New Jersey and Western Pennsylvania: Catholic Historical Societies

By John C. Bates, Esq.
Secretary of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

The New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission was established in the American Bicentennial Year of 1976 by the Catholic bishops of New Jersey and Seton Hall University. The Commission is one of a select group of Catholic historical societies within the United States to have survived and thrived.

The ecclesiastical impetus for the formation of American Catholic historical societies is attributed to Pope Leo XIII, who opened the Vatican Secret Archives in 1883 and issued a public letter, Saepenumero considerantes, on the importance of historical studies, declaring that the Church had nothing to fear from historical truth. The Pope established the Commission of Cardinals for Historical Studies to promote the development of the historical sciences. Historical societies were to be formed to act as clearinghouses for historical investigation and disputation. Historical journals, with their notes and references, were to publicize research and provide review of historical literature.

In light of the pope’s actions, Fr. Andrew A. Lambing (1842-1918) in the diocese of Pittsburgh shortly thereafter gathered a few friends on February 1, 1884, and proposed organization of the “Ohio Valley Catholic Historical Society” and publication of a Catholic historical magazine, through which the early American records of the Catholic faith could be preserved.

This effort was successful (in contrast to his earlier unsuccessful attempt in May 1879). In July 1884, under the auspices of his newly formed historical society, Lambing started publication of a quarterly journal entitled Historical Researches in Western Pennsylvania, Principally Catholic. After four issues, in July 1885, the title was changed to Catholic Historical Researches. The annual subscription price of the journal was one dollar.

This quarterly journal was the first devoted to the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. Publication continued for two years, the burden of research and writing almost entirely the work of Lambing. Struggling alone, he abandoned his efforts at maintaining both the historical society and the journal—but did not abandon his work of historical research, later authoring two histories of the diocese of Pittsburgh. His journal articles between 1884 and 1886 are among the rarissima of Catholic Americana.

The Pittsburgh experience was to be repeated in a number of other dioceses, with the formation of historical societies and the initiation of publications—typically folding within a short time.

More than half a century would pass before another effort was made to form a Catholic historical society in western Pennsylvania. Anticipation of the 1943 centenary of the Diocese of Pittsburgh served as the impetus for Bishop Hugh C. Boyle of Pittsburgh to support the effort to establish such a society and write a new diocesan history. On May 27, 1940, at Saint Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe (the first Benedictine establishment in the New World), eight persons met and established the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania: two Benedictine history professors, a diocesan priest/history professor, two prominent attorneys, two officials of The Pittsburgh Catholic (which had served as the diocesan newspaper since 1844), and a librarian from the Carnegie Library. The Society was expressly organized to preserve and promote Catholic history throughout all of western Pennsylvania—the
original territory comprising the diocese of Pittsburgh before successive carve-outs of the dioceses of Erie, Altoona (now Altoona-Johnstown), and Greensburg.

On July 8, 1940, Bishop Boyle presided at a meeting of over 500 supporters, at which by-laws were adopted and the first public lectures were delivered. The Society quickly developed archives at Duquesne University to preserve donated historical records. Regular lectures, field tours, radio addresses (and later TV interviews), essay contests and lectures in schools, public exhibits, special religious ceremonies, oral history interviews, and workshops became the norm. In 1943, the Society published its long-awaited centennial volume, *Catholic Pittsburgh’s One Hundred Years 1843-1943*. Eighteen writers contributed to this volume.

In 1950, the Society undertook the microfilming of all issues of the Pittsburgh diocesan newspaper—a first ever for an American see and its diocesan newspaper. The 200th anniversary of the First Mass in Pittsburgh—celebrated by Fr. Denys Baron, chaplain to the French forces at Fort Duquesne (today’s Downtown Pittsburgh) in April 1754—was marked by both the Society’s commissioning of an oil painting of the event and the reprinting of Father Lambing’s 1885 publication of *The Register of Fort Duquesne*, which had been penned in French by Father Baron and contained the day-by-day entries of baptisms, marriages and deaths of both French and Native Americans. In observance of the bicentennial of the City of Pittsburgh in 1959, the Society published *From the Point to the Present: The Catholic Church in Pittsburgh*.

The Society initiated publication of a semi-annual newsletter entitled *Gathered Fragments* (a title taken from the Gospel of St. John 16:12, “Gather up the fragments [of history] that remain lest they be lost.”). That evolved into an annual 100+ page color print journal. The 25th anniversary year issue (2015) contained an article by Alan Delozier, Executive Director of the New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission and Archivist of Seton Hall University, titled “Gannon, Guilfoyle, and Walsh: Shared Education and Catholic Higher Learning Objectives in Western Pennsylvania and Beyond, 1873-1957”—which traced the relationship of three natives of western Pennsylvania who rose to the episcopate and served in important sees in New Jersey (Walsh) and Pennsylvania (Gannon and Guilfoyle).

After functioning as a voluntary association for over fifty years, the Society achieved a formal legal existence by incorporating under Pennsylvania law in 1993. The Diocese of Pittsburgh thereafter included the Society in the diocesan listing in *The Official Catholic Directory* (P.J. Kenedy & Sons).

The Society maintains a website ([http://catholichistorywpa.org/](http://catholichistorywpa.org/)) and Facebook page ([https://www.facebook.com/chswpa/](https://www.facebook.com/chswpa/)). The Society celebrated its 75th anniversary of establishment with a Pontifical Mass at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh in May 2015, followed by re-blessing of the bishops’ memorial plaque which it had installed in Synod Hall, adjacent to the cathedral, in connection with the 1943 diocesan centennial.

While establishment of the respective Catholic historical groups in New Jersey and western Pennsylvania occurred at different times, episcopal support along with clerical involvement and active lay participation have been critical to the flourishing of both the Commission and the Society and their ongoing research, publications, and preservation of American Catholic history in both states.
Synod Hall, Pittsburgh – the original office of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania