



Photo by Dr. W.J. McCall, Jr.

2010

St. Mary Star of the Sea, the ninth oldest parish in the Diocese of Richmond and the oldest Catholic parish on the Virginia Peninsula, holds a unique distinction: *It is the only diocesan church in the nation located on a military installation.*

This year marks the Sesquicentennial Anniversary of our parish. We have made physical improvements that include a beautiful Casavant organ console and digital pipes to add to the original pipe work, thus making the organ one that can more readily accompany music for mass, from the quiet sounds needed for the psalm to the larger sounds for congregational hymns, to the grand sounds for wedding recessionals and postludes. The Lucite coverings on the southern stained glass windows have been replaced. The bells have been repaired and now toll the hours and the Angelus daily, making our presence known throughout the fort and surrounding area, and call the faithful to worship before each mass. We commissioned a unique hand-made anniversary rosary. We produced a parish photo directory, the first in many years.

We have had celebrations all year long, beginning with our Parish Picnic in September, followed by the revival of an old tradition of sharing a Parish Thanksgiving Dinner on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, then followed by special weekend masses to celebrate weddings, sacraments and the military. Finally it has culminated with an Anniversary Mass, with several of our pastors and our Bishop Emeritus who was an associate pastor here near the beginning of his priestly life.

As we celebrate this 150th Anniversary, we who are currently part of St. Mary Star of the Sea Church, stand with those who have gone before, seeking unity and following our faith. We pray it forward to the future generations who will worship in the beautiful and sacred space within this stone church by the sea.

St. Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church

Fort Monroe, Virginia

Sesquicentennial Anniversary Parish History ~ 2010



**7 Frank Lane, Fort Monroe, VA 23651-1010
757-722-9855**

First Mass ~ 1823 Founded ~ 1860

Pastors of St. Mary Star of the Sea

Joseph Plunkett ~ 1860 - 1863
(from Portsmouth)

Thomas Oulet, S.J. ~ 1864 - 1865
(from Annapolis)

Matthew O'Keefe ~ 1865 - 1870
(from Norfolk)

John J. Doherty ~ 1871 - 1872
(from Norfolk)

Henry J. Cutler ~ 1872 - 1873
(from Norfolk)

John P. Hagan ~ 1873 - 1875

Patrick J. Hasty ~ 1875 - 1877

Thomas J. Murray ~ 1877 - 1886

Thomas J. Mercer ~ 1886 - 1901

William A. O'Hara ~ 1901 - 1901

William A. Fallon ~ 1901 - 1908

Thomas J. Wilson ~ 1908 - 1920

William T. Whearty ~ 1920 - 1921

William A. Gill ~ 1921 - 1933

Richard B. Washington ~ 1933 - 1936

Joseph F. Govaert ~ 1936 - 1940

John Igoe ~ 1940 - 1950

Julius O. Schmidhauser ~ 1950 - 1958

John F. McMahon ~ 1959 - 1961

John J. Riordan ~ 1961 - 1968

Robert J. McEleney ~ 1968 - 1971

Raymond E. Schantz ~ 1971 - 1975

Leonard Cordier ~ 1975 - 1977

Eugene Daigle ~ 1977 - 1979

Charles W. Brickner ~ 1979 - 1990

Joseph L. Clark ~ 1990 - 2003

Peter M. Creed ~ 2003 - 2006

Anthony Morris ~ 2006 - 2008

Peter E. Sousa ~ 2008 - present

We have been blessed that each pastor at St. Mary's has been the right man at the right time. Each had different strengths, talents, and experience, but each brought love for the community and a commitment to see it grow both physically and spiritually.

The history of St. Mary's is especially interwoven and determined by local historical events, from its very beginning to the present day.

1610

Three years after the settlement of Jamestown, a small group of civilians and soldiers moved to the fertile area near Strawberry Banks to avoid the disease and starvation rampant at Jamestown. Fort Algernon (now Fort Monroe) had already been fortified in 1609 to guard the narrow point of entrance to Hampton Roads. Thus, on July 9, 1610, after a battle on the site of the Indian village of Kicotan, the city of Hampton was founded. In 1619, "Kecoughtan" was named "Elizabeth City" in honor of the daughter of King James I, but the lovely Indian name remained in popular use for another century. The growing settlement was then renamed "Southampton" to honor the Earl who was a major stockholder in the Virginia Company. In time the name was shortened to "Hampton". By charter, the only church allowed, and indeed required, was the Church of England. Thus Elizabeth City Parish Church was founded. This name was later changed to St. John's Episcopal Church. According to a second charter of King James I, members of the Church of Rome were banned from the Virginia Colony.

