

Our Lady's Chapel

A Brief History



July 2007
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Beginnings:

Early Maryland colonial records provide clues that indicate an early Catholic Chapel was located in Medley's Neck. This projection of land lies between Breton Bay and the Potomac River just south of Leonardtown Maryland.

On 11 October 1647, John Nun was granted a patent for 300 acres on the south side of Breton Bay. A year later on 20 October 1648, Nun sold 150 acres of this tract to John Shircliff and Henry Spinke. A Chancery Court land inquisition conducted on 19 July 1678, revealed that on 12 February 1650 Edward Cotton had come into possession of this 150 acres of Shircliff/Spinke and three other adjacent tracts "Excepting about an acre of Ground which they [Shircliff and Spinkes] formerly Granted unto m.^f Lawrence Starkey & as it is now marked out..."¹.

This Lawrence Starkey was a Jesuit priest who had arrived in the Chesapeake area from Europe in 1648. From 1649 through 1654, Starkey was in Maryland "attending to outlying missions" at Newtowne and Portoback under his superior, Thomas Copley at St. Inigoes.* By 1655, as a result of puritan control of the colony², both Starkey and his new superior, Francis Fitzherbert, were forced to flee to Virginia. Neither Starkey, who died in February 1657, nor Fitzherbert ever returned to Maryland.³

The clue in all this is the "acre of Ground" and its location. A single acre in the possession of a priest could well mean a church and/or burial ground.

On 11 October 1712, a Court of Chancery produced a deposition by Mary Dent concerning this land. It states that "... Mrs Mary Dent aged Sixty-five years ... That her father John Schertilife her mother Anne Schertilife her uncle Henry Spinke often times say that her Said father and Uncle Sold the Tract of Land beginning in the Valley where there was a well about fifty or sixty yards from her fathers then dwelling house ... and when her father and mother lived on the said land there was a **Chaple** Some Distance from her fathers house about one hundred and fifty yards or thereabouts".⁴ It is interesting that Mrs. Dent identified a chapel and not a dwelling or other type of structure being used as a chapel.

What did the chapel look like? More than likely it was a typical post-in-ground construction with clapboard siding and a minimum of brick if any. Father Starkey bought from London, a list of goods in 1654 which contains tools, various sizes of nails and other hardware that could have been used for the construction of such a wooden building⁵.

By 1653 most of the initial land possessors in the immediate area of the Chaple were gone. By the 1660s, the "chapple" at **Nun's Oake** had been abandoned, forgotten or destroyed.

In 1658, the Calverts regained control of their colony and by the early 1660s many new colonists were taking up land between Breton's bay and St Clement's bay. On 10 November 1661 a one and a half acre parcel of land on the north side of Breton's Bay was donated to the community by William Bretton " ... to erect and build a Church or Chappell ... Likewise for a Church yard wherein to bury their dead ... ".

* The names Newtowne, St Inegoes and Portoback designated areas within the Maryland colony instead of actual towns. By 1649, there were at least three such areas: Newtowne Hundred, St Inegoes Hundred and Portoback Hundred. Each hundred was a civil district, which sent representatives (burgesses) to the Maryland Assembly.

In 1666, an adjacent land indenture cites this “Church or chappell in Brettons bay ”.⁶

On 2 December 1668, William Bretton sold all of his land to one Henry Warren, who was also a Jesuit.⁷ Today (2001) this 840 plus acres of land still remains in the custody of the Jesuits with the exception of two small tracts one of which is about 9 acres which contains the present St Francis Xavier Church and graveyard and is owned by the Archdiocese of Washington.

