

THE STORY OF OUR FOUNDING



The story unfolds with the major migration of Syrians to Rhode Island starting in the 1870's. The stories about the freedoms enjoyed in America, and the many opportunities for a better economic life there, constituted a powerful stimulus to immigrate to the United States. This promise of a better life is what brought to Rhode Island a group of people from the beautiful capital city of Damascus, from the bustling "souks" of Aleppo, from the summer retreats of Ma'arrat Sadnaya, and from the pearl of the Mediterranean, Beirut. They left behind the "sahrat" and the "soubheeyat", the "tarab" and the "aseedeh", the family and the friends, the cousins and the neighbors, to travel to this unknown country—what was in store for them?

First was the long, wretched journey across the ocean with no end in sight. With hesitation, they stepped onto shore in a country where they were unable to communicate. Coming face to face with the American immigration officials at Ellis Island was the first hurdle—Ellis Island, "Island of Hope, Island of Tears." Often after the official finished spelling a name in English, the immigrant's ethnic identity seemed to be completely obliterated. However, they were strong, determined people and continued their long journey which finally ended in Rhode Island.

They sought out Central Falls and Pawtucket, having heard of these cities as the centers of the textile industry. In Central Falls, they settled in the Washington Street area, and in Pawtucket, the Pleasant View area. Many of the immigrants were weavers by profession and were soon able to find employment in the many thriving textile factories.

Slowly the early immigrants began adjusting to their new country. Many opened small businesses—grocery stores, variety stores, restaurants, etc. Socializing together, they preserved their customs and traditions. However, their first priority in preserving their heritage was founding their own church.





ST. BASIL'S FOUNDED BY BISHOP HARKINS IN 1907

A study of the early records of the Diocese of Providence indicates that "St. Basil's was founded for the Syrian Catholics of Rhode Island by the late Bishop Harkins in 1907, when he secured the acceptance of Rev. Hananias Boury, then of Boston, MA, one of the comparatively few priests of the Greek-Melkite rite in the United States, to serve as first pastor."

Father Boury celebrated Mass for his parishioners in the basement of the "old" St. Joseph's Church, Central Falls, and rented a house nearby on High Street as the first rectory. The composition of the parish included:

Greek Melkite Rite: 40 families and 20 unmarried adults

Syriac Rite: 14 families and 4 unmarried adults

Armenian Rite: 5 families

Chaldean Rite: 1 family



First Communion (circa 1934)





St. Basil's School (founded by Rev. Timothy Jock, circa 1921)

In 1909 Rev. Boury started a fund for a church, raising \$1000 among his people with which he purchased the site, 50 by 100 feet, at 445 Broad Street, Central Falls.

The records go on to state that after the price of the land had been raised there were no funds available for erecting the church, and the cost, \$8000, was provided by Bishop Harkins. A combination church and rectory, with living quarters for the priest on the second and third floors and an attic above the latter, the building required more than a year to construct. Its cornerstone was laid by the Bishop in May, 1910, and the structure was completed in September, 1911.

In November, 1919, the late Bishop Hickey named Father Jock, who was then chaplain of St. Mary's Hospital, Wausau, Wisconsin, as pastor. Father Jock refurnished the building at a cost of \$1700, repaired the roof for \$2500, remodeled the basement and opened a school, spending \$10,000 in his first year at St. Basil's. There were 92 pupils in the school when it opened. During the 13 years of its existence it graduated 151. Three to four thousand dollars annually were required to maintain it, a burden that Father Jock found himself unable to carry in the midst of the depression. He was obliged to close the school.

Father Jock was stricken with a serious illness and passed away in early 1948 and was replaced by Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Justin Najmy who happened to be visiting family in Rhode Island at the time. Father Najmy reactivated the church societies, formed a choir and initiated a church renovation project, and purchased the present rectory at 111 Cross St. in Central Falls.



MOMENTOUS HAPPENINGS

In 1966 Rev. Najmy was named as the first Exarch for the Melkites in the United States. On May 29, he was consecrated in the Holy Cross Cathedral, Boston, by Metropolitan Athanasios Toutoundji of Aleppo, Archbishop George Hakim of Galilee, and Archbishop Paul Ashkar of Lattakieh. One week later he was installed in his own cathedral in Roslindale, Massachusetts.

