

“.....THE CENTER OF YOUR RELIGIOUS LIFE AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH.”

Located off the rural roads of southern Charles County, Maryland one finds the peaceful surroundings of St. Mary Parish, Newport. The present Church, built in 1954, sits on an historic tract of land which was one of the first areas colonized by the English in the 1600's. The Newport area of that time was the most settled area of the county and most of the regions steadfast Catholic families lived in the immediate area – Boarmans, Neales, Brookes, Edelens, Simpsons, Wathens, Lancasters and others.

When Father Andrew White, a Jesuit, arrived at St. Clement's Island in 1634 and said the first Mass, the Jesuits found they had the perfect opportunity to serve God by tending to the spiritual needs of the Catholics in the new Maryland colony. They also felt they could do great work among the native Indians and non-Catholics. For thirty to forty years, the number of Jesuits administering to the people, which numbered in the thousands, rarely exceeded four and it soon became obvious that their task was enormous.

In 1669 the Jesuits reached a critical state. Recognizing the need for more priests, proposals were put forward in England and Rome to send missionaries, other than Jesuits, to the colony. At the request of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation, the provincial chapter of the English Franciscans decided in 1672 to send two missionaries to the new territory. Father Masseur a Sancta Barbara Massey and an unknown companion were sent as assistants to the Jesuits. Two years later in 1674 Fathers Basil Hobart and Polycarp Wickstead arrived.

The very earliest records of the Newport parish and the Franciscans are few. Those that do exist are often confusing and discrepancies appear. However, we do know that with Father Hobart, our parish was established. His name is always connected with Newport and the Franciscan mission work here. His entire ministry in the colony was centered here.

At the time of Father Hobart's arrival, Major William Boarman, a devout Catholic, lived on his plantation "Boarman's Rest" which was near the present church. Major Boarman was a powerful influence in the area because he understood the native Indian languages and was often in demand in dealing with the transactions of the early settlers. Father Hobart was closely associated with Major Boarman and most likely received assistance from him in establishing this new mission.

Most written records concerning early Newport center around the Sheriff's report of 1697. The Maryland counties were ordered to report to the Governor the names of the priests or brothers that resided in each county and any chapels, churches or places of worship that existed. In Charles County, it was reported that there were "three Romish priests and one lay brother..." Father Hobart is mentioned. The places of worship were "one chapel, near Newport Town about 40 feet long and 20 feet wide, has been built above 20 years (before 1677). Also another chapel at Major Wm. Boroman's about 30 feet long and 20 feet wide, being within two miles of the aforesaid, and has been built about 16 or 18 years (1679-1681): also a place of worship used as

Priest Hubbert's own dwelling-house, about a mile and a half from the aforesaid Chapel...". The chapel built before 1677 coincides with Fr. Hobart's arrival and this is believed to be the place where the Newport mission began. According to land records this chapel stood on a 1665 land grant known as St. Thomas. The present Church is located on part of that same St. Thomas tract.

During the end of the 17th century the Maryland colony was entering into a very dark period. The Protestant Revolution was underway in 1689 and Maryland again became a royal colony. Catholics were made targets of persecution. They were not allowed to practice their religion freely, priests were forbidden to say mass, the children could not be educated in their faith and church lands were turned over to private citizens in order to protect them. Later these properties or most of them would be re-transferred. Many priests fled the colony, including Father Hobart, who spent some time in Virginia. He later returned and served the people of Newport until he died in 1698 as a result of an epidemic which swept through Maryland. Records say he was buried at his church although no one knows where that grave is located.

In 1697, according to the Provincial Annals of the Franciscans, Father Hobart is said to have replaced his chapel with the first church described as a frame structured building. With Father Hobart's death, the Franciscan reign in the area ended and again the Jesuits became the main force in the spiritual life of Newport and it stayed that way for 183 years.

Fathers William Hunter and Robert Brooke, Jesuits, arrived to serve the Newport mission after Fr. Hobart's death. Father Brooke was the first Marylander to become a Jesuit. He and Father Hunter most likely stayed at St. Thomas Manor at Chapel Point. During this time of repression, they endured the humiliation of being called before the Maryland Council accused of "dedicating a Popish Chapel and saying Mass". In 1704, as a response to this action, all chapels and schools were ordered permanently closed. In 1706 permission was granted by Queen Anne allowing Mass to be said in private homes. Those who owned land built chapels joined to their houses. Those who were less wealthy set a room aside in their home for Mass and religious worship. The priests traveled from place to place.

It is evident that a Church continued to exist at Newport during the repression time of the 1700's even though records are very scarce. In 1704 Jon Wathen witnessed a transfer of tobacco which was part of Captain John Bayne's "subscription toward finishing the Church at Newport." Richard Edelen, who had purchased portions of "St. Thomas" bequeathed to Reverend George Hunter, the pastor, one acre... "it being our famelys burying place and whereon our Chapple now stands." In 1757 Edelen sold 115 acres to John Corry. "there is a Reserve of one Acre of Land Round the Chappell it being for a place for the Congregation."

