

North Carolina/Brunswick County Catholic Timeline

A brief history of St. Paul the Apostle, Sacred Heart & St. Brendan the Navigator Catholic Parishes

As of March 2020

Compiled by Ed Beckley

First Century, In the Year of Our Lord 30 – 33 A.D. – Jesus Christ ascends body and soul to His Father. His remaining 11 apostles receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and form the original catholic faith. The word catholic means universal. Their directive is to love God and their neighbor and spread the good news of the Kingdom of our loving God throughout the world. The first written record in existence referring to the faith as Catholic stems from Saint Ignatius of Antioch's epistle to the Smyrnaeans late in the century, or early second century. He writes, "Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." The Catholic Church continues today as the original Christian faith, and its liturgy of remembering Christ's birth, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and ascension, which is called the Mass, is very similar to the way the earliest Christians celebrated Jesus in the first century. The highlight of the Mass is the Eucharist, honoring Jesus' command that followers eat of His body and drink of His blood, in memory of Him. Knowing that anything is possible with God, the Catholic priest surrounded by the faithful asks the Father to send His Holy Spirit once again to conceive Jesus by converting simple unleavened bread wafers and wine into Jesus' body and blood, so believers may partake in Jesus' requested memorial.

1526 A.D. – Several hundred Hispanics and African slaves arrive in July on ships at the Cape Fear River from Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, in what may be the first attempted Spanish settlement of North Carolina. They make land at Cape Fear but sailed on and establish a colony they name San Miguel de Guandape but nobody today knows exactly where it is. Reports say one of the ships sinks in the shoals of the river's mouth, and they build another one to replace it. Dominican Priests Antonio Montesino and Anthony de Cervantes offer Mass at the settlement. The colony fails and hundreds die of starvation and disease. They return to Santo Domingo in October.

1700's – The *Catholic News Herald* in 2016 quotes news sources noting Catholicism scarcely exists in the Carolinas, except for a few exiled Acadians who are here at the start of the American Revolution. All religions here except Protestantism are disenfranchised by law, and the NC Constitution declares only Protestants may hold public office. The Spanish return to re-establish Christianity and banish the British at Brunswick Town. They shell the town and come ashore and celebrate Mass. But the British drive them off. Catholics keep their faith so secret they are not even known to one another in Carolina. Maryland being a Catholic colony, Carolina's Catholic colonists are part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Their first Bishop is John Carroll.

Early 1800's – The Irish potato famine and British harassment lead to Irish Catholic immigration to America. Irish stonemasons and tradesmen begin arriving in North Carolina. Pope Pius VII creates the new Diocese of Charleston, SC, comprising the Carolinas and Georgia, because the Baltimore archdiocese feels it can no longer oversee such a distant area effectively.

1821 – May 15: Bishop John England of Cork, Ireland (1786-1842) is the first Bishop of Charleston, SC (1820). Bishop England spends eight months in North Carolina for missionary evangelization, starting in Wilmington. There he organizes a small number of Catholics and procures a lot for building a church. Catholic immigrants of diverse nationalization begin working on construction projects in the state, steadily growing Catholicism during the bishop's tenure. He institutes missionary services to Forts Johnston and Caswell.

1828 – The first Catholic Church in North Carolina is St. John the Evangelist in Washington.

1840 to 1850's – Father Thomas Murphy moves from Fayetteville to Wilmington in 1846 and begins a regular schedule of Masses. He also serves Forts Johnston, Caswell and Fisher, and Confederate troops on Smith Island (Now Bald Head Island). Parishioners include two Generals, Major James Reilly (who commands Fort Fisher, the last stronghold of the Confederacy, when it falls), and the Oak Island lighthouse keeper, who is also a blockade runner during the Civil War. Father James A. Corcoran and other missionaries continue his work after his death during a Yellow Fever epidemic in 1862.