Bishop Najmy's first act was to name his own replacement in Rhode Island. He appointed the Rev. Nicholas Abraham as temporary administrator and assigned Rev. Joseph S. Hagggar as assistant pastor. On Sunday, October 30, 1966, the Rev. Peter Cappuci arrived to assume his duties as fourth pastor of St. Basil Church. Fluent in Arabic, French, Latin and Greek, Fr. Capucci quickly acquired a command of the English language. He and Fr. Hagggar became the moderators of the major societies and organizations of the Church.

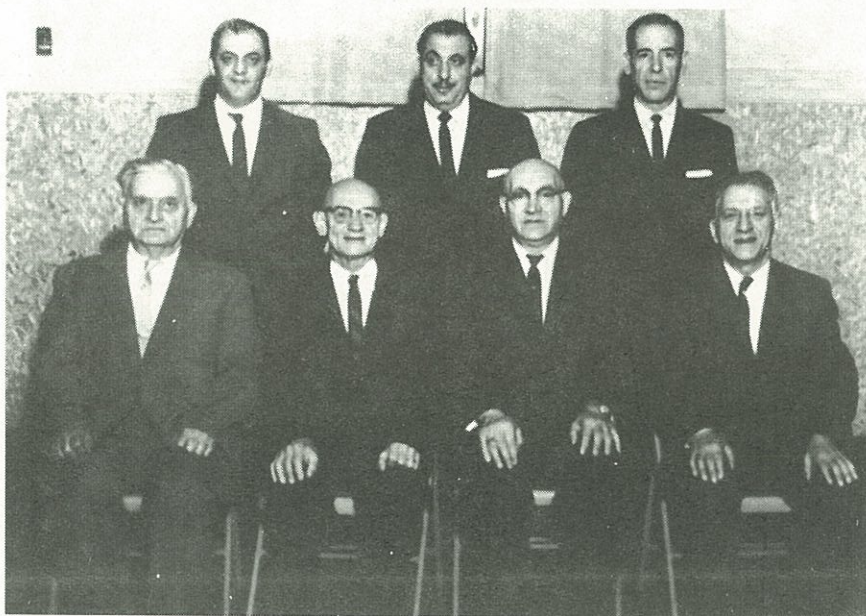
The church was deeply saddened when on June 11, 1968, it was learned that Most Rev. Justin Najmy had passed away suddenly. His final resting place is in St. Basil's Cemetery, to rest forever with those who were in his flock in bygone years. The community also suffered another great loss in the death of their beloved pastor, Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Peter Capucci, on Good Friday, April 20, 1973. Fr. Peter, a zealous and faithful priest of God, will stay in our hearts forever.



Msgr. Justin Najmy with St. Ann's Society of St. Basil's Church (circa 1960)



Sadness turned to joy on April 29, 1973, as George Yany was ordained at the hands of Archbishop Joseph Tawil as the first permanent married deacon of the Melkite Church in the United States. Archdeacon George's devotion to the church has proven him to be a most valuable addition to the community of St. Basil, especially his work with the youth of the parish, the youth of the diocese, and in the religious education program.



St. Basil's Cemetery Committee (circa 1962)

On July 16, 1973, Archbishop Joseph Tawil named Rev. Joseph Haggar as the pastor of St. Basil's Church. At this point, Fr. Joe had been at the parish for several years. His age enabled him to relate to the youth, while his knowledge of Arabic, both written and spoken, enabled him to communicate with the older generation and those who recently migrated from the Middle East. His dedication to the parish and to the Diocese has won him much admiration and respect. The years have proven him to be an outstanding clergyman in the Melkite Diocese, having recently been elevated to the rank of Exarch and was named by Archbishop Cyril Salim Bustros, as the protosyncellus. We are truly blessed! He has served St. Basil's Parish for the past 41 years—a man of integrity, caring and devotion.



Sunday School (circa 1962)



St. Basil's CYO (circa 1962)



Choir Members (circa 1960)



Young Adults of St. Basil's (circa 1975)

CONSTRUCTION OF BROAD STREET CHURCH

On the evening of May 5, 1972, a fire extensively damaged the Church. Services were held in Central Falls High School Auditorium and at the Holy Trinity Church. From June 1972 through March 1973, the Parish Council under the leadership of its president, the late Judge George Nazarian, was involved in insurance company negotiations, damage estimates, and replacement/remodeling costs, etc.

