

1882 sketch by G. Williamson

Today

The Catholic faith community at St. Ignatius Chapel Point continues to cherish and share the same faith which Jesuit missionaries brought to Maryland in 1634.

Our church may be a national historic landmark, but we are much more than honor bricks. We do not see our job as preserving an artifact of the past but keeping the Spirit alive and vibrant in Maryland and the nation today. We were once the Catholic Church for all of Charles County sending priests into Virginia northern Maryland and even into Pennsylvania. While our reach is short today we can reach more people in a moment than Fr. Andrew White saw in a lifetime.

Learn more about us and the Catholic Church at www.chapelpoint.org.

Look us up on Facebook.

Join us in worship

Monday – Friday 8 am
Saturday 5pm
Sunday 7:30 am
9:30 am
11:00 am
6:00 pm



BEGININGS

When two ships arrived at St. Clement's Island 1634, the Maryland Mission was born. It was an auspicious beginning; the day Andrew White celebrated a Mass of thanksgiving for Leonard Calvert, son of Lord Baltimore, proprietor of the Maryland Colony, was the Feast of the Annunciation, the day when God took Flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The group of "gentlemen adventurers" who stepped ashore that day asked the Lord to en flesh their humble beginnings.

So it was. Of their discovery, Father White wrote in his diary: "The Potomac River seemed one of the most beautiful he [writing in the third person] had even seen. Groves of trees, not chocked with an undergrowth of bramble and bushes, lined each bank as if laid out by hand. You might freely drive a four-horse chariot under the trees. The first night, fires were kindled through the whole region by armed natives. Messengers were sent everywhere to announce, 'A canoe as large as an island had brought as many men as there were trees in the forest.'"

A few years later, the work at Saint Mary's City on solid ground, Father White moved to the Indian Village of Potopaco, which the colonists later called Port Tobacco. It was here that he built a crude wooden structure to function both as his humble residency and the first Catholic church in Charles County. He named this site Chapel Point, and it survives today as the oldest continuously active Catholic parish in what is now the United States.

What drew Father White to the Port Tobacco area of the Potomac was his desire to work with the Piscataway Indians. He converted a number of the Indians to Christianity, broke through their language barrier, and wrote a catechism in their language. His missionary work is commemorated in the stained glass window above the choir loft. This window depicts the baptism of the king and queen of the Piscataway tribe.

Father Thomas Copley, who arrived in the Colony in 1637, also a Jesuit priest, joined his companion, Father White, and together they labored in the new mission. It was to Father Copley that Lord Baltimore made the original manorial grant of 4,000 acres in the Portobacco Hundred. The year was 1649. Named after Thomas the Apostle, who set off to the Asian subcontinent to convert those Indians, over 3,000 acres of Saint Thomas Manor lay west of the Port Tobacco River and the remaining acres lay to the east where the manor house and church stand. In the same year Father Copley received the grant, he assigned the Manor to Thomas Matthews to act as lay trustee for the Jesuits, an action undoubtedly prompted by the religious turmoil here and in England.

The Manor remained in Mr. Matthews' name until he conveyed the property back to the Society of Jesus in 1662, the same year Father Henry Warren established his residence as Mission superior on the Port Tobacco. That began the permanent presence of priests ministering to the area chapels and churches from St. Thomas Manor.

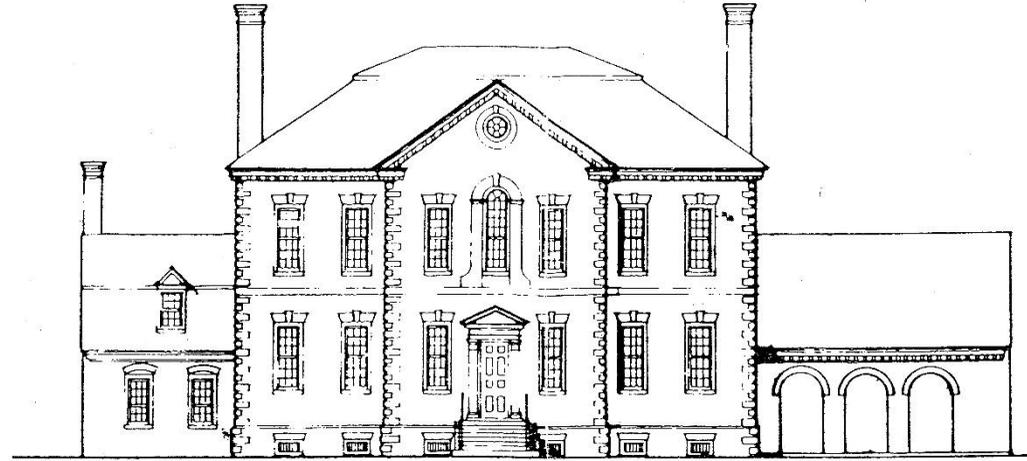
SETTLING IN

By the 1690's, horses were the basic means of transportation to the mission stations. The hilltop provided commanding views of the Potomac and Port Tobacco Rivers and warning of approaching government or pirate raids.

