

Tracy City's Roman Catholic Church

By Jackie Layne Partin (2018)

With Contributions from the Diocese of Nashville Archives

Contributor, Barbara Baltz

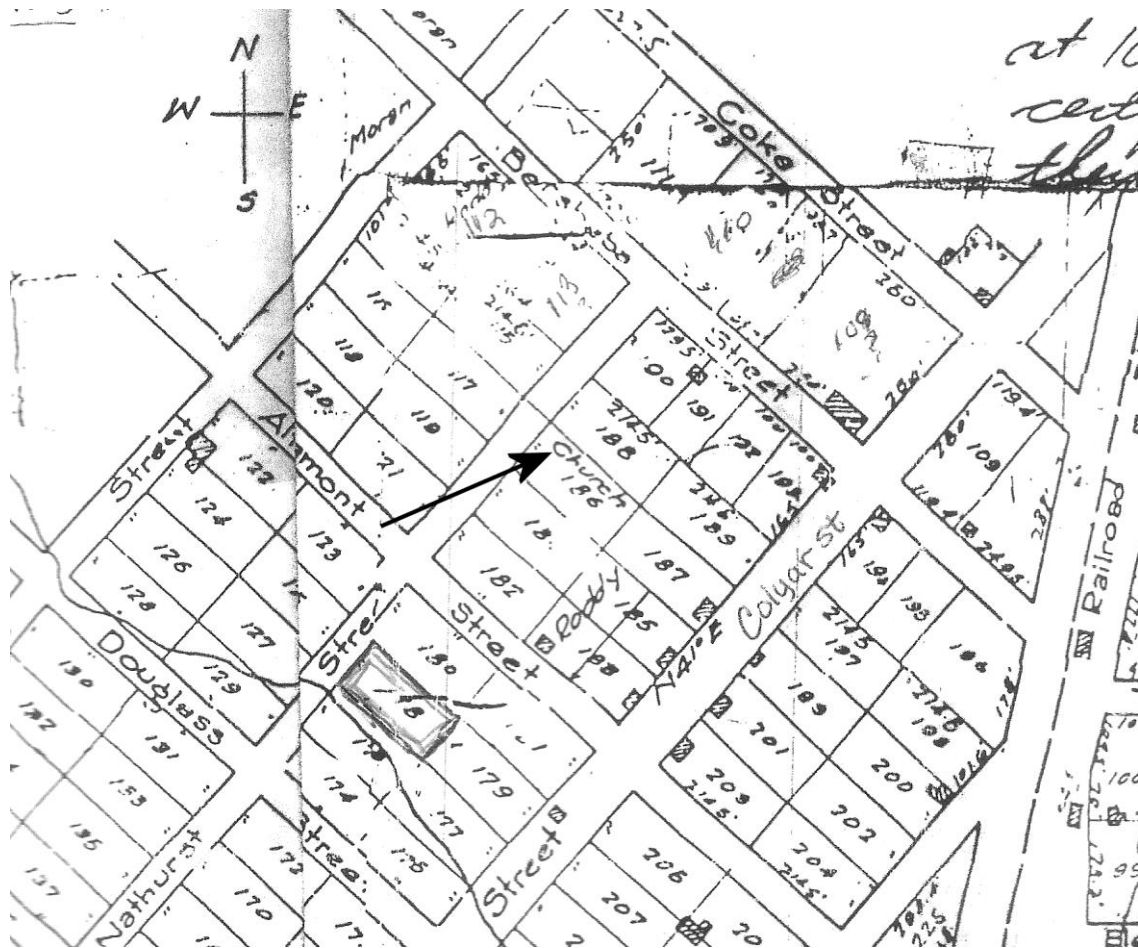
Some years ago, while researching for a short story on the now non-existent Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Tracy City, I stumbled upon a few hints that there was also a Catholic Church in this town. Questions were asked, but no one seemed to know about such a group in the area. The desire, to find out if I was right, spurred me to search more diligently for proof.

The following excerpts shoved me off, much like my husband did for one of our sons when he left his ramp during a soap box derby in the country of Fiji in 1975. Of course, my journey was much safer than my son's, but we both got the job done, somewhat. While I was writing about Tracy City's Methodist Episcopal Church, South, originally called Teresa's Chapel, I found an interesting note in Lou (Shook) Woodlee's written memories, "*I think the **Catholic** and Methodist churches were the first built.*" Since the town was given the name Tracy City around **1857**, I believed that many wives of the coal mine immigrants to our little village would be looking for church spires when they stepped off the train that year, but they found none. They sat on logs at a sawmill with opened Bibles just long enough to get organized in their thoughts; then they started their drive to see church spires reaching for Heaven.