In September of 1974 the Parish Council, under leadership of newly elected President Dr. John Nazarian, finalized plans for the construction of a new church on the site of the original church. Serving on the building subcommittee were Louis Azar, Edward Ameen, and John Koury. On September 30, 1974, the demolition of the original St. Basil Church began, and on September 21, 1975, the first Liturgy was celebrated in the new church. Within fourteen months from the dedication, the parish was able to burn the mortgage.



Parish Council (circa 1975)





A NEW BEGINNING

The parish began to witness increased activities, the involvement of more people, especially the young, in church life, and the thoughtful consideration of our future goals. Two committees were formed to investigate the future expansion plans—the first evaluated the feasibility of expansion of our facilities in Central Falls, and the second searched for new land.

The idea of moving the church from its original location in Central Falls, to Lincoln, RI, was met with some resistance as parishioners were sentimentally attached to the “old church.” However, it proved to be the most rewarding accomplishment in the history of the parish. The plan to move, founded and structured by Dr. Yusuf Mussalli, utilized goal setting, group dynamics, the method of consensus, and the expertise of a huge team of qualified parishioners, who researched the cost of expanding at the original location vs. the costs and benefits of moving to another location. In May of 1988, the parish voted 90% in favor of purchasing new land. Thus, the land search was narrowed to a twenty-acre parcel located in Lincoln, overlooking the Providence skyline. Construction of the new church commenced in 1997 and was completed and dedicated in October 1998. Amazingly, the parish burned the mortgage on this splendid facility in September, 2006.





Many parishioners played a role in the success of the instigation and completion of the building project. Dr. Yusuf Mussalli, Founder of the Project; Georgeanna Deckey, Chairman of the Building Project and responsible for the design; Joseph Jabbour, Chairperson of the Land Search Committee; Charles Robat, Located the Land Site; Samuel Raheb, Footings and Foundations; Atty. Joseph Raheb, Legal Counsel; Atty. Bruce Balon, Legal Counsel; Edward Ameen, Finance and Loans; Anthony Mardo, CPA, Finance and Loans; Ann Marie Ramos, CPA, Finance; Dr. Charles Riotto, Chairperson Pledge Drive; and Ellamarie Hanna, Pledge Brochure.

Our new facility represents Phase I of a three-phase relocation project. It consists of a magnificent 26,500 sq. ft. structure, housing the Cultural Center, Religious Education Facility, Provisional Church, and Baptistry, built on a 23 acre land site on Skyview Drive atop a beautiful hill overlooking the skyline of the City of Providence, RI. Phase II will include the construction of a formal church, and Phase III will be the construction of a new rectory. Also in the future is the expansion of St. Basil's Cemetery.





Our church has been enhanced by the addition of a beautiful Shrine of the Blessed Mother on the church grounds. The mosaic icon of Our Lady of Tenderness, with granite reflection pool, fountain, and benches was donated by Deacon Dr. and Mrs. Edmond Raheb. Deacon Raheb was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop John A. Elya on June 18, 2000, and has devoted his ministry at St. Basil's to adult Bible studies, adult religious education, and visitation of the sick.



The parish has enjoyed a renaissance with its move to the beautiful new facility that meets all of its needs—a full program rich with religious, educational, cultural, and social activities for all age groups. Parish membership and church attendance have increased and the parish now looks forward with great anticipation to Phases II and III of the Project.





As we view St. Basil's parish today, it is gratifying to note the progress that has been made over the years. Many of our parishioners hold positions of distinction in the fields of medicine, law, government, investments, finance and banking, media, music and art, education, engineering, and the sciences. Presently, eight have entered the priesthood; namely, Rt. Rev. Archimandrite John T. Azar, Jr., Rev. Albert Azrak, Rev. Michael Bowab, Rev. George Hanna, Rev. Joseph Koury, Rev. Msgr. Norman Metsy, Rev. Daniel Nassaney, Rev. John Rudy. We have come a long way. At times, it has been a difficult journey. With God's help, we have succeeded. St. Basil the Great Church, with its beautiful Melkite Rite, continues to serve as a beacon of the rich cultural heritage of our people.

Blanche Mussalli
Church Historian

