

150 Years of History

St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church celebrates its 150th Anniversary on June 27, 2008. Fifty years ago, Philip V. Brennan, Jr., wrote a centennial history titled, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception: The Story of a Church, 1858-1958*, as part of the parish's 100th anniversary celebration. That work began with the introduction of Catholicism into the Virginia colony and recorded the development of the parish up to the date of its publication in 1958. The history section of our 150th anniversary commemorative publication includes the historical accounting in Brennan's book, as it was printed. Insertions of new, complementing, or correcting information to those pages are added where appropriate. The numbers in brackets indicate the beginning of the history pages, 27 through 44, of Brennan's work.

The second part of the history relates to the third half-century of the life of the parish from 1958 to 2008. The liturgical and social structure of today's parish organization is different from that of the parish of 50 years ago. The Second Vatican Council heralded changes not only to the conduct and language of the liturgy but also to the participation in ecumenism by the lay membership and the introduction of new ideas, such as folk Masses. The advent of the 1970s witnessed the implementation of earlier plans to construct a new St. Mary church, rectory, and activity center—a transition that was made easier by the selfless support from Fredericksburg's religious and secular communities. Over the next three decades, the rapid growth of the parish spawned the formation of the parishes of St. Patrick, St. Matthew, and St. Jude. Catholic education programs were expanded with the construction of two elementary and middle schools—Holy Cross Academy and St. Patrick—and the formation of two embryonic high schools.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the beginning of St. Mary Parish. The formation of this parish at this time and with the name honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary could be considered as being something more than a chance occurrence. Over the previous two decades there had been four apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in Paris (1830); Our Lady of the Miracle in Rome (1842); and Our Lady of La Salette, France (1846). The same year that St. Mary parish was formed and the cornerstone of the church was laid, there were 18 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin at Lourdes, France, the last occurring July 16.

1858 The First Century 1958

The path that has led to the growth of the Catholic community in the Fredericksburg area began a century and a half ago in an age and region that were tolerant but not completely amicable toward Catholicism. Understanding the evolution of Catholicism in Colonial and Early America Virginia will give one a better appreciation of the depth of faith that the early Catholics of Fredericksburg exhibited in establishing St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Parish. So, we begin with Brennan's history and the words that Jesus spoke at the founding of his Church--

I Upon this Rock . . .

All life, collective as well as individual, has its antecedents, and St. Mary's is no exception. And its antecedents are proud ones, indeed.

The earliest history of the Catholic Church in the State of Virginia is not unlike the early history of the Church in Rome; for Virginia, like most of the English colonies, was not given to the toleration of Catholicism. The first Catholic group in our area received the Sacraments from a priest who came secretly into their midst from the neighboring colony of Maryland. This group was headed by Capt. George Brent, who, in 1687, was granted the right of free religious worship

by James II of England, for himself and all the members of the Catholic colony he intended to found. The settlement was not immediately successful, due primarily to the death of James II in 1701. The spirit of Catholicism was nourished however by Capt. Brent and his descendants and, early in the eighteenth century, a settlement of Catholic families had grown up on the southern shore of Aquia Creek.

The Brent family was an illustrious one and it counted among its friends such men as George Mason, Thomas Jefferson and the Fitzhughs, of Chatham. This is significant, since Jefferson, Mason and others, in meetings held in Fredericksburg, planned the practice of religious freedom. It is doubly significant in the light of the fact that the person unveiling the Aquia Crucifix, at the dedication ceremonies of this monument commemorating the Aquia Catholic settlement, was a great-great grand niece of Thomas Jefferson. She in one of the many beneficiaries of her ancestor's actions vis-a-vis religious freedom for she herself is a Catholic.

The first Catholic church in this area was the log chapel erected at the Aquia settlement and it was called, fittingly enough, St. Mary's.

In the year 1845 a ship bound for Canada put into the port of Alexandria on the Potomac River. For some reason the passengers were disembarked at this place. These passengers were from the North of Ireland and had come to the new world with the intention [28] of settling in Canada. Most, however, remained in Alexandria. Some of these families found their way to Fredericksburg where they settled.

If the new land in which they found themselves seemed strange to these settlers they themselves seemed stranger still to the people of Fredericksburg. Alien to the ways of the new world, harboring the only too recent memories of oppression in their native land these new Americans represented something that the native Fredericksburgers found difficult to understand. If these qualities were not sufficient to set them apart from their new compatriots their Catholicism was. In those days a Catholic in Fredericksburg knew well the meaning of the term "social outcast."

In these days there was no provision made for Catholics in this area. Accordingly, representatives of the new group set out for Richmond where they petitioned the Very Reverend Richard V. Whalen, Bishop of that city, for a missionary priest to provide for their spiritual needs.

The request for a priest to serve a mission church 50 miles away must have caused the Bishop some consternation. In 1830, there were only four priests in Virginia—one each in Richmond and Martinsburg (now in West Virginia) and two in Norfolk. By 1841, there were eight churches and six priests in the Diocese and in 1850 the Diocese was divided to form the Diocese of Wheeling. When the first Synod of the Diocese of Richmond was held in 1856—two years before the cornerstone of St. Mary was laid—there were only nine priests in attendance. Five years later, the Diocese comprised six priests, fifteen churches, six ecclesiastical students, two academies for young ladies, six parochial schools, two orphan asylums, a hospital, an infirmary and a population of 12,000 Catholics. By comparison, the parishioners of St. Mary number over 12,000 today.



Nevertheless,

His Excellency heeded their petition and a priest was assigned to look after the flock in Fredericksburg. The amount of time this priest was able to devote to Fredericksburg is not a matter of record but one need not peruse the archives of the Diocese to realize the great burden placed upon this priest for he was also assigned to Kilmarnock. He must have spent most of his time en route.

There were a number of priests assigned over a period of years to serve the Catholic community in Fredericksburg, but exactly when priests started visiting Fredericksburg is difficult to ascertain. It can be assumed that it was in the early 1830s or about the time that the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad was being constructed through the town. Many of the railroad workers were Irish Catholics (and possibly some from other Catholic European nations like Italy and Spain) whose numbers complemented a small Catholic community in the area. The priests who visited Fredericksburg before St. Mary parish was formed came mainly from Richmond and were assistants at the Cathedral. One historian notes that a Reverend



Missions and stations visited by priests from St. Mary, Fredericksburg, 1872-1922

Mission/Station	Initial Yr	# Visits	Mission/Station	Initial Yr	# Visits
Ashland	1892	13	Marmion	1910	2
Bayview	1907	7	Mary Washington College	1938	3
Berry Plain	1915	2	Massaponax	1907	1
Brooke	1914	13	Midway Island (Midway)	1905	6
CCC Camp	1940	1	Mine Road	1910	1
Cloverdale	1907	1	Monaskon	1907	2
Colonial Beach	1903	8	Morris	1919	1
Dahlgren [Naval Station]	1921	13	Mount Holly	1897	1
Newland	1919	1	Nuttsville	1917	1
Doswell	1907	1	Penola	1922	1
Fleeton	1914	5	Quantico	1917	1
Guinea	1910	1	Saunders Wharf	1914	2
The Hague	1892	2	Sharp's Wharf	1914	3
Hardings	1919	3	St. William of York	1955	17
Hawthorne	1907	1	Stafford	1892	3
Heathsville	1910	7	Tappahannock*	1872	*
Hewlett	1907	1	Tidewater	1919	2
Kilmarnock	1892	15	Westmoreland County	1905	2
King George	1922	19	Wheatland	1914	1
Lively	1921	1	Widewater	1892	12
Loretto	1923	8	Wycomico	1917	1

Timothy O'Brien traveled here from Richmond during the construction of the railroad bridge across the Rappahannock. Father O'Brien had been sent to Richmond by the Archbishop of Baltimore in early 1832 and remained in the diocese until 1850. Others who reportedly came here were Father John Teeling and Father Oscar Sears although their names do not show up in the records of St. Mary.

These missionaries, and later, resident pastors, served not only Fredericksburg but also other missions and stations scattered over a vast area. Brennan's centennial history names only a few of the more familiar places that were visited throughout the mission years (1858-1871) and shortly afterward. It is from the Annual Reports that were submitted by the resident Pastor for the years of 1872 to 1922 that we glean the dedication of those priests. Those reports list 42 different sites that extended across the length and breadth of the Northern Neck and in some counties located between Fredericksburg and Richmond. The vastness of that area traveled by the priests can be seen in the map in the figure below; the names of those 42 locations are listed in the accompanying table. It should be noted that some of those places cannot be identified on today's maps. Also, the visits to Tappahannock were never included in the reports but were mentioned in both Bishop McGill's diary and in the Fredericksburg Ledger of May 28, 1872.

Many of the locations were probably private residences and were visited only once or twice until another site could be found or a church could be built nearby. The number of visits to each site during the year varied with the priest, means and availability of transportation, and the weather. Some reporting pastors would list the number of visits; others would generalize them collectively as "monthly, quarterly, semiannually, annually." Over time the visits were productive and left a legacy that resulted in the building of churches and formation of parishes in Aquia (St. William of York), Ashland (St. Ann), Colonial Beach (St. Elizabeth), King George (St. Anthony), Kilmarnock (St. Francis de Sales), The Hague (St. Paul Mission), and, later, Woodford (St. Mary of the Annunciation), formerly known as Woodslane.

On a more personal note, the heritage of St. Mary is found also in the early Catholic families that formed the core of the initial parish, as Brennan notes.

Many of the families of this first group of Catholics bore names quite familiar today. Fitz-Patrick, Mullen, Martin, Graninger, Gayle, Cavanaugh, Gately, McCracken, Griffin, Solen and Cahill. Of the original families some descendants still remain in the Parish. Mrs. E. C. Carpenter springs from the Cavanaugh family, Mrs. Elinore Fox from the McCracken clan, Mrs. Lizzie Cox from the Cahills and the Misses Anna and Elizabeth Fitz-Patrick from the Fitz-Patrick family; also Mrs. J. W. Kimman and Mr. Chas. Cassidy from the Griffin family. There are quite a number of the Mullen family in our midst, to mention a few--Patrick, John and Donald Mullen, Agnes and Hugh Mullen, also Mrs. Edward W. Jones. Of the Graninger family we have Sebastian, Bernard, and Hugh Graninger and Mrs. Leo Musante.

A tombstone in the Confederate Cemetery commemorates the McCrackens buried there. Also entombed in this grave are the remains of a priest who died while attending to the flock in Fredericksburg. [29]

Among the McCracken family members buried in that cemetery is a headstone for Matthew Cavanaugh who died in January 1855. A small article in the Virginia Herald for January 25 mentions that he died suddenly but lists neither cause of death nor any other information. As of the date of this publication, no source has been found that verifies that he was either a priest or even a relative of the Cavanaugh or other family referred to in Brennan's history.



Brennan continues with his narrative that began "Upon this Rock . . .

II
... Is Built a Church.

In 1856 the right Reverend John McGill, Bishop of Richmond, visited Fredericksburg. S. J. Quinn's "History of the City of Fredericksburg, Virginia," describes this visit.

"... (Bishop McGill) preached a sermon of great ability and spiritual power and, under his influence, a nucleus was formed, out of which the church was organized three years afterward. The newly organized church went earnestly to work at once to build a house of worship, and from amounts subscribed by the members and friends in the town, and the assistance they received from abroad, a neat and comfortable brick building was erected on Princess Anne Street . . ."

To which can only be added a note of awe at the effectiveness of this "sermon of great ability and spiritual power." It is indeed a pity that it has not been recorded. [29]

While waiting for "a house of worship" to be built, the Catholic community had not been inactive in trying to find a place to gather and celebrate Mass. One historian wrote that Mass was celebrated in 1854 in the home of Mr. John Solon [spelled Solen in some records] by Father Joseph Bixio, S. J., the Assistant Pastor of the, then, Jesuit parish of St. Mary in Alexandria. The mission of that church was to send priests to minister to the nearby Catholic communities in Maryland and Virginia, so other Jesuits probably visited Fredericksburg in the ensuing three years.

