

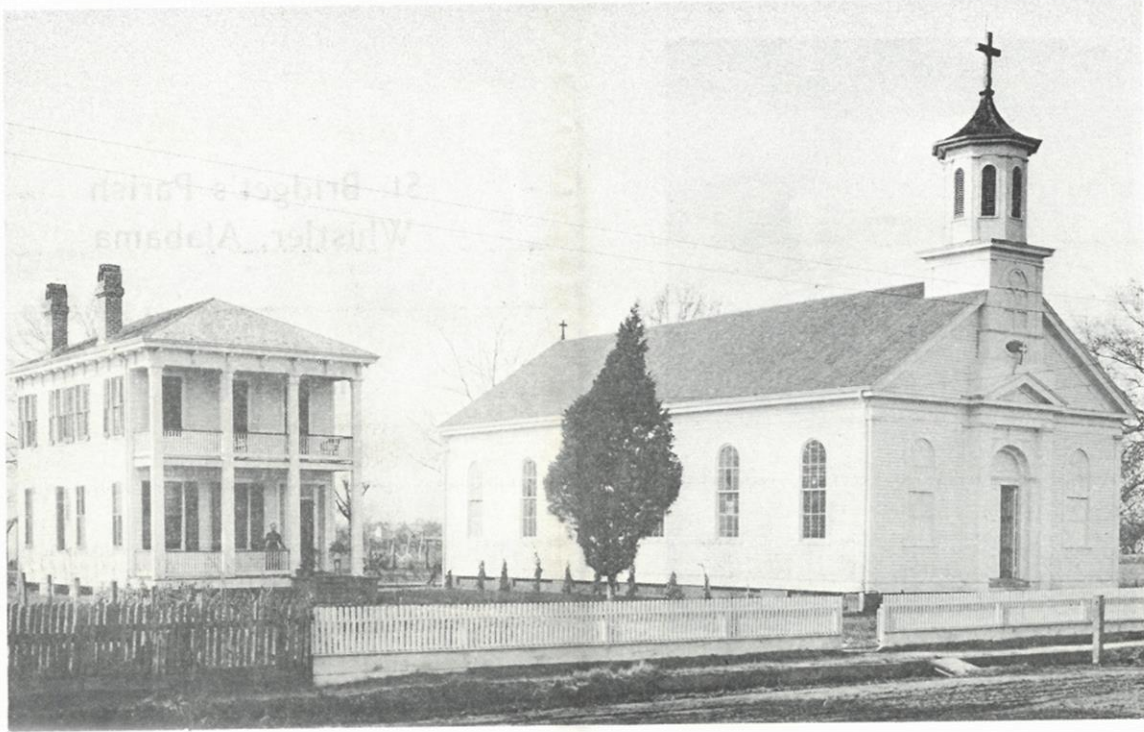
Before we talk about St. Bridget Catholic Church, here is a little background about Whistler, Alabama. "Whistler holds a significant place in the history of Mobile County. It was settled early in the 19th century and became the second largest community in the county by 1860, with a population of 1,509. This growth was because of the opening of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad in 1855, one of the most important ventures in antebellum Alabama, running from Mobile to Cairo, Illinois. In 1851 Jacob Magee donated the land and the new town was named for Washington Jefferson Whistler, a well-known engineer and the older brother of James Abbot McNeill Whistler, the artist. Whistler was a railroad community, complete with locomotive shop, roundhouse, and business district."

(Whistler Historic Association presents nostalgic holiday tour by Jo Anne McKnight, Press-Register Correspondent)



The Machine Shops of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad at Whistler, from an 1856 sketch by William M. Merric. A clerestoried roof, and walls pierced all round by open arches, were standard features of mid-nineteenth century train sheds and foundry building.

Courtesy of The Bienville Historical Society



(Much of the information below was taken from the 1974 Centennial Anniversary Booklet but updated wherever possible. Other sources as well as the 1974 Centennial Anniversary Booklet will be linked in the resources.)