In 1741, the Jesuits, whose plantation had become one of the more prosperous in the region, began erecting a much more substantial building to serve as their residence and the headquarters. It was an ambitious project for which their Jesuit brothers at Saint Inigoe's Manor and Saint Francis Xavier Manor, in Saint Mary's castigated the priests at St. Thomas Manor writing to Rome that they are raising a palace unbecoming of a religious order.

But the House represented a bold political statement: a difficult-to-ignore physical reminder of the Jesuit's and their lay colleague's perseverance and continuing triumph over adversity following a century of religious persecution here and in England, as well as a retrenchment of sorts, against the anti-Catholic climate that was to be endured for many years to come. It is as, if the Manor House shouted out the symbol: We are here. And we are here to stay. (It may be noted that the 1692 act establishing the Church of England as the official Church of the Colony remained in force until the ratification of the Maryland Constitution in 1776. The Society of Jesus also experienced a suppression of its Order here and in the most of the rest of the world from 1773 until 1805.)

The rent roll records for Charles County from 1755 to 1774, to which Father George Hunter, the resident superior of the Maryland Mission is referred to as "The High Priest in Charles County," shows that Saint Thomas Manor consistently was accorded a high evaluation. The assessor, Col. Hoskins Hanson, described the



St. Thomas Manor

From a drawing by
Michael E. Trostel, A.I.A.

buildings thusly:

"a large & elegant 2 story brick: dwelling to which is joined a Chapple dedicated to St. Ignatius, a very large barn with an open shed in front, and a large corn house with two close sheds laid off in convenient stables also a very old kitchen & four negro quarters, 3 old Tob° [tobacco] houses and a new meat house, about 20 apple trees & a large & beautiful garden, all beautifully situated on Port Tobacco creek."

THROUGH THE CENTURIES

For 170 years, the Manor House was headquarters for the Maryland Mission of the Society of Jesus. From here, outriders established foundations as far away as Philadelphia, New York, and the southern reaches of New England. It was the residence of the superior of the mission at this time, and after 1833, when the mission achieved the status of a province, it was the first residence of the provincial. Indeed, the Manor House

itself is the oldest Jesuit residence in continuous use in the world.

An awesome fire in December of 1866 razed the interior of the buildings leaving only the walls standing as stark as the topless towers of Ilium. Of the disaster, Father Francis McAtee, pastor of Saint Thomas Manor at the time, wrote.

"Our house and church are a mass of ruins. Our house took fire on Saturday (December 27). I attribute it to the chimney, which may have been burning a long time before discovered . . . All the sermons and scraps of a lifetime have gone to Vulcan, so that if anyone were ever found inane enough to propose my canonization the Devil's advocate need not examine my writings."

Nobody has been quite that insane. But the religious foundation almost was lost to the temper of

the times. Father McAtee continues.

"A strong party will desire to build a church in Port Tobacco & I fear unless decided measures be taken, that this idea will divide the congregation: besides the unhealthiness of that Classic locality if the church be erected there, Chapel Point which we trust to see one day a city, will be materially injured."

After the tears were dried, the interior of the church and Major House were rebuilt to the temper of times, a delightfully gaudy Victorian. Thus, the exterior walls of the Manor house are Georgian and the exterior of the Church is Federal in architectural Style the interior of the buildings is early to high Victorian. The reconstruction on the Church and the east wing of the manor began in June of 1867. It was rededicated in June of 1868. In the intervening months the warehouse on the point served as the church. Reconstruction of the Manor itself would have to wait two years more to begin and stretched out for years.

In 1922, the surrounding churches received their independence from Saint Ignatius Church and the Mission circuit of St. Thomas came to an end. The Jesuits eventually closed their amusement park at Chapel Point a community – building recreation center, which they had run for many years. The Jesuits sold all but twenty acres of the property to the State of the Jesuits sold all but Maryland in 1973. Today, Saint Thomas Manor House and its dependent building, Saint Ignatius Church, stand alone as a silent dignity, a reminder of glory past and a beacon of hope for a strong future. What is past is prologue.