

## **Oldest Catholic Parish in continuous existence in the present United States**

Our claim for St. Ignatius Parish at St. Thomas Manor on Chapel Point in Maryland is not to being either the first parish, or the oldest building, but rather the oldest Catholic parish in continuous existence. In a strict canonical sense, this would be an impossible claim, since prior to having a local bishop chapels and churches operated as missions and became parishes more less at the same time. What the claim really means is that from 1662 on, the prior chapels and present church at St. Thomas Manor have been under the care of resident priests, having been neither suppressed nor abandoned during that time. The Jesuit residence on a 4,000 acre manor which served as the parish center for chapels and mass stations bound the priests to a substantial and enduring presence. The manor residence was also at times the meeting place for two different organizations formed to run the church in Maryland during the Jesuit Suppression. A visitor a few years ago said- "Oh this is that parish that has never missed having mass." No clearly not. The nature of the original mission set up was that priests from the main mission residence went out and served other chapels and churches from that base. There were days, even some Sundays where there would have been no mass at St. Thomas Manor because of commitments to masses elsewhere in homes and chapels of the larger parish.

(See at the end of this article for information on the oldest parish foundation in Florida and the oldest church in New Mexico and our older worshipping communities in Maryland.)

Countries in the early stages of missionary activity typically have a number of mission stations operating from one or more base stations, spreading a few clergy among many locations. It would be most unusual for an early mission to survive uninterrupted from its first moments. Places which seem ideal for early missionary activity, often do not prove to be the most ideal. St. Ignatius/St. Thomas Manor was no different. For the first 21 years, after the choice of Chapel Point, there was often a shortage of priests and certainly no continuous ministry at Chapel Point. There were also two periods of time when Catholic priests were completely driven from Maryland. Jesuit assignments reconstructed from English Province catalogs, letters and other sources, provide an imperfect sense of where Jesuits resided and worked. All available records suggest however that from 1662 to the present, there have been priests residing at Chapel Point and ministering to a far flung congregation.

In 1639, the colony was well established and peace prevailed with most of the native peoples of Maryland. The governor then allowed some Jesuits to move from the area of St. Mary's City and English enclaves to live among native peoples. St. Ignatius counts it's foundation from the choice of land on the Port Tobacco River for the Jesuit house to serve the tribes and plantations on the upper Potomac. By 1641 or earlier, Fr. Andrew White ministered to the Portobacco people. In his 1642 letter to his superiors, Fr. Andrew White reported on the conversions in the village at Portobacco, but also the need to move from the more exposed Indian town of Piscataway to what we now call Chapel Point. He noted that this place was, almost in the centre of the Indians, and so more convenient for excursions in all directions, we have determined to make our residence ; and the more so, because we fear that we may be compelled to abandon Pascataway, on account of its proximity to the Sesquesehanni, which nation is the most savage and warlike of these regions .

We cannot claim continuity from that early date. The full transition of the residence took some time. Fr. White seems to have resided in Piscataway from 1640 through 1642, though he clearly spent time in Portobacco.

Even though or perhaps because Maryland had a friendly Catholic proprietor, the Jesuit missions were vulnerable to attack more from angry Englishmen than hostile native tribes. During periods of political unrest in England, attacking the Catholic minority and their government repeatedly seemed like a way to win the favor of new rulers in England. Sometimes rebels simply took advantage of English distractions to advance their own interests. Those problems came thick and fast as the Portobacco church was taking root. The English Civil War began in 1642 leading to the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell in 1649. In 1645, Richard Ingle of Virginia (who had lost trading privileges when Maryland was carved out of the original Virginia land grant) kidnapped Fr. Andrew White and Fr. Thomas Copley carrying them back to England for trial. Three other Jesuits either fled or were transported from Maryland to Virginia, leaving Maryland without Catholic clergy from 1645 through 1647.

In 1648, Fathers Copley and Starkey returned to Virginia in order to test the possibility of returning to Maryland. In 1649, Fr. Copley was allowed to return and set about finalizing Fr. White's claim to 4,000 acres along both shores of the Port Tobacco, though at the time he lived at St. Inigoes in St. Mary's County. The Jesuits in Maryland would usually claim and own land in their own individual names rather than in the name of the Society of Jesus or the Catholic Church, but the turmoil of the time made even personal claims risky. Fr. Copley assigned the claim based on the transportation of 10 indentured servants in 1634 to Thomas Matthews Esq. as a form of trust. The Jesuits needed the protection of the Lords Baltimore and they in turn needed Charles I, but the king had been beheaded by Parliament in January of 1649. From 1649 to 1662 there were only one or two Jesuits in all of Maryland most often headquartered at St. Inigoes, but trying to serve the outlying missions including Port Tobacco.