A group of men under the leadership of Arthur St. Clair Colyar left Nashville by train with the Sewanee mines at Tracy City as their destination. From the *Republican Banner*, **Mar. 20, 1869**, I transcribed the following excerpt from an article, "*TRACY CITY—The settlement which the Tracy City mines have called into existence consists of some 700 inhabitants, 120 of whom are miners...There is in the village a Methodist and **Roman Catholic Church** in the course of erection, and a flourishing school of about sixty scholars.*" This sounded great, for some of Lou Woodlee's ancestors had arrived a few years earlier. Now a date, **1869**, of a church building being prepared for the Catholic believers tantalized me all the more. Actually in **1867**, the Official Catholic Directory mentioned Tracy City as a mission station, so believers were present before the carpenters started the building on town Lot #186 on Nathurst Street. Because of information I found in old deeds, one might get the idea that someone in the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company may well have been eager to have a place to worship, so from the beginning of the erection of church spires and belfries, a piece of land commodious for a church

building was set aside allowing only the surface rights to the land as was the way all deeds were written by the company.

Below, the 1873 map of the town shows us just where the church lot was. Strangely, there is no small building inserted as shown in other lots. This does not correspond with the 1869 sighting of a building being erected, unless it was built on a different site.



Town Lot # 186 Where the Catholic Building Had Already Been Erected in 1873

On Dec. 24, 1881 in Grundy County, we find a deed with the Grantor being the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company and the "Rt. Rev. Richard Sconnell" being the grantee, one-dollar cost. There is no mention of a building on the lot or any other appurtenances. However, we must remember that in 1869, a traveler in the area wrote that a Catholic building was being erected. Then in the *Nashville American* news of April 19, 1882, we read the following: "Tuesday evening's train landed at Tracy City quite a

*number of lawyers and litigants on their way to attend Chancery Court at Altamont. There was quite a rush from the train to the livery stable of Messrs. Hobbs. One buggy and a two-horse farm wagon were secured, the buggy taking the lead by half an hour. The writer arrived in time to secure a seat in a chair in the rear end of the wagon by turning his back upon the legal fraternity...On the return trip we took a look over Tracy City, and report it building up. Several residences and a **Catholic Church are in course of erection**, and the round house and shops will soon be completed. The running condition of the railroad is said to be better than ever before; it is now being ballasted with stone."*

Here again we can only speculate as to what exactly went on with the church in **1867, 1869, 1873, 1881** and **1882**. What kind of building did the travelers see in **1869** as compared to what was seen in **1881**? Did the Catholics and the Methodist sit on logs together in the sawmill yard waiting until their buildings were completed? Did the Catholics' original building burn, then instantly rebuilt? One thing that might help us visualize the church buildings in the **1860s** here on this plateau is the realization that a one-room log building was the norm for some years. Then later the logs were framed with lapboard, actually forming a welcoming, village church building, often sparkling with whitewash.

Let's see what "Rt. Rev. Richard Sconnell" did with Lot #186. A little over six months later on **July 9, 1882**, he handed it off to "Rt. Rev. Bishop Joseph Rademacher" for the sum of two dollars. A Grundy County deed lets us know this. On **Sept. 5, 1894**, old #186 was handed over for \$2.00 to Bishop Thomas Sebastian Byrne. His deed has the words, "*No Tax-Church*," written on the side of the page. Was there a building on the lot then? My search for the transfer of the lot from Byrne to whom is still ongoing.

However, in **December 1984**, the lot was in the hands of grantor, Phyllis J. Lockhart, widow of Milton Lockhart, Jr.; she sold the lot for \$100.00 to Edista Hall. At present time (**2018**), Christy R. Fults is owner of the old Catholic Chapel lot. Even though so many years have given us no information, or I haven't yet found it yet, it does appear that the planned new mission of **1937**, spoken of later, just never came to fruition.

Now let's inject some life into this church by acknowledging a few of the local people who probably were members. From the **1885** letter below it appears that Mrs. Julia Elizabeth Bolton, wife of William Harrison Bolton, was an important person in the Tracy City mission/parish. (This would probably be a good place to insert the fact that I am not a Catholic, nor do I understand the set up of the Catholic Church, so forgive

me if I use the wrong wording as I write about this moment in Grundy County, Tennessee's history.)



