

Project will digitize Catholic records of Boston Archdiocese

January 10 2017, by Mark Pratt

Two of Boston's most venerable institutions are teaming up to create an online database of hundreds of thousands of Roman Catholic Church documents to help people trace their family histories.

The New England Historic Genealogical Society and the Archdiocese of Boston on Tuesday announced the project that was first talked about two years ago. It's the first time a significant number of sacramental records from any U.S. diocese have been digitized on this scale, the organizations said.

The plan is to digitize and index records from 1789 to 1900 from all the parishes in the archdiocese, even those that no longer exist. They are about 5,000 volumes to digitize, some as many as 500 pages, said Thomas Lester, the archivist and records manager for the archdiocese.

Lester noticed when he first took the job a couple of years ago that the parish sacramental records were among the most frequently referenced.

But the downside of that was the wear and tear it caused to already crumbling documents.

"Pages are brittle and flaking, bindings are coming unstitched, some are just falling apart," he said. "Of course we try to restore them, but we can't do it fast enough. So we looked into scanning all of them, that way if we can't save the books we can at least save the information."

He talked to Jean Maguire at the genealogical society.

Established in 1845, it is the premier national resource for genealogists and family historians and already home to more than 28 million items, including records from other New England churches, said Maguire, the society's library director.

So far, the records from four churches are available online, but they include some of the most significant churches in archdiocese history, including the mother church, the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, as well as now-closed Holy Trinity—also known as the German Church—and Our Lady of Victories, the first French parish in Boston.

The records already online are available to browse for free. As more are posted, a paid membership to the genealogical society will be required.

The records include baptisms, marriages, confirmations, ordinations, first communions and other pivotal life events.

They include important clues to [family history](#). For example, marriage records often include the names of witnesses and baptism records include the names of godparents.

The majority of the records are in Latin, but because many Catholic churches were established for a particular immigrant group, some are also in Italian, French, Polish and other languages.

"The whole 19th century was a time of waves of immigration to Boston, and this project will make it easier to study that era and for people to trace their family history back to Europe," Maguire said.

Records searchable by name will be available later this year, but it may ultimately take years to complete the project.

"We have a lot of parishes to cover," Maguire said.

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