No records have been found to indicate if residences besides that of John Solon were ever used for Mass, but other facilities in town did become available. In January 1857, the Fredericksburg Weekly Advertiser reported that the Common [Town] Council "authorized the public property committee to rent the upper room of the [Town Hall] to persons who wished to use it as a Catholic Church." The Town Hall was used for Mass--quarterly at first, then monthly--for nearly two years. The amount of rent that was paid to the city and the exact number of Catholics who attended the services at that building remain unknown. Regardless, it was during this period that plans were being formed for building a Catholic church in Fredericksburg.

In May 1858 a Mr. James Behan (or, perhaps Bollhan) of Norfolk contributed the sum of Three-thousand dollars to Bishop McGill. Five Hundred dollars of this amount was to be used for the purchase of a lot in Fredericksburg and the remaining Twenty-five hundred dollars was to go towards the erection of a Catholic church on this lot. The lot purchased from Mr. John Herndon, was 58 by 100 feet in size. The purchase of the lot was noted in the Richmond Dispatch together with an observation which shocked the Fredericksburg News:

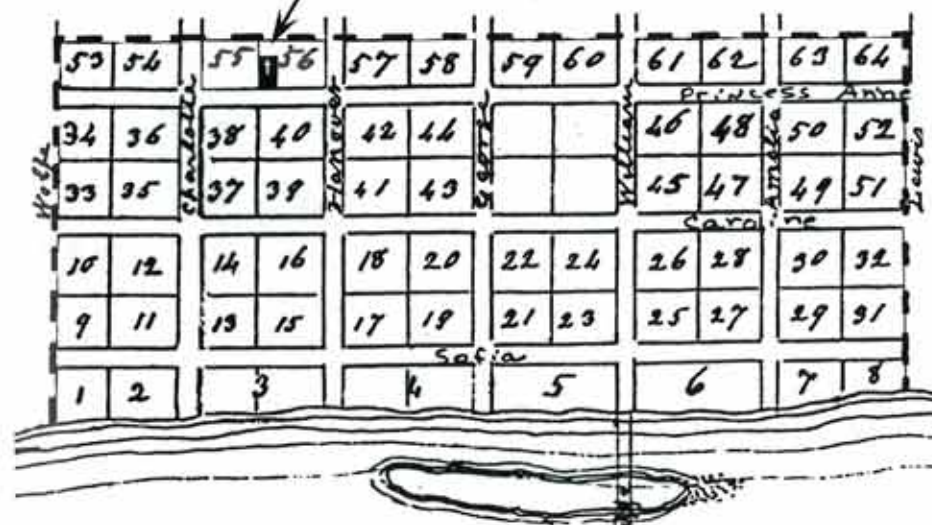
"... the Dispatch makes a most irreligious statement, 'Mr. H. has sold the lot but is as far from being a Catholic as he is from intending to build a Catholic Church.'"

The property that John Herndon sold to Bishop McGill was historic in its own right. Fredericksburg was formed in 1728 from fifty acres appropriated from the original 2000 acres of land patented to John Buckner and Thomas Royston by the King of England in 1671. Those fifty acres were divided into one-half acre, numbered lots. It was on part of Lot 56 of that original town plan that St. Mary ultimately would be built. Two decades after the initial purchase, the bishop would buy land with a residence for a rectory on Lot 55, also. Seven years before the church was built the town limits had been expanded westward to what would be today an extension of Winchester Street.

Fredericksburg

--- Town Limits, 1728

St. Mary Initial Lot Location
 1858 - 1970



Bishop McGill notes in his diary that he visited Fredericksburg on Sunday, June 27, 1858 and there laid the cornerstone of the new church of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. The Bishop then preached a sermon. The event was noted by both Fredericksburg newspapers. The "News" applauds the Bishop's scolding of some observers who openly laughed at his vestments and at the services conducted. The "Weekly Advertiser" seemed more taken by the fiscal facets of the occasion. It notes approvingly the Three-thousand [30] dollar gift from "a gentleman of Norfolk" and reports that the parishioners had subscribed some Nine hundred and fifty dollars, leaving only One thousand dollars still to be raised.

The newspapers continue to note the progress of the building of the church. They both comment favorably on the building and the "News" praises the builders, the Messrs. Baggett and Aler. At last the building is finished! Both papers approve. The "News" calls it "... one of the most beautiful edifices ever erected in Virginia, for the money. Messrs. Baggett and Aler, in the wood and brick work, as well as in the architecture, have succeeded in satisfying not only the Catholics of this place, but also the most fastidious outsiders."

The Weekly Advertiser likes it, too; "neat and tasty" is its somewhat subdued praise. Lest, however, they be accused of damning with faint praise, they let us know that they are not completely happy about the building. The doors bother them. "There is one thing, however, which offends the eye of observers and which we cannot refrain from referring to: it is, that the front doors have been made to open outward, presenting a very ugly appearance." Apparently, there was at least one "most fastidious outsider" the News forgot to talk to.

The church has changed little since its erection. The balcony has been extended, buttresses have been removed and the steeple at the rear of the building is a recent addition. Bishop McGill gives a brief description of the structure in his diary:

"... The building (62 x 40) ... is to be Gothic ... with buttresses, pecos, altar, pulpit, etc., for \$4500 ..."

In December, 1858, although the Church was unfinished, regular services were commenced which continued until the completion and dedication in March of 1859.

Bishop McGill, who probably was aware of the history of destructive fires in Fredericksburg, wisely insured the new structure against fire damage. In January 1859, he signed a declaration with the Mutual Assurance Society for \$5000 coverage on the church. That document describes the building as having brick walls and a slate roof, and being contiguous to five other buildings. His wisdom in insuring the church paid off when the church was damaged by a fire that destroyed two of the nearby buildings, one being the rectory, in 1882.

On Sunday, March 20, 1859, Bishop McGill, assisted by the Rev. Father Brady, dedicated the new Church. Father Brady celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at 10:00 A.M. The Jesuit President of Georgetown College, Rev. Dr. Snyder, S.J., preached the sermon. Since these ceremonies were completely novel to the residents of the city, they attracted a large audience. Father Snyder spoke on the Mass and explained the Sacrifice. That afternoon Bishop McGill spoke on the Infallibility of the Church in matters relating to doctrine. The whole affair received considerable notice in the local press. [31]

Fredericksburg, so often celebrated as the home of Mary, mother of Washington, could now boast of a Church dedicated to Mary, Mother of God.

The Fredericksburg area hardly contained a sufficient number of Catholics to justify the stationing of a resident Pastor at St. Mary's. Therefore, together with Warrenton and Fairfax, it was served by priests from the Cathedral at Richmond and, in fact, is referred to as "the Fredericksburg Mission" in several contemporary publications.

In 1861, the number of priests in the diocese was small. St. Mary, like many other parishes that were supported by these priests, was limited to one visit a month. For the more remote parishes, visits were less frequent. At that time, Mass was held at St. Mary every third Sunday of the month but the schedule varied periodically, as did the particular attending priest, throughout the missionary years of the parish.

Records at the church show that the missionary priest charged with tending the flock at Fredericksburg at about the time of the dedication to have been a Rev. Father Purdy. The times at which he commenced and ceased to administer the mission are unknown to the writer.*

The "Weekly Advertiser" of September 15, 1860 notes that "The Rev. Mr. Andrews will preach in the Catholic Church in this place on Sunday next . . ." The Rev. Mr. Andrews, however does not appear in the records supplied the writer. This "Rev. Mr." title incidentally, is not confined to the secular press. Records of the Diocese of Richmond also use the designation, and Bishop McGill in his diary, refers to "the Rev. Dr. Snyder, S.J." It somewhat surprises the contemporary reader, however, so it should be explained that this was the customary appellation. It might also be noted that, in Bishop McGill's time, a Bishop was referred to as the "Right Reverend," a title now-a-days used in connection with domestic prelates (Monsignori). Bishops, of course, are now addressed as "Most Reverend."

The Rev. Robert A. Andrews, referred to above, was a curate (assistant) at St. Peter in Richmond, and assigned to serve St. Mary parish from January 16, 1860, to April 8, 1862. These dates would have placed his time at St. Mary between the periods of Father Purdy (or Brady) and Father John P. Hagan.

* It is likely that "Rev. Father Purdy" was in fact Father John Brady who assisted the Bishop during both the blessing of the cornerstone and the dedication of St. Mary and was at the Cathedral in the 1850s. The few priests who were in the diocese at the time were well documented and no reference to a Father Purdy has ever been found. "Brady" could easily have been misread as "Purdy" in the old handwritten documents

Father Patrick Donelan (spelled Donnelon in newspapers and Brennan's history) was assigned to St. Mary twice, the first being for an unspecified period following Father Andrews. An early St. Mary register, Baptismal Record, 1862-1931, shows a single entry for him in September 1862 and no more entries for any priest until the first baptism by Father J. P. Hagan on October 1, 1865. The second assignment for Father Donelan occurred in 1866. The lack of detailed documentation during that period is understandable considering the political instability that was about to place Fredericksburg center stage in a bloody war.

The next priest in charge of St. Mary's was a Rev. J. P. Hagan. His initial service with the church commenced sometime after 1860. He served until March, 1866, when he was transferred to Norfolk.

Of historical note, the St. Mary Baptismal record shows Father Hagan baptized John Singleton Mosby, Jr., son of Colonel John S. Mosby of "Gray Ghost" fame, at the "Warrenton Mission" on December 10, 1865. The sponsor for the Mosby baby was "Mrs. Dr. Chilton" wife of Dr. John Chilton of Warrenton. Missionaries who visited Warrenton would often reside at the Chilton or Mosby house.

III "Unexpected Congregation"

For nearly two hundred years, Fredericksburg had been a city of no small importance. Situated between Washington and Richmond, at the head of navigation of a river, vastly important in the days of river transportation, and nearby to the hustling river landings at Belle Plain and Aquia Creek on the Potomac, the city had [32] reaped many benefits from its geographical location. It had become provisioner for storied farms and plantations that dotted the surrounding countryside, a winter home for many of the country gentry and a major terminal for the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad. It had numbered among its inhabitants some of the most important figures in the history of the youthful nation. It had been intimately connected with the entire life of Washington, the Father of his country. It had, indeed, reaped many benefits from its location. Now, in the sixth decade of the nineteenth century, it was to pay a bitter price for its valued location. And, in a city where nearly every building had some historical significance, St. Mary's was about to acquire some of its own. The Civil War had come.

All churches--Protestant and Catholic--in Virginia would be subjected to unfamiliar and adverse activities as the war raged. Father Joseph Magri, in his *History of the Catholic Church in the City and Diocese of Richmond*, succinctly described these effects of the Civil War:

"Congregations were dispersed and churches and other religious institutions were made use of as hospitals. . . . The Catholic congregations of the diocese dwindled down to insignificant numbers, composed almost exclusively of women, children and old men, practically all of the able-bodied men and youth having enlisted in the army, and many of the women being prevented from attending church owing to their nursing of sick soldiers and other cares put on them. . . . The Bishop, because of Army regulations, [was] not able to journey over his diocese."

St. Mary parish was just one of many that had to endure the misery that worsened as the war escalated in Virginia, but the church survived the devastation of the town. Churches in some towns were not so fortunate.

Early in the War, Fredericksburg had been occupied by large bodies of Federal troops but, at that point, the fighting was going on at other places. The Army of Northern Virginia, first under Joe Johnson, and then under Robert E. Lee, had faced the invading Federal Army of the Potomac under the unfortunate McDowell, the cocky but cautious McClellan, and the incredibly inept Gen Pope, at the seven days before Richmond, twice at Manassas, and at Sharpsburg, on the Antietam Creek in Maryland. Fredericksburg had been spared in the first year of war but no city located exactly between the two capitals of warring combatants, astride an important railroad terminal, could long escape involvement of the bloodiest sort. Fredericksburg's turn came at last, in December 1862.

For three gristly days the City played host to Two hundred thousand soldiers locked in deadly conflict. Thousands of Federals fell within blocks of St. Mary's and many of these wounded were carried to the Church which was stripped of its pews and used as a hospital. How many wounded and dying were treated here is unknown, but the number must have been great, for even today, the grounds to the rear of the church are honey-combed with the relics of war,--medicine bottles, military paraphernalia such as canteens, and Minie balls and even the gristliest of all mementos of battle, bits and pieces of human bones.