This is possibly a photo of the Catholic Chapel. Feel free to correct me on this photo or any other information in this article. Also, if you know of families who embraced the Catholic faith and worshipped here at Tracy City, let me hear from you.

Nashville, Aug. 7/85
Mrs. Julia E. Bolton,
Dear Madam:
A priest will come to Tracy City next Saturday, the 15th inst., and hold services for the Catholics of Tracy City and vicinity on Sunday, the 16th inst. As he will be in Manchester on the 15th, the feast of the Assumption, he will have to take the evening train, and arrive at Tracy City at 9:05 P. M. As he is a complete stranger, some body ought by all means to meet him at the Depot. I would like to know at once whether you have rec'd my letter, and also as far as you know, what articles for Divine Service there are in your church.

With best wishes
Yours sincerely in Christ
+ Jos. Radtke, Sacer
P.S. The priest's name is
Joseph J. Murray

The following is a transcription of the letter:

Nashville, August 7, 1885

Mrs. Julia E. Bolton,

Dear Madam,

A priest will come to Tracy City next Saturday, the 15th inst., and hold services for the Catholics of Tracy City and vicinity on Sunday, the 16th inst. As he will be in Manchester on the 15th, the feast of the Assumption, he will have to take the evening train, and arrive at Tracy City at 9:05 PM. As he is a complete stranger, some body ought by all means to meet him at the Depot. I would like to know at once whether you have received my letter, and also as far as you know what Articles for Divine Service there are in your church.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Joseph Rademacher

Bp N

(Bishop of Nashville)

P. S. The priest's name is

Joseph F. Murray

We learn from this letter alone that there were a good number of Catholics in town, and they did seem to be a mission getting services whenever possible. By Julia Elizabeth (Coker) Bolton doing the correspondence with the Nashville Diocese, makes me wonder if her husband William H. Bolton was a Catholic by faith. Julia's husband accidentally met his death on **March 1, 1897** as we read in the *Nashville American* on Mar. 6, 1897 – "*The tragic death of John Bolton, engineer of the Tracy Branch of the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad, at Tracy City, on Monday morning caused general regret in this place. He was climbing into the cab to make the usual run to Cowan, when he slipped and fell under the wheels. Death was instantaneous. Mr. Bolton has been on this line over twenty years. Quiet and efficient, he had the respect of all who knew him. A number of the people of this place attended the burial services on Wednesday.*" I do not know why the name "John Bolton" was used, possibly a misprint or maybe William had a nickname. We know that this is the right man because Julia sued the railroad with the lawsuit going on for several years, even moving to Nashville to help her cause. Mr. Bolton is buried in the Tracy City Cemetery.

Another letter to Julia was written on **Sept. 5, 1890.**

Dear Madam,

In answer to your kind inquiry about Father Teifel's condition, I hasten to say that he is improving – slowly but, I think, surely. He was for several weeks in a great danger, but I hope and trust that the worst is over. I shall inform him this afternoon or tomorrow evening that you have inquired about him. I am sure he will feel pleased and thankful. You will have services on the 3rd Sunday of this month, that is on the 21st, and I hope regularly hereafter on every third Sunday.

