

A History of the Diocese of Arlington

Part I: Origins of the Church In Northern Virginia

The Arlington Diocese will celebrate its 25th anniversary on Aug. 13. To prepare for this special anniversary, Father Thomas Ferguson, parochial vicar at St. Luke Parish in McLean, has prepared a four-part series on the history of the Catholic Church in Virginia. This week's first installment focuses on the Catholic presence in Virginia prior to the formation of the Arlington Diocese in 1974.

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On Aug. 13, 1999, the people of God in the Diocese of Arlington will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the formation of

the history of Catholicism in the territory included in the Diocese of Arlington, however, one must acknowledge that

commemorating the history of the diocese, I will present a story with a rich prologue, an auspicious beginning, a period of great growth and a future that is bright and promising. These movements in the history of the diocese are the story of the emergence of a Catholic presence in the northern portion of Virginia until 1974; the founding and first years of the diocese under the leadership of Bishop Welsh

Although not the work of a professional historian, these articles will be a glimpse into the past for those who wish to know something of our origins as Catholics in this diocese, in this commonwealth. The articles also will recognize the contributions that have been made to the growth of the Church in Arlington by many who still live and serve among us as well as by those whose souls we have already commended to God.

The history of the Church in Northern Virginia will always begin with mention of the Brent family, relatives of Cecil and Leonard Calvert, the Catholic founders of the Maryland colony. The first foothold of Catholicism in Northern Virginia was on the Brent family estate, established by land grant in 1654, near Aquia in Stafford County.

In 1749, the Virginia House of Burgesses established the city of Alexandria, and soon a small Catholic community began to form in this port city. Catholics gathered for the celebration of Mass in private homes until 1795, when St. Mary Church was established as the first Catholic parish in Virginia, with Father Francis Ignatius Neale, S.J., as its first pastor.

In 1808, the territory of the Commonwealth of Virginia was included in the newly formed Archdiocese of Baltimore. In 1820, Pope Pius VII established the Diocese of Richmond, which encompassed all of Virginia, including what later became the state of West Virginia, but not the city of Alexandria or the County of Arlington (which remained part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore until being joined to the Diocese of Richmond in 1858).

Father Peter Kroes, S.J., pastor of St. Mary Church in Alexandria, built a mission church in Fairfax Station to serve Irish railroad workers in 1858. St. Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, thus became the second parish founded in what is now the Diocese of Arlington.



HISTORIC CHURCH — Old St. Mary's Church in Fairfax Station (above) was used as a field hospital by Clara H. Barton during the Second Battle of Manassas. Barton was the founder of the American Red Cross. The church, once the home of Irish railroad workers, is still used today for weddings and other special occasions. The parish holds its annual Labor Day picnic on the church grounds.



This same year, a third St. Mary Church was erected in Fredericksburg by the Bishop John McGill, the third bishop of Richmond.

From the middle of the 19th until the middle of the 20th century the establishment of parishes in what is now the Diocese of Arlington can be linked with the extension of railroads and other means of transportation that stimulated population growth in the northern portion of the state. Between 1870-1972, new parishes emerged in what is now the western portion of the diocese: Sacred Heart of Jesus in Winchester (1870); St. John the Evangelist in Warrenton (1874); St. John the Apostle in Leesburg (1926); All Saints in Manassas (1929); St. John the Baptist in Front Royal (1940); Precious Blood in

Culpeper and St. Mark in Gordonsville (both 1946); Our Lady of the Valley in Luray (1954); St. John Bosco in Woodstock (1959); St. Francis de Sales in Purcellville (1967); and St. John in Orange (1972). Many of these parishes can trace their origins either directly or remotely to the effort to provide for the pastoral care of railroad workers.

The number of Catholics in the area surrounding the city of Alexandria and Arlington County also grew steadily from the middle of the 19th until the middle of the 20th century. At the time of the establishment of the Diocese of Arlington, nearly 40 percent of the parishes that would form this new diocese were located in the areas of Alexandria, Arlington, Falls Church and McLean. These included

(in addition to St. Mary's in Alexandria), St. James (1892), St. Charles Borromeo (1909), St. Joseph, Alexandria (1915), St. Rita (1924), St. Agnes (1936), St. Thomas More (1938), Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady Queen of Peace, Blessed Sacrament (all 1946), St. Ann (1947), St. Louis (1949), St. John, McLean (1951), St. Anthony (1952), St. Luke (1961), St. Philip (1962), Queen of Apostles (1963), Good Shepherd (1965), and St. Lawrence (1967). Following World War II, significant population growth took place in the Annandale and Springfield areas, and Catholic parishes were established to meet the needs of the faithful at St. Michael (1953), St. Leo (1957), St. Bernadette (1959), Holy Spirit (1964), St. Ambrose (1966), and Nativity

