

A History of St. Mark Church

The campus of St. Mark Church is located on land that was once frequented by the Susquehanna Indians, and the earliest European settlement in the area was known as *Johnny Cake Town*. Among the oldest Catholic families in America, the Carroll family acquired land and built one of their many plantations, Castle Thunder, in the area. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, gave the land as a dowry to his eldest daughter, Mary, upon her marriage to Richard Caton in 1786. The area became known as the Village of Caton, hence Catonsville.

During the mid-1800's, as Catholicism spread in the Catonsville area, Catholics journeyed to St. Peter's Church at Hollins and Poppleton Streets in Baltimore City, or to St. Paul's Church in Ellicott City, Maryland to attend Mass. On October 13, 1852, the first Catholic parish near Catonsville was established at St. Agnes Church, in what was then known as Woodlawn, three miles to the northeast of Catonsville.

In early February of 1888, an article in the Catonsville newspaper, *The Argus*, stated that a Catholic Sunday School would be started in Catonsville. The editor added, "Our town should also have a Catholic Church." In March of that year, *The Argus* announced that Cardinal James Gibbons had instructed Rev. John E. Dunn, Pastor of St. Agnes, to begin the building process for a new Catholic church. Initially, Fr. Dunn was to be pastor of both parishes.

Cardinal Gibbons came to St. Mark on October 7, 1888 to lay the cornerstone of the new chapel. At a grand ceremony, amidst some 10,000 people, the cardinal announced that the new church would be named in honor of St. Mark. After a few setbacks, including a violent storm that demolished much of the work that had been done, construction resumed in the spring of 1889 with completion scheduled for August. Staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the first St. Mark School was also built and opened on September 2, 1889.

The first Mass and Baptism at St. Mark Church were celebrated on Sunday, November 3, 1889. To mark the beginning of the parish and to renew the faith of its people, the Redemptorist priests opened a week-long mission at the church. The official dedication of St. Mark Church was held on December 8, 1889, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

In these early years, St. Mark Church received many blessings from God. By 1908, it had become a vital and growing parish with substantial assets including the chapel, rectory, and convent and the school with approximately 165 children. There was also a hall consisting of an auditorium, gymnasium and bowling lanes. By 1936, the school had grown to 400 students. Monsignor Joseph Leary, appointed Pastor in 1943, served the parish until his death in March of 1967.

Construction of the first wing of the new school was begun in 1949. Enrollment in the school exceeded 500 at that time. The parish progressed with increased vitality over the years to include an active Holy Name Society, and events such as an annual Communion breakfast, baseball night and retreat.

A very active Mother's Club assisted the school financially and socially. The St. Mark Social Club allowed eligible young men and women of the parish to meet and socialize, and expanding youth activities included baseball, football and lacrosse. These youth activities were expertly guided by Rev. Thomas Farrell, who became Associate Pastor of St. Mark Church in 1945.

In 1956, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for elementary and secondary school students who did not attend St. Mark School was begun. Enrollment in the school increased to more than 1,000 and the second wing was constructed in 1960, giving the school its now familiar H shape. The building process continued and the new Church was completed in the spring of 1962.

The new Church was a great change for the parish, but greater changes were forthcoming not only for St. Mark, but for the worldwide Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council began in October 1962, instigating changes of a magnitude unprecedented in the lives of St. Mark parishioners. As a result, the parish became more active and community-oriented. Lay people came to know the full-bodied meaning of the word "minister" for they themselves became, in various capacities, ministers. Other ecclesiastical changes focused on the Mass. A new altar was constructed which allowed liturgical flexibility. Also, a new emphasis was placed on ecumenism. St. Mark Parish was chosen to begin one of the new programs, a pilot program called *Living Room Dialogues*. St. Mark's first Parish Council was formed in 1969.

Further reforms of Vatican II were implemented in 1971. Reconciliation rooms were constructed to allow parishioners the option of celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation face-to-face with the priests. In 1975 a committee planned the renovation of the Church and Chapel which included removing the brass gates and the communion rails from the altar, thus eliminating part of the barrier between the congregation and the altar.

The priority of the new pastor, Rev. John McCall, upon his arrival in 1979 was to renovate the parish's physical facilities. Major renovation to the Chapel was completed in 1981. School enrollment began to decline after reaching its peak in the 1960's. The quality of education, however, continued to improve. The school attained Middle States Accreditation and continues to provide excellent academic opportunities. Attendance in school years 1987 and 1988 numbered approximately 433 students. As of September 2001, total enrollment in St. Mark School was 592, and there were 394 students enrolled in the Religious Education Program.

The generous response of parishioners to several campaigns, including the Building Campaigns of 1996 and 1998 and the Heritage of Hope, brought about the completion of the new Parish Center. The facility, containing all of the parish offices, was dedicated by William Cardinal Keeler in December 2000. The former Fr. Dunn Room was converted into offices and work areas for the school. Unfortunately, the old rectory had to be demolished due to structural weaknesses.