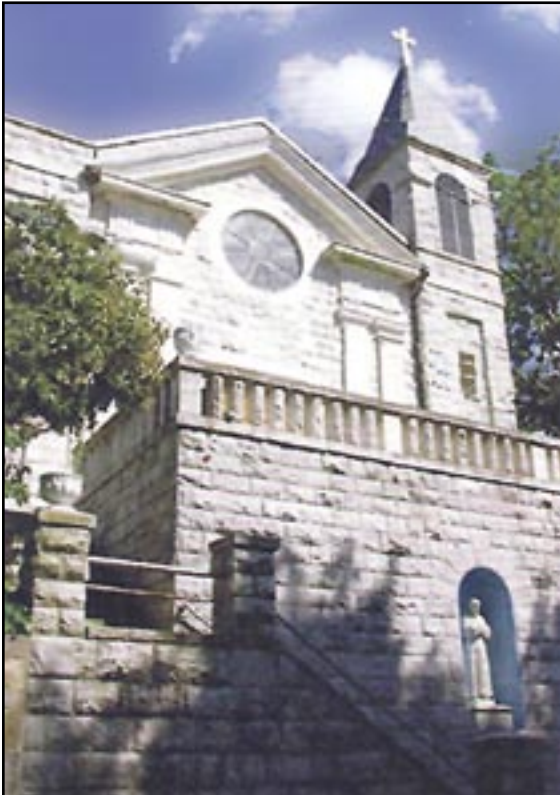




Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
Richard Forliano

The Assumption Church, 100 years old



The Assumption Church in Tuckahoe celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2011. Contributed photo

It is very difficult for young people growing up today to understand how different life was before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. It is almost incomprehensible for them to understand that in the American South, the descendants of African-American slaves

Italians had come to America for the same reasons the Irish had a few decades before, but the Italians posed, at best, a dilemma and at worst, a threat. First, the Italians were in desperate need of work and they were willing to work for less. They spoke

not only had to ride in the back of the bus, but attended separate and grossly inferior schools and were even denied the right to vote. It is also equally hard for many middle-aged people to fully understand the ethnic animosity that existed against southern and eastern European immigrants, many of whom were Italian.

In the late 1840s, Irish Catholic immigrants that came to America consisted of some of the most backward peasants in Europe that also faced discrimination from the mainstream Protestant majority. For the Irish fleeing the horrors of the Potato Famine, the Roman Catholic Church dominated by Irish clergy provided their fellow countrymen in America with advice, leadership, and support in a culture that looked down upon them. The churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and places to socialize gave meaning and order to the lives of the first large wave of Irish immigrants.

For the Irish here in town and in other major cities, the arrival of Italians posed a dilemma. The

a different language, were ambivalent about staying in America, and preferred handling most matters by themselves.

For many Italian immigrants, the Roman Catholic Church in America was an alien institution. Marge Gotti, a former president of the Tuckahoe Board of Education with a Ph.D. in American History, beautifully described the uncomfortable situation that the early Italians faced when they arrived in America in a book she coauthored, entitled "The Italians in Yonkers":

For many Italian immigrants, the Roman Catholic Church in America was alien and failed to meet their needs. The hierarchy of the church was concerned about what was termed the 'Italian problem.' The Irish had preceded the Italians to the United States and the Roman Catholic hierarchy and priesthood was, to a large extent, dominated by the Irish. Sermons were given in a language that the Italians did not understand, and the mass became meaningless for those who did attend. There was also suspicion about confiding in a priest who did not understand the language and customs of the immigrant.

This situation did not merely happen in lower Westchester, but all over the more populated areas of the Northeast. Recent Italian immigrants in Tuckahoe felt shut out from the predominantly Irish congregation of the Immaculate Conception Church that had recently moved from Waverly Square to the "Cathedral on the Hill" at the top of Winterhill Road.

The role of the Roman Catholic Church was to administer the spiritual needs of its constituency. Either in response to the ethnic conflict between the Irish or because of it, the church began to encourage priests from Italy to travel to America. One of these priests was the beloved Rev. Vincent Lojacommo. In 1906, he was assigned as a second assistant to Father McCormick at Immaculate Conception Church. A native of Palermo, Sicily, he immigrated to the United States in 1904.

Italians did not feel comfortable with the service conducted in an alien language that was mindless of Italian customs. Catholicism, as practiced by most southern Italians, was a rich blend of traditional Catholicism and folklore, mixed with colorful celebrations and religious feasts with origins dating to Roman times. What they found in America was far different, austere in comparison.

By the start of 1911, it had become evident to the Roman Catholic hierarchy that a separate church had to be built for the Italians living in Tuckahoe. In January of that year, Father Lojacommo made his first baptism, Angelo LaManna, and made his first convert, Mary Florence Powers. On March 5, 1911, Lojacommo celebrated mass for the first time in Italian. The mass took place at the now defunct Lyceum building where a mall now stands, just south of Tuckahoe Village Hall.

Construction began on July 16, 1911 at the highest point of Pleasant Avenue, near a quarry directly up the hill. The structure was to be 44'x90' with a capacity for seating 400 people. The church was built entirely of Tuckahoe marble by Italian stonemasons, masons, contractors and other laborers on their own time. Construction began on Aug. 20, 2011. The first mass of the then unfinished church occurred on Christmas Eve of that year. The final dedication took place on Columbus Day, 1911.

The entire structure is supported by wooden beams, shown by hand. One must look in awe at those workers, exhausted by long hours, constructing so beautiful and meaningful an edifice. The families of three of the men of whom many still reside in our town who built the church with their own hands are the DiPippas, DiRienzos, Vecciarellis and the Capparellas.

Michael Servidio, who is working on a history of the church, beautifully places the importance of the Assumption Church in perspective:

The church of the Assumption has been and still is the presence of God in the small Village of Tuckahoe. I see the church as a shining light of