May of 1863, saw Fredericksburg once again become a battlefield and the church once again became a refuge for the wounded. From this point on, until late in the spring of 1864, the area remained the main theatre of war. The City became a giant Hospital after [33] battles at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Courthouse and probably continued to serve in that capacity until the end of the war in 1865. Tradition also has it that the Church was used on several occasions as a stable for cavalry horses. This seems to be a gross misuse of a structure meant to be the dwelling place of Jesus Christ, but it has faint echoes of another stable, in Bethlehem, where Christ also once dwelt.

Parts of some churches, such as basements, were used to stable horses, but it is not likely that it happened to St. Mary or any other church in Fredericksburg for the reasons that Brennan stated above. This story probably evolved because there was a stable lot adjacent to the church property that extended from Hanover Street to the rear of the St. Mary church building (see figure 1, below).

IV Mission Still, Soon the Parish.

As mentioned earlier, Father Hagan had been in charge of St. Mary's during the war. In March 1866, however, he was transferred to Norfolk. Bishop McGill then appointed Father Patrick Donnelon, of All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland, to tend the flock at Fredericksburg. Father Donnelon had been curate at the church at Portumna, Ireland.

Father Donelan, like all of the missionaries at the time, was active in several parishes. Church records show that he baptized people in Warrenton, Hanover Junction [Doswell] and Fredericksburg through the spring of 1866. Also, Masses were periodically said at each of these, and other, locations throughout the period. The Warrenton True Index of May 26, 1866, reported that Father Donelan was to celebrate Mass there "on May 27 and every successive third Sabbath thereafter."

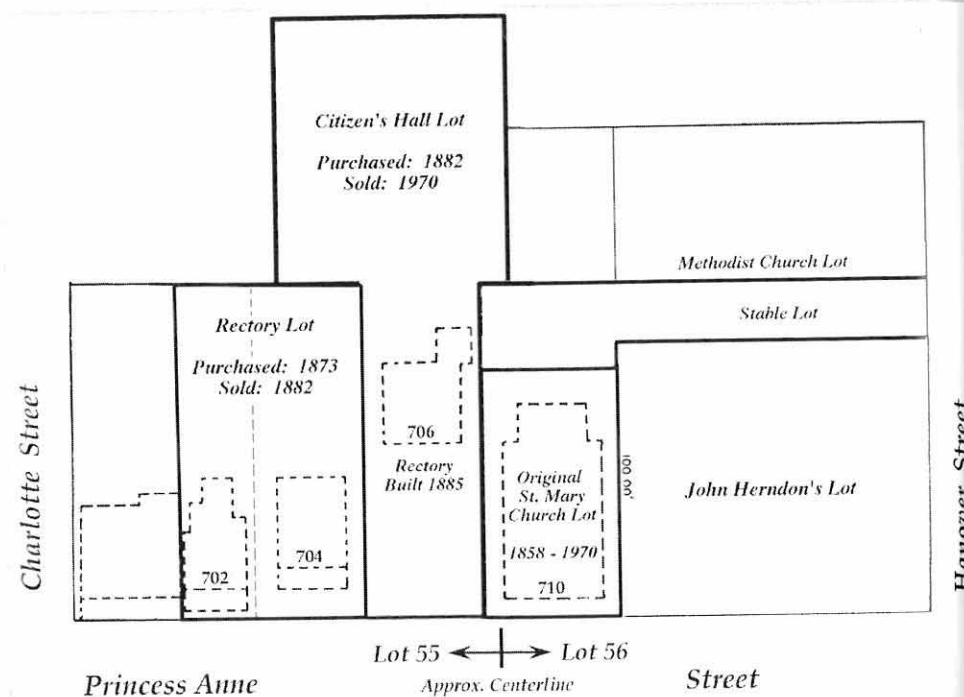


Figure 1. Property occupied by old St. Mary.
[Dashed lines indicate structures and lines today.]

Much of the City had been devastated during the war, particularly during the Battle of Fredericksburg, when 100 Federal cannon pounded the City for over an hour prior to the river crossing by the Federal forces. St. Mary's, however, had escaped serious damage but it appears that the United States Government had neglected to return the pews at the end of the war. Merely to illustrate that the Federal Government was in no greater hurry than to oblige complaining citizens than it seems to be now-a-days, it might be added that it took ten long years to get these pews back where they belonged. Those among us who might be inclined to consider our present seating and kneeling arrangements as less than comfortable are requested to contemplate the comforts of ten pew-less years.

It is difficult to find much to say of the unfortunate Father Donnelon's stay in Fredericksburg--not, of course, because of any laxity on the good Father's part--but merely because our best source of reference for this period, the Fredericksburg "Ledger" has little to say. Let me illustrate. The "Ledger" of Tuesday, March 13, 1866, announces the appointment of Father Donnelon to St. Mary's. The next item concerning the good Father is dated July 20, 1866, four months later. This item headed "Death of Father Donnelon" [34] and it goes on to describe Father Donnelon's death from the "intolerably severe" heat of the past week. The Paper states:

"... In the midst of his usefulness, young in years, ardent in his faith and beloved by his flock, he is called in a moment from the labors of earth to the realms of the blessed..."

Of which, in retrospect, we might add,--what more could be said of any man?

That same news article explains that prior to his sudden death, the 36-year-old Father Donelan, "had been to Fairfax County, where he preached on Sunday," July 15. Two days later, he boarded the steamer Vanderbilt to return to Fredericksburg via the landing at Aquia. When boarding, he had complained of a slight illness that worsened and subsequently proved fatal during the trip. He was found dead upon arrival at Aquia. His body was returned to Washington and taken to Richmond with Father O'Farrell as escort.

A Father O'Farrell replaced the late Father Donnelon in July of 1866, but there is no way of knowing whether this is the same priest who was later named Pastor here in 1884, nineteen years later.

Father O'Farrell presents a mystery. The Father O'Farrell who replaced Father Donelan was not Father, later Monsignor, James T. O'Farrell, who was ordained in 1879 and Pastor of St. Mary 1883 to 1886. Although his identity has not been determined, he probably is the same Father O'Farrell who escorted Father Donelan's body from Washington to Richmond. Likely, Father O'Farrell had been ministering to churches in the northern Virginia area and was familiar with St. Mary. On July 20, 1866, less than a week after Father Donelan's death, a Father "J. O'Farrell" administered the sacrament of Baptism to a St. Mary parishioner. The next week, the Warrenton True Index of July 28, reported "Father James O'Ferrall [sic] has been appointed to the Fredericksburg Mission (Catholic) and to the Churches of Warrenton and Fairfax by Bishop McGill of Richmond." His name last appears in the parish records with a marriage he performed on Christmas Eve, 1866. Beyond these facts little information has been found to identify this "J. O'Farrell." So, with the Father O'Farrell mystery intact, the Brennan history continues.

One year later, Father Thomas A. Becker was named to the Fredericksburg mission. The Ledger states that "he is said to be a very able man." The Ledger proved to be eminently correct in this judgment for Father Becker's next assignment was as Bishop of the new Diocese of Wilmington. He was replaced in 1869 by the Rev. Thomas J. Brady, whom the Ledger insisted on calling "Grady" for several months. Father Brady organized the first Choir at St. Mary's and he must have been most successful in this endeavor. Mrs. Baker, wife of the United States assessor, and a Miss DeKuhn,

were the chief members of the new choir. They must have been terribly good since the Ledger lavished praise on their first appearance in December of 1869. This, in spite of the fact that Mrs. Baker must have had two strikes against her as the wife of an official of the Federal Government which was not too popular in these parts at the time.

The Ledger also states that the Church is growing very rapidly and joins the parishioners in the speculation that Bishop McGill, who at the time was visiting in Rome, might return with "a pastor and priest" for the parish. Also mentioned is the fact that a new organ is soon to be installed in the church.

In January of 1870, The Catholic Benevolent Society, the first social and religious group in the parish, was founded. The Society, which met weekly, elected as its first officers the following parishioners:

Dr. M. J. Griffith	President
T. McCracken	Vice-President
G. Alexander Baker	Secretary
Thomas Griffin	Treasurer [35]

The Parish apparently commenced to operate as a parish under the guidance of Father Brady who held services on the third Sunday of each month. He was much beloved by the congregation who mourned his transfer to Portsmouth, Virginia, in September 1870.

Social events occurring during Father Brady's pastorate reveal that St. Mary, although still a mission, was indeed becoming a parish community. What was probably the first church picnic for the Sunday school took place in June 1870 at G. W. Wheeler's property in Stafford County. The event was newsworthy enough for the Fredericksburg Ledger to report "that about sixty persons, including children and their parents, teachers and friends," were present. And, further, that the number attending the outing required "the teams of the whole congregation for the transportation of people and fixings." Apparently, the picnic was a very enjoyable experience for members of the parish because it was repeated in June the following year at Alum Spring. That picnic would be the last newsworthy social gathering of the St. Mary congregation as a mission church.

Father Brady was replaced by the Rev. Augustine Van De Vyver, the last missionary to be assigned to St. Mary's. Father Van De Vyver had recently come to this country from Belgium. Eighteen years from this time Father Van De Vyver would become Bishop of Richmond.

Perhaps, at this point, it might be wise to digress from the chronology for a moment in order to discuss a matter that should give the parishioners of St. Mary's a feeling of great pride. St. Mary's had been frequently visited by two Bishops who made their mark in the field of Catholic apologetics in a most conspicuous manner. Bishop McGill wrote two books, "The True Church Indicated to the Inquirer" and "Our Faith the Victory." The latter, also titled "The Creed of Catholics" went through 10 editions. This book, written during the Civil War, was still being published as late as 1906. Bishop McGill was followed by Bishop Gibbons who was to become one of the greatest figures in the History of the Catholic Church in America. He wrote a book entitled "Faith of Our Fathers" which sold millions of copies all over the world. This book, still in print, and still selling, has been responsible for countless conversions to the Faith. It remains one of the most articulate explanations of Roman Catholicism ever to be written. The author fared well in that he later became a Cardinal while serving as Archbishop of Baltimore.

Another Bishop of Richmond who was familiar with our parish, was Bishop Keane who later became Archbishop of Dubuque, Iowa.

Carrying Brennan's digression further, there were two Bishops who had had last names pronounced "Kane" and the same first names and middle initials. Neither was ever stationed at St. Mary as a priest. The first John J. Kain, as a priest from Harper's Ferry, made at least two newsworthy visits to conduct missions in Fredericksburg. Although the Fredericksburg Ledger spelled his name Kaine, the story of his visit in April 1873 reported that he "preached two very able, instructive and eloquent sermons on the doctrine of the Catholic Church." In February and March 1874, Father Kain held a five-day mission that resulted in three converts to Catholicism. These three baptisms by Father Kain are recorded in the St. Mary Baptismal register for that month. He was consecrated the second Bishop of the Wheeling Diocese in May 1875. No records have been found to indicate that he made other visits to Fredericksburg as a priest or as a bishop.

The other Father John J. Keane (mentioned above) visited Fredericksburg as the fifth Bishop of the Richmond Diocese to confer the sacrament of Confirmation on several occasions between 1884 and 1887. In May 1888, he became the first Rector of the Catholic University. So, back to the history.

Father Van De Vyver served here for about one year and, upon his departure from Fredericksburg, the first resident Pastor was appointed to St. Mary's. We were at last a parish, in every sense of the word. [36]

V

Pastors in Residence

On Sunday, November 15, 1871, the Reverend Hugh J. McKeefrey, took up his duties as resident pastor. Father McKeefrey had only recently come into the diocese and had come to Fredericksburg from Harpers Ferry where he had been temporarily stationed. He was to remain here for four years.

