

The Knights of Columbus celebrate 100 years in Dedham Square

by Brian Keaney

On November 25, 1897, Thanksgiving Day, a charter was given to 45 Catholic men of Dedham establishing Council 234 of the Knights of Columbus. The council, which has been in existence ever since, is celebrating the 100th anniversary of owning a building in Dedham Square this month. Located at the corner of High and Washington Streets on a storied lot of land, generations of Dedhamites have come to the Knights of Columbus building over the past century.

Countless visitors have attended social events, from middle school dances to themed parties for adults in the hall. Grandfathers have brought their sons and grandsons to get haircuts at Sergi's. Numerous lawyers and other professionals have used the upstairs accommodations as offices convenient to the courthouses, and thousands of Knights have passed through the doors for civil, social, fraternal, and charitable events.

Early days

The first meeting of the council was held on December 2, 1897, in Cycle Hall above the Snow Brothers Grocery Store on High Street. Among the charter members was 20 year old Charles A. Finn, the valedictorian of his class at Dedham High School.

After graduating from Boston College, Finn went off to Rome. There he was ordained a priest at the Basilica of St. John Lateran and was a classmate of Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII. At the time of his death in 1982, Monsignor Finn was the oldest Knight of Columbus and the oldest priest in the United States. He now has an impressive gravestone on Clover Path in Brookdale Cemetery.

Though they did not have a permanent home, the council got off to a rousing start. In May 1900, the Knights of Dedham Council attended Mass and received the Eucharist as a body. Today, 120 years later, the tradition of the Communion Breakfast continues each spring. A month later, the Third Degree ceremony was conducted in Dedham for the first time. Roughly 1,000 people jammed into Memorial Hall to see the spectacle.

Those first members had already been inducted into the Order through the Hyde Park Council and were thus ready to hit the ground running, but that first night there were only two orders of business. The first was to elect Charles K. Scrivener as Grand Knight and Fr. C.P. Heaney as chaplain, along with all the other officers. The second was to appoint a committee of four members to seek out suitable accommodations for future meetings.

For a few years, they bounced around town. In addition to Cycle Hall, early meetings were held in the Grand Army of the Republic Hall, the Hibernian Hall, and the Odd Fellows Hall. On May 7, 1901, the first meeting was held in their new rented rooms in the Greenleaf Building, where Cafe Fresh Bagel stands today. There they remained for the better part of two decades.

A new home

The council eventually outgrew the space and, on May 18, 1920, at its 544th meeting, a committee was formed to look into purchasing a piece of land or a building for the council to call their own. The committee made short work of their assignment and, on July 20, 1920, the council voted to purchase the Ovens lots on High and East Streets for \$4,000.

They quickly changed their minds, however, and on August 3rd that vote was rescinded. A new motion passed that night to purchase the current Knights of Columbus building from Elizabeth A. Carberry in the heart of what was then known as Memorial Square.

To finance the purchase, the Knights of Columbus Building Association of Dedham was established and met for the first time on September 21, 1920 in Hibernian Hall with Daniel H. Maher as president. In addition to a 12% mortgage from Dedham Savings, the Association sold stock at \$10 a share. The council bought 642 shares and 144 members bought 258 shares for a total of \$9,000 raised.

The property was conveyed to the Association's trustees, Thomas J. Hannon, Paul S. Barry, Thomas J. Brennan, Daniel Maher, and Charles W. Harris on September 27, 1920.

The sale was coordinated by Joseph R. McCoole, a past grand knight of the council who was appointed a judge of the probate court by Governor Channing H. Cox two years later.

The building grows

The current building was constructed in 1897 and was smaller than what exists today. In 1926, a 30' by 100' addition--designed by Rowell Victor Provost, an architect from Oak Street in East Dedham--was added to the back at a cost of \$50,000. The renovations gutted the second floor, and new offices and woodworking were installed throughout. On the first floor, Cole's drug store, Gilbert's lunchroom, and the post office gained additional space, and two new street level storefronts were added.