The History of St. Bridget Catholic Church

Long before the turn of the 18th century, when the town of Whistler was still young, the Jesuit fathers came from Spring Hill College to say Mass in the homes of the parishioners in the area. On August 25, 1864, Jacob and Mary Magee deeded a parcel of land on Engine Street (now Main Street) to the second Bishop of Mobile, Bishop John Quinlan, to be used as a place of worship by the Catholics of the area. Three years later the Church of Saint Bridget Catholic Church was dedicated.

The original church and rectory at St. Bridget's were built by the Rev. Edward Kirwan, St. Bridget's first pastor, who was born in County Waterford, Ireland, in 1842. The original church, which was dedicated in 1867, and the rectory, was finished the following year. Unfortunately, both were destroyed by a storm but then rebuilt in 1874. The rectory was then converted into a parish hall in 1953 when the present rectory was built.

The windows were given as memorials by families whose names are, themselves, a part of the history of St. Bridget's. They are:

- | | | |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| ❖ McDonough | ❖ Griffin | ❖ Swan |
| ❖ Hanley | ❖ Sanchez | ❖ Hinchey |
| ❖ McAfee | ❖ Adams | |

One window was donated by Miss Maggie Welch in memory of Monsignor William W. Hume. Monsignor Hume came to St. Bridget's from Westminster Cathedral in England. At the time of his death in 1924, he was the Chancellor of the Archdiocese of New Orleans and secretary to His Grace Archbishop Shaw. (Taken from A Southern Catholic Legacy: Notre Dame Seminary In New Orleans, Louisiana By Rev. Mark S. Raphael, Ph.D.)

There are other numerous memorials in the church commemorating deceased parishioners among them are the Stations of the Cross, many pews, and the organ.

- According to the Centennial Booklet written in 1974, one of the first Organists was Mrs. Fannie Finnegan. She was succeeded by Mrs. May Manley Gurganus, who faithfully served for more than fifty years. Upon Mrs. Gurganus' retirement Miss. Agnes Saxon became the organist. Miss. Saxon was succeeded by Mrs. Wayne Culpepper. Currently the organ is silent and unused.

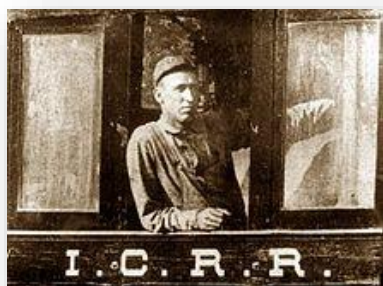
Although the early records of the parish were destroyed along with the original church and rectory, the records of two early baptisms were preserved through sponsors, family and parish priests.

- ❖ On November 1, 1871 John Phillips Rourke was baptized by Father Kirwan (written on the inside cover of the Records book dated 1874 – 1887).
- ❖ On September 2, 1874 John Fallon was baptized by Rev. E. P. Lorigan (rerecorded in 1879, the 15th entry).

The present records begin with the Baptism of Edward Matthew Holland by Rev. Matthew Gardiner on December 25, 1874.

“Six degrees of St. Bridget’s”

- ❖ The eighth recorded baptism at St. Bridget’s is that of Christina Heil in 1873, who was later to marry Mr. Walter Royer. Their three sons, Walter, Joseph, and George became priests in the Mobile Diocese. Monsignor Walter, Monsignor Joseph and Monsignor George Royer were all assigned to be pastors at St. Matthew’s parish in Mobile. Later, Monsignor George Royer was the pastor of Our Lady of the Gulf Catholic Church in Gulf Shores.



- ❖ Casey Jones, the celebrated railroad engineer, was baptized in St. Bridget’s under his Christian name of John Luther Jones, on November 11, 1886. His grandson, Tom McKenzie, returned for the rededication of St. Bridget’s on July 23, 2000.