The first recorded action of the new pastor was the baptism of Amelia Francis Dumbacher on November 25, 1871, ten days after Father McKeefrey had become pastor. He recorded this baptism in a parish register which he probably picked up in the neighborhood of a Union Army Post. This register, which was in use until 1929 was a military record book whose pages are all headed with designations such as "Corps, Staff Rank & Regiment." Two other registers date back beyond Father McKeefrey's time. One has an entry dated September, 1862, two months before the first battle of Fredericksburg. The entry records a Baptism performed by a Father Donnelon. The child receiving the Sacrament was Eleonore Ryan, daughter of Jacob and Marie Ryan. This book was in use until 1928. Many parishioners of today will find their names inscribed in this register, linking them with the dim past. A third register, recording deaths in the parish shows its first entry as 1866 and was in use until 1936.

In June of 1872, St. Mary's played host to the statewide convention of the Catholic Benevolent Society. The press followed this convention with great interest and one can imagine the pride of the parishioners, as their city, for the first time, was the scene of statewide Catholic activity.

Bishop Gibbons paid a visit to Fredericksburg in November of 1872. In his diary he notes that he arrived in Fredericksburg on November 21, and started with Father McKeefrey, for Tappahannock. On the 23rd they returned to Fredericksburg and, on the following morning, November 24th, the Bishop confirmed 13 persons. That evening he preached a sermon on the Ecumenical Council and the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility. The Fredericksburg Ledger reports that a large congregation of all faiths was in attendance, attracted by the Bishop's reputation for "eloquence and ability." The "Ledger" further reports that "Bishop Gibbons is a young man [38] of frank and intelligent countenance and pleasant and persuasive address."

Bishop Gibbons, upon his return to Richmond, noted in his diary the Catholic "population" of Father McKeefrey's missions.

Fredericksburg---180	King George Co.-----16
Ashland-----40	Tappahannock-----10
Chesterfield-----26	Total-----272

These figures provide an interesting sidelight, the size of the area covered by our first pastor. These areas remained within the province of the pastors of St. Mary's until comparatively recent times.

St. Mary parish had been without formal housing for the pastor from its beginning. This condition was rectified in July 1873 when Bishop James Gibbons purchased a nearby lot with a house that would become the first rectory. The lot, measuring 72 feet by 132 feet, was bought from G. H. B. Fitzhugh for \$1700 and is located where 702 and 704 Princess Anne Street are today. Father McKeefrey had begun visiting larger cities--Portsmouth, Baltimore and Washington--earlier in the year to secure funds to buy a rectory, an effort that continued into the fall. The *Fredericksburg Ledger* of August 8 reported that he traveled to Alexandria for "collecting funds to complete the payments on the parsonage building recently purchased." In his second Annual Report to the bishop for fiscal year 1874, he reported that the parish still owed a debt of \$400 "on the parochial house which was bought this year." Father McKeefrey's future was to hold more future construction and property improvement challenges, but not in Fredericksburg.



St. Mary Rectory
Built 1885

In 1875, Father McKeefrey was transferred. He was truly a pioneer of this diocese. First resident Pastor at St. Mary's, he went on to build a church at Keyser the year of his departure from Fredericksburg. He also remodeled the church at Martinsburg and secured a convent for an order of Sisters. He built rectories at Keyser and Martinsburg and also here in Fredericksburg. He later served as Rector of St. Patrick's in Richmond.

Father McKeefrey was replaced by Father J. L. Tiernan who served for nine years as Pastor. During his Pastorate, Bishop Gibbons paid his last visit to Fredericksburg as Bishop of Richmond, just a few days before leaving for Baltimore where he was to become Archbishop and, later, Cardinal. In 1878, Bishop Keane came to Fredericksburg to confer the Sacrament of Confirmation. He appeared here in Fredericksburg on many occasions after this. In February of 1878, the church was draped in mourning for the death of His Holiness, Pope Pius IX.

On Wednesday, May 31, 1882, in the worst conflagration to hit Fredericksburg since that caused by Union and Confederate guns in 1862, the rectory was destroyed by fire. A bazaar was arranged several months later, and, through the profits realized from this affair, a new rectory was financed and construction began in September of 1882. This is the present rectory.



Rev. John L. Tiernan
Second Resident Pastor
1875-1883

The *Virginia Star* of May 31, 1882, reported that the old rectory was destroyed four days earlier by a fire that began in Citizen's Hall, Fredericksburg's entertainment center. That hall was situated on the adjacent lot between the church and the rectory (See figure 1). Although the fire destroyed both the hall and rectory, it only slightly damaged the church. Neither Father Tiernan nor "Miss Lucy Mullen and family," who were also residing at the rectory, were injured.

In August 1882, Bishop John Joseph Keane, purchased the Citizen's Hall lot from St. George R. Fitzhugh and sold the old rectory property in November to A. Mason Garner for \$500. A fortunate consequence of the fire was that this new property would permit the placement of a rectory next to the church. The lot was also large enough to accommodate the future Parish Hall that was to be built in 1948.

Father Tiernan was transferred in October of 1883 to the pastorate at Harpers Ferry. He was replaced by Father J. T. O'Farrell. Father O'Farrell had been Assistant Pastor of St. Francis Church in Staunton. During his stay, Father O'Farrell had the Church painted and probably instituted the annual bazaar. The Fredericksburg Virginia Star notes, on August 27, 1884, that the ladies of the [40] parish will hold a "fair and festival commencing about the 15th of September. We bespeak them a very liberal patronage, as they very seldom call upon our citizens for aid."

A few months later, one of the more notable parishioners during Father O'Farrell's pastorate at St. Mary, Captain Noah Fairbank (often spelled Fairbanks), was claimed by death. As the pioneer of local river navigation, he commanded steamboats on the Rappahannock River-Chesapeake Bay route between Fredericksburg and Baltimore for many years. In his 70s during the Civil War, he retired to a small farm in Caroline County, and in October 1869, he became a Catholic at St. Mary. When he died in Fredericksburg on December 1, 1884, at the age of nearly 93, the *Fredericksburg News* described him as being the town's "oldest inhabitant." The *Virginia Star* of December 5, reported that his "funeral took place Sunday afternoon from St. Mary's Catholic church and his remains followed to the city cemetery by a large concourse of friends." The death of his wife is also recorded in St. Mary records as "Nov. 1879, Mary Fairbanks."

In 1885, the church underwent repairs and remodeling.

The Catholic Church.

St. Mary's Catholic Church has recently undergone a thorough renovation and repair. When, nearly a year ago, Father O'Farrell, the present popular and genial Pastor, took charge of this parish, the Church was not particularly attractive in its internal appearance and in some respects the inside arrangements were very injudicious. This was particularly the case in regard to the old style, harsh, straight-lined wooden canopy that covered the altar, which then served as a repository for the accumulation of dust, producing an unsightly appearance, especially when viewed from the gallery. Now all this is changed. The Altar is set in an alcove, surmounted by a graceful roof which rises to an apex formed by the joining of two serpentine curves somewhat like Hogarth's line of beauty. The sacristy and the opposite apartment on the other side of the altar are likewise arched over--the effect of the three arches being a singularly neat and graceful appearance. Each arch is surmounted by a large gilt cross. The ceiling has been torn down and instead of being plastered, the entire chapel is now ceiled with a light colored wood, which rising in a concave form gives not only a graceful and pleasing appearance, but good acoustic properties to the sanctuary. All around the sides of the church there runs a neat wainscoting about five feet in height. The whole interior has been beautifully painted in delicate mezzo-blue shade, and as the church now appears with its newly carpeted aisles it is one of the handsomest and most orderly-looking we have seen for a long time.

Just below the apex of the dome of the centre alcove hangs a beautiful bronze sanctuary lamp.

The arches, which span the alcove and sacristy, are made of galvanized iron, and are the work of Messrs. Whyte & Overman, of Washington. The wood-work was done by Mason L. Garner, and does credit to his skill and taste. The painting, which is the work of John J. George, is excellent.

On the whole the congregation of St. Mary's church are to be congratulated on their pluck and determination to possess a suitable house of worship; and they may also be considered fortunate in having such a pastor to lead them as Father O'Farrell than whom no minister in our town is more popular and beloved.

Fredericksburg Free Lance
June 26, 1885

(Courtesy Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star)

Father O'Farrell oversaw what was likely the first major renovation of the church. An article in the June 26, 1885, Fredericksburg Free Lance provided a good description of the appearance of the church, before and after those changes. (See the newspaper article, page 27.)

Father O'Farrell's last major social event at St. Mary was the church picnic. The Fredericksburg Free Lance of August 21, 1885, reported that Father O'Farrell and "the younger members of St. Mary's Catholic Church started in wagons, buggies, and carriages for Jett's Woods, about five miles west of town, to hold their third annual picnic."

Father O'Farrell was a noted speaker and his orations before groups, such as the Sons of Sobriety, and at St. Mary missions were often newsworthy. On August 25, he traveled to Warsaw where he celebrated a High Mass in the morning and "at night, spoke to a goodly gathering, most largely composed of Protestants, in the Court-house."

Father O'Farrell was transferred in September 1885 and replaced by Father Charles Donahoe who also had served at St. Francis in Staunton. Father O'Farrell was transferred to St. Joseph's in Petersburg.

Father Donahoe served in Fredericksburg until 1890, when he was replaced by Father M. F. Dinneen, who served for two years. In 1892, Father Thomas J. Wilson became pastor and remained at St. Mary's until 1895, when he was replaced by Father J. J. Kenefick. Father Kenefick had been Assistant Pastor at St. Mary's in Alexandria. He was held in the highest esteem by his former parishioners who journeyed to Richmond to petition the Bishop to reconsider his transfer of the young curate to Fredericksburg. The Washington "Post" reports that the Bishop was "inexorable" however, and the transfer was carried out. Father Kenefick fell ill almost immediately upon his transfer but soon recovered sufficiently to take up his duties here. On two other occasions in the following months he became dangerously ill and, finally, on October 29th, 1895, at the age of 28, he died. He was buried in Richmond, his birthplace.

Following the death of Father Kenefick, Father Cyril DeMuynck was temporarily assigned to St. Mary for the months of November and December 1895. On December 31, 1895, the new pastor, Father William Anthony McKeefry, arrived in Fredericksburg, a town with which he was familiar. He had resided at the St. Mary Rectory during the pastorate of his older brother, Father Hugh McKeefry.

Father William McKeefry, brother of the first Pastor, was named to replace the late Father Kenefick and he served here until the following year when Father Cyril DeMuynck was named to the Pastorate. While Father DeMuynck was serving here an unusual gathering took place as the result of a death in the Parish. At the funeral of Mrs. Mary O'Donnell, a very prominent parishioner, the last four living Pastors were in attendance. They were: Fathers Donahoe, Wilson, O'Farrell and Tiernan. Father DeMuynck was the first Pastor to have an assistant, the Rev. W. B. Hanley. Father DeMuynck left here in 1899 when Father F. Gaston Payne was appointed Pastor. Father Payne, however, remained here for less than a year and was replaced by Father David Coleman who was pastor until 1906.



Rev. J. J. Kenefick
(Fredericksburg Free Lance
courtesy of Alexandria Times)

Father William Gaston Payne was at St. Mary during the months of May and June of 1899. After his departure and before the arrival of Father Coleman, another priest, Father James E. Collins, was assigned temporarily to St. Mary. He arrived on July 1, 1899, but was here about three months before the arrival of Father Coleman. Father Collins had been ordained in Baltimore only two weeks prior to his being transferred from Lynchburg.

During his [Father Coleman's] stay in Fredericksburg there were 24 families in the parish. He said Mass on the 1st, 3rd and 4th Sundays of the month at St. Mary's. On the 2nd and 5th (if any) he journeyed to Kilmarnock by carriage and boat in order to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass for the Catholics in that then isolated place. Father Coleman was succeeded by Father Joseph M. Perrig [41] in 1906. His assistant was Father A. J. Halbleib. Father Perrig died in the rectory in 1914.

Father Perrig died on December 13, 1913, at the age of 44 from complications of diabetes. The Fredericksburg Daily Star reported that he not only served the missions at Ashland, Colonial Beach, Kilmarnock, and all of the Northern Neck, but also had time to build the church at Woodford (Woodslane), St. Mary of the Annunciation. The St. Mary baptismal records specify the name of the church in November 1913, a month before his death.