One priest of importance during this time in Newport history is Father Henry Pile, S.J. He served as pastor for almost 30 years (1784-1813). Father Pile was born at Sarum Manor near Newport. He entered the Jesuit order and having lived abroad for many years returned to his native Maryland and became the pastor of the missions of Newport and Cobb Neck.

With the end of the Revolutionary War the Suppression ended and the Church began to reorganize. The Jesuits became established once again in the United States, and parish communities started to become more active. We are led to believe that another church replaced Hobart's church some time at the end of the 1700's. In 1818 Archbishop Marechal came to Newport for confirmation and he describes the church as a frame building about 15 years old, and states that it is "extremely neat and ornamented with extraordinary taste." Bequests leaving money for the building of a "cathedral" at Newport at the end of the century seem to corroborate another church having been built.

A need for a new or larger Church at Newport was begun in 1836 when the trustees of the parish, James Hamilton, James Corry, John Higdon, Benedict Simpson and Alexius Lancaster had a document drafted contracting William Kendrick to furnish 100,000 good merchantable brick and 25,000 face brick for a Church at Newport even though the shape and dimensions had not been determined. Whether or not this became a viable contract in any form is unknown because in 1839 Father Aloysius Mudd, pastor from 1832-1842 writes the Reverend Mr. Sanders at Newtown about building three churches in the county, a brick one at Newport, one at Pomfret and a third frame building at Port Tobacco. The cornerstone for our old brick church is dated 1840. It seems very likely that this was a construction/rebuilding project. Several parishioners at the time gave money towards paying for the building of Newport Catholic Church or for "improvements to the said Church". In the diary (dates 1818-1856) of Alexius Lancaster, who was a trustee of St. Mary, he mentions all types of work being done at the Church during this time, but never refers to a new building being erected. The 1840 Church was thoroughly researched in 1990 in preparation for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In that research it was revealed that there is definite evidence of a reconstruction of an earlier building that was most likely made larger.

During the second half of the 1800's it is well documented that St. Mary was a thriving and busy parish. There were missions and jubilees, picnics and fairs. Large confirmation classes were prevalent. 218 persons were confirmed in June of 1852. Missions lasting five days were customary. The social events were major fundraisers for the parish. In a Maryland Independent ad dated August 1877 a two-day festival was to be held. A "sumptuous" dinner would be served both days. "Every delicacy the human appetite can crave will be at the disposal of guests and no pains spared by the fair waiters to furnish anything on the bill of fare." There was to be a band for entertainment both days and a 25¢ charge for concerts both evenings given by a troupe from Washington City. Events like this were held regularly.

The Reverend Barnardin F. Wiget built the first rectory in 1855. It was described as "containing 2 rooms downstairs and two upstairs. The kitchen was separated from the house". It was also during this period that the Jesuits ended their work at St. Mary and the first secular priest, Fr. Joseph S. Cunnane, was appointed as pastor in 1881. Newport was part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

In 1906, another church was built, possibly being the 5th building. A Mr. Rock from

Baltimore left a sum of money in his will specifically for a new church to be built in Southern Maryland. His connection with the area is unknown. Through the efforts of Fr. John Fannon, pastor of St. Mary at the time, the Orphans Court of Baltimore, and Cardinal Gibbons, the money was directed to be used for a new church at Newport. Built by contractors Hawkins & Wills, it was a white frame building with a stucco finish, tin roof, cellar, bell tower, stained glass windows, marble altar and balcony area – an elegant building.

In 1928, Fr. William Baldus became pastor. During his 19 years of service he was held in high esteem, not only by the parishioners, but by the entire Southern Maryland community. While he was here, our first church hall was built by parishioners Will Clements and George Simpson. It was attached to the 1840 Church. The church became a kitchen and the entire complex became the center of parish activities. Dinners, which had previously been held outside under tents with the parishioners bringing the food, now drew large crowds. Busloads of people from as far away as Baltimore would come to attend the dinners. The hall was also used for dances, card parties and summer religion classes, which were conducted by the School Sisters of Notre Dame from nearby Bryantown. Some of these classes were held outside under a covered pavillion which no longer exists.

Father Baldus is also known for the large crowds that came to Newport to honor St. John Vianney. It is said that Fr. Baldus modeled his life after this humble priest who was canonized in 1925 and is known as the patron saint of the clergy. In 1931 Father Baldus was responsible for establishing the first public shrine in the Baltimore Archdiocese honoring St. John Vianney. People travelled great distances to participate in the novena services to this saint. A front-page article in the Washington Times dated August 30, 1934 stated that over a hundred physical cures had been reported and verified at this shrine. A parishioner is also said to have had a miraculous recovery from a life-threatening injury received while working on his farm.

