



Courtesy of MARI LUCEY

The postcard (above) shows the 'old' St. Mary Catholic Church at 706 Princess Anne St. in Fredericksburg, which was used by the church from 1858 to 1970. It now houses law offices and apartments. The current church building is on William Street. The photo at right shows the old church interior on May 6, 1961, during the wedding of Janet Kulesz and Charles Martin, with the Rev. Edward Tobin presiding.



Courtesy of JANET KULESZ MARTIN

# St. Mary: Church of memories, history

By Kathleen McCabe Mahoney

WHEN THE CALL went out for memories from St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception parishioners who had attended services at the original church site at 706 Princess Anne St. in Fredericksburg, the response was puny and the excuses plentiful. "Someone else will tell that tale!" or "I don't write too well!" were two common refrains from those who worshipped at the downtown site, which had been dedicated in 1858.

Arm-twisting, albeit gently in the case of our octogenarians, did eventually work, and the reunion committee was able to produce a book of reminiscences in time for the homecoming picnic Sunday, June 11, held on the grounds of Holy Cross Academy in Stafford County.

While the collection of first-person accounts and interviews from both natives and "come heres" serves to tell quite a lot about being Catholic in mid-20th-century Fredericksburg, the committee considers it merely an appetizer. In 2008, St. Mary will celebrate its sesquicentennial, and plans an expanded publication with a formal history and additional recollections.

Many of the submissions were fond tributes to the Rev. James Widmer, who served as pastor from 1942 to 1959, when he died suddenly shortly before Christmas. His was the longest tenure

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for a pastor at St. Mary. Generous, gregarious and unbelievably energetic, he had great rapport with both the youth of the parish and the adults.

Nancy DeBruyn Burton, now of Spotsylvania County, remembered how Widmer would go over to Stafford's Chatham Heights section to pick up her and her sister, Mildred DeBruyn Haynes, and their dear friend to this day, Margaret Staples Moore. Continuing his rounds, he would head out to Kings Highway to pile in some of the nine Barrett children. Once back in the city, the priest taught them and the townies who had walked to religion classes and then transported them all back home again. The DeBruyn sisters, just preteens at the time, marveled that they often were allowed to steer the pastor's car.

Marie Savage of Falmouth, retired from the Stafford County school system, shared many memories of Widmer, who married her and Judge Joseph Savage Jr. in August of 1948 as well as baptizing their first son in 1949. As a volunteer secretary, she witnessed many important events in

the life of the growing parish, such as the beginnings of Montfort Academy, the first private Catholic school in the area.

"They are coming, the sisters are coming!" an elated Widmer shouted when he took the phone call confirming the arrival of the teaching nuns. Mother Alexander of the Daughters of Wisdom opened the school in 1948.

Savage remembered another call to the rectory, this one delivering the tragic news of the death of two Montfort youngsters who had been killed by a speeder on busy U.S. 1 in Stafford County. Maria and Eugene Brown had just been let off the Montfort school bus when they were hit.

Little Maria's classmate at the time, Margaret Barrett Hein, in her first-person submission for the book, wrote movingly of the sadness that enveloped the community. For the funeral Mass, the children and their teachers processed downtown from their school off Sunken Road.

"For many of us it was our first funeral." Hein wrote. "It impressed on us that God could call us home at any time."



**Popular priest:**  
The Rev. James  
Widmer

While officiating at sad occasions such as funerals and burials undoubtedly was a big part of life for the Fredericksburg pastor, Widmer managed to fit in visits and dinners with a variety of his parishioners. The roly-poly priest's love

of good food was no secret, and with a housekeeper who was reportedly no great cook, Widmer gratefully accepted all invitations for meals.

Virginia Havasy and N. Richard "Dick" Mountjoy, longtime parishioners, were two memorialists who mentioned entertaining the much-beloved priest in their Stafford homes. Janet Kulesz Martin of Spotsylvania added that the priests were frequent diners at her family's restaurant, Paul's Grill, on Lafayette Boulevard.

A cherished invitation was one that did not come from Catholic parishioners but from Jewish hosts. Long before people talked about the importance of ecumenism, Dr. Martin Blatt, a local optometrist, and Widmer had a close personal relationship and mutual respect. It was a natural alliance since they were both from New York

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City. The story of this charming friendship came to light during an interview for the book with Rupert and Josie Silver of Ferry Farm.