Father Augustine J. Halbleib was at St. Mary from mid-1907 to the fall of 1909. In 1910, he was an Assistant Pastor at Sacred Heart Chapel in Norfolk. Father Halbleib died on July 1, 1933, and is buried in Chesterfield County, Virginia.

After the death of Father Perrig, Father Thomas B. Martin became Pastor. Father Martin built the churches at King George Court House and Colonial Beach. His assistants were the Reverend Fathers Leo L. Farrell, Damian Kennedy, John F. Kociela, Albert H. Klocke, and Emmett Gallagher. Father Gallagher is still living and is now Pastor of St. Rita's Church in Alexandria. He is the oldest living ex-pastor or assistant at St. Mary's.

Father Emmett O'Connell Paul Gallagher died on February 9, 1968. Most of the assistant pastors of Father Martin were at St. Mary for only short periods and included some from religious orders as well as diocesan priests. Father Farrell and Father Kennedy (and Father W. D. Noon, who assisted occasionally) were of the Order of Preachers (Dominican); Father Klocke was a Jesuit. A more complete list of priests who assisted at St. Mary can be found in a later section.

Father Martin left St. Mary's in 1922 when Father John A. Callahan became Pastor. Father Callahan served here for seven years. He was replaced by Father Joseph V. Brennan.

Father Callahan oversaw a major renovation of the church in the summer of 1927 that included not only the overall necessary repair work but also major improvements. That effort included the stucco coating of both the inside and outside walls, addition of new kneelers, repainting of the pews and altar, and the installation of new carpet for the aisles. Masses were held in the Sacristy while the work was ongoing.

It was during Father Brennan's pastorate that the St. Mary's Sanctuary Society was founded. This organization of the ladies of the Parish is one of the financial mainstays of the parish, their many affairs providing the church with a substantial share of its funds. Responsible for the weekly maintenance of the Sanctuary, the ladies have long kept this sacred place a fit home for the Tabernacle in which dwells the Real Presence.

There was a Sanctuary Society at St. Mary from the very early years. The 1873 and 1874 Annual Reports to the bishop listed the Benevolent Society and the Sanctuary Society as the only parish organizations. With the

exception of 1879, when the Altar Society was named the sole society, no organizations were listed for St. Mary parish until 1894. From then, the Sanctuary Society, sometimes called Altar Society or Tabernacle Society, was listed as a parish organization.

Father Brennan was replaced by Father Richard B. Washington in 1936. Father Washington, now Pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Hot Springs, West Virginia, is a convert, and a collateral descendant of our first President. He was followed in the Pastorate by Father James H. McConnell in 1937. In 1942 Father McConnell enlisted as a Navy Chaplain, and after his stint of service to his country, became Pastor of St. Francis' Church in Staunton.

In 1942 Father James J. Widmer, our esteemed present Pastor, came to Fredericksburg. At this time the Parish numbered 350 souls and the missions at King George Court House, Dahlgren Naval Proving Grounds, and Midway Island were still within the purview of the Pastor.

Father Widmer immediately set out to arrange for a Parochial school, a task that would require six years before fruition. The Church building, which was badly in need of repairs, was completely remodeled in 1944. The stucco exterior of the building was renewed, the balcony extended to over twice its size and a new stairway added. Since that time a completely new Altar, of semi-liturgical style, replaced the old Gothic one, new flooring has been laid and rubber cushions placed on the kneelers. A new roof replaced the old slate roof, the original, which had begun to fall, piece by piece. In 1945 Father Widmer built a steeple to house the [43] bell which had, some years before, been hung on a small wooden platform in the rear of the Church. The bell, inscribed "Church of the Immaculate Conception" was found half-buried in the ground when Father Widmer first came here.



Rev. James J. L. Widmer
Pastor 1942 - 1959

The church bell was left behind when the old St. Mary was sold in 1970. It was not until 1985 that the bell was eventually moved to the new St. Mary. There is more about the bell in a later section.

In 1948 Father Widmer built the Parish Hall. This structure, 97 feet by 34 feet, is equipped with a kitchen and rest rooms. Recently the parking lot in the rear of the church was blacktopped in order to improve the parking facilities.



St. Mary Parish Hall
Built 1948

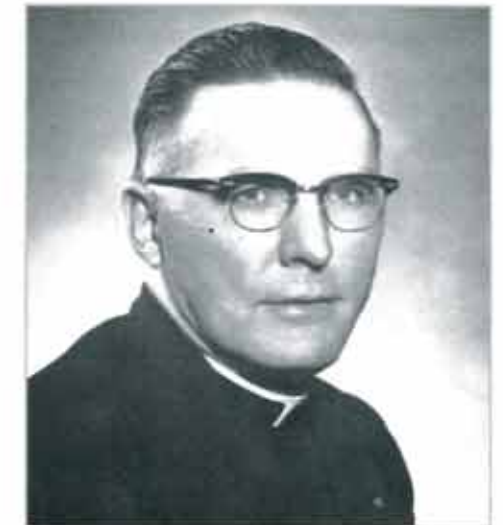
The completion of the Parish Hall was celebrated by holding an Open House on St. Patrick's Day, 1949, and was highlighted with an address by Father Thomas O'Connell, Pastor of St. Paul Catholic Church in Richmond. This building was a focal point of Catholic religious and social life at St. Mary throughout the life of the old church.

For the first five years of his pastorate Father Widmer served the mission at Midway Island. This mission was the forerunner of St. William of York's. Assistance was required in order to carry on the work at St. Mary's and its far-flung missions. This help was supplied by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, from Washington, D. C. These priests made themselves available to Father Widmer and his predecessors until 1948 when the Bishop was able to supply a regular assistant. Their aid was invaluable.

Father Widmer has served here longer than any other Pastor. His sixteen years here have seen the Parish grow from 350 souls in Fredericksburg and surrounding areas to 1200 at the present time with an additional 250 persons at St. William of York's. He has seen, and in many cases, helped many converts enter the Church, sometimes as many as 35 in one year. He has witnessed the passing of such early customs as the celebration of Mass in private homes in such places as Loretto, Port Royal and Tappahannock.

During his sixteen years in Fredericksburg Father Widmer has been most ably assisted by Reverend Fathers Charles A. Ryan, now assistant at St. Agnes Church in Arlington, John J. O'Connell, presently assistant Pastor of the Church of the Assumption, Keyser, West Virginia, and his present Assistant, Father Edward McLean.

Father Ryan left St. Mary because of illness in 1950, and upon his eventual recovery was assigned to another parish. His vacancy was filled by Father Ronald J. McCarthy, a former director of the "Ave Maria Hour" radio broadcast program. However, Father McCarthy, also, became ill before he completed his first year at St. Mary. In early 1951, he was taken to Georgetown University Hospital where he died on March 11. He was succeeded by Father John J. O'Connell in June 1951. During his five-year assignment at St. Mary, Father O'Connell was the Chaplain of the Fredericksburg Volunteer Fire Company and a member of the Elks Lodge. In May 1956, Father O'Connell was transferred to St. Andrew in Roanoke and was replaced by Father Edward J. McLean, formerly of Blessed Sacrament in Alexandria. Father McLean remained at St. Mary for four years, departing in May 1959.



Rev. Edward J. McLean
Assistant Pastor - 1956-1959

The Parish, visited so frequently by its long line of illustrious Bishops recently was honored by the presence of our new Bishop, His Excellency, John A. Russell. Bishop Russell celebrated the annual field Mass in the Old Brent Cemetery, Aquia. This Mass is celebrated each year on the Feast of Christ, the King. It commemorates [44] the first Catholic settlement in Virginia and we are honored to have this great distinction for our Parish.

And thus--one hundred years. It is indeed fitting that the passing of this first century should be witnessed by Father Widmer, under whose tutelage the greatest growth of our parish has taken place. It is also fitting that the centennial celebration will be honored by the presence of our new Bishop, who commences his Bishopric concurrently with the commencement of our second century. We earnestly pray that his future, and ours, will be as bright as our respective pasts.

1958 ~ The Third 50 Years ~ 2008

The future remained bright and prospering for St. Mary Parish, but the initial years of the third 50-year era were heralded by very dynamic and challenging changes. During the pastorate of Father Widmer, the size of the parish tripled, signaling a rate-of-growth trend that was to continue for five decades. The increasing size of the parish overtaxed more than just the church building. A widespread shortage of priests affected St. Mary and other parishes as well. In addition to the growth pangs, the parish had to adjust to changes that were globally mandated by the Second Vatican Council.

Some events at the beginning of the second centennial were personal and sorrowful. In May 1959, Father Widmer became ill with a heart condition and remained under a physician's care for six months. The Assistant Pastor, Father McLean, was transferred to Blessed Sacrament in Norfolk. Father Williamson Henry Wade was transferred from Christ the King parish in Norfolk to become the Assistant Pastor at St. Mary's, but he became ill soon after his arrival at in Fredericksburg. In November, Father Widmer's condition worsened and he was hospitalized at Georgetown University Hospital, leaving Father Wade to assume Pastoral duties. In early December, Father Wade's health deteriorated from the increased workload, which resulted in his being admitted to the same hospital as Father Widmer. With both Pastor and Assistant Pastor ill, Father Leo Creamer, Director of the Propagation of Faith of the Richmond Diocese, was assigned temporarily as Pastor for St. Mary. On December 7, a new Assistant Pastor, Father Edward L. Tobin, was transferred from St. James in Falls Church to St. Mary. The 56-year-old Father Widmer returned to Fredericksburg on December 18, but died the next day at the rectory ending a pastorate of 17 years. Father Wade, upon his recovery, assumed the position vacated by Father Tobin at St. James. Father Tobin remained at St. Mary until May 1962. During that period he served under four Pastors and was Acting Pastor for the first half of 1961.

Following the death of Father Widmer, the Very Reverend Chester P. Michael was temporarily assigned as the Pastor of St. Mary. At the time, Father Michael was the Rector of the newly founded St. John Vianney Minor Seminary, under construction in Richmond. In May 1960, Father Michael left Fredericksburg to become the full-time head of the seminary that was opening in September.

Father Joseph G. Heye replaced Father Michael as Pastor in May 1960, but his assignment at St. Mary was cut short by a tragic accident. On January 19, 1961, he was killed in a car crash while returning from a visit with friends in Winchester. Father Heye became the sixth priest to die while assigned at St. Mary; he was preceded in death by Father Donelan, (during the missionary years, 1866), and Fathers Kenefick (1895), Perrig (1913), McCarthy (1951), and Widmer (1959).

For the first half of 1961, Father Tobin was the acting Pastor of the parish until Father John T. Meehan arrived on June 16. Father Meehan was faced with two major issues for the parish: the need for a larger church to accommodate the growing Catholic population and the implementation of the changes ordered as a result of Vatican II. Showing himself to be a very proactive priest, he immediately set out to achieve both goals with good planning and organization and by mustering support from all of the parishioners.

Father Meehan formed the first building committee, organized the first fund drive, and set forth a plan for purchasing more land for a larger parish facility—all part of his St. Mary's Development Plan which extended into the 1970s.

Paralleling the progress of the Development Plan was the introduction of the changes dictated by the Second Vatican Council for the laity. In August 1962, Father Meehan, as part of the new lay participation in parish life, began instructing the Latin responses with the goal that "gradually the entire liturgy will be participated in by both priest and laity." This was a radical change not just at St. Mary but also for the Catholic world. One example of how the responses were simplified was contained in a Papal Decree dated April 25, 1964. The Eucharistic Formula of the priest's Latin, which communicants had heard from the time of



Father Meehan

their First Communions, "*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen,*" was replaced with the Congregation of Rites in which the priest said "*Corpus Christi*" and the communicant responded "*Amen.*" Later, this would be changed to the vernacular "Body of Christ" with the same response, and Communion could be received in the hand and standing instead of on the tongue and kneeling at the altar rail. These changes would be part of the transition to a new liturgy that would continue throughout the remainder of the 1960's.

A new Catholic education program was started for those students who were not able to attend Montfort Academy. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) program began in late 1962 and was formalized with a decree by the Bishop in January, 1963. The following month, the Mission Sisters of the Sacred Heart provided special training for the new CCD teachers at Montfort Academy and, with the formation of classes of all grades, the program began to flourish.

