

History of St. Louis Parish

(extracted from "Dedication of St. Louis School and Convent, Groveton, Sunday September 16, 1956, Most Rev. Peter L. Ireton, D.D, Bishop of Richmond, Presiding)



St. Louis Parish in Groveton

The history of Catholicism in and around the Alexandria area goes back many many years. Prior to the Revolutionary War, the Catholic religion was proscribed [forbidden] in Virginia. Priests from Maryland would cross the Potomac to minister secretly to their co-religionists. The first public Mass was probably said by the French chaplains of Rochambeau's army, a part of which wintered in Alexandria after the surrender of Cornwallis in 1781. After the War, Catholics discussed plans for a formal place of worship in Alexandria. The first Catholic Church in this part of Virginia was finally built in 1793.

For many years, Jesuit priests from Georgetown University took care of St. Mary's, the new parish in Alexandria. The parish continued to grow during these years and in 1891 Father Cutler, a priest of the Diocese of Richmond was appointed pastor. He was succeeded by Father Smet, Father McKeefry, Msgr. Rankin, and Msgr. Stephens [the present pastor in 1956].

These priests cared for a parish that included not only Alexandria but also a large area outside the city, including what is now St. Louis parish in Groveton [now known as St. Louis Catholic Church]. Father Louis Smet, in particular, seemed to be interested in the Groveton area. Under his direction, Mrs. L. E. Tull, who lived in Groveton, began a Sunday school for the Catholic children of the area. Within a year or two, Father Smet decided that the time had come to establish a mission church in Groveton. With this

purpose in view, he commissioned Mr. L.A. [Ludwood A.] Popkins [son of Richard Nelson Popkins and Laura Washington Ayers] to buy the old Groveton School house [on the corner of what is now known Popkins Lane and Route 1] and the land that went with it. This was done in 1925. [The Groveton School House had been used by the Seminarians to hold non-denomination Sunday school referred to as the Groveton Mission for Groveton residents from 1880 to 1903. After 1903, the Groveton residents were now able to attend other churches that were being built, such as the “Christ Chapel of Groveton” on Route 1 between the streets now known as Memorial and Groveton Streets.]

One detail of the purchase is of additional interest and the source of some amusement to us today. One of the Catholics living in Groveton, not knowing that Mr. Popkins was bidding on behalf of Fr. Smet, himself bid for the old school. In order to get the building, Mr. Popkins was forced to bid six hundred dollars more than he had been authorized.

At the time of its purchase, the old schoolhouse was considerably smaller than it is at present. It faced out on U. S. Highway 1, instead of on Popkins Lane as we see it today. Mr. Popkins with the aid of a team of horses moved the building to its present location. [The picture at the beginning of this brief history shows the mission chapel after its relocation. The picture of the chapel was scanned from the original booklet and the booklet has been returned to its owner, Frank Perka.]

Mass was said in Groveton once a month at first and later twice monthly. It is difficult to ascertain just how many Catholics lived in the area served by the mission chapel. We do know that at times there were as few as eight or ten people in attendance at Sunday Mass.

In the early 1940s, Father Rankin, had the chapel remodeled. Its length was doubled which in turn tripled the seating capacity. Electricity was installed and a more adequate heating system was added. It was at this time that the chapel was named St. Louis, in honor of Father Louis Smet who had originally established the