

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

St. Mary's History ©

Although the history of the Catholic Church in Georgetown is relatively short, the effects it had on our community were strong and lasting, not only encompassing religion, but education and even a military component.

In a special edition of the "St. Anthony Guild" in 1904, the story of how St. Mary's came to be was described. "There were scarcely half a dozen Catholic families prior to the Civil War and visits from a Catholic priest were few and far between. For many years in that period, and until the death of Mr. Arthur Morgan in 1878, Mass was celebrated in the parlor of his residence (now the Kaminski House) and later, in the home of his nephew, Mr. William Doyle Morgan. Georgetown was one of many mission places in eastern South Carolina that the priest had to visit, therefore his visit was generally on a weekday at which time Mass was celebrated. The first Sunday services in over thirty years were held by Father Charles D. Wood, on Sunday, October 29, 1899, at a private residence. The congregation increasing, Father Wood determined that a private residence should not be used any longer for the purpose of holding services. He converted what was known as "Walker's Rink" on Highmarket Street into a chapel and named it "St. Ann's".

On October 10, 1899, ground was broken for the first Roman Catholic Church erected in Georgetown. The cornerstone was laid on November 30, 1899, (Thanksgiving Day) by the Right Reverend H. P. Northrop, Bishop of Charleston, assisted by the pastor, Father Charles Dubois Wood. The Church, named St. Mary's, Our Lady of Ransom, is built of brick, and trimmed with stone. The first services were held in the Church, June 23, 1901.

Many beautiful and meaningful gifts were bestowed on St. Mary's. The window over the altar is an emblem of the Holy Trinity. The four memorial windows were made in Germany and are genuine art glass. Two windows were erected as a memorial by Mr. W. D. Morgan to his mother and father, Mrs. Mary Morgan and Mr. John Morgan. They represent "The Good Shepherd" and "St. Mary of Ransom". The other two were erected by Miss Sarah Sullivan to her sister and nephew, Mrs. Catherine McFeely and Mr. John McFeely. They represent the "Flight into Egypt" and the "Apostle John Writing the Gospel at the Isle of Patmos." All of these windows were imported.

The four transept windows are credited to the vestry of the church: St. Matthew for George A. Lohr, St. Mark for Daniel J. Crowley, St. Luke for Mr. Patrick J. Doyle, and St. John for Mr. E. J. Whelan. They bear appropriate texts of the four gospels.

The sanctuary lamp is from Tiffany and is of solid brass. The statues represent the "Sacred Heart", the "Blessed Virgin", St. Joseph and St. Anthony. The two side memorials are fine specimens of carved wood.

The fourteen stations of the passion of Christ are in alabaster and is a gift to the church from parties in New York City. The confessional is of carved butternut wood, the pews are of oak and the lectern also of oak. The three are gifts to the church and valued at \$800 at that time.

The baptismal font is of carved oak and bears the following inscription: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." It is a gift of Simon P. O'Reilly. The main altar of the church is white and gold.

The cost of the church, including memorials, furnishings, vestments, and altar ornamentations was \$14,000. The bell was molded by the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, especially for St. Mary's. It is a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Simon P. O'Reilly of Reading, Pa. It weighs 2,300 pounds and is a particularly fine bell. Its cost was upwards of \$900 and bears not only the name of the Church molded in its rim but the name of the pastor, Father Wood, and the initials of the vestry."

The home of William Doyle Morgan, mayor of Georgetown, was used often for Mass before St. Mary's was built. It then became a parochial school from 1950-1968. Convent quarters for the nuns were built in the house while classrooms were built in the rear of the grounds.

During World War II, a POW camp was located near Myrtle Beach. Father John Steigner, fluent in German, visited there regularly, saying Mass and ministering to the 250 German prisoners. Another role St. Mary's played during the war was through the Vatican, where information about American soldiers could come more quickly than through the Red Cross. The priests of St. Mary's were able to deliver vital personal information to families about their loved ones and minister to them at least twelve hours before the Red Cross could deliver notification. Regardless of denomination or creed, the fathers brought comfort to all.

In 1968, a major restructuring of the church took place. The new renovations saw many of St. Mary's original furnishings sold or claimed. The entrance on Highmarket Street was moved to the opposite end of the church where a lovely garden and patio is laid out. The original entrance is now a niche with a statue of the Blessed Mother, the Madonna.