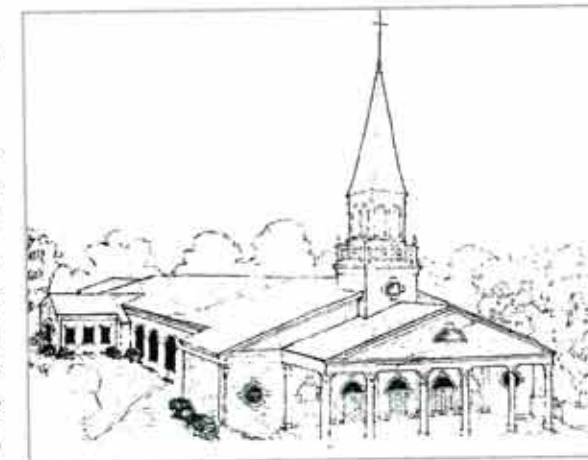
The dissemination of information to parishioners was enhanced to include the establishment of the St. Mary Parish Lending Library in June, 1965. By December, the Library Committee, headed by Virginia Havasy, obtained and cataloged hundreds of books about the Catholic Church, family life, the saints, and many other subjects. The library, sponsored by the CCD, was located in the Parish Hall so anyone could conveniently check out books after Mass.

The plans for a new church and rectory began to solidify in mid-1966. The Sunday Bulletin for July 3 stated that an "official announcement concerning the purchase of property for our new Church and Rectory will be given in the very near future. Meanwhile, give some thought to the type of church you would like to see built . . ." That solicitation of ideas from the parishioners was accompanied by the Pastor's thank-you note to the advisory committee for formulating plans "for the present with an eye on the future"—a positive indication that a new church was forthcoming. By the end of July, meetings were scheduled by the Board of Advisors and Committee Chairmen to discuss building plans with the architect. Meanwhile, the Property Committee, comprised of William F. (Nick) Kennedy and Ed Carroll, located a suitable site for the new church. With the approval of Bishop John J. Russell, a 2.8-acre tract at the corner of Stafford Avenue and William Street was purchased on August 8 from Mrs. Emily Dowling.

The new property was historic in its own right because it was part of the same Buckner-Royston Patent on which Fredericksburg and the old St. Mary church were built. In 1816, Mr. Jonathan Thornton owned the property, then named Byram Hills, that now comprises the University of Mary Washington and much of College Heights. St. Mary property is located on part of what was, then, Lots No. 12 and 13 of Byram Hills. Over the years, Thornton's property was divided and sold many times. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Fredericksburg Development Company (FDC) resurveyed and designated the property just to the west of Fredericksburg into Blocks and Lots. The new St. Mary occupies all of 30 of the 38 lots, and parts of the other eight that made up FDC Block 128. At the time of its purchase, the new site had been

part of the larger Rose Hill Farm that was owned by the Dowling family.

Through 1966, the St. Mary building program continued to move toward its goal—a new church. The initial architectural design of the church appeared on the front of the Sunday Bulletin for December 11. Inside that Bulletin, Father Meehan reported the status of the building program to the parishioners with an encouraging, but realistic, message: "The sketch on this new Bulletin is the proposed 'New St. Mary's.' We hope to see our dream realized as soon as possible. However, as in all major projects we must 'make haste slowly.' So many angles have to be considered: finances, architectural planning, building fund campaign, construction loans, et al. Presently all of these are



Original design of New St. Mary

under consideration by our Financial and Building Committees. When these are finally completed and the Bishop's approval is given then we can go ahead. Meanwhile we commend these for your consideration." The architectural drawing was only conceptual but remained on the Bulletin cover for the 18 months. The final style, design, and completion date of the building were not finalized until mid-1969.

Before the new church could become a reality, the parish had to realize \$400,000 in the building fund and that did not occur until a year-and-a-half later. A professional fund-raising company, The Community Counseling Service, was hired to organize and conduct a multi-phase campaign lasting from February to May, 1967. In March, the Bishop approved the design for the church and the rectory. Throughout the rest of the year and into early 1968, Father Meehan saw both the building fund and the parish growth rate increase.

To help alleviate the crowded conditions of the church during the late 1960's, Masses were scheduled, rescheduled, and moved to alternate locations several times. These changes were occurring at the time when the Liturgy of the Mass was being changed from Latin to English. In addition to the 7:30, 8:45, 10:00, 11:15 AM, and 5:30 PM Masses and one at St. William of York, an additional 12:30 Mass was added in October, but was discontinued the following month when another 11:15 Mass was scheduled at Montfort Academy.

In February 1968, Father Meehan was transferred to be Pastor of St. Joseph in Petersburg, and was replaced by the Pastor of that parish, Father Walter Rosser Muir. The Assistant Pastor, Father Patrick Cassiday, had also left St. Mary and was succeeded for a short time by Father John F. Mallon who remained until the end of September, 1968. Father Muir inherited fund-raising and building programs, continual changes instituted by the Ecumenical Council, and a parish with nearly 2000 parishioners trying to fit into a church building designed to hold about 250.

The perennial problems of the condition of the church building and lack of priests forced a search for other facilities for Sunday Mass. Father Muir had concerns about the safety of the church balcony because of overcrowding at Mass. When this fact was brought to the attention of Bishop Russell, it was suggested that the City Inspector examine the structure. The inspection discovered enough deficiencies to recommend that "a less than full occupancy was desirable" at Mass. Relief from the overcrowding came when the Fredericksburg School Board voted to let St. Mary use the Maury School auditorium for Sunday Mass based on a six-month renewable contract. That large facility permitted Father Muir to reduce the number of Sunday Masses by combining those at 10:00 and 11:15 into one at 10:30, somewhat decreasing the strain on the two parish priests. Two years later, the School Board again approved the use of school property--the auditorium of James Monroe High School--for Sunday services and religious education.

Additional support for St. Mary throughout the building-campaign years came from the other churches of Fredericksburg. The pastors of St. George's Episcopal Church, Trinity Episcopal Church, the Fredericksburg Baptist Church and the Arwood Church of God generously opened their churches at various times for St. Mary to use for Sunday and Vigil Masses, and other services. The last Midnight Mass for the congregation of the old St. Mary was celebrated in the Fredericksburg Baptist Church, thanks to its Pastor, Reverend Robert Cates, and the Board of Trustees.

Even though the strain of overcrowding was somewhat relieved, the workload of the priests diminished very little. The assistance that St. Mary received from outside priests began to fade in mid-1968. The Consalata Fathers said that after May they could no longer support the parish. When Father Muir was unsuccessful in obtaining priests from other areas, the Bishop was able to provide some relief by drawing on the priests from the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Missionhurst) missionaries. Father Albert Nobels arrived in September, 1968 to replace Father Mallon. (Incidentally, the title Assistant Pastor was last used with Father Mallon; Father Nobels was the first priest at St. Mary to hold the new title of Associate Pastor.) Another Missionhurst priest, Father Gerald Brouwer, replaced Father Nobels in January 1969.

The building program continued to move closer toward having a desperately needed new church, but the process

was not a smooth one. During the late 1960's, liturgical changes were influencing the design of churches. Instead of the traditional look, as initially shown in the Bulletin, the new church designs sought to move the congregation closer to the altar. The church-in-the-round design--one with more width than depth--was to become a reality for the new St. Mary edifice. In May 1969, with the approval of the bishop, an architect was selected and tasked to begin preliminary sketches for the new church.

In addition to the demands of the building program and his pastoral duties, Father Muir was active in other areas of the Fredericksburg community. He was the first Catholic clergyman to become a staff member of the Fredericksburg Personal Counseling Service. To be qualified for that position, he had to complete a course in counseling at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. The remainder of the staff was comprised of clergy from other local churches. Father Muir was also active in the Human Relations Council. In September 1969, Father Muir resigned his pastorate and returned to his home in Alexandria.

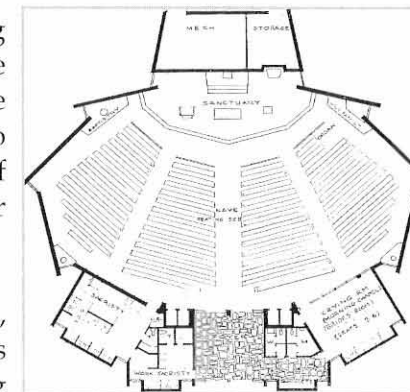
Replacing Father Muir as pastor of St. Mary was Father Vincent S. Sikora, the founding pastor of St. Ambrose in Annandale. His eight-year tenure at St. Mary was a dynamic one resulting in the construction of the new church, rectory, and activity center. During that period, the parish grew from about 1700 to over 3100 members. In January 1970, Father Brouwer departed to be an Associate Pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in Staunton. His replacement, Father John S. Wysocki, arrived in August 1970 but held that position for less than a year. He was reassigned as the first pastor of St. William of York in Aquia when it was established as an independent parish on June 1, 1971.

Groundbreaking for the new \$300,000 St. Mary edifice was on June 14, 1970. While the construction was on-going, Mass and religious education was held at other Fredericksburg churches and the James Monroe High School Auditorium. Two months after work began on the new church, the old St. Mary church and property were sold to the Virginia District of the Church of the Nazarene for \$50,000. Celebration of the last Sunday Mass at the old church was on August 16, 1970. The new St. Mary church was completed the following year and was dedicated on June 20, 1971.

The sale of the old church property left the St. Mary clergy without formal housing. For three years, a residence owned by Mrs. Mamie Flippo Gaughan at 917 William Street was used as a temporary rectory. Construction for a new rectory adjoining the new church did not begin until September 1972, but was completed a year later.

The first half of the 1970's brought a major change to the parishioners of St. Mary and the other parishes of northern Virginia. In June 1974, the Diocese of Richmond was split to form the Diocese of Arlington, encompassing St. Mary and 54 other parishes. A Mass of Installation for the first Bishop of the Diocese of Arlington, Thomas J. Welsh, was celebrated on August 13, 1974. The action that finalized the separation of the dioceses occurred on April 4, 1975, when the titles "of any and all lands . . . in the City of Fredericksburg" owned by Bishop Walter F. Sullivan were transferred to Bishop Thomas J. Welsh.

Groundbreaking for the third major construction project of the St. Mary building



Early Design of New Church

Parishioners of The Catholic Church of Saint Mary cordially invite you to be present at the Blessing and Dedication of their New Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia
 by
 His Excellency The Most Reverend John Joyce Russell, D. D. Bishop of Richmond
 Sunday, the twentieth of June Nineteen hundred and seventy-one
 A concelebrated Mass with Most Reverend John J. Russell, D. D. as main celebrant will be conducted at twelve o'clock noon
 Rt. Reverend Justin D. McClunn, J. C. D. will deliver the Homily



Cornerstone



Temporary Rectory

campaign, a new Activity Center, was held on August 3, 1975. Bishop Welsh dedicated the new center on August 18, 1976. The building is the focal point for many parish religious and social events and serves as the center for the Religious Education program and Holy Cross Academy Preschool.

Father Sikora worked diligently throughout of his eight-year pastorate. From mid-1971 and until early 1977, he was the sole priest at St. Mary except for a short period. Father George Costabile was "in residence" at St. Mary in December 1972 but remained for only a few months. For most of the period, needed pastoral assistance came from Northern Virginia, especially from the priests of Bishop Ireton High School. In April 1977, just a few months before Father Sikora left, a full-time Associate Pastor, Father Gerald T. Weymes, was assigned to the parish. Father Sikora's legacy is more than the three buildings that make up St. Mary parish. Those who met him were touched by his vibrant personality, devotion to the priesthood and dedication to the spiritual growth of the parishioners. The appreciation of his efforts extended beyond Fredericksburg. Following the death of Father Sikora in December 1989, the Knights of Columbus at the Nativity of Our Lord in Burke, Virginia, honored him by naming their organization the Father Sikora Council #7992.

