

# SAINT MARY'S NEWPORT CATHOLIC CHURCH



## Historic Old Church History and Vision



## HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S OLD CHURCH

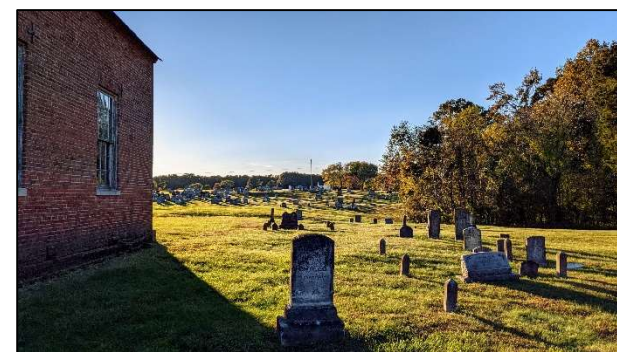
Off a lightly-traveled side road, in an out-of-the-way corner of southern Maryland, in a lovely expanse of fields and farms surrounded by woods and creeks, lies a remarkably preserved brick church, over two-hundred years old, part of the parish of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Newport.

St. Mary's was established in 1674 by two Franciscan priests, Fr. Basil Hobart and Fr. Polycarp Wickstead, the only Franciscan parish in the thirteen colonies. It is the third-oldest continually open parish in the United States. In 1698, the parish was given to the care of the Jesuits; in 1881, it was handed over to the Archdiocese.

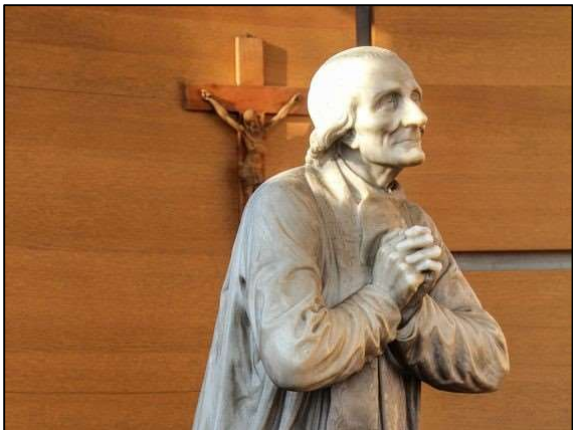
The old brick church was likely erected in the late 1790s, as the oldest headstones in the adjacent cemetery date from this time. In the brick exterior, one can see its history outlined: originally a one-story building, the church was enlarged and gables were added, as a balustraded gallery was built inside.

The church in its present form was finished in 1840 in the Greek Revival style, notable for its paneled wooden front door and marble threshold, 12 over 12 sash side windows with marble sills, sawtooth patterned corbeled eaves, and inside, an altarpiece of fluted pilasters below an arched pediment and remarkable hand-painted images and stenciling of high artistic quality.

Unlike most buildings from that time, the old church never suffered a fire nor was ever substantially altered after 1840, making it the oldest intact building in Charles County. The historic cemetery contains many gravestones of notable quality, especially the section of the Brent-Merrick family, containing the grave of the only senator from Charles County, William Merrick, who cast the deciding vote to admit Texas to the Union. Buried at St. Mary's as well are Thomas Jones, co-conspirator with John Wilkes Booth, members of the Union's 19<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry, and several veterans of the army of the Confederacy.



In 1906, a new, larger church was built at St. Mary's, and the old church was converted to a kitchen, as a parish hall (torn down in 2003) was built and attached to the front of the old church. By the 1980s, the church was no longer used and became a building for storage. In 1991, the National Historic Registry completed a report on the history of the church and cemetery, remarking upon the outstanding architectural and artistic features of the site. In the late 1990s a committee was formed to see about renovating the old church. In 2021, the current pastor, Fr. Matt Fish, was sent to St. Mary's. He immediately began efforts to rehabilitate the church; moreover, its potential to serve as a home for the Shrine of St. John Vianney, was identified.



St. John Vianney, often called the “Curé of Ars” (meaning, the parish priest of the town of Ars), was a French priest who lived from 1786 to 1859, one of the most remarkable saints of modern times, and the patron saint of parish priests. Though he barely passed his classes in seminary, and was sent to a forgotten parish in a remote corner of his diocese—so little did they think of his potential—he became the greatest parish priest in the history of the Catholic Church. His piety, humility, and tireless dedication, as well as his miraculous ability to read hearts in the confessional, soon attracted thousands of people from all over Europe (some 20,000 a year!) to meet this saintly country priest.

**“I love You, O my God, and my only desire is to love You until the last breath of my life. I love You, O my infinitely lovable God, and I would rather die loving You, than live without loving You. I love You, Lord, and the only grace I ask is to love You eternally.... My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love You, I want my heart to repeat it to You as often as I draw breath.”**

**- Saint John Vianney**

In 1931, Fr. William Baldus founded the Shrine of St. John Vianney at St. Mary’s Newport. He obtained a first-class relic (a piece of bone from St. John Vianney’s body) and a statue of him. Noting that Newport was a small country parish much like Ars, where St. John Vianney served, Fr. Baldus hoped that this shrine would be a source of renewal for the priesthood throughout the country. Right away, many miracles came from people praying before the relic. To this day, it remains the only Shrine of St. John Vianney in the United States.



Our vision for the old church and Shrine of St. John Vianney in Newport is to be a place where people can retreat to encounter God in a peaceful corner of the lovely countryside of southern Maryland. We hope to make the shrine a place of national pilgrimage, to come and venerate our first-class relic of the Curé of Ars and ask for his prayers. Under his patronage, we want to be a place of intercession for priests. Each week we offer Mass for a pastor of our archdiocese and for vocations to the priesthood from his parish, imploring the intercession of St. John Vianney. We hope to create sodalities to pray for priests and vocations under the patronage of St. John Vianney, throughout the country.

While much has been done to clean and begin restoring the church, major work still lies ahead. Once the floor is repaired, we plan on moving the shrine from our new church to the historic old church, dedicating it exclusively to the shrine. The foundation must be secured, the exterior brick must be cleaned and repointed, and the roof repaired. The interior plaster must be rehabilitated, the stenciling and murals redone, pews installed, and the sanctuary and altar rebuilt. Electricity, a heating/cooling system, and an exterior sacristy must be added.



As the campus is a fitting place to come and enjoy the peace and quiet of the countryside, a walking trail will be built around the property. Benches and chairs, and grottos and statues of Jesus, Our Lady, and saints will be added.

But we cannot do any of this without much support! Volunteers are always needed, and we depend on the financial support of donors to accomplish our vision.

If you would like to visit, help with work, or contribute financially to the restoration of the old church and the building up of the shrine, please contact us or stop by:

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