1860 – Aug. 19: Thomas Frederick Price is born in Wilmington. He is the first native North Carolinian Catholic priest. He spreads the Faith to other parts of the State. On 300 acres he buys just outside Raleigh, he establishes the Nazareth orphanage at the close of the 19th Century. He co-founds Maryknoll in 1910, leads missionaries to China in 1918 and dies there the next year. He is a “Servant of God” in the cause for beatification for Sainthood. [An estimate of the state Catholic population is 350 members.](#)

1865 to 1870 -- The first Catholics in rural Brunswick County live in Maaco (formerly Farmer's Turnout). Bishop James Gibbons becomes the state's first apostolic vicar in 1868. [State Catholic population in 1868 is 700 members.](#)

1875 – [State Catholic population 1,600 members.](#)

1880's to 1905 -- Priests from St. Mary's Parish in Wilmington celebrate Masses in the Southport homes of Melarkey, Marron, Shannon and McNeil. Up in Farmer's Turnout (now Maaco), Civil War veteran Major James Reilly provides land for a church, school and cemetery on his plantation. Charleston South Carolina Bishop H.P. Northrop dedicates the first Catholic Church in Brunswick County with the name Saint Paul the Apostle. Father Marck Gross leads the mission, which [ultimately numbers about 50 parishioners.](#) (Church bulletins of Our Lady of the Snows in Elizabethtown in 1954 say that “the colored people who got out the timber” receive as a gift enough lumber to build a church for themselves. As heads of the original families die, and descendants move from the rural area, the church stands idle, empty and soon abandoned. Major Reilly leads efforts to open a Catholic school next to the church in 1888, and it, too, closes, and goes up for sale in 1905. Interestingly, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad passes by the property, with service between Florence and Wilmington. Major Reilly furnishes fuel for the wood-burning locomotives. Reilly learns that U.S. President Grover Cleveland is en-route as part of a hunting trip. He makes arrangements for the train to stop a little longer for the President to speak with Saint Paul's school children and their teacher, Miss Elizabeth Darby. The church also has a cemetery, and several parishioners lie in burial here. Located in the woods off the country road are the old stones, many so worn the dates are not legible. The most recent burial seems to take place in 1954. Meanwhile, internationally, turmoil in the Middle East

results in the arrival of Lebanese migrants to North Carolina, through Ellis Island, New York, greatly increasing North Carolina's Catholic population.

1924 to 1929 – The Diocese of Raleigh begins service to most of the state of North Carolina except western counties served by the Belmont Abbey. Bishop William J. Hafey re-establishes the mission in Maaco, under the direction of Father James McCourt. They somewhat restore the church, but there's a nearby Catholic church in Delco now, so the building is idle once more. Father Frank J. Howard, pastor of the Whiteville (Columbus County) Sacred Heart Church becomes the diocesan missionary priest for Brunswick and Columbus Counties, as a mission of St. Mary's Church in Wilmington. He urges area Catholics to patronize Saint Paul's to no avail. Bishop McGuinness gives permission to dismantle the church and salvage the lumber to help build new churches at Tabor City and Southport. Much of it goes into construction of Sacred Heart Church in Southport. – [State Catholic population 6,534 members.](#)

1929 to 1939 -- Father Frank J. Howard, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Whiteville, founds the mission churches in Southport and Elizabethtown (and Tabor City and Chadburn, which no longer exist). He oversees development of Southport's first Catholic Church. Catholicism celebrates beginnings with the new Sacred Heart mission in Southport (Brunswick County) and Masses at the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp, followed by the first Masses in the then Southport City Hall "Blue Room" upstairs. (The location is now Franklin Square Art Gallery.)

1940 – Lumber from the dismantled St. Paul's Church goes to the building of new churches in Tabor City and Southport. The Whiteville Sacred Heart Parish (Columbus County) population is 114 Catholics. [The Southport Catholic population is 20 members. The Shallotte \(Brunswick County\) Catholic population is 3 members.](#)

1941 – Father Frank Howard oversees the first Sacred Heart mission church in Southport, which opens its doors on a site donated by James "Gus" McNeil, one of the Parish's earliest and dedicated members. It is on the corner of Caswell and West Streets, which today is a private residence. The new church contains much of the lumber, the baptismal font and sill of the old Saint Paul's Church in Maaco. Japan attacks Pearl Harbor and the U.S. enters World War II. Priests serve nine Coast Guard stations and Fort Caswell during the war. [Fewer than 20 families in the church.](#)