Father Leo Creamer, formerly the Senior Associate Pastor at St. Louis parish in Alexandria, was assigned to be the second pastor of the new St. Mary in January 1978. Father Creamer was no stranger to Fredericksburg, having been assigned temporarily to the one-hundred-year-old St. Mary in 1959. He was now pastor of a much younger seven-year-old St. Mary. Father Creamer demonstrated his interest in the Holy Land with the annual pilgrimages he made and the support he gave to many missions, convents, orphanages and parishes there. In August 1978, Father Creamer initiated the Brother Godfrey Program, in which St. Mary, as a parish, would donate one-tenth of its offertory collection to some needy organization. The first Brother Godfrey recipient was the Home of Peace Orphanage on the Mount of Olives, run by the Polish Sisters of St. Elizabeth. The program continued for at least nine years with many of the collections in 1983, and afterwards, assisting nearby embryonic parishes—St. Patrick in Chancellorsville, Our Lady of the Blue Ridge in Madison, and Our Lady of the Valley in Luray.

Shortly after the arrival of Father Creamer, the Catholic students at Mary Washington College acquired their first off-campus facility. In August 1979, Paul and Sandra Glancy sold a house and lot to the Bishop of Arlington for use by the Director of the Catholic Campus Ministry, Sister Joanne Zielinski. The residence at 1225 Brent Street gave the college members of the Newman Club and Catholic Students Association a place to gather for religious and social events. As the organization grew so did its need for larger facilities. The former College Station Post Office building at 1614 College Avenue was bought in September 1999 to be the new Catholic student center. The new building had space for an office, a large meeting room, and a chapel, as well as off-street parking.

In June 1980, Father Keith R. Ramey replaced Father Weymes who was appointed Associate Pastor of Blessed Sacrament in Alexandria. Within a few months, Father Ramey established a small bookstore in the coat closet of the church vestibule. Catholic books and religious items were sold there until the bookstore was moved to the Activity Center in 1990. For a while, Glory Books,



Father Sikora



Rendering of new St. Mary



Completed Activity Center



"Brother Godfrey"

owned by Richard and Louise Midland, sold books and religious items there and at their store in downtown Fredericksburg. The closing of that store couple of years later created a void that was filled when Connie Sielicki opened Christ the King Bookstore in 2000.

During the summer and fall of 1981, the small Byzantine Catholic community in the Fredericksburg area used St. Mary for services. With the nearest church being in northern Virginia, Rev. John Lazarek, Pastor of Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church in Annandale, and his assistant, Rev. George Dobes, traveled to Fredericksburg to hold evening services on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. Evidently, the community has remained too small to support a resident pastor and a church in Fredericksburg because the nearest Byzantine Church (Ukrainian Rite) today is the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Manassas.

St. Mary began the celebration of its 125th anniversary year in December 1982. The ceremony, held on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, was preceded with the unveiling of a five-foot marble statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary that had been placed on a pedestal in front of the church. The statue was obtained from the Visitation Convent in Bethesda, Maryland, and donated to St. Mary in the memory of John C. Wimsatt, a parishioner. The yearlong observance was concluded on December 3, 1983, with a Mass celebrated by Bishop Keating, assisted by Monsignor Justin McClunn, Vicar General of the diocese.



125th Jubilee Year Mass

Celebrated by Most Reverend John R. Keating, center, concelebrating were (left to right): Rev. John J. O'Connell; Rev. Edward J. McLean; Rev. Leo Creamer, Pastor of St. Mary; Rev. Msgr. Justin D. McClunn, Vicar General; Rev. Charles A. Ryan; Rev. Thomas F. A. O'Brien, Master of Ceremonies and Parochial Vicar, St. Mary; and Rev. Gerald T. Weymes.

(Photograph by Michael Flach; courtesy Arlington Catholic Herald)

The first half of the anniversary year was a noteworthy period for both the diocese and St. Mary parish. In February 1983, Bishop Welsh was appointed as second Bishop of the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania. The following month and on his last day as Bishop of the Diocese of Arlington, Bishop Welsh, announced that St. Mary parish boundaries would be divided to form the seventh new parish in the diocese, St. Patrick in Spotsylvania County. That announcement was made, appropriately, on St. Patrick's Day. The bishop also named Father Roy Cosby, formerly of St. Timothy in Chantilly, as the founding pastor of St. Patrick. Mr. and Mrs. John E. Pruitt, Sr. donated the 20-acre site on which the church, rectory and school are built. Historically, that land was not far from where the northern troops of Brigadier General Thomas Meagher's Second Brigade, also known as the Irish Brigade, fought during the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863.

Also in March 1983, the newly ordained Father Thomas F. A. O'Brien was assigned as Associate Pastor to St. Mary where he had been a transitional deacon. For the first time, St. Mary had three priests in attendance, but for only a month. In April, Father Ramey was transferred to be Associate Pastor of St. John parish in McLean. Father O'Brien remained at St. Mary for three years and left in June 1986 when he was awarded a research fellowship at Yale University. He was replaced by Father Dominic Irace, former Associate Pastor at St. Luke parish in McLean. Father Irace continued with his collateral position as Director of the Commission on Sacred Liturgy, Music and Art for the diocesan chancery.

On June 7, Father John R. Keating, chancellor and vicar general of the Archdiocese of Chicago, was selected by

Pope John Paul II to fill the vacancy of Bishop Welsh. He was installed as the second Bishop of the Diocese of Arlington on August 4, 1983.

In 1985, St. Mary was given back her "voice" after 15 years of silence. The bell of the old church remained with the property when it was sold to the Church of the Nazarene in 1970. Fifteen years later, the Nazarene congregation needed a larger church and sold the property, including the bell, to Beaclaire Partnership who returned it to St. Mary in January 1985. Father Creamer, with the bishop's permission, initiated the effort for the bell to be placed prominently near the church. A new bell tower, designed and built by I. T. Verdin Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio, was erected in November and blessed by Bishop Keating after the 12:30 Mass on December 22.

After nine years at St. Mary, Father Creamer retired in February 1987 because of health problems. (He died in November 1991 at the St. Joseph Home for the Aged in Richmond.) A replacement pastor would not be available until June so in the interim Father Irace was appointed as parish Administrator. Although here for only a short time, Father Irace is remembered for his powerful, operatic voice. A new Associate Pastor, Father David Martin, was assigned in February 1987 and remained at St. Mary until May 1988 when he was transferred to be Associate Pastor at St. John the Evangelist in Warrenton.

The spring of 1988 saw the formation of another Catholic church in the area. Bishop Keating dedicated the St. Matthew Mission Chapel of St. Patrick on February 6. After 11 years as a mission, St. Matthew, with boundaries encompassing the southern half of Spotsylvania County, became an independent parish in 1999.

Father Charles W. Merkle, III, came to St. Mary following his ordination in May 1988 to replace Father Martin as Associate Pastor. He remained until his transfer to St. Mary of Sorrows in Fairfax in 1991. His replacement was Father Kevin Gallagher, Associate Pastor of St. Timothy in Chantilly. About the same time, and with the permission of the bishop, Father Robert J. Hermley, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, was assigned to assist at the parish.

Father John J. Munley became Pastor of St. Mary in June 1987, replacing Father Irace. He delighted in his Irish heritage (visiting Ireland more than 15 times) and shortly after beginning his pastorate he formed a chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an international association of Irish Catholics, at St. Mary. He also served as the Virginia state chaplain of that association. Father Munley retired in May 1992 and returned to his native Pennsylvania to be near his family. He died in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on April 26, 1995.

The first Permanent Deacon of the parish, Rev. Mr. David J. Geary, arrived from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in mid-1990. Ordained in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 1979, Deacon Geary served at St. Mary until November 1993. For the next six years he was assigned to St. Patrick/St. Matthew. After three years out of the area, he returned to St. Patrick in 2002. In October 2007, he was appointed by Bishop DiLorenzo of the Diocese of Richmond as Deacon Administrator of St. Mary of the Annunciation in Ladysmith.

The decade of the 1990's witnessed the beginning of St. Mary parish being able to retain a staff of at least three priests. The presence of the additional priest was a blessing with the parish population increasing from 6700 to 8700 during that period. Father Hermley returned to his Oblate order in 1992 and was replaced by a new Associate Pastor, Father Juan A. Albaladejo, of the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest. Father Gallagher was transferred to St. Phillip parish in Falls Church in June 1993 and was replaced by newly ordained Father Michael Orolowsky. Father Albaladejo was recalled to New Jersey in 1994 to be reassigned by the superior of his religious community.



Fr. Creamer with St. Mary bell

(Photo by John Paraskevas; Courtesy of Free Lance-Star)

Father Christopher M. Buckner, formerly Associate Pastor at Holy Spirit parish in Annandale, was assigned to be pastor of St. Mary in June 1992. Father Buckner was no stranger at St. Mary; he served here as a seminarian during the summer of 1978. His background was strong in Catholic education having taught at Loyola University and the Notre Dame Institute (now Graduate School) of Christendom College in Alexandria. He wrote a 100 page thesis on the Eucharist and sent busloads of Marchers for Life to Washington, D.C. every January. He had written course manuals for the Catholic Distance University since 1984 and remained involved with its curriculum throughout his pastorate at St. Mary. He arranged and lead pilgrimages to the Holy Land for our youth and adults. He enlarged the rectory, sanctuary and church parking lot. He was transferred to be the full-time undergraduate dean at that university in June 2000 and resided at St. Veronica parish in Chantilly. Father Buckner's informative, theology-based homilies at Sunday Mass are memorable.

Father John (Jack) Peterson was assigned as Associate Pastor in June 1995 and remained until June the following year when he was transferred to St. Patrick parish in Chancellorsville. During that time he also served as the Director of the Catholic Campus Ministry for the students at Mary Washington College. The newly ordained Father Edwin Tewes replaced Father Peterson in June 1996.

After four years at St. Mary, Father Orlowsky was appointed as Parochial Vicar of Sacred Heart parish in Manassas in June 1997. Father Christopher Mould from Church of the Nativity parish in Burke, Virginia, filled his vacancy.

During the pastorate of Father Buckner, the Diocese of Arlington suffered a great loss. Bishop John R. Keating died on March 22, 1998, while making his *ad limina* visit to Pope John Paul II. During his 15-year episcopate, he dedicated 20 churches and seven parochial schools, numbers that reflect a 78% growth of Catholics in the diocese. (For the same period, St. Mary parish grew by 47%.) Bishop Paul Stephen Loverde, ordinary of the Diocese of Ogdensburg, New York, became the third Bishop of the Diocese of Arlington when he was appointed to fill the diocesan vacancy on January 25, 1999.



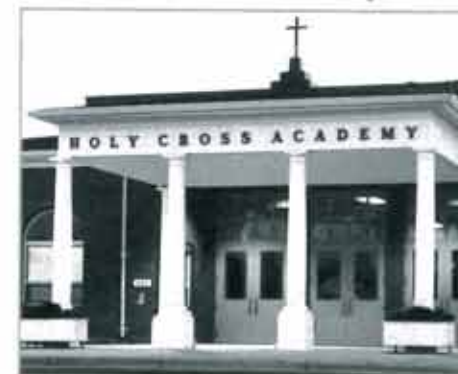
Bishop John R. Keating

The late 1990's was a period of transition for religious education in the parish. The Daughters of Wisdom sold the property and buildings of Montfort Academy to the U. S. National Park Service in June 1997 after providing a Catholic education to children for a half-century. The Academy remained open for the next year and graduated the last class in June of 1998. The Daughters of Wisdom returned to their headquarters in New York. The following September, a new, larger parochial elementary and middle school, Holy Cross Academy, opened on a 25-acre site in southern Stafford County. The Oblate Sisters of St. Francis De Sales administers the education program and operations of the school. At the close of the 2008 school year, the enrollment of the school was about 530 students.

Father Francis Peffley arrived in June 2000 as the new Parochial Vicar in the place of Father Tewes who was transferred to St. Timothy in Chantilly. Known as the "juggling priest," Father Peffley entertained many audiences, especially the students and staff at



Montfort Academy



Holy Cross Academy

Holy Cross Academy and residents of senior citizen facilities, with his handling of flaming torches, bowling balls and machetes. In July 2001, he was assigned to become the founding administrator of Holy Trinity parish in Gainesville. His replacement was Father James Haley who remained for less than one year. Just prior to Christmas 2001, Father Stefan Starzynski arrived at St. Mary to fill that vacancy.

