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FATHER THOMAS DALTON HIS PARISH EXTENDED TO FOUR MINING COUNTIES

By Fr John Dwyer, printed February 12, 1976 in *the Catholic Herald*



Father Thomas Dalton

**Pastor of St Patrick Church, Grass Valley, June 10, 1855 to December 27, 1891
1826 - 1891**

Many titles could appropriately be given to this priest: "Pioneer missionary, builder of churches, father of orphans, and patron of education." All could equally apply to this man whose name was synonymous with Grass Valley for 36 years.

Born in Collinstown, Westmeath, Ireland on September 20, 1826, Thomas Dalton, like so many of his contemporaries, entered All Hallows Seminary in Dublin. On July 3, 1853, he was ordained a priest for the missionary diocese of Nesqually, Oregon. By the time he was ready to leave for his mission, Oregon had been severely depopulated by the California gold rush. On arriving in New York, because a cholera plague was raging, he promptly offered his services to the Bishop of Brooklyn. His experiences during those difficult months made a great impression on him.

By February 1855, he was ready once again to set out for Oregon. This time it was the Archbishop of San Francisco who would prevent his ever seeing Nesqually. Aware of his own great need for priests and the lack of need in Oregon, Archbishop Alemany delayed his departure and gave him a temporary appointment as assistant to Father Peter Deyaert of Nevada City, with instructions to take care of the Downieville area. This appointment was made on March 10, 1855. Meanwhile the Archbishop wrote to the Bishop of Nesqually with the request that he be allowed to keep young Father Dalton. When an affirmative answer came, the Archbishop moved Father Deyaert and on May 7, 1855, appointed Father Dalton pastor of the immense parish of Grass Valley – Nevada which at that time included parts of Placer, all of Nevada and Sierra Counties, and parts of Plumas County.

With unusual foresight, a characteristic of Father Dalton, he promptly decided to reside in Grass Valley rather than in Nevada City as his two predecessors had done. He always considered June 10, 1855, the day he took up residence in Grass Valley, as an important date in his life. These years in the second half of the 1850's were consumed with constant travels on the back of his faithful mule and with successive building of churches.

When the Downieville church burned down in 1855, Father Dalton bought a Baptist church and converted it into an appropriate building for Catholic worship. When St Peter church in Nevada burned down in the great fire of 1857 he built a new one which he called Saints Peter and Paul. In 1856 he built a church in St Louis in Plumas County. He erected churches in Moores Flat Iowa Hill and Forest Hill and in Auburn in Placer County. But his crowning achievement was the beautiful St Patrick church in Grass Valley in 1858, built of brick at a cost of \$38,000. The building of churches consumed only part of his time and efforts. His long – often six weeks at a time – visits to the far flung mining camps consumed most of his time. Sick calls of one hundred miles in the winter snows taxed the iron constitution of this short and swarthy priest who was often mistaken for a Mexican. One such sick call almost resulted in his death for he fell exhausted by the wayside and only a providential rescue from a nearby camp saved his life.

No sooner was the church in Grass Valley completed than Father Dalton opened a school of the Irish style in the former church. By 1863 he had 150 pupils. Fulfilling an ambition to get Sisters to teach in the school, he appealed to the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco. They sent five Sisters who arrived on August 20, 1863 to take over the school. But the San Francisco community made it clear that they could not afford five Sisters for long. He would have to get his own. Therefore in September 1863, he left for Ireland and brought back three Sisters with him on November 5, 1864.

He then began the construction of a new school convent complex which was to be an orphanage. The big heart of Father Dalton was ever responsive to the needs of his fast growing parish. The Sisters took in the first orphans on April 2, 1866.

