessed the growth of the parish, soon overflowing the small stone church. Under Msgr. Daly, there were two assistant pastors: Fr. John Tracey and Fr. Gerald Mullins.

In 1954, Fr. Thomas O'Connell became the eighth pastor of the parish in its hundred-year history. Msgr. Daly also traveled down Whitney Avenue to become pastor of St. Rita Church. Under Fr. O'Connell, the assistants were Fr. John Conley, Fr. Gus Hennessey, Fr. Luke Lauretano, Fr. Cornelius Doherty, Fr. Peter Lanza, and Fr. Charles J. MacDonald.

During Fr. O'Connell's years as pastor, the Sisters of the Atonement arrived in 1955. The new church was built and dedicated in 1959, and two more parishes were established. Ascension Church was formed in 1964 and St. Joan of Arc in 1971. In 1973, the original rectory was demolished, and a new rectory was built.

Fr. O'Connell became Pastor Emeritus in 1976, and the first team pastorate was appointed with Fr. Daniel Johnson from St. Rita Church and Fr. Charles J. MacDonald.

In September of 1990, Fr. Johnson and Fr. MacDonald were transferred to St. George Parish in Guilford and were replaced by Fr. Neil Fitzgerald and Fr. Daniel Sullivan.

On January 1, 1991, Sr. Ann O'Neill, RSM came to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church to develop a Confirmation program for the students in high school. The administration of the Franciscan Sisters of Atonement made a decision to withdraw

the Sisters of the Atonement from Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in June of 1992 because of their shortage of sisters, and Sr. Ann then became the Director of Religious Education for the parish in July of that year.

In 1999, Fr. Neil Fitzgerald retired due to ill health, and Fr. Daniel Sullivan was appointed as Pastor. The Parish Center was then built in 2001.

Fr. Daniel Keefe was appointed to the parish in June of 1999. Then in March 2003, Fr. Keefe was appointed as Pastor of St. Joan of Arc Church in Hamden.

Fr. Ralph Colicchio was appointed to the parish in 2003. In April of 2008, Fr. Ralph Colicchio was appointed as Pastor of St. Michael and St. Anthony's Church in New Haven.

Fr. Faron Calumba was appointed as Parochial Vicar to the parish on April 15, 2008.

On February 21, 2015, Archbishop Leonard Blair sent a letter to men and women of the Archdiocese of Hartford informing them of the inauguration of a process to create and implement an Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan for the purpose of repositioning the Archdiocese, its parishes, schools and institutions, in order to ensure a spiritually rich and vibrant future. After more than two years of research, conversation, and meeting, this plan was made public on May 6, 2017.

The plan, which became effective on June 29, 2017, called for the merging of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church and St. Joan of Arc Church, both of Hamden. These former churches were brought together as one united community, to be named Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish. With this merger came the naming of a new Pastor, Fr. Michael Dolan, and a new Parochial Vicar, Fr. Matthew Gworek.

The story of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish portrays a history of change and adjustment that includes a community which, like that of our nation, is a melting pot of cultures and peoples. The Irish came first, then the Italians. Later, the Polish and Germans moved in from New Haven. In recent years, many have come from Cuba, the Philippines, Vietnam, and many other countries. This diversity and ability to adapt has allowed the Catholic community of Hamden to succeed and blossom for over a century and a half. As the parish continues to do all that it can to share the gospel with the people of Connecticut, it remains excited to grow and build itself up in ways that the first five Catholic families who gathered across the street for Mass in 1852 could never have imagined.