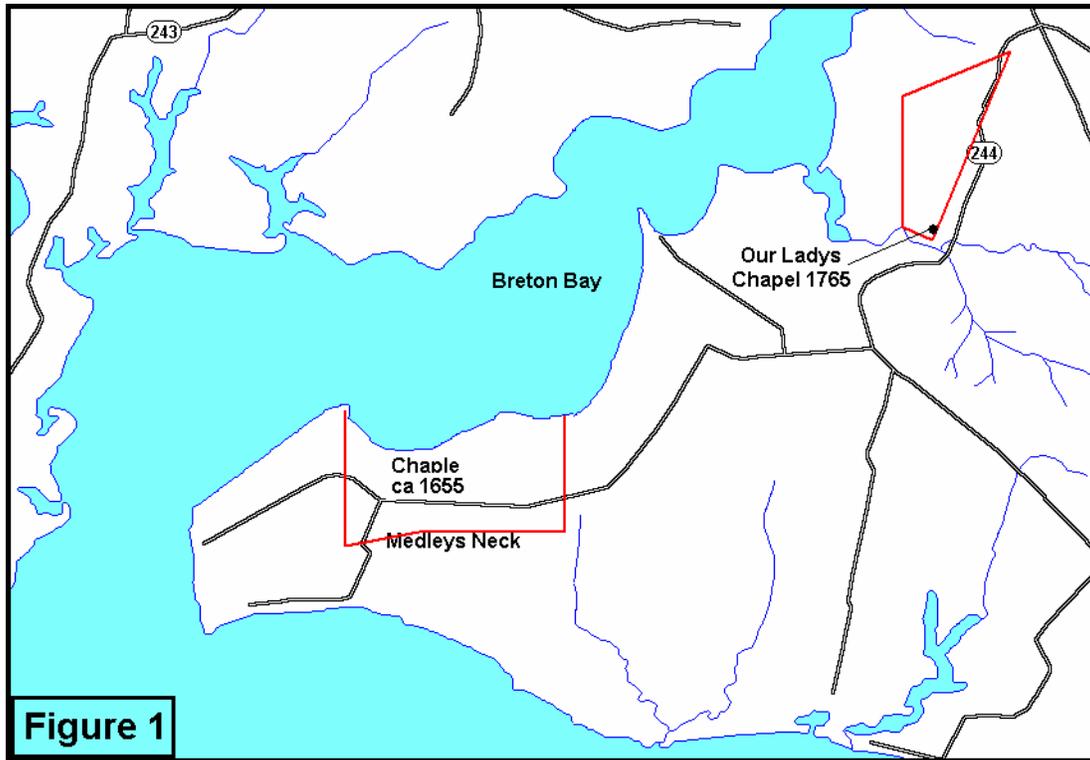


Figure 1

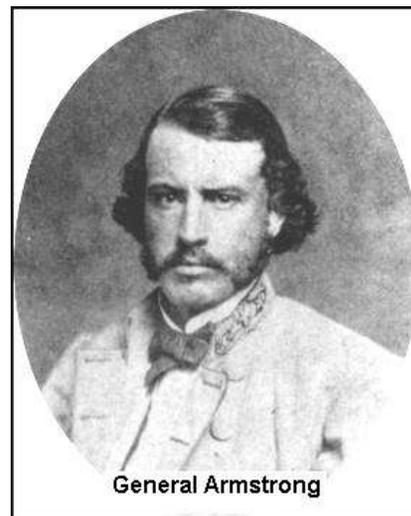
Our Lady’s Chapel:

It would be 100 years before the Jesuits erected another church on the south side of Breton’s bay. On 22 January 1765, Stephen Gough sold a 2-acre parcel of a tract called **St. Barnards** to George Hunter⁸, the Jesuit superior stationed at **St Thomas Manor** in Charles County⁹. Here again a priest is buying a small number of acres. It had to be for a church and/or graveyard. **St. Barnards** was/is located just north of the then *Nevitt’s Creek* as shown in Figure 1. An accounting on 7 November 1767 reveals “Lady’s Chappel” to have been built by James Gough - but not paid for¹⁰. James Gough, Stephen’s father, had died in June 1764, which means that the chapel had been built previous to the land’s acquisition. This may not have been unusual, as Catholic priests during this time were forbidden to build churches. Since this area today is the site of the current Our Lady’s Chapel, it may be deduced that Hunter’s purchase was the beginning of this Catholic mission and later parish.

About 1816, the poor condition of the original chapel was cause for Archbishop Marechal to close it for worship. A new brick structure replaced the old Chapel about a year later. Major repairs to this second chapel were done circa 1831. This structure had the altar on the east end of the church.

The land of Our Lady’s Chapel was expanded by 2.5 acres in 1861. This additional land was bought from Dr. J Felix Morgan and was intended for a burial ground¹¹. It today is part of the south graveyard and parking lot.

In 1910 it became necessary to replace the old brick building. Much discussion concerned the site of the proposed new building—a new site or original. The matter was settled when Mrs. Archibald Barkley offered five thousand dollars to begin building only if the new church was on the original site and the new church also be called the General Armstrong Memorial Chapel. Mrs. Barkley was the step daughter of Charlotte Coad Combs who was the second wife of General Frank Armstrong. General Frank Armstrong served in both the Confederate Army and later the United States Army. The new building, constructed of hollow tile and cement after the Spanish mission style, was dedicated in May of 1911.



In 1914 an additional 2.65 acres was purchased at the rear of the church. This land was used as a graveyard extension and also contained a sextons house.

In 1921, Mr. & Mrs. Eric Floyd donated land a short distance from the church for use as a parochial school. The school was closed in 1954 and its function performed by the new Father Andrew White School in Leonardtown.

The current, 2009, parish bounds are shown below.



References:

- ¹ Edward Hande Browne et al, *Archives of Maryland*, (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society) 72 volumes, hereafter cited as *Archives*, Vol. LI, Pages 253-256.
- ² *Ibid*, Vol. III, Page 311.
- ³ *Catalog of Members of the Maryland Mission of the Society of Jesus, 1634-1806*, n.p., n.d., n.pag., year 1648 - 1655. This hardbound book gives no author, publisher, or date. The pages are arranged by years. A brief introduction states “ This catalogue has been made out with copies of Roman Catalogues, Annual letters, baptismal Registers, old records, ... and other similar works.” It may have been prepared by Reverend William P. Treachy whose book “Old Catholic Maryland and Its Early Jesuit Missionaries”, 1889, contains an appendix, which appears to be an abbreviated version of this Catalogue. Copies of both books are at the research facility of the St. Mary’s County Historical Society, Leonardtown, Md., Hereafter cited as *Jesuit Catalog*.
- ⁴ CHANCERY COURT (Chancery Record), Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Md., Liber PC, page 861. MSA No.: SM 1-3.
- ⁵ *Archives*, Vol. X, 437.
- ⁶ *Archives*, Vol. LVII, 209.
- ⁷ *Jesuit Catalog*, Year 1668 and *Archives*, Vol. LVII, 384.
- ⁸ MARYLAND PROVINCIAL PAPERS (Land Office Miscellany), Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Md., *List of Alienations, SM*, MSA No.: S 50-49.
- ⁹ *Jesuit Catalog*, Year 1765.
- ¹⁰ PREROGATIVE COURT (Testimony Proceedings), Maryland State Archives, Annapolis Md., Liber 43, Folio 170, MSA No.: 529-61.
- ¹¹ Clerk of the Circuit Court (Land Records), St Mary's County Court House, Leonardtown Md. Liber JTB3, page 542.