- ❖ Arthur Edward (Ed) Lilley was baptized at St. Bridget’s on June 30, 1928. He was an altar server in his youth. He went on to earn graduate degrees in physics and Astrophysics from Harvard University. He briefly taught at Yale University but in 1959 was appointed senior professor at Harvard where he remained but stayed very active in the astrophysics/science field. During the Kennedy administration he served on the President’s Advisory Panel evaluating Cold War weapons and nuclear war communications systems. He also served on many advisory panels for the Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation. He was active in the early space program and co-designed equipment for the U.S. planetary mission, the Mariner II space probe, which was sent to Venus in the early 1960’s. He is the author of over a hundred scientific papers, is credited with the discovery of complex molecules in interstellar space, developed a precise radio method to measure distances in the universe and received numerous academic honors and awards. At Harvard he taught a generation of students, lecturing in a very popular course on the science, history, and future threat of nuclear weapons. He passed away on August 1, 2020. He was 92 years old. (Some information was written by the late Shirley Sharik, Whistler Historical Society founder)



❖ The Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland show that three sisters were sent to Whistler in 1874 to conduct the St. Vincent's Academy (located on the corner of Lawrence and Charleston Street in Mobile and is now Prince of Peace Catholic Church); along with Father Guedry, who was there to supervise the arrangements for the opening of the school. The Whistler Town Directory of 1876 lists the Superior as Sister Mary Agnes and gives the location of the convent on the corner of Anderson and Engine Street (which is now Main Street). The Daughters of Charity Provincial Annals list Sr. Mary Agnes Gleason, sister servant, and Sisters Rowan and Rockford accompanied her from the seminary. (Picture is of an example of the habits worn by the Daughters of Charity in the late 1800's.)

- ❖ In the late 1920's St. Peter's church on Fulton Road was a mission of St. Bridget's. This church was located on what is now Dauphin Island Parkway somewhere between the now existing Carmelite Monastery and St. Monica's Church. St. Peter's was demolished in 1928 and the lumber was used to help build Little Flower church, which was dedicated on April, 1929.
- ❖ In the 1940's the people were told that Sunday Masses would be at 7 am in Whistler and 9 am in Chickasaw because the Pastor of St. Bridget's also said Mass in Chickasaw until St. Thomas the Apostle was established in 1947.
- ❖ In 2011 Father William Saucier, pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle, asked to take over St. Bridget's when Father Leo Blanchett retired and is now the pastor for both parishes. In 2021, Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi gave Father Saucier the faculties to celebrate the Latin Mass at St. Bridget's twice a month.

Priests throughout St. Bridget's Years

(Listed from the Archdiocesan Official Catholic Directory)

- Father Edward Kirwan (1868 – 1871)
- Father E.P. Lorigan (1872 – 1875)
- Father Matthew Gardiner (1876 – 1877)
- Father James P. McCafferty (1878 – 1879)
- Father Robert Fullerton (1880)
- Father P. A. O'Reilly (1881 – 1888)
- Father J. T. Cassidy (1889 -1898 was asst. pastor in 1898)
- Father John Kelly (1899 -1902)
- Father R. J. McQuillen (1903 – 1904)
- Father Andrew Sweeney (1905 – 1907)
- Monsignor William Hume (1908 – 1910)
- Father Herman Schmidtner (1911 – 1915)
- Father M. Genet (1916 – 1917)
- Father Patrick O'Connor (1918 – 1923)
- Father Thomas J. Earley (1924)
- (1925)
- Father Thomas Massey (1926)
- Father John Bratton (1927 – 1930)
- Father Francis Doyle (1931 – 1938)
- Father Patrick Littleton (1939 – 1967)
- Father John Robinson (1968 – 1969)
- Father Andrew Stauter (1970 – 1977) & (1985 – 1986) & (1987 – 1996)
- Father J. Cecil Gill (1978 – 1984)
- Father John R. Amos is listed as Administrator, along with Fr. Stauter (1986)
- Father Leo Blanchett (1997 – 2011)
- Father William Saucier (2012 – present)

Two other priests who for many years assisted during the summer months were Father Paul Deleare and Father J. M. McCarty. As well as Father John Lyons, who would step in to help towards the end of Father Leo Blanchett's time at Bridget's.

