

JEAN LOUIS ANNE MADELEINE LEFEBVRE DE CHEVERUS was born in in Mayenne, France, on January 8, 1768. Ordained in Paris, he was imprisoned with 600 other priests during the French Revolution and later fled to England. At the invitation of his friend, Reverend Francis A. Matignon, Cheverus travelled to Boston, arriving on October 3, 1796.

Matignon had received numerous pleas from remote areas of Massachusetts for a resident priest, and in the summer of 1797 Cheverus travelled to Maine to minister to the American Indians in the region.

Former Archdiocesan Archivist James O'Toole writes that "because Catholics were so widely scattered around New England at the end of the eighteenth century and there were so few priests to minister them, a large portion of Bishop Cheverus' time and that of his clerical colleagues was spent travelling around the region."

It was during this trip that he met with several families who had settled in the area, including the Hanly family. On the return journey from his trip to Maine he also stopped in New Hampshire and Massachusetts towns, and would continue to revisit these areas over the coming years.

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THE HANLY FAMILY was one of about seven families who emigrated from Ireland and settled in Bristol, Massachusetts (now Maine) in the late 1770s. There were two branches of the family, Patrick and his wife Agnes, and Patrick's brother Roger and his wife Margaret. By 1798, Patrick and Agnes had nine children, while Roger and Margaret had six.

The Hanly family, along with the Jackson, Kavanagh, and Cottrill families, formed the core of the Catholic Community in Maine.

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THE CHEVERUS-HANLY CORRESPONDENCE offers us insight into the early missionary work of Catholic priests in Boston.

While travelling, Father Cheverus would often carry books to sell or distribute, the works he references in his letters are those which he presumably left with the Hanly family during their initial meeting.

Some of these books included the *Bible*, *Garden of the South*, and the *Poor Man's Catechism*. These were common titles which had also been distributed earlier by Fathers John Thayer and Matignon, and were ordered through Matthew Carey, a Catholic publisher in Philadelphia.

In the *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, the authors write that the Cheverus-Hanly letters provide "an illuminating example of

Father Cheverus' use of these books in his missionary work."

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LATER, Cheverus and Matignon would prove to be two of the most significant figures in early New England Catholic History, helping to establish the Boston Catholic community in a historically anti-Catholic region.

Cheverus played a large role in the creation of the Church of the Holy Cross, a precursor to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, which was completed in 1803.

At the time of Cheverus' arrival in the United States, there was only one diocese which was located in Baltimore. In 1808, growth of the Catholic population of the region prompted Pope Pius VII to create four new dioceses including one in Boston - he chose Cheverus to be its first Bishop.

During his time here Cheverus was admired by the Boston community, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and they lamented his departure to France in 1823.

Despite his status and accomplishments in the community, what really shows through his letters is his humble nature. As a testament to his character, the last surviving letter between Cheverus and the Roger Hanly family, from July 18, 1815, is

signed “Your friend and humble servant,
John, Bishop of Boston.”

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TODAY, these letters are an inspiration, and provide an exquisite example of evangelization and discipleship which the Archdiocese of Boston has taken up as its mission in recent times.

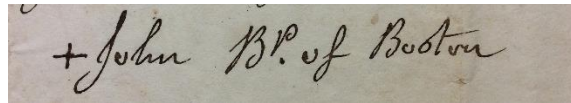
Father John Cheverus was only 28 years of age when he arrived in Boston, and it is unlikely that he would ever meet the families which had settled in remote areas of Massachusetts.

Records show that the Kavanaghs and the Hanlys were married by Father Matignon, and may have moved due to the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment in Boston. They returned to the city each year during the Paschal season, and it was only by chance that Father Cheverus was sent to visit them when Father Matignon proved unable to make the journey.

Christ labors in his Church by the power of the Holy Spirit to make known the Father’s desire that all should be one. The context of these letters show the labor undertaken by Cheverus to reach these families, and to maintain this relationship, painstakingly writing out instructions for daily worship to ensure their spiritual well-being

This story also reminds us of the love and care given and received by Christ in his Church. It is something we should keep in mind as we look to share our faith with one another.

Finally, Cheverus’ persistence should remind us that our mission is never complete. His work did not cease after one visit, or one letter, but guided the family’s spiritual life over a number of years, for our work is never complete and there are always some of God’s children in need.

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive ink on a light-colored paper. The signature reads "+ John B.P. of Boston".

For further reading:

Lord, Robert H., John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington. *History of the Archdiocese of Boston: In the Various Stages of Its Development, 1604 to 1943* (3 vols.). Boston: The Pilot Publishing Company, 1945.

Melville, Annabelle M. *Jean Lefebvre de Cheverus, 1768-1836*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1958.

O’Toole, James M. *From Generation to Generation: Stories in Catholic History from the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston*. Boston: Daughters of Saint Paul, 1983.

“John, Bishop of Boston”

The Correspondence of Cardinal Cheverus
and the Hanly Family



Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston

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