1945 – With the end of the world war, Bishop Vincent Waters increases evangelism and missions across the state. Veterans return to their homes and spouses and spark the "Baby Boom." [State Catholic population 12,000.](#)

1950's – Korean War begins. The Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point opens, bringing a number of new Catholics to Sacred Heart. Sacred Heart becomes a mission of St. Mary, Wilmington, 1951-'53; a mission of Our Lady of the Snows, Elizabethtown, 1954-'55; and then back to St. Mary, 1956- '60. The diocese makes these transfers due to the better availability of priests. [State Catholic population 20,060.](#)

1960 to 1979 – There is great industrial development in the state, including the opening of IBM. North Carolina becomes a vacation and retirement destination. Residential neighborhoods spring up. The Diocese of Charlotte begins operations in western North Carolina. The Diocese of Raleigh serves the

eastern part of the state and transfers the Sacred Heart mission one final time to Our Lady of the Snows Church in Elizabethtown. The church finally becomes a canonical parish in 1964 and receives its first full-time pastor, Father Louis E. Morton. Sacred Heart in Southport has [20 families](#) and builds a Parish Hall, a huge undertaking for such a small group. The new Carolina Power and Light plant brings new faces to the church. Catholics in the Shallotte area send a request for a new church to Bishop George Lynch, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Southport. He offers little encouragement, due to a shortage of priests. [State Catholic population 38,490.](#)

1980 – Holden Beach Catholic Sally Mulholland hand-writes a letter to Bishop Joseph Gossman in Raleigh with signatures representing nearly 100 South Brunswick Catholic families asking him to establish a church in the Shallotte area. She advises him of the long distance to other Catholic churches in the area, and that the tourism industry is growing fast here. Bishop Lynch and Father Robert Shea, the Catholic dean of the region, assist their cause. [State Catholic population 46,691.](#)

1982 – Sacred Heart converts its parish hall and rectory into classrooms and a new social hall, and builds a new rectory beside the church. [There are now 120 families registered.](#)

1983 – May 28: Bishop Joseph Gossman makes “South Brunswick County” a mission of Sacred Heart Church in Whiteville. Father Jeffrey Ingham, the pastor of Sacred Heart, celebrates the first Mass for the mission in the cafeteria of the Union Primary School in Shallotte on this day. Father Ingham becomes the diocesan chancellor in June and Father John Richardson succeeds him at Sacred Heart and the mission. Several committees form to operate the mission. The mission's Catholics soon evidence the need for a more permanent location. Father Richardson leases Carter's Trading Center restaurant on Highway 17 for a year, which extends to 20 months. The restaurant serves the mission well for Mass, council meetings, faith formation and fund raising dinners. Mrs. Ruth Beck of Calabash donates an organ. Mrs. Lenora Dawson is most faithful in playing at multiple Masses on the weekends. The fledgling group wastes no time in buying property for a new church. With diocesan permission they purchase 13.2 acres on Highway 17 in Shallotte from Mrs. Clara Russ. Dr. and Mrs. Ronald Glinski of Whiteville donate a house which they move to the new site to serve as the priest's rectory for Father Richardson. Joe and Mary Duffy lead the efforts to refurbish it.

1984 – Aug. 6: In his official capacity as Chancellor of the Diocese of Raleigh, and representing the bishop, Father Jeffrey Ingham writes to Father Richardson, “Shallotte is officially a mission with the name of St. Brendan,” and wishes him well in the new endeavor. Mission Parishioner Rita Canfield writes in ***The Brunswick Free Press*** that Bishop Gossman provides “full mission status under the title of St. Brendan the Navigator.” On Nov. 17, Bishop Gossman visits the mission, says Mass, meets his flock, and offers support and encouragement for future plans, which include the construction of a metal building to serve as church and hall.