Visiting Priests who officiated for St. Bridget Sacramentals:

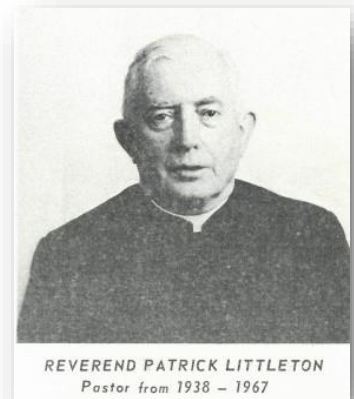
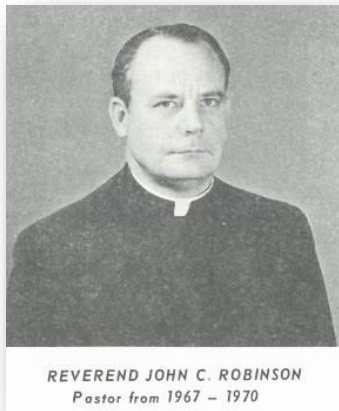
- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Father William John Hamilton | • Father T. P. Cassidy |
| • Father Hugh J. MacDevitt | • Father Angelo Chiarigilione |
| • Father James William Marley | • Father E. LaCombe |
| • Father J. J. Browne | • Father Bernard Plato |
| • Father Charles M. Callion | • Father Leo Mayer |
| • Father J. D. Power | |

- The longest pastorate was that of Father Patrick Littleton who came to St. Bridget's in 1938 and remained for twenty-nine years. During this time the present rectory was built, and the church was air conditioned. Father Littleton was born in Ireland on October 21, 1894 and was ordained on April 18, 1921. Before coming to St. Bridget's, he was assistant at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile and pastor of St. Patrick's in Apalachicola, Florida. Father Littleton retired in 1967 and moved to San Antonio, TX where he lived at Our Lady of Charity Monastery, until his passing in 1976.
- Father John Robinson was pastor from 1967 until 1970. During this time the Diocesan Office for the Propagation of the Faith was located at St. Bridget's Rectory. Father Robinson was born in Birmingham, Alabama on March 27, 1928 and was ordained on May 27, 1954. He was assistant at St. Paul's in Birmingham, assistant at St. Mary's in Mobile, assistant at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church in Birmingham and Religion teacher at McGill Institute of Mobile. Father Robinson served as Pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church in Mobile from 1970 to 1982 and returned there 1986 where he served until he retired in 1998. Father Robinson moved to Birmingham in 1998 to be closer to his family and was in Residence at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church from 1998 until 2016. He also served as Chaplain for the Birmingham Southern University Newman Center; Director of the Archdiocesan Pontifical Missions Society (Propagation of the Faith, Missionary Co-op, Holy Childhood Society) and many other ministries for the Church. He attended the Notre Dame Center for Clergy Education from 1985 to 1986. He passed away on September 28, 2018, he was 90 years old.
- Father Andrew Stauter was born on December 19, 1930 in Mobile, Alabama. He attended St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School and McGill Institute. In 1949 he entered seminary at St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama and went on to complete formation at Mount St. Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He was ordained to the Priesthood of Jesus Christ on May 18, 1957 at the Cathedral-Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Mobile. After ordination, Father Stauter held assignments throughout the territory of the then-Diocese of Mobile, which included all of Alabama and the panhandle of Florida. It is interesting to note that a former pastor of St. Bridget's, Father Francis Doyle, officiated at the marriage of Father Stauter's parents