The Silvers and the Blatts were neighbors on Bunker Hill Street in Fredericksburg and were often included in social events when Widmer was a guest. Dr. Blatt's generosity went far beyond social occasions. According to the Silvers, he was a philanthropist and great humanitarian who was well-known in the Catholic community. He treated the nuns and priests at no charge and provided eyeglasses for them. Blatt died in 1961. The Silvers remain good friends with Mrs. Blatt and regularly keep in touch.

While discussions of the kindly and pious pastor dominated the reminiscences, other themes emerged from the collection of memories. Civil War connections to the antebellum church cannot help but fascinate the reader. Philip V. Brennan's history, "St. Mary's Church Centennial Celebration 1858-1958," discussed the use of St. Mary as a hospital for the wounded. Today, several members who attended services at the old church maintain they saw bloodstains on the floor.

William F. "Nick" Kennedy of Falmouth contributed a strong recollection from the 1950s that involves a famous Civil War figure, Col. John Singleton Mosby, "the Gray Ghost of the Confederacy." According to Kennedy, who was at the rectory

helping with the annual Thanksgiving clothes drive, Widmer was thumbing through some important-looking papers and suddenly held one up and said, "Nick, since you're a history buff and a fan of the Confederates, you might like to look at this." The document purported to be the baptismal record for Mosby and claimed that he had been baptized a Catholic at St. Mary in 1878.

The pastor offered the document on the spot to Kennedy, who would have been ecstatic to add it to his collection. His conscience and his sense of history, however, would not allow him to accept it, he recounted, but he does confess to having a lot of second thoughts down through the years. The legitimacy of the baptismal record and its current location are two questions Kennedy promises to investigate further.

University of Virginia professor Gerald P. Fogarty, in his "Commonwealth Catholicism" (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), notes that Mosby was buried next to his Catholic wife in St. John's churchyard in Warrenton. Fogarty adds: "Though Mosby never became a Catholic, a rumor persisted in the family that his daughter Ada had baptized him on his deathbed while he was unconscious."

Tracking down sacred items from old St. Mary Church was another goal of the committee working on the reunion. Through chance conversations and submitted recollections, the editor was able to hunt down several

items, both large and small, that were associated with the old site.

The most surprising, some would say "disconcerting," discovery was finding that the former church altar is now located at the Ingleside Winery in the Oak Grove section of Westmoreland County. Acting on a tip from Bill and Nancy Smithdeal of Spotsylvania, the editor found the cherished piece there and, by comparing photos, confirmed that it was the old altar. It still bore the small identification brass plate at its bottom: "Josephinum Church Furniture Co., Columbus, Ohio."

Surprisingly, it was not marble, but from the pews it certainly fooled generations of worshippers. At some point, the all-white original had been painted with some blue trim on the front and with some red trim on each end. It is used as a counter and for wine tastings.

Doug Flemer, the owner of Ingleside Vineyards in the historic Northern Neck, was extremely cordial and cooperative when first contacted but was unable to provide much background. He wrote: "I have asked about the altar that we now have in our wine shop. It seems no one knows the origin except that we purchased it from an antique dealer in Fredericksburg some time in the late '80s or early '90s."

Many of the special linens for that altar are much farther away than Westmoreland County—they went to Alaska. When Mary Janis Kassock of Fredericksburg was leaving to serve in a Jesuit mission as a lay volunteer there around 1975, the

Rev. Vincent Sikora, then pastor of the new St. Mary in College Heights, asked if she would like to take along some of the extra altar cloths.

Other items like candelabra and small statues are in places of honor in private homes. The Stations of the Cross from the Princess Anne site can be now found at St. Matthew Catholic Church in Spotsylvania County.

The story of the St. Mary Church bell has been told admirably by J. William Mann, Fredericksburg author of "Bells and Belfries and Some of Neither" (1993), in which he uses the literary device of personification to relate in charming fashion the Cinderella tale. The bell stayed downtown with the Nazarenes who bought the St. Mary complex on Princess Anne Street but did eventually find its way home to the Catholics when the complex was sold.

For the church's sesquicentennial in 2008, the reunion committee hopes to add a large number of recollections from those who began attending the "new" St. Mary on William Street. That structure was dedicated on June 20, 1971.

*A copy of the memory book of St. Mary Catholic Church may be seen at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library.*

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