Our second Permanent Deacon, Donald K. McAskill, was introduced to St. Mary in September 2000. Deacon McAskill served the parish until his death in November 2003.

After five years at St. Mary parish, Father Mould was reassigned to Alexandria in June 2002 to become Administrator of St. Lawrence the Martyr parish. That same month Father Joseph Kenna arrived at St. Mary from All Saints Parish in Manassas to replace Father Mould. Father Kenna was an ardent sports fan, especially of the Pittsburgh teams. Father Kenna known, as "Padre" by his hockey teammates, and Tom Sherman, the Holy Cross Academy Athletic Director, played defense for team Villa Bella at the Central Park Ice Rink. After two years, he was transferred to St. Bernadette parish in Springfield, Virginia.

Father Daniel E. Hamilton became pastor of St. Mary upon the departure of Father Buckner. He had been Associate Pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish in Lake Ridge, Virginia for 13 years. He was a fan of the Washington Redskins and had jokingly stated early in his pastorate that he was not to be interrupted when that team was playing on Monday night. Father Hamilton resigned his pastorate in August 2002.

Father Donald Rooney was transferred from St. Leo the Great Parish in Fairfax to be Administrator for St. Mary upon the departure of Father Hamilton, and remained in that position until the bishop appointed him as Pastor two years later. By then, the parish population had grown to over 10,000. With barely a year of his administration behind him, Father Rooney saw the boundaries of St. Mary change with the formation of St. Jude parish in Spotsylvania County.

From the beginning of his time at St. Mary, Fr. Rooney was dedicated to unity, joy and healing, bringing the Catholic community together as one family alive in the sacraments, and ready to actively serve the wider community of Fredericksburg. The Parish Council was reestablished and the work was begun in calling members of the Church to take active roles as volunteers in the many ministries of the parish.

His love of music and art became apparent with the broadened music liturgy he instituted and the decor improvements he made to both the interior and exterior of the church. One notable addition is the Mary Grotto, built around the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in front of the church, which serves as a place of meditation, prayer, and quiet gathering. Another improvement is the outdoor garden area that he and Sister Susan Louise, the Principal, designed for Holy Cross Academy. What had been a partially grassed and mulched tract that became muddy when it rained was transformed into a decorative concrete patio for school activities and social events. Other improvement projects that he designed include a variety of garden areas that were embellished with art, perimeters of flowers, decorative shrubs, and trees.

The interior of the church was brightened through the use of fabrics, new light-grained hardwood for the floor of the sanctuary, and clear-glass side doors. Other interior improvements include a redesigned sound system that improves the church acoustics and larger Stations of the Cross. The vestibule was renovated with improved lighting, a life-size image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and a new bulletin board.



Today, August 1, 2004,
at
12:30pm
for a joyful celebration
of the Eucharist
and
the Installation of

The Reverend Donald J. Rooney
as our Pastor
Reception following

A major focus of Father Rooney is his dedication to ecumenism. He is the Director of the diocesan Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and takes a proactive role as a member of both the state committee of LARCUM (the Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, United Methodist Covenant), and the coordinating cabinet of the Virginia Council of Churches. His feelings about ecumenism were expressed in an interview for the *Arlington Catholic Herald*:

"First of all our job is to dispel all the misconceptions people have about each other. And then it's about speaking the truth in love to one another, so we get to know one another, because you can't love somebody unless you know them. . . . I know how the Holy Spirit can change hearts and reveal truth. That's why I'm a priest. . . . There are just some things that we human beings are not going to be able to accomplish on our own, and because we know this truly is the will of Christ, we literally need to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to make it happen."

Those feelings are exemplified by his involvement with Christian-Muslim interaction groups and have been demonstrated by his introduction of the monthly multi-denominational, music-based Taize service. He strongly encourages parish interaction with the Micah Ministry, the Homeless Shelter and other charity organizations, as well as nurturing friendships with other churches in Fredericksburg. His energy for organizing parish social events is clearly evident by the number of attendees at the annual parish picnics.

Among Father Rooney's plans for St. Mary is a needed expansion of church support facilities that will add more office space, meeting rooms, religious education classrooms, a choir area, and ultimately a church that could seat 1,000 people. The planning process is on-going, and like all plans, is driven by many factors, not the least of which are affordability and time. As Father Meehan said about church expansion 40 years ago, to achieve a goal, one sometimes has to "make haste slowly."

Parochial Vicars at St. Mary changed just prior to Father Rooney's formal installation as the Pastor. In mid-2004, Father Wilhem Ettner arrived from St. John parish in McLean to replace Father Kenna. A year later, Father Ettner was transferred to be the Administrator at St. John Bosco parish in Woodstock, Virginia; and was replaced by Father Michael Weston from St. Mary of Sorrows in Fairfax.

Also in mid-2004, Father Ronald Escalante arrived from St. Matthew in Spotsylvania to be a part-time Parochial Vicar at St. Mary. For two years prior to his arrival he had been assigned to be the Chaplain of the Catholic College Ministry at Mary Washington College (later University of Mary Washington) and would retain that responsibility while at St. Mary. He was often seen riding his electric motor scooter around the streets of College Heights while traveling between the college campus and the church.

Father Edwin Perez, formerly a Parochial Vicar at St. Michael parish in Annandale, arrived at St. Mary in the fall of 2004 to replace Father Starzynski. Father Perez was an accomplished musician and played with instrumental groups during religious services. He coordinated the Extraordinary Ministers, Altar Servers and Ushers as well as working with the Youth Ministry.

In June 2007, both Father Weston and Father Escalante departed the parish for new assignments. Father Weston was assigned to be the new Director of Liturgy at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC. Father Escalante was transferred to St. Luke parish in McLean as a Parochial Vicar.

That same month, Father Stephen McGraw arrived from St. Leo parish in Fairfax to replace Father Weston. His fluency in Spanish was a welcome complement for spiritual support of the Hispanic community at St. Mary. Prior to entering the priesthood, Father McGraw was a lawyer specializing in constitutional law for the United States Department of Justice.

Father Fred Edlefsen arrived at St. Mary in June 2007 to replace Father Escalante. Formerly, he was the Chaplain of Bishop O'Connell High School in Arlington and now is in residence at St. Mary as the full-time Chaplain of the Catholic Campus Ministry at the University of Mary Washington. He assists with some of the Sunday Masses and other services.

The June 2008 annual diocesan appointment of priests occurred just as this book was about to be published. Father Perez was assigned to be the Chaplain and Assistant Principal of Bishop Ireton High School. His replacement was the newly ordained Father Wilson (Bill) Korpi. Father Korpi has been a Permanent Deacon at St. Philip in Falls Church and Church of the Nativity in Burke.

So, the arrival of the new Parochial Vicars at St. Mary brings a conclusion to the sesquicentennial year of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. In his homily at the anniversary celebration Mass, Bishop Loverde stated that the seed of Catholicism in Fredericksburg was planted 150 years ago when our parish was organized. Even earlier, the ground in which that seed was planted had been cultivated by selfless, dedicated missionary priests who risked their safety for a small group of brave Catholics who, in remaining steadfast in their faith, nurtured that seed until the building of the church. Growth of that seed began in spite of being subjected to a devastating war that occurred during a decade when spiritual ministering was provided only occasionally by traveling missionaries. With the continuous spiritual nourishment provided by many gardeners over a century and a half, that seed has grown into the flourishing Catholic community that, today, is the parish of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. That seed was truly the mustard seed of faith! For the future, we pray that God will continue to bestow upon this parish the blessings of the past.

Afterword

The history of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, like all histories, is incomplete. Not all persons could be named or events be reported because much of that information is hidden away in undiscovered sources, is not recorded, or has been lost. Time and space restraints, also, were major factors that governed the presentation of the parish story.

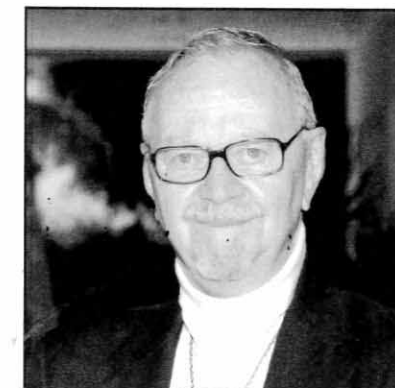
The preparation of the history required a search for sources and information that took the writer to various archdioceses, dioceses, parishes, and institutions that were located in several states of this nation and in foreign countries. Fortunately, most of the searching could be done over the telephone and internet. On-site searching at libraries and archives required traveling several hundred miles and spending scores of hours of ferreting out related facts and stories that could be included in the history. Fortunately, the writer had a well-written centennial history on which to build the story of the third half-century of St. Mary parish.

About the Author

William (Bill) Shorter retired after a 34-year career as an electrical engineer and military analyst with the Department of Defense. He has been involved in genealogy research for over 40 years and has written papers on local history. The last two were: "The Trench Hill Block" and "The Swift Run Gap Turnpike." His latest research effort was on-going when the 150th anniversary year of St. Mary parish began. The parish history became an extension of a work that traces the pedigree of the lands on which St. Mary church has occupied. That paper will be a separate work and completed in the near future.

He has been a member of St. Mary since he moved to Fredericksburg in 1964. A native of Hinton, West Virginia, he graduated from West Virginia Institute of Technology. He has been married to the former O'Neta L. Skiles for 45 years and they have two children, Kelly and Steven, and three grandchildren.

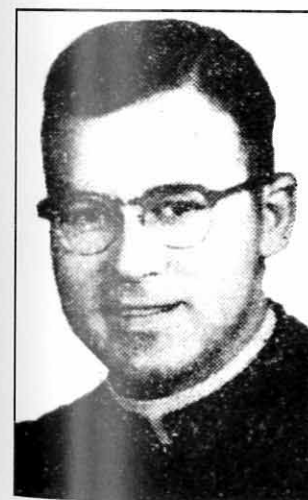
Two Tidbits of St. Mary History



Philip V. Brennan, author
*St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception:
Story of a Church, 1858-1958*

Philip V. (Phil) Brennan is a veteran journalist who is still active at nearly 81 years old. He attended the Jesuit-run Brooklyn Prep and in 1943, at the age of 17, joined the U. S. Marines. In 1956, he moved his family to Fredericksburg and for three years in the 1960's was a columnist for the *National Review* in Washington. His 12-year tenure on Capitol Hill brought him jobs for Richard Nixon, Dwight Eisenhower, and Barry Goldwater. He also served as a staff aide for the House Republican Policy Committee and helped handle the Washington public relations operation for the Alaska Statehood Committee that won statehood for Alaska. It was during this period that Father Widmer, knowing of Brennan's writing profession and interest in history, approached him to pen a centennial history of St. Mary parish.

Philip Brennan left Fredericksburg in 1964 and moved to Maryland near the U. S. Naval Academy, and later, in 1968, to Boca Raton, Florida, where he now resides. For eight years, he was the Sacristan of St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church. He writes for NewsMax.com and is an editor & publisher of *Wednesday on the Web*, a trustee of the Lincoln Heritage Institute, and is a member of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.



Rev. Ralph Hamlet
(Photo courtesy Free Lance-Star)

Reverend Ralph M. Hamlet, Retired Diocese of Richmond

St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception parish has had many priests--missionaries and residents--in attendance. There were countless others who visited and assisted the parish on many occasions. But, one is unique because he was the first parishioner of St. Mary to become a priest.

Reverend Ralph Hamlet is the son of Mr. and Mrs Edward Hamlet who were residents of Spotsylvania County when their son entered the seminary. Father Hamlet was ordained in Richmond on May 1, 1962, by Bishop John R. Russell. Although he celebrated his first Mass at St. Mary a week later, he was never assigned to St. Mary.

He served four years in the U.S. Air Force and he converted to Catholicism in 1951. He attended St. Bernard Seminary in Cullman, Alabama, and St. Mary Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland. He also received a Masters of Education degree from Loyola College in Baltimore in 1962.