at St. Vincent's in Mobile. Father Stauter was assigned as Assistant Pastor at St. Stanislaus Parish, Wylam, AL; St. Mary Parish, Ft. Walton Beach, FL; North Alabama Missions, Birmingham, AL; Ozark and Enterprise Missions; and St. Columba Parish, Dothan. He was first named Pastor in 1970 at St. Bridget Parish, Whistler, AL. Father Stauter went on to be Pastor of St. Columba Parish, Dothan; St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Chickasaw; St. Agatha Parish, Bay Minette; and was Chaplain to Allen Memorial Home from 1984-1985, and to Sacred Heart Residence from 1998-2002. Father Stauter retired in 2002. Father Stauter held administrative positions with various Catholic organizations throughout his tenure including Moderator of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Mobile in 1970; Port Chaplain for Mobile Maritime Club in 1972; Faculty of Religion at McGill-Toolen Catholic High School in 1973 and Chaplain to the Legion of Mary Mobile Curia in 1985. He passed away on March 9, 2015.

- Father Leo Blanchett Father was the pastor from 1997 until 2011. In his time at St. Bridget's Fr. Leo worked with members of the parish, their friends and families and the Knights of Columbus of the State of Alabama to restore "this historic church, which had suffered the ravage of time" (~Father Leo's letter, written for the July, 2000 celebration bulletin). Father Leo was born on September 2, 1929 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island to Eugene Rosario Blanchet and Marie Louise Blais Blanchet. He professed religious vows as a brother with the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette on July 2, 1950. He entered La Salette Seminary in Enfield, New Hampshire in 1944 as a high school student and graduated from La Salette Seminary in 1954. From 1959 until 1981, he was assigned to the Philippines as a Missionary of La Salette where he was involved in several apostolates to the poor and disadvantaged. He attended Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana from 1983 until 1986. He was ordained to the priesthood on May 31, 1986 in the Cathedral-Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile. His first assignment was as Parochial Vicar to St. Columba Parish, Dothan, Alabama, from 1986 until 1995. He undertook a sabbatical year from 1995-1996. In 1996, he was named Pastor of St. Bridget Parish in Whistler, AL. He was also the State Chaplain for the Alabama State Council of the Knights of Columbus from 1996 until 2008. He served as Archdiocesan Director for Pontifical Mission Aid Societies from 1996 until his retirement in 2011. His energy was infectious, and a lot

was accomplished before he retired on April 9, 2011. He passed away December 26, 2011.



- As with most established churches in Alabama and Florida from the 1800s until the area divided into dioceses in 1829, the priests at St. Bridget's served an area much larger than the present Whistler-Eight Mile communities.
 - In the records book from the years of 1886 to 1917, the financial, as well as the Confirmation records from both St. Francis Xavier in Toulminville and St. Bridget's were combined. Notes were written on some pages giving many details. For example, "The Bishop (Jeremiah O'Sullivan) visited Whistler and Three Mile Creek on Sunday, September 25, 1887 and preached in both churches."
 - In the Years around 1910 we find the Baptisms of several people living at Citronelle, Lambert Station, Deer Park, Burbank, Oak Grove and Escatawpa. On May 20, 1915 nineteen people were confirmed at St. Thaddeus Church, Escatawpa (Quo Vadis), Alabama.
- During the years St. Bridget's' had several societies and organizations:
 - The Catholic Knights
 - Ladies of America
 - Holy Name Society
 - Altar Society
 - Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary
 - The St. Bridget's Ladies Club



Holy Name Society

Folks from the parish:

- Mrs. “Belle” Ballantine Street was an active member during her years at St. Bridget’s. She taught Catechism and prepared many children for their First Communion, Confirmation and was instrumental in overseeing the procession to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- The oldest member of St. Bridget’s parish, as of the 1974 Booklet compiled for the Centennial, was Mrs. May “Daisy” Hallett McDonough who was quite active in her nineties. She and her husband, Patrick Anthony McDonough (who was Confirmed at Bridget’s in 1893), were married at St. Bridget’s on June 28, 1905. She passed away in 1982, she was 101 years old.
- One of Whistler’s long-time postmasters from the 1930’s was William Henry McDonough. He was married to Valerie Bitzer McDonough, they were lifelong members of St. Bridget’s, until he passed away. Valerie was the president of St. Bridget’s Altar Society for many years before moving to Mobile.