1985 – May 4: With construction of the new metal (\$100,000) church building half completed in Shallotte, Father Richardson drives from Sacred Heart in Whiteville to celebrate the first Mass within the structure. The building is near Brunswick Memorial Gardens. He says the mission formed “because of the large number of Catholics moving into the area.” There are now [110 families in the pending Parish](#), and the Sunday Mass attendance soars with summer vacationers. Meanwhile, Sacred Heart in Southport experiences great growth, adding [80 families to its rolls, totaling around 200 registered families, and as many as 600 visitors each Sunday.](#) They buy property on Doshier Cutoff Road for a new

church. [State Catholic population 59,218.](#)

1987 – June 26: Bishop Joseph Gossman confirms in writing to Father Richardson that he is appointed as Pastor of the new St. Brendan the Navigator Catholic Church Parish. Church records show a growing [population of 160 families](#), including 85 men and 145 women. As many as 800 people are attending Mass each week, and probably 70 percent of the Parish are retirees, Father Richardson states. Father Richardson has a hand in naming the church. He is an avid boater and former chaplain for the U.S. Power Squadrons. He discovers the name in the book, “The Brendan Voyage,” by Tim Severin. He was looking for a saint connected with the sea.

1988 to 1991 – St. Brendan reports 107 men and 169 women parishioners, three weekend Masses from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and its first celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the first phase of an expansion project, Sacred Heart Parish builds and dedicates a new, bigger church on Doshier Cutoff Road in 1991, costing around \$650,000. Phase 2 will include a fellowship hall, classrooms and a kitchen. [The church now enjoys around 300 registered families in membership. State Catholic population is now 65,000.](#)

1992 – St. Brendan's new Pastor Father Francis G. Maloney reports to parishioners the phases for construction of a new church, and they develop land adjacent to the metal building church according to their master site plan. The goal is a seating capacity of 526, and space for 68 standees. He surmises this will suffice for 10 to 15 years.

1993 – Feb. 18: Father Maloney reports [605 parishioners](#), of whom about 80 percent are retirees. “Almost all are transplanted Yankees,” and there are very few school-age children. He says, in 1992 weekend Masses cumulatively total 33,433 worshipers, averaging 642 a week. “Compared to 1988, our attendance is up 33 percent.”

1994 – March 13: 200 people attend the groundbreaking for the new 12,000 square foot red brick and wood St. Brendan the Navigator Church, incorporating the 6,000 square foot metal building church structure.

1995 – Jan. 15: The local Press reports the number of Catholics in Brunswick County tripled since Mrs. Sally Mulholland presented a case to Bishop Joseph Gossman for a church in the Shallotte area in 1980. On this day, Bishop Gossman presides over the new St. Brendan Church dedication ceremonies, and more than 600 parishioners attend. The church cost \$1.4 million to construct and furnish. It becomes the largest church in Brunswick County. Father Maloney said more than 1,500 visitors attend each of the four Easter Masses at St. Brendan's, which continues to grow very quickly. The new church regularly accommodates 950 people each Mass. Father Maloney now proclaims 90 percent of the parishioners are retirees who move to the area from northern states. He conservatively estimates the church will need to serve 2,500 weekly attendees by the year 2015.

1998 – Sacred Heart constructs a 44-apartment low-income senior citizen apartment building behind the church. A second phase is for higher income seniors.

1999 – A large number of Hispanic Catholics arrive in North Carolina in the decade, turning to the Church for social and financial support, and religious instruction. [The state Catholic population is now](#)

more than 700,000, half of whom are Hispanic.

2003 – In Southport, Sacred Heart dedicates an expanded church campus to accommodate its daily growing membership. The old church area becomes an all-purpose room. The new worship site displays a beautiful wooden beam ceiling, statues and stained-glass windows. [There are now 700 families, 1,500 individuals and more than 1,000 visitors attending Mass; well beyond the 1991 predictions.](#)

2005 – [Sacred Heart reaches a milestone 1,000 families registered.](#)

2007 to 2010 – St. Brendan's builds its third new sanctuary since its inception. Father Robert Ippolito is Pastor and oversees \$8.5 million in new construction, and 9,000 more square feet, which includes a 75-foot-high bell tower. With 3,800 registered members, and a quarter of them Hispanic, the church offers four weekend Masses, with one of them in Spanish. The summer average weekly attendance is 3,000, and the new church seats 1,100 people. The main entrance features a larger than life statue of Saint Brendan.

