St. Bridget Parish, Whislter

On October 17, 1974, St. Bridget's celebrated its Centennial at a Mass at 3:00 o'clock p.m., celebrated by Bishop John L. May and concelebrated by Father John Robinson, former pastor and Father Andrew Stauter, then pastor of St. Bridget's. In connection with this celebration, the following history was written by Margaret Hanley.

Long before the turn of the century when the town of Whistler was still young Jesuit Fathers came from Spring Hill College and said Mass in homes of parishioners.

On August 25, 1864, Jacob Magee and his wife, Mary Magee, deeded to Bishop John Quinlan, second Bishop of Mobile, a parcel of land on Engine Street (now Main Street) to be used as a place of worship by Catholics of the area. Three years later the Church of St. Bridget of Ireland was dedicated on this property by Bishop John Quinlan.

The first pastor of St. Bridget's was Father Edward Kirwan. Born in County Waterford, Ireland, in 1842, young Kirwan was among the first students to volunteer for work in the Diocese of Mobile as the result of a personal appeal by Bishop Quinlan in 1860.

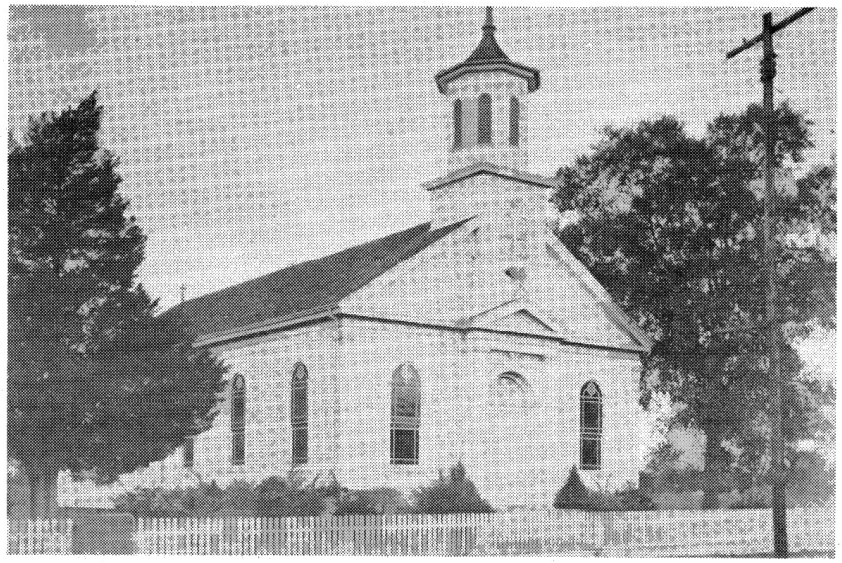
The bishop and a group of ten seminarians sailed for New York from Queentown in October, 1860. Kirwan entered Mount St. Mary's College at Emmitsburg, Maryland and remained there until completion of his classical and theological studies in 1866. Arriving in Mobile during the summer of that year, he was ordained a priest by Bishop Quinlan on August 30.

While residing at the Cathedral the newly-ordained priest served Catholics in the then distant settlements of Whistler and Toulminville. Father Kirwan and his people cooperated in a zealous program of organization. St. Bridget's Church in Whistler was dedicated in 1867, that of St. Francis Xavier at Toulminville in 1868, and the following year saw a rectory ready for occupancy in Whistler.

The original church and rectory built by Father Kirwan were destroyed by a storm and were rebuilt in 1874. The rectory was converted into a parish hall in 1953 when the present rectory was built. The present St. Bridget Church is built, with a gabled roof and front bell tower or steeple. The Roman type architecture of the church has many interesting features that express the nobility of its structure, with wide double doors beneath a cross and small windows.

The interior of the Church is simple, but beautiful and leaves a peaceful effect upon all who come to worship. Although a new Altar of Sacrifice has been added to accommodate the liturgical changes, much of the original interior has remained. The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle of the center Altar.

There is a wide chancel and altar railing which extends the full width of the church and in front of the altars of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph on either side. The gabled roof or ceiling is supported by columns on either side of the main aisle. There is a narrow aisle on either side next to the wall and windows are of stained glass. The windows were given as memorials by families whose names are themselves part of the history of St. Bridget's: McDonough, Hanley, McAfee, Griffin, Sanchez, Adams, Swan, and Hinchey.



St. Bridget Church

There is a window in memory of Monsignor William W. Hume donated by the late Miss Maggie Welch.

There are numerous memorials in the church commemorating deceased parishioners, among them an organ in memory of Miss Maggie McDonough.

One of the first organists was Mrs. Fannie Finnegan. She was succeeded by Mrs. May Manley Gurganus who faithfully served more than fifty years. Upon her retirement Miss Agnes Saxon took over the duties. The most recent organist is Mrs. Helen Sylvester.

Although early records of the parish were destroyed along with the original church and rectory, records of two early baptisms were preserved. On December 1, 1871, John Phillip Rourke was baptized by Father Kirwan. On September 2, 1874, John Fallon was baptized by Father E. P. Lorigan. Present records begin with the baptism of Edward Matthew Holland by Father Matthew Gardiner on December 25, 1874.

It is interesting that the eighth recorded baptism is that of Christina Heil, later to marry Mr. Walter Royer. Their three sons, Walter, Joseph and George became priests in the Mobile Diocese.

Thomas P. McArdle, father of Monsignor Joseph McArdle was baptized at St. Bridget's.

John R. Courtney, father of Father James W. Courtney, S.J., deceased, was baptized at St. Bridget's.

Jennie McHugh and Patrick Burns, great grandparents of Father Adrian Cook, were married at St. Bridget's.

Casey Jones, celebrated railroad engineer, was baptized in St. Bridget's under his christian name of John Jones, on November 11, 1886.

The Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland, show that three Sisters were sent to Whistler in 1874 to conduct St. Vincent's 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.

Father James Marley, pastor of St. Bridget's at the time, became a victim of the dreaded yellow fever and died from its effects.

One other priest, Father Francis Doyle, is known to have died while pastor at St. Bridget's.

A total of thirty-one priests have served the people of St. Bridget's parish over the years: Fathers Edward Kirwan, E.P. Lorigan, Matthew Gardiner, William John Hamilton, Hugh J. MacDevitt, James William Marley, J.J. Browne, Charles M. Callion, Robert Fullerton, J.D. Power, P.A. O'Reilly, J.T. Cassidy, T.P. Cassidy, Angelo Chiarigilione, John Kelly, R.J. McQuillen, Andrew Sweeney, William Hume (later Msgr.), Herman Schmidtner, M. Genet, Patrick O'Connor, E. LaCombe, Thomas Massey, Bernard Plato, John Bratton, Leo Mayer, Francis Doyle, Patrick Littleton, John Robinson, Andrew Stauter and Joseph C. Gill.

The longest pastorate was that of Father Patrick Littleton who came to St. Bridget in 1938 and remained for twenty-nine years. During this time the present rectory was built and the Church was air conditioned.

In the 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.

Mrs. Belle Ballentine Street will always be remembered for her many years of teaching Catechism and preparing children for First Communion, Confirmation and processions in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The oldest member of St. Bridget's Parish is Mrs. May "Daisy" McDonough, who is quite active for her 98 years. It is in this church that May Hallett and Patrick McDonough were married on June 28, 1905.

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 century, 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 continue this responsibility as a privilege.