At the dedication of the new council chambers, which was paneled in wood and big enough for 300 people, an address was given by John E. Swift. At the time, Swift was the Massachusetts state secretary but would go on to become Supreme Knight 20 years later. A number of other state, local and Knights dignitaries spoke. After the speeches were completed, Tom Lilli's Orchestra provided dance music.

In 1959, a new facade and roofline would be added to the building. Included in this renovation was arched brick above the High Street front with a clock featuring the Knights' logo.

The post office was not the only government tenant. Until the 1960s, the Board of Health rented space on the second floor. When Memorial Hall was torn down and a new Town Hall built, they moved to Bryant Street. The council took the vacated space for themselves, building a suite of club rooms including a large kitchen.

The mortgage is burned

The Great Depression hit Dedham just as it did the rest of the country. In 1932, members had to loan the Building Association money to keep it afloat. The Association sufficiently recovered by 1936, however, so that they were able to offer free storefront space to the committee organizing the town's tercentenary celebrations. Visitors from

as far away as California, Colorado, and New Brunswick visited and signed the guestbook.

A decade later, in 1946, many debates led to the decision to sell a portion of the land along Washington Street to Allen Motors. After applying the money raised to the mortgage, the balance stood at \$30,000. The final payment was made ten years after that and, on October 11, 1956, a mortgage burning banquet was held at Dedham High School. Monsignor Finn, the recently named pastor of Holy Name Church in West Roxbury, returned to his alma mater and had the honor of setting it ablaze before the Lester Lees Orchestra played.

From Colburn to Columbus

The land on which the building sits has a notable history that goes back to the earliest days of Dedham. In the 1650s, the Colburn family built a house across what is today Washington Street. When Washington Street north of High Street was constructed in 1802, the house was moved and turned sideways to make room for the road.

The land was still in the family when Samuel Colburn died as a soldier in the Crown Point Expedition. In his will he bequeathed 135 acres across eight parcels to St. Paul's Church, a curious choice considering he wasn't an Anglican. One parcel included the family homestead and much of what is today known as Dedham Square.

In 1851, the church gave a 999 year lease to Josiah D. Howe for the land where the Knights building stands today. There, the Lexington native ran the 60 room Phoenix House, one of several inns to stand on the lot. Among other notable happenings during his tenure, Howe hosted the Massachusetts Association of Base Ball Players in 1858. It was during this meeting that the rules of the "Massachusetts Game" were established. Ultimately, the New York rules proved to be more popular and more closely resemble those used at Fenway and Barnes Memorial Parks today.

When the Knights acquired the land in 1920, they also assumed the responsibility to pay the \$55 annual lease Howe negotiated. Eventually, in 1999, a vote of the rector, wardens, and vestry of St. Paul's released the Knights from the provisions of that lease 851 years early. As a result, the Building Association now owns the property outright.

The Knights of Columbus today

Today, the Dedham Council is a thriving group of Catholic men from Dedham and surrounding communities. Still dedicated to the principles of charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism, it meets on the first and third Tuesdays of the month just as it did over 100 years ago.

In large part due to the storefront and office rentals, in addition to regular fundraising, the Council is able to give generous amounts to charity each year. Every time someone takes a music lesson at Jam Zone, gets a pastry at La Luce, or has their hair done at Armando Cassano's Hair Studio, they help to support scholarships to Dedham students, donations to Dedham organizations, gifts to St. Mary's and St. Susanna's parishes, and more.

Knights volunteer their time each year at Dedham Day running the Soccer Challenge and in the winter running the Free Throw Contest. They help senior and disabled residents with the upkeep of their homes, feed hot meals to those in need, and spend Saturday mornings helping out at the Food Pantry. Before the pandemic made it impossible, Knights served coffee and donuts after mass.

There are several subgroups within the council as well. An investment club for members meets monthly and regularly sees returns that beat the market. The Saturday Knights Club puts on social events each month for knights, their wives, and friends. Other social events include an annual spring dance, periodic fraternal nights, and trips to sporting events.

More information about the Knights of Columbus can be found at www.KofC.org and about the Dedham Council at www.DedhamKofC234.org.