2019 – St. Brendan reports 2,216 families, totaling 5,056 registered members; 1,754 being of Hispanic descent. The church and service buildings continue to expand, and now seat 1,275 parishioners and visitors for each of four weekend Masses. These numbers more than double Father Maloney's conservative 1995 estimate for growth. Sacred Heart Church now serves 1,560 families including 2,600 individual members, with a church seating capacity of 750. Both churches also provide the sacraments for thousands more attendees who vacation at the local beaches each year.

Retirees from the northeast U.S. continue to relocate and retire to the beautiful low country and beaches of Brunswick County. This, coupled with an increasing population of Hispanics, continues to grow the ranks of Catholicism in the county. Catholicism is now the second largest religion in the state, after Southern Baptist. [The State Catholic population is now 1,000,000 faithful who in apostolic fashion love God and their neighbors, spread the Good News about Jesus and the kingdom of God, and who celebrate the memory of Our Lord by bringing Him into their lives every week in the Sacrament of The Eucharist.](#)

**We prayerfully remember the priests who dedicated themselves in service as our Pastors
(And apologies for those who served, and for whom we have no records)**

Sacred Heart Church

1941 -- Fr. Frank J. Howard, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Whiteville, in 1939 founds the Southport mission, and now oversees Southport's first Sacred Heart (mission) Church (Caswell and West Streets)

1954 – Fr. Thomas Williams succeeds now Monsignor Howard in Whiteville, and oversees the mission church in Southport

1961 – 1962 – Our Lady of the Snows Parish in Elizabethtown pastors oversee the mission: Frs. Gordon Kendall (1961), Herman Bauschermuller (1962) and Joseph Bumann (1962)

1964 – Sacred Heart becomes a canonical parish and Fr. Louis E. Morton is first pastor

1967 – Fr. Chan H. Chase

1973 – Fr. Allen A. Jacobs
1974 – Fr. James A. Mobbs
1975 – Fr. John G. Obrien
1981 – Bishop George E. Lynch
1985 -- Fr. Frank Moeslein
1987 -- Fr. John Carcich
1992 – Fr. Joseph G. Vetter
1998 -- Fr. Douglas Lawson
2005 -- Fr. Trent Watts
2017 – Fr. J. Victor Gournas
2019 -- Fr. Thanh Nguyen

St. Brendan the Navigator Church

1983 -- Fr. Jeffrey Ingham, Sacred Heart-Whiteville Pastor celebrates 1st Mass at South Brunswick mission at Union Primary School in Shallotte
1984 -- Fr. John Richardson, first resident Pastor
1988 -- Fr. John Williams, temporary administrator
1989 -- Fr. Francis Maloney
1996 -- Fr. Francis Simeone, OSFS
1998 -- Fr. Michael Connolly
2005 -- Fr. Robert F. Ippolito; Fr. Hector LaChapelle, assistant
2012 -- Fr. Ryszard Kolodziej
2018 -- Fr. Mark Betti

St. Paul the Apostle Church

(lumber had also been donated by a parishioner for a blacks-only church at that time)

1870's – Fr. White, Priest in charge of the mission
1880's-- Fr. Mark Gross, Fr. Patrick Moore, Fr. Christopher Dennen, Fr. Burns, Fr. Schall, Fr. Griffin, Fr. Quinn, Fr. William F. O'Brien, Fr. Patrick Marion (and perhaps others)
1929 – Fr. James McCourt, director of the re-established mission

Credits

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Beverly Methvin – St. Brendan Scrap Books

Mary Hart – Early St. Brendan History

Sources:

- The Diocese of Raleigh, NC, Archives (Monsignor Gerald L. Lewis, director)
The Diocese of Charleston, SC, Archives (Brian P. Fahey, archivist)
St. Brendan the Navigator and Sacred Heart Church historical archives
- M.P. Connaughton, Sacred Heart historian/author of *History of Catholicism in Brunswick County*
 - Sandy (Potter) Spencer, author of *A Brief History of Sacred Heart Catholic Church*
 - Mrs. Harvey V. Norris (formerly Mary Applewhite), author of *A history of Catholic Communities in Columbus and Brunswick Counties taken from Our Lady of the Snows Catholic Church, Elizabethtown, 1954 church bulletins*
 - *Wilmington Morning Star*
 - *Catholic News Herald/History of Catholics in the Carolinas*