Father Baldus died suddenly in 1947 while visiting in Washington, D.C. His wake was held here at the church and the parishioners kept vigil. At his request, he was buried in the parish cemetery and his pallbearers were members of the congregation.

Father William Stricker succeeded Fr. Baldus. He was here for a very short time but was remembered as one who enjoyed life and a good laugh.

In 1948 a territorial change took place. Monsignor Patrick O'Boyle was appointed the first resident Archbishop of Washington. Five of Maryland's counties (Charles, St. Mary's, Calvert, Prince Georges and Montgomery) were added to the District of Columbia to form the Archdiocese of Washington.

Father James P. Grace followed Fr. Stricker and was here for three years. During his time the parish became known for the two-day picnics which drew enormous crowds.

The stucco church and rectory were torn down and the brick structure with attached rectory is what we have today. It was dedicated in May , 1954 by Archbishop O'Boyle. "Father Charles"

Salkavich was the pastor at this time. He was here for five years.

From 1956 to 1986 the parish was administered to by Fr. J. Kelly Reese and Fr. Gerard Cole. The church hall, which was used for dinners until the mid-60's, was renovated and used for CCD classes for the children of the parish. The interior of the church was changed to comply with Vatican II and several changes were made on the church grounds.

In 1986 Fr. Cole retired and Fr. Aloysius Newman became pastor. Under his direction, St. Mary formed its first Parish Council and Finance Committee, the first Easter egg hunt for the children, which has become a tradition, was begun. Fr. Newman was instrumental in starting adult religious education classes and forming the anniversary committee for the 300th celebration held in 1995. Much was learned about the parish history, the 1840 church and the cemetery for this event. A section of the cemetery that had been neglected for years was discovered. There was evidence of numerous unmarked graves. Many of the parishioners helped to restore the area leaving the tombstones that were found. Several displaced tombstones were recovered from the woods in another area and placed in a memorial in the old part of the cemetery. This memorial was dedicated to all those buried here whose names or gravesites are unknown or whose graves were unmarked. It was dedicated in 1993.

Our history is very apparent in the older part of the cemetery. There are many graves marked only by a depression in the earth. Many of the old stones, the earliest dating to 1795, carry the names of the descendants of those first parishioners – Boarman, Corry, Edelen, Wathen, Simpson and others. The old part of the cemetery is the largest and most intact pre-Civil War Catholic cemetery in the county. It contains a large number of artistic stones, many made by the A. Gaddess Monument Company, a very prominent business in Baltimore for many years. A number of notable Marylanders are buried here: William D. Merrick (1793-1857), the only United States Senator from Charles County, Jane Matthews Merrick, sister of Rev. William Matthews, the first native-born priest ordained in the United States, George Brent, Judge of the 7th Judicial District of Maryland, Thomas Jones and Col. Samuel Cox, Confederate agents who helped President Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, escape into Virginia.

A statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was placed in the cemetery in memory of Fr. Gerard Cole, our pastor from 1974 – 1986. It was dedicated in May of 1998. An inventory of the cemetery stones was completed in 2000 and another section was added to our present cemetery. The sites became available to the parishioners in November, 2001.

Our 1840 Church and cemetery gained recognition in 1991 and were listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Some of the original interior woodwork and stencilling in the old church remain. Because a restoration project was so involved and not a parish priority at the time, it was decided to have the building documented for historical purposes. The interior was extensively photographed and the prints and slides are stored in the Southern Maryland Room at the College of Southern Maryland.

In 1993, Fr. Newman retired and Fr. Michael Murray assumed the duties of pastor. Although he was not here very long, he was responsible for our first parish directory and he played a large part in planning the 300th anniversary celebration and making it a success.

1996 brought Fr. Frederick MacIntyre, “Father Fred” to the parishioners. Newport saw many changes with his arrival. Area growth brought many new members and there were many physical changes. The glass entrance and the arch behind the altar were added as well as a bathroom, also our steeple and portico. A building fund was begun for our long awaited Social and Education Center. In 1999 Patuxent Architects was hired to design the building and in November, 2000 we finally had a “ground breaking” ceremony. Three years after groundbreaking our building was completed. The St. Francis Hall and Education Center was dedicated December 14, 2003.

Fr. Oliver McGready arrived in 2006 and will always be remembered for his homilies and Irish humor. He became “our” Monsignor before his retirement.

In 2010 Fr. Mark Ervin became pastor. He was responsible for the rededication of the St. John Vianney Shrine. A very spiritual man, his untimely death after an illness left St. Mary without a pastor for several months. The void has been filled by Fr. Michael Briese. His challenges will be many.

St. Mary, Newport has survived 343 years. It continues to grow and is very active. When this brick church we now use was dedicated on May 2, 1954, Monsignor Edward P. McAdams made the following statement in his address: **“for you parishioners, this Church will stand for many years as the center of your religious life and of your spiritual growth. It will be with you and your children’s children for many generations.”** So it is and will be.....

Irma Simpson