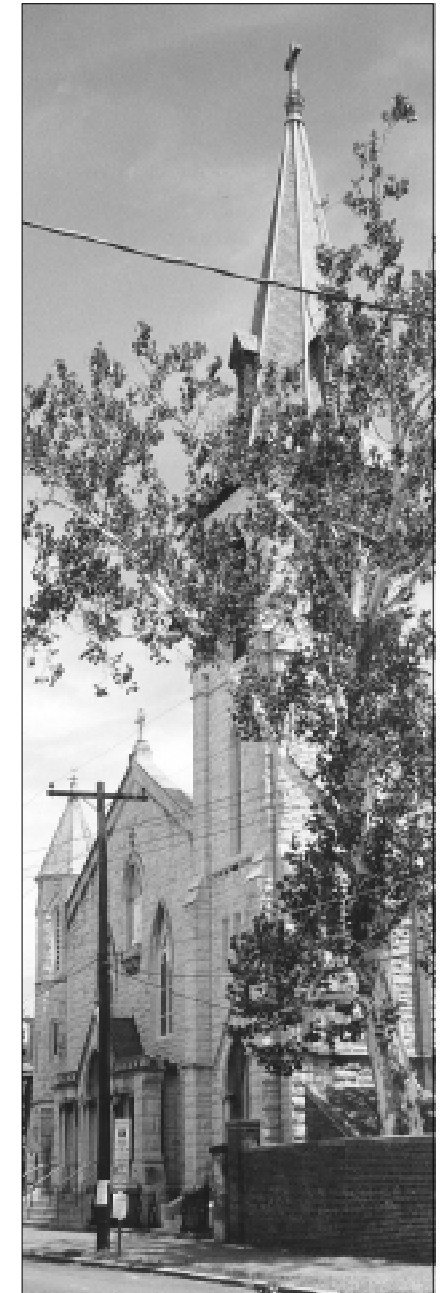
(1973). Similar post-World War II population growth took place in northern and western Fairfax County, and so there emerged a need for parishes such as St. Joseph, Herndon (1950), Our Lady of Good Counsel (1955), St. Mark (1965), St. Timothy (1969), St. Thomas à Becket (1970), and Christ the Redeemer (1972).

To the south of what would commonly be known as "Northern Virginia," growing Catholic populations required new parishes such as St. Francis of Assisi in Triangle (1957), Our Lady of Angels, Woodbridge (1959), Holy Family, Dale City (1970), and St. William of York, built near the original estate of the Brent family in Stafford (1971).

In addition to these parishes, two on the Northern Neck — St. Elizabeth in Colonial Beach (1917), and St. Francis de Sales, Kilmarnock (1966) — increased to 50 the number of parishes that would be included in the diocese whose life as a unique entity would begin on Aug. 13, 1974.

While the territory encompassed by these parishes constituted less than one-third of the territory of the entire commonwealth of Virginia, the Catholic population in these parishes was more than one-half the entire Catholic population of the commonwealth. On Aug. 13, 1974, the Bishop Thomas J. Welsh would find himself the shepherd of a flock that could trace its origins to the colonial period of American history, that could take pride in its steady growth throughout the 19th century, and that was increasing rapidly in number during the post-World War II era of suburban sprawl. The prologue to the history of a diocese had been written — its foundation and first years of history were just over the horizon.

Fr. Ferguson is parochial vicar at St. Luke Parish, McLean. Next week: The diocese during the Bishop Welsh years.



VIRGINIA'S OLDEST PARISH — St. Mary Church on Royal Street in Old Town Alexandria, the oldest parish in Virginia, was established in 1795. The original church, which stood until 1839, was built on the site which is now home to St. Mary's Cemetery (at Washington and Green Sts.). Col. John Fitzgerald, George Washington's aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War, was a parish founder.



AQUIA CROSS — This depiction of the crucified Christ was erected in the 1930s on Route 1 near the Brent family cemetery in Aquia. The Brents were the first permanent Catholic settlers in Virginia.

this particular church by the decree of His Holiness Pope Paul VI. One could begin a study of the history of the Diocese of Arlington with the installation of the Bishop Thomas J. Welsh as its first bishop on Aug. 13, 1974. To do justice to

the history of the Church in this portion of the Commonwealth of Virginia began long before that date. In fact, the history of the Church in Virginia begins even before the founding of the American republic.

In this series of articles (1974-1983); the activity and milestones in this church's life during the years of service offered by Bishop John R. Keating (1983-1998); and the vision and hope that have accompanied the arrival of Bishop Paul S. Loverde (1999).

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