1785

During the American Revolution, sixty French priests ministered to the French troops in the Battle of Yorktown. After the war ended, Thomas Jefferson wrote in his Act for Established Religious Freedom that Catholics, as well as other religions, were free to worship in Virginia.

1820

The Diocese of Richmond, formed from America's first Diocese, the Archdiocese of Baltimore, was erected by a decree issued by Pope Pius VII. It encompassed the entire state of Virginia, including what is now West Virginia.

1823

Rev. Thomas Hore, described as a "zealous Irish priest" from County Wexford, Ireland, celebrated the first recorded Catholic Mass at Fortress Monroe, though we do not know the exact site or date. He had been called to serve the spiritual needs of military personnel and construction workers for the moat and fortress. Begun in 1819 the fort was still far from completed. By 1825 Fortress Monroe was said to have had the largest garrison of any establishment. It later

declined, and priests came to serve it on a mission basis. The Rev. Walter Moriarity and the Rev. Francis Devlin of St. Paul's Portsmouth, said mass every third Sunday at Fortress Monroe. Fr. Devlin served the sick and dying during the terrible yellow fever epidemic that swept Norfolk and Portsmouth in the early 1850s, his actions dispelling much prejudice towards Catholics. He succumbed to the plague in 1855.



View from the Sallyport showing moat in foreground, school on left, and original St. Mary Star of the Sea Church as the dark wooden building in the center.

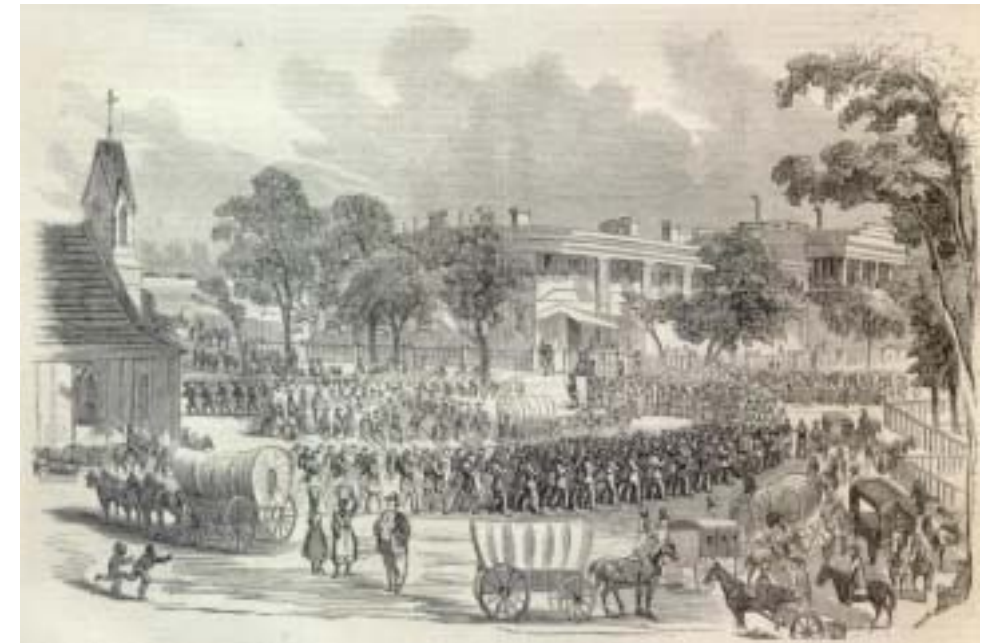
1860

Right Rev. John McGill, Third Bishop of Richmond, and Col. Rene E. De Russy, representing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, signed an agreement, dated June 6, 1860, that, with permission granted by President Abraham Lincoln, authorized the construction of a Catholic church on Fort Monroe. The government would retain ownership of the land, but the Diocese would own the church and rectory buildings. Originally established for the Catholic military personnel and workers on the fort, it was later re-designated for use by all Catholics in the nearby area.

A simple one-story frame building was built, originally probably painted red or black, and after the Civil War painted white, surrounded by a white picket fence. It had to be small because the authorities would not allow a structure to be raised to a height that would interfere with the range of guns mounted on the

ramparts. Fortunately its small size allowed it to survive through the Civil War, unlike the neighboring Hygeia Hotel that was demolished because it's height and size hindered the war effort.