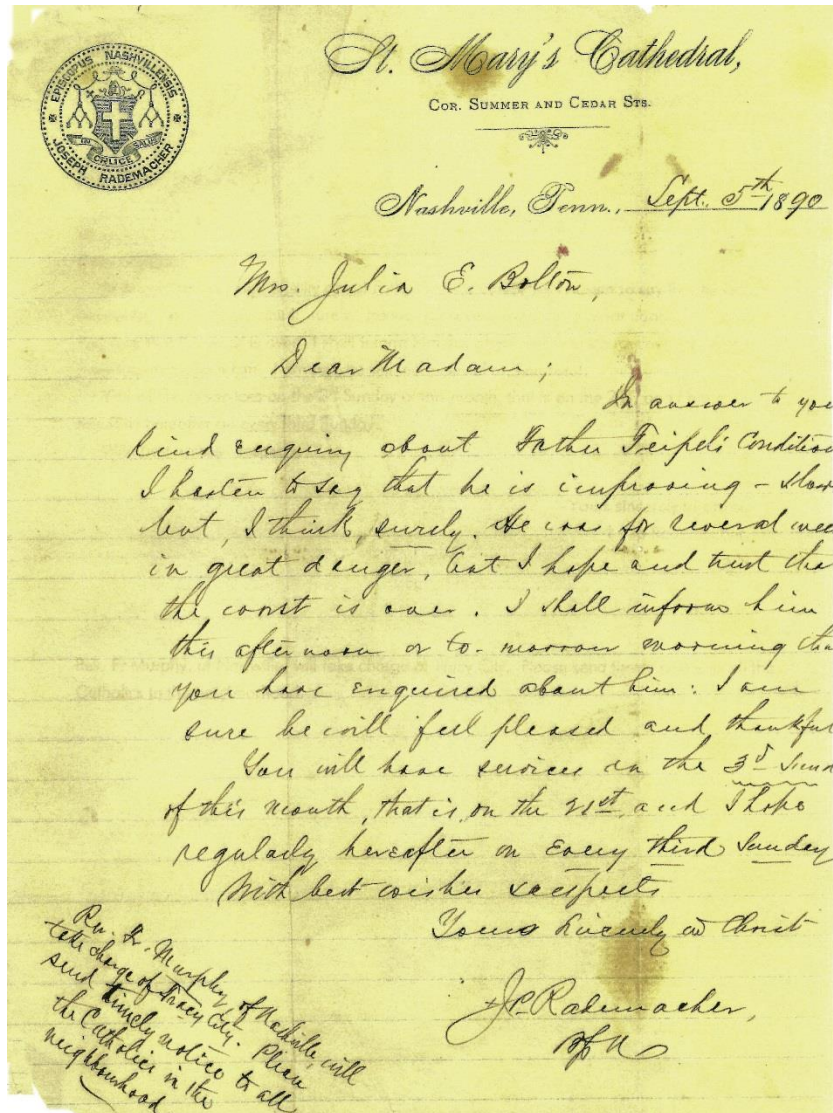
With best respects,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Jp Rademacher, Bp N

Rev. Fr Murphy, of Nashville, will take charge of Tracy City. Please send timely notice to all the Catholics in the neighborhood.

If we had this letter in our hands, we would be holding a letter that is one hundred twenty-eight years old. A sweet piece of our local history.



In the **1893** issues of the *Tracy City News*, the Catholic Church was included in the Church Directory along with the M. E. Church, South; Cumberland Presbyterian Church; Church of Christ, aka Christian Church; Methodists Episcopal Church (North); Episcopal Church; Missionary Baptists and the Congregational Methodist Church. There they are – those tall church spires and ringing bells.

The earliest Grundy County newspapers are just not with us anymore, only scant articles going back to **1888**. However, in a **1904** issue of *Mrs. Grundy*, we read in the Church Directory, "**Roman Catholic** – Services the fourth Sunday in each month. Mass and sermons 10 a. m. Sermon and benedictions 8 p. m. Sunday school every Sunday. Paulist Fathers, of Hundred Oaks, Winchester, in charge." Again in **1905**, "Right Rev. Thos. Sebastain Byrne, of Nashville, will administer the Sacrament of Confirmation in the **Catholic Church** here, Saturday morning, at 10 o'clock. The Paulist Fathers, of Winchester, extend a cordial invitation to all their friends to be present on this occasion." The Roman Catholic Church continued to be on the church directory of **1911**. Some weeks the newspaper excluded the whole directory, but it reappeared on **August 1, 1916**, with some church names missing including the Roman Catholic Church. This may give us a hint as to something having happened to the actual building on Lot #186. Since we will find out later that the chapel was no longer there, there were the possibilities that fire destroyed it, or termination of aid from the Paulist Fathers of Winchester because of disinterest by members, or just the fact that all members died out through the years.

The *Nashville American* published on **Nov. 29, 1899**, an article about a wedding in the Tracy City Catholic Church: "Miss Mary Smith, of Monteagle, and John Ross, of Kansas, were married Sunday morning by Rev. Father Van Ree, of Winchester. The ceremony took place during the regular morning service in the **Catholic Church at Tracy City**. The bride's parents, brothers and sisters were all present. On Monday Mrs. Smith gave a family dinner in honor of the marriage, and in the evening a bridal reception, which was attended by a large number of friends. The happy couple left to-day for their new home near Topeka, Kan. A party of ladies and gentlemen gathered at the depot to say good by and shower them with rice and good wishes."