- Mrs. Ethel Shearer moved into the two-room house, located on the south side of St. Bridget's Parish Hall. She was known for her yummy baked goods, being a devout Catholic and devoted mother. Ethel Shearer's husband, Robert, died when she was 28 years old. This left her to raise their four children alone. To support her family, she worked at the International Paper Company's Mobile Mill. The job required her to work different shifts and with no one to help care for the children in the evenings and at nights she had no other alternative than to place them, temporarily, in St. Mary's home. She worked at International Paper Mill for twenty-five years. Throughout her remaining years she was an active member of St. Bridget's. Giving of her time to the Ladies Club, Vacation Bible School and whatever else she was called on to do. When her son died during World War II, she also belonged to the Gold Star Club. Mrs. Ethel lived in her little cottage until her health no longer allowed her to do so. After her death the family rented out the house until her son-in-law gave the house to St. Bridget's. The house sat empty until 1986 when someone from Catholic Charities asked about the possibility of setting up something in the area where the needy in the community could be ministered to, both physically and spiritually. Fr. Stauter, pastor at the time, said that this was a great idea, if they kept up with the expenses. This was how "Mrs. Ethel Shearer's house" became known as the "Thrift Shop." The "Thrift Shop" was very successful but not just monetarily. The shop made enough to make repairs and pay monthly bills, but its true success was how the "The ladies of the Thrift Shop," Evelyn and Patricia Echkoff and Rose Lofton, affected each and every person that visited the shop. Three years after opening, due to illness and changes in circumstances, the three ladies had to pass the torch off to other ladies from the parish. But over time the "thrift shop" had to close and it sat empty once more. In 1998, due to Fr. Leo Blanchett's energizing desire to breathe new life into St. Bridget's parish and property, the little house was going to get a face lift too. The plan was to update the little house so that it could be used as a guest house and so, the "Thrift Shop," became the "Ethel Shearer Guest House." Currently, the little house has gone through another transformation, has been updated and is now being offered to any retired priests who need a place to go.

The history of any parish is above all else the history of those who through it find their way to God and secure the salvation of their souls. Through the past years, St. Bridget's church has enriched the Catholic and Civic life of the Mobile area in its sons and daughters in whom it has nurtured faith, formed character, and fostered learning. Parishioners on the other hand have been steadfast in their loyalty to their parish. The manner is remarkable in which certain families have taken up the burden of service generation after generation and continued this responsibility as a privilege.

If you would like to submit information (pictures, sacramental documents, etc.) pertaining to the history of St. Bridget Catholic Church in Whistler please email us: development@stthomastheapostleatholicchurch.com or contact us at 251-452-9837.

Pictures from the Past





FIRST COMMUNION – 1922



Wedding ceremony, 1950

LECTURE

FOR THE BENEFIT OF
ST. BRIDGET'S CHURCH,
WHISTLER.

By Rev. Father Kirwan of St. Patrick's Church,

ON THE LIFE OF

DANIEL O'CONNELL,

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23, 1880.

At 8 P. M.

Admission 25 cents.

A Special Train will leave foot of Beauregard St. at half-past 7, returning after the Lecture.