Bishop McGill dedicated the chapel on September 9, 1860. Rev. Joseph Plunkett was the first pastor, although he was headquartered in Portsmouth. He traveled by boat and had easy access to the church property that was at that time, directly on the waters of Phoebus Bay. It is said that sometimes the waves lapped against the picket fence surrounding the church. When the war began this passage across Hampton Roads became impossible because of gunfire over the water. However, the Rev. Matthew O'Keefe, a native of County Waterford, Ireland, and pastor of St. Mary's in Norfolk, and his assistant, the Rev. Michael Ferrin, made the boat trip to Fort Monroe despite the cannon fire. Like Bishop McGill, they were ardent supporters of the Confederate cause.



The Army of the Potomac passing the Hygeia Hotel at Old Point Comfort, Virginia. Building on left is the first St. Mary Star of the Sea Church at Fort Monroe. Harper's Weekly, 1862, pg. 604.

1862

From November 1862 the Redemptorist Fathers of Annapolis, Maryland were asked by the Archbishop of Baltimore to assume spiritual care of Fort Monroe until the end of the war. They took the overnight boat trip to Old Point Comfort from Maryland and stayed in the Sacristy quarters in the church.

Rev. Francis Seelos was one of these Redemptorist priests who answered the call of duty to Fortress Monroe in December 1862 to give spiritual help to the soldiers. His short stay at the fort was characterized by long hours celebrating mass, hearing confessions, and administering communion. He also recalled how bitterly cold it was, "We didn't have any snow, but there was a cutting wind, fresh from the north." He found warmth in the appreciative attitude of the soldiers, and he encouraged them to be faithful in the service of God for the great grace they were given. All were moved to tears. Francis Seelos was beatified in 2000.



A photo taken after the Civil War that shows the original wooden church, then painted white, with its white picket fence.

1873

The first fulltime resident pastor at St. Mary's was the Rev. John P. Hagan. He arrived in October 1873 and lived in a room off the sanctuary that was a combination office, study, and sleeping apartment. He tried to gain permission to build a rectory, but was denied. He spent a great deal of time away on horseback serving the needs of various missions. He would return with saddlebags full of fruits, preserves, and homemade bread, and other welcome gifts of gratitude from those to whom he ministered. Fr. Hagan baptized Evelina Nealon, daughter of Jacobus and Catherina Nealon, on 11 October 1873. This was the first recorded baptism at St. Mary's.

1876

The first application to the Post Engineers to build a priest's dwelling near the church was forwarded to Washington, but rejected by the Secretary of War. Approval for the rectory was finally obtained, after special permission was granted from the Virginia General Assembly in July 1876. Construction began under the pastorate of Rev. Patrick J. Hasty and was completed under Rev. Thomas J. Murray.

Father Murray also directed the building of a small school, but it was destroyed by a severe storm in 1881. A larger school was built and the growing Mill Creek area changed its name to the town of Phoebus. During Father Murray's pastorate, the school and church grew and became a congregation of about 400 people. St. Mary's provided spiritual aid to the Civil War veterans who sought refuge at a shelter provided for them in the National Soldiers Home, Hampton. Now called the Veterans Administration Center, St. Mary's priests served it until 1955.

1877

The first entry in the marriage log was made in 1877. Rev. Thomas J. Murray performed the wedding ceremony of Judson Jerome Rogers and Ann Louise Wall on 13 February 1877.

1886

These years saw the Old Point area become a favorite resort area. The Chamberlin Hotel and Hygeia Hotel were highly praised for their beneficial aid to good health by bathing in the waters of Hampton Roads. The wealth and

substance of the visitors benefited St. Mary's. By the end of Fr. Murray's pastorate the church had seen many improvements. Stained glass windows replaced the plain glass windows, a heating apparatus was installed, new altar furnishings were procured and parish work increased to the extent that two priests were required.



Photo of rectory, circa 1960s

1889

In 1889 the Rev. Charles Donahue became assistant pastor of St. Mary's. He had a wonderful singing voice and loved fishing and boating. At dusk he would regularly get in his boat, sail out into the nearby waters, and serenade an audience of Old Point Comfort residents, who would rush to their porches and hotel verandas to listen.



St. Mary's and rectory, circa 1903

1903

Under the Rev. William A. Fallon's leadership, funds were raised and construction was begun of a new stone church, using stones brought from Europe as ballast in ships. The new church was estimated to cost \$15,000, and each contributor to the building fund was acknowledged in the "Fair Journal". The new church building was dedicated on June 9, 1903. The interior of the building has seen many changes over the years, but the exterior appearance remains the same, with the exception of its original cathedral-like spires that were removed in 1966 due to the problem of water leakage.