



# Haverford Township Historical Society



## ST. DENIS CHURCH IN HAVERFORD

By Richard D. Kerr

The Welsh Quakers who came with William Penn to found Pennsylvania as a colony of England were followed by a growing stream of people from many countries. Whether persecuted, living in poverty or hunger, disillusioned or just adventurous, they sought a new life in the New World and took the gamble to get here.

Among the many was a family from Ireland, landing in the port of Philadelphia in 1806. Dennis Kelly, age 26, arrived with his wife Mary and their baby Margaret. His goal was to buy tickets for a stagecoach ride west, with the dream of becoming a rancher raising cattle and horses. He bought the tickets, putting a considerable dent in his finances, but the ranch was not to be. The story goes that, after the stagecoach left Philadelphia by the Market Street bridge over the Schuylkill River and got on the Lancaster Turnpike, the ride for those crammed inside the stagecoach became very jostling and uncomfortable. One foul-mouthed passenger began complaining and cursing incessantly. Despite the pleas of the others, he would not stop, so Mary Kelly asked the stagecoach driver to stop and let her family out. She was insistent and refused to continue the trip, so the Kellys' trip ended right there. They walked back to the last tavern they had passed on the road (there was almost one per mile), and so found themselves settling down just west of Philadelphia and not "out West."

Described as personable and hard-working, Dennis Kelly got a manual labor job on a Radnor farm and a half-refund of his stagecoach fare. He went on to prosper in life in America, and it is said he eventually came to own every place where he had ever worked. Over the years, he amassed a fortune in the textile business, converting mills along Cobb's Creek in Haverford Township to wool and cotton textile production. He eventually owned some 800 acres of land in Haverford and adjoining townships, including one parcel bought from a descendant of Welsh Quaker settler Daniel Humphrey. It was on the north side of present-day Eagle Road and basically stretched from Darby Road down to Cobb's Creek, where there was a mill.

Kelly hired and in other ways supported many Irish immigrants to America. To address the growing need for Roman Catholic worship, Mass was celebrated in part of the old Humphrey mill and later (about 1815) in Kelly's home on the east side of Cobb's Creek off of Manoa Road, near another of his mills. The Kellys set aside a one acre piece of the old Humphrey parcel, nearly across from the Old Haverford Friends Meeting House, for a church and a burial ground. It was up the hill from Cobb's Creek and the Powder Mill Valley.

The original church, a small stone building, was completed in 1822, but due to disagreement over technicalities in how to deed the property, it was not dedicated and used for services until July, 1825, when a Mass was first celebrated in it. The ultimate deed from the Kellys, dated 1826 and recorded near the end of 1834, was for one acre and eight perches, for the consideration of one dollar. (A perch in this usage is a measurement of area, being 1/160 of an acre.) Named for St. Denis, but originally using the Anglicized spelling "Dennis," the parish was Augustinian and fell under the hierarchical control of the Augustinian Order at the college of Villanova. (Saint Denis was an early Bishop of Paris, who was

martyred by beheading sometime after 250 A.D. Statues of him often show him holding the head in his hands, and ancient accounts say that after his beheading, he picked up his head and walked ten kilometers, or six miles, preaching a sermon as he walked.)

St. Dennis Church thus became the first permanent house of Catholic worship in Delaware County. For a while, it was a “mission” church. Various priests from the monastery at Villanova were sent down to it to conduct services, staying in a small rectory behind the church building.

By the 1850s the original stone church building was already proving to be too small for the growing parish. The population of Delaware County had doubled since the 1820s. St. Dennis Church remained the only Catholic church along the present “Main Line” area, with worshippers coming from far and wide. The Kellys stepped forward again in 1856, deeding (for five dollars) eight acres and sixty perches of land to the Augustinian College of Villanova for the construction of a new church within ten years. The stipulated deadline was not met, but Dennis Kelly, just before he died in 1864, again deeded the same eight acres to the Brothers of the Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine for a church, again for the consideration of five dollars, but without a time deadline.

In 1865, a year after the death of Dennis Kelly, the spelling of St. Dennis Church was changed to the more traditional French spelling “St. Denis,” which has been used since that time.



*The original St. Denis building with 1969 additions and 1910 window updates. The 1904 rectory stands to the rear in this vintage John Eckfeldt photograph.*

In 1869, additions and alterations were completed on the church building. These, including a new transept and a new rear wall, served to double the capacity of the building. In the early 1880s, additional work was done on the building’s interior. A new stone rectory, the present one, was constructed in

1904. An individual, Warren White, bought the old frame rectory, dismantled it and re-erected it as his home, just up the street at 143 East Eagle Road.

In 1923 construction began on the St. Denis School. The two-story, gray stone building opened in 1924 and contained four classrooms for grade-school students. A convent was built in 1927 for the Sisters who taught in the school. Despite the construction of neighboring Catholic churches and schools with the growing suburbanization of the area, the St. Denis School quickly and seemingly perpetually needed expansion, the first stage of which happened in 1930.

With a large influx of immigrants of Italian origin, the community's need for the church, the school and the cemetery continued to grow. The present, even larger St. Denis Church building was started in 1946 and dedicated in 1948. It was built on the same site as the original, expanded church building and connected to the existing rectory.



*The present St. Denis Church, built between 1946 and 1948.*

### **Explore for More... St. Denis Church in Haverford**

The best source for the history of the St. Denis Church is unfortunately not available online. Try to track down a copy of *The Sesquicentennial History of Saint Denis Parish (1825-1975)* written by Joseph P. Barrett, researched by a church committee and published in 1975 by the church itself.

Here's a Philadelphia *Inquirer* newspaper article about the 175th anniversary of St. Denis Church:  
[http://articles.philly.com/2001-09-23/news/25313659\\_1\\_parish-history-church-expansion-catholic-population](http://articles.philly.com/2001-09-23/news/25313659_1_parish-history-church-expansion-catholic-population)

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