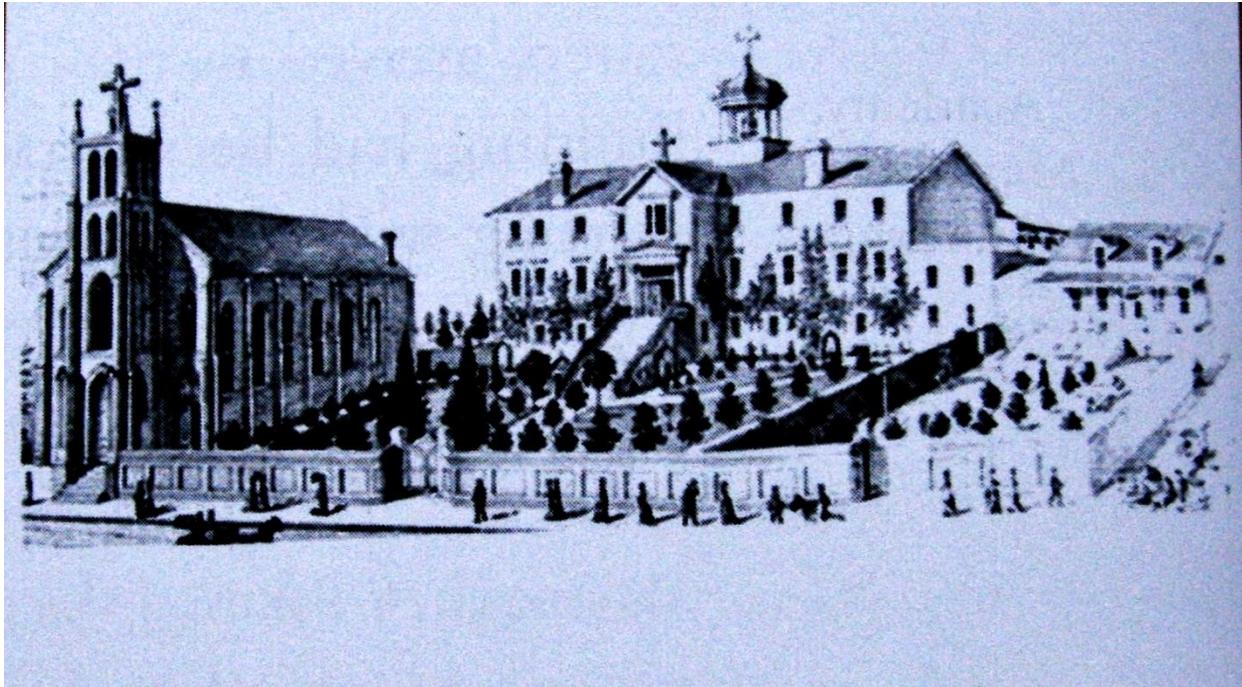


Photo from *The Story of Mount Saint Mary's* (Grass Valley, n.d.)

A Lithograph of St Patrick Church, Orphanage and Convent, Grass Valley

In March 1868, when Grass Valley became the See of Bishop O'Connell of Marysville, Father Dalton was appointed Vicar General, a position he held until 1884. While Bishop O'Connell was in Rome at the first Vatican Council in 1869-70 Father Dalton was in charge of the California portion of the huge diocese while Father Manogue of Virginia City took care of the Nevada portion.

When the Sisters came in 1863, he received an assistant pastor to aid him in his duties. Slowly the huge parish became smaller. In 1856 Downieville with Sierra and Plumas Counties were cut off from Grass Valley. In 1861 Bishop O'Connell created the Forest Hill parish which cut off the Placer County missions. In 1867 Nevada City with its missions became an independent parish so that Grass Valley eventually was without missions. But in the meanwhile it had grown into a thriving parish with its flourishing school, its two orphanages, one for boys (1872) and the one for girls together with a boarding school eventually to be called Mount Saint Mary's.

The 1880's were quieter for Father Dalton, no longer in the saddle, no longer building churches, no longer founding orphanages. He was now approaching old age, for in those days a maximum life expectancy of 60 years was ordinary.



Photo from the *Sacramento Bee* Collection

St Patrick's Orphanage for Boys, Grass Valley

Twice in his early days he had sent outstanding men whom he found working in the mines to the seminary to study for the priesthood. He had the joy of welcoming back as priests the newly ordained Father Patrick Manogue in 1864 and Father Joseph Phelan in 1874. In 1884 he welcomed as coadjutor bishop the same Patrick Manogue and in 1886 saw the See transferred to Sacramento with Bishop Manogue as its first bishop.

On June 10, 1880, he observed with great solemnity the 25th anniversary of his arrival in Grass Valley. In 1884 he was relieved of the position of Vicar General. Slowly the hardships of the early years had taken their toll on the health of the "little giant." It was no surprise when death came on December 27, 1891. So popular was he that even in those times of difficult travel and in the dead of winter 19 priests besides the bishop came to Grass Valley for the funeral. He was buried at the foot of the Blessed Virgin's altar inside the sanctuary of the church he had built. There his remains lay until 1949 when his grave was removed to St Patrick's Cemetery in Grass Valley.

Even today, 85 years after his death, the name of Father Dalton lives on in Grass Valley in the street named after him, in the original orphanage built by him, which is now a State Historical Monument housing a museum, and in the flourishing Mount Saint Mary School established by him so long ago.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

St Patrick Church, Grass Valley, Built by Father Dalton in 1858