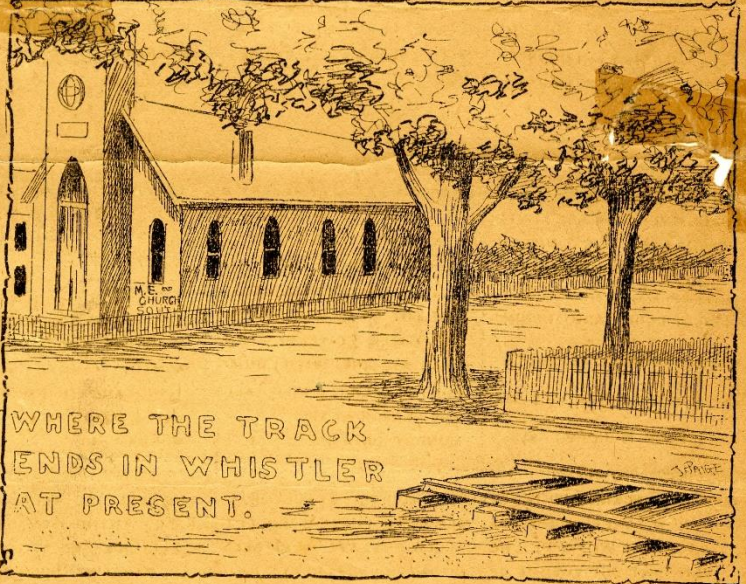
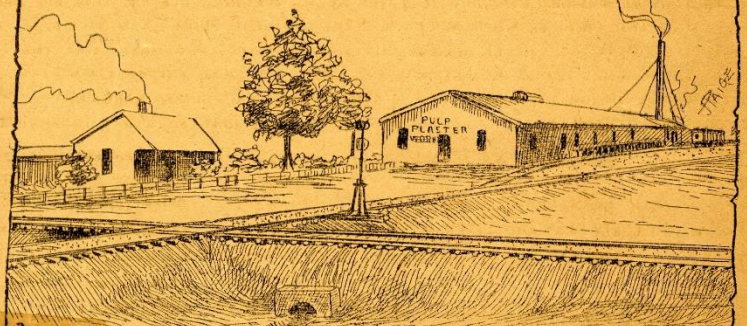


100th Anniversary
Saint Bridget's Catholic Church
1874-1974

THE MOBILE-WHISTLER STREET CAR LINE IS NEARLY COMPLETED

Will Probably be in Operation This Week for Passengers--Views of the Track at Pritchards and Also Point at Which the Whistler Track Ends--Some of the Benefits to Accrue From the Operation of the Line.

WHERE THE STREET CAR TRACK
CROSSES THE M.&O.R.R.
AT PRITCHARDS.



WHERE THE TRACK
ENDS IN WHISTLER
AT PRESENT.

The Mobile-Whistler street car line will probably be in operation this week for passengers.

An item representative made a trip over the line yesterday, and found it a delightful ride. The track will be a fast one, there being many long stretches of straight, level roadbed. The country passed through, especially in Touminville and north of there, is very pretty and refreshing. In one place the line runs between a bunch of great overhanging trees at the foot of a hill which is quite picturesque.

The track crosses the Mobile and Ohio Railroad, in Pritchard's, just to the north of the Pulp Plaster Factory, and runs from there to Whistler on the east side of the Mobile and Ohio. The track from Pritchard's to Whistler is almost a straight line, and is quite level, and splendid speed can be made. At present the line ends close to the Methodist Church in Whistler. The Whistlerites are anxiously waiting for the time when they can avail themselves of the advantages to be derived from this line. The school

children attending the Mobile schools will be greatly benefited by being able to make the trip to and from Mobile with ease and at convenient times. The theatre going people will also be able to attend theatres and return home the same night, while those wishing to attend the Mobile churches on Sunday will be able to do so. This line is certainly a great boon to Mobile, Pritchard's, Whistler and all the country between these places and the Mobile Light and Railroad Company is to be congratulated.



Resources:

- The 1974 St. Bridget's Parish Centennial booklet
- Towns along the Mobile and Ohio Railroad (M&O), provided by the University of South Alabama
- Alabama Department of Archives & History: Picture of students from St. Vincent's Academy in the 1800's
- <https://daughtersofcharity.org/our-legacy/>
- Write up about Edward Lilley by the American Astronomical Society
- National Railroad Museum's write up about Casey Jones
- Archdiocese of Mobile, History
- The History of St. Bridget's Catholic Church's "Ethel Shearer Guest Cottage" by Linda B. Jewell