In **December 1902**, the *Sequatchie News* on the Tracy City social page recorded that Thomas Geary, just after services at the **Catholic church** and while shutting the windows, was stricken with paralysis and fell as though dead, but recovered and would probably get well.

On **June 12, 1913**, *The Mountain Herald* made this sad announcement, "John Flannigan, Sr., died at his home here on last Friday and was buried Saturday at the City

Cemetery. *Funeral services were conducted at the **Catholic Church** by Father Duffy. Mr. Flanagan was 85 years old and was one of our oldest and best respected citizens."* Mr. Flannagan was born in Ireland and died **June 5, 1913**. He was buried in the Tracy City Cemetery.

On **Dec. 4, 1919**, Thomas Jubilee "Cripes" Geary died. In the *Sequatchie News* a short article is quoted here: *Tracy City, Dec. 15 – Thomas Geary died at his home in the Orange Hill district of Grundy county, Dec. 4, aged 80 years. He was born in Ireland. He was a veteran of the Civil War, fighting on the Union side. While soldiering he met a Miss Dixon of Sequatchie Valley, to whom he was married after the war. He is survived by his wife and seven children: Donald, of Oklahoma; Joe, of Guild, Tenn.; William, Thomas, Lee, Miss Rebecca and Mrs. Sartain, of this city. He was a member of the **Catholic Church**. This obituary announcement makes no mention of Mr. Geary's funeral being held in the Chapel.*

We may have found a few surnames who worshipped at the church building, i.e., Bolton, Flannigan, Geary, and Smith or Ross. No doubt there were many more, but these seem to be obvious.

Faith leads me to believe that there was a Catholic Church building in Tracy City, but even the Catholic archives cannot give me proof of anything more than possibly a small mission. So we amble forward in history looking under every rock for any notes to help us in our searches. On December **10, 1931**, the Diocese of Nashville wrote a letter to Mr. J. E. Wilson, Land Agent, Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Co., Whitwell, Tennessee. The transcription follows:

Dear Sir,

*Mr. A. D. Lanier, Title Agent for your Company has written to Right Reverend Alphonse J. Smith, D. D., Catholic Bishop of Tennessee, regarding the property on which the **Catholic Chapel** formerly stood. Before putting a price on this lot, the Bishop will consult with the Reverend Francis R. McNab, C. S. P., of Winchester, who has Tracy City in his charge. Immediately on hearing from Father McNab the Bishop will write you.*

Very truly yours,

Vicar General

On the same day the Vicar General wrote the following letter:

Very Rev. Francis R. McNab, C. S. P.,

Hundred Oaks,

Winchester, Tennessee.

Dear Father McNab,

The Right Reverend Bishop has received the enclosed letter and before giving a definite answer he would appreciate your advice in the matter.

*The property in Tracy City was given as a chapel site. The Bishop has the surface rights only to the land, and as there seems to be no need to retain it, he is willing to **sell the lot**. If it isn't too much trouble, would you mind getting in touch at our earliest with someone informed on conditions in Tracy City and let the Bishop know what price should be put on the property?*

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Vicar General

What a wonderful nightmare for researchers! At different points, we have Catholics meeting and getting messages concerning upcoming events; then we have no building and find ourselves back to an empty lot. And if that doesn't confuse the reader, then read the following letter written six years after the discussion of selling lot #186.

September 9, 1937

The Most Rev. William L. Adrian, D. D.

328 Fifth Avenue, N.

Nashville, Tennessee

Your Excellency:

We are very grateful for the letter you wrote to Father Harney some few days ago with regard to our Trailer Chapel work in the Diocese of Nashville.

*Our Trailer Chapel is completely equipped now, and Father Holloran and I expect to leave New York City on Tuesday for Tennessee. We will be in Nashville on Friday, September 17th, and we hope to open **our first Mission in Tracy City**, September 19th...*

Obediently yours

(Rev.) James F. Cunningham, C. S. P.

Now we are back to the desire to start a Catholic mission in Tracy City. We have spanned time from **1867 to 1937**, seventy years. This story is full of missing links, but those little items make research fun and especially exhilarating when one finds another piece of the puzzle. Okay, now I still see with my mind's eye an empty lot, but hopefully I can also see that there was a building at one time called the Catholic Chapel. What happened to the Chapel? Did it burn? Was it torn down? If so, when? More importantly, why do local folks have no remembrance of there ever being a Catholic church in Tracy City or even have stories in the vaults of their minds ready to open up for inquisitive minds?

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