In 1662 following the restoration of the English monarchy Mr. Matthews transferred the title to the Jesuit mission superior, Fr. Henry Warren. Once the land title to St. Thomas Manor was transferred, it remained the residence of the Mission superior until 1683. From 1684 to 1686, Jesuits were listed at St. Thomas, but the superior resided at Newtown. During the onset of the Glorious Revolution in 1689 the superior was in New York. The rest of the Jesuits continued to live and work in Maryland, including Fr. Gullick who had resided at the Manor continuously since 1676. In 1692, about the time that we think the east wing of the manor was built as a permanent resident, Fr. William Hunter was listed as living here as the local superior. The Sheriff also reported that Hunter was fitting up a new church in 1697 (our current sacristy and sanctuary). From 1693 through 1709, the superior of the whole Maryland mission again governed from St. Thomas Manor, Chapel Point. From 1710 to 1723 the Superior of the mission is not identified with a specific residence. In most years one or two priests and a Jesuit brother were identified as living at St. Thomas Manor, in some years all the Jesuits are just listed as being in Maryland, given the presence of a residence and the chapels served from it, we could presume some Jesuits resided here throughout that period. From 1725 until the Suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, the Mission Superior clearly resided at St. Thomas. During that time in 1741, the large brick manor house was constructed.

When the Jesuits ceased to exist by Papal decree there was no longer a Jesuit mission superior. Fr. John Lewis became the superior of the clergy in Maryland, under the authority of

the Catholic Vicar of London, Bishop Challoner. He and Bennett Neale and George Hunter, the superior of St. Thomas Manor resided here at Chapel Point. Fr. Hunter would be the local superior until his death in 1779. From 1780 to 1789 between 3 and 7 Jesuits listed St. Thomas Manor as their residence. In 1790, the elevation of John Carroll, as bishop meant there would be no mission superior, just local parish superiors under the bishop. From 1790 to the 1805 Restoration of the Society of Jesus in the U.S., between 3 and 7 priests operated at and from St. Thomas Manor. In 1798, Fr. Charles Sewall built the present Church dedicated to St. Ignatius. This begins the period in which this parish would be known as St. Ignatius Church at St. Thomas Manor, or often simply as St. Thomas.

From 1805 until the creation of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus in 1833, there was a mission superior resident at St. Thomas. In 1833, the manor became the residence of the Jesuit provincial. St. Thomas Manor would continue as the residence of the Jesuit superior who oversaw the Jesuit pastoral work in Charles County. In 1925, the main Jesuit residence in Charles County moved to Sacred Heart in La Plata, continuing to serve Hilltop, McConchie and for a while Indian Head and Pomfret churches. Finally beginning in 1925 the resident priest at Chapel Point has had charge only of the parishioners of St. Ignatius Parish at St. Thomas Manor. It had been the expansive responsibilities for ministry in Charles and Prince Georges Counties that preserved our continuity since 1662, but it also meant that the pastors' duties had always been divided. In a sense the move in 1925 was a demotion of status but it allowed the pastor to focus all of his attention on a smaller local flock.

### **Oldest Parish- St. Augustine Florida**

The Oldest Parish title clearly belongs to St. Augustine in St. Augustine Florida. Since St. Augustine was the first permanent European settlement, it is obviously where we would look for the oldest Catholic parish. That parish claims the same foundation as the town, 1565. The first Mass was celebrated on September 8, 1565, seventy-six years before the first chapel at Chapel Point.

St. Augustine's history is clearly not continuous, due largely to the fortunes of the Spanish empire, the close relationship between church and state in Spanish colonies and tensions with its English speaking neighbors to the north. It fell victim to first hostility first from English colonies and empire and then U.S. land policy.

St. Augustine was the center of surrounding rural missions in northern Florida, much as Chapel Point was for upper Potomac area. There was a major disruption of the Church in the early 1700s, because of brutal raids on the mission system by English and Indian forces from the Carolinas. About 4,000 native converts were killed, enslaved or fled into exile.

The clearest break in their continuity parish continuity came in the period during which Spain had given control of Florida to England at the end of the Seven Year War. We in the United States call that conflict The French and Indian War. St. Augustine had operated as a parish under the bishop of Cuba, distrusting the English promises of freedom of religion Spanish Catholics abandoned land and church buildings to seek refuge in Cuba.

Altogether, 3,104 residents, including 80 survivors of the Indian missions and 48 free African- American families, took ship to Cuba, New Spain (Mexico), or Spain. The first American parish was officially abandoned in February 1764, when a schooner carried the

pastor, SACRISTAN, altars, sacred vessels, and other objects from all the sanctuaries in the city, as well as fifteen folio volumes of parish registers, to Havana. (**Michael Gannon, S.J. “Catholic Church in Florida.” New Catholic Encyclopedia 2009 Supplement Gale Publishing**)

Catholicism restarted in various parts of Florida, including St. Augustine, before Florida was acquired by the United States in 1821. This time Catholics in St. Augustine generally took their chances with their new government. Unfortunately, in the purchase, the U.S. government acquired all lands of the Spanish Crown, and treated the churches as such. The loss of property and the return of Spanish clergy to Spanish territories entailed several more years of interruption.

For more information of the Church in Florida c.f. . (**Michael Gannon, S.J. “Catholic Church in Florida.” New Catholic Encyclopedia 2009 Supplement Gale Publishing**)

And <http://thefirstparish.org/visit-us/our-history/>

### **Oldest Catholic Church building in the present United States San Miguel Mission**

The old San Miguel missions in Santa Fe, New Mexico in part of what may be the oldest Catholic Church built in what is now the United States. The original chapel dates to about 1620. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680, drove the clergy and the Spanish out accompanied by many of the native converts. The church remained inactive until the Reconquista of 1694. There have been a number rebuilding projects necessitated by different uses and periods of disuse or decay. It is still in use as a chapel, but for much of its life it was a chapel for the Franciscans and their school, St. Michael’s College. It is no longer a parish and has not been for a very long time. Its claim is to be the oldest Catholic church structure in use in the United States.

<http://www.sanmiguelmission.org/#!faith-in-blood/cjg9>

<http://www.sdc.org/~smiguel/about.htm>

Information on its filing for landmark status as part of the Barrio de Analco Historic District can be found at:

<http://focus.nps.gov/GetAsset?assetID=1c989456-d96c-45db-b671-f10c92590ba0>

### **Other earlier Maryland Churches**

St. Ignatius at St. Thomas Manor, Chapel Point, was clearly not the earliest catholic worshipping community in Maryland. The first presence was at St. Mary’s City and at St. Inigoes Planation or Manor which was the first Jesuit plantation acquired in Maryland.

The general pattern of church organization was that there would be a central parish or mission residence serving the local population and traveling to outlying chapels to minister to the dispersed Catholics. In St. Mary’s County there were a succession of manor residences serving dependent mission, they included,

St. Inigoes, St. Francis Xavier in Newtown and newer centers at Leonardtown and Choptico. The Chapel in St. Mary's was first chapel but was permanently closed by the Royal governor in 1704 and eventually torn down. Its bricks were moved to St. Inigoes for building a manor house. After the move of the colonial capital to Annapolis the little city of St. Mary's City faded into farm fields.

The mission center for chapels in St. Mary's County shifted to the manor at St. Inigoes and at times also at St. Francis Xavier in Newtown. The area around St. Inigoes was and remains thinly populated even today. The fact that the Mission superior had lived at St. Inigoes, that generations of Jesuits in training had vacationed at the villa house there and that it was the longest held Jesuit property in the United States all made parting difficult. The times, however, made change essential. The Jesuit residence and mission center moved from St. Inigoes in 1919. Fr. John Lafarge provided a wonderful essay not only on the history but also about the changing settlement patterns in Southern Maryland in explaining the move to a sentimental Jesuit population. (<http://jesuitarchives.org/woodstock-letters/#woodstock051>)

"The Transfer of the St. Inigoes Residence, Woodstock Letters 1922 Vol 51 pp 192- 208). The 1919 Maryland Province catalog lists four Jesuits in residence serving St. Michael's, St. Peter Claver, St. Nicholas St. George, Holy Face, St. Francis Xavier and Sacred Heart. The next year all the same missions were covered from ST. Michael's In Ridge. The 1970 filing with the Department of Interior, seeking landmark Status notes the end of regularly scheduled service in 1930.

([http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/stagsere/se1/se5/026000/026200/026262/pdf/msa\\_se5\\_26262.pdf](http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/stagsere/se1/se5/026000/026200/026262/pdf/msa_se5_26262.pdf)) There is still a chapel at St. Inigoes which is used for occasional masses by St. Cecelia's Parish, St. Mary's City which was established in 1975. The Jesuits continue to own the chapel and cemetery, but it has clearly not been an active fully functional church or parish in decades. It is today surrounded by Webster field at St. Inigoes Naval Air Station.

St. Francis Xavier claims essentially the same founding dates as St. Ignatius in Port Tobacco. It survived as a mission center in times of river travels and faded when land travel, shifted traffic inland. St. Francis Xavier is beautifully surrounded by water, the church was built part-way down a neck of land distant from the interior and surrounded by Jesuit farm lands. It would meet the same end as St. Inigoes, but it would later revive followed the transfer of Jesuit parishes and churches to the Archdiocese of Washington in the 1960s. In Fr. Ender's Obituary, Woodstock letters (1884 vol 13 p402

<http://jesuitarchives.org/woodstock-letters/#woodstock013> ) noted the transfer: In July, 1868, Fr. Enders made Leonardtown the residence of the mission; this was a judicious change; for it he had already made preparations by the enlargement of a building he had purchased. Now the Fathers from a central point could more easily attend their churches.

For nearly 100 years St. Francis Xavier once home to the Mission superior as has been St. Inigoes and St/Ignatius St. Thomas Manor , would be served on an occasional basis from the upstart parish at Leonardtown established in 1710. Once it was given to the Archdiocese, it gained a residential pastor.