The Knights of Columbus was founded in 1882 by Father Michael J. McGivney, a priest from New Haven, Connecticut. Concerned about the plight of poor and immigrant families, McGivney created the Knights to be a fraternal insurance society. Christopher Columbus, the namesake of the organization, symbolizes the Catholic origins of the “New World.” In a society given to periodic waves of anti-Catholicism and nativism, the Knights are identified as a Catholic anti-defamation society.

The Knights’ social service for members of the military began in 1916 with United States’ incursion into Mexico. After learning of the recreational, social, and religious needs of thousands of Catholic troops stationed along the Mexican border, the Knight of Columbus established sixteen centers. These centers stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of California.

During World War I, the Knights established social centers for servicemen of all faiths. Known as “huts,” these service centers were located in training camps in the United States. Huts were also established in rest and
recovery hostels in England and Ireland. After the war, the Knights served in Allied-occupied areas in France, Germany, Italy, and even Siberia. The Knights of Columbus was the only Catholic society granted permission to work with the military.

Every Knights of Columbus hut included a banner that read “Everyone Welcome, Everything Free.” The huts featured social programs such as sports, music, and drama. The huts also catered to the spiritual needs of soldiers. Working with the YMCA, the Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army, and other groups, the Knights helped raise over thirty million dollars for the War Camp Fund.

Following the armistice in 1918, the Knights of Columbus created special postcards known as “Safe-and-Sound” cards by which soldiers notified their families that they had survived that war and were coming home. Soldiers leaving Europe by ship were given a free Knights of Columbus gift pack featuring cigarettes, candy, handkerchiefs, and shaving materials. The Knights established employment bureaus throughout the country to help veterans find jobs. They also provided college scholarships for returning servicemen as well as set up evening schools for veterans and all others interested in academic and vocational advancement. Between 1917 and 1923, nearly 450,000 men joined the Knights.
The Holy Redeemer Council No. 1974 was organized on July 13, 1919 with 150 men. The following September, the Knights participated in a World War I “Welcome Home Parade” in Freeport. Nearly 10,000 Freeporters supported this parade, which honored 222 servicemen and one woman. During the exercise, girls representing the Knights gave each of the servicemen a handkerchief, a bar of chocolate, chewing gum, and cigarettes. Like many of the Knights’ Councils throughout the United States, Freeport’s Knights stood up to the negative rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan, which first appeared in Freeport in 1922. It was during the 1920s that the Freeport council adopted the name Bishop Molloy Knights of Columbus. In 1935, the Knights initiated an annual Remembrance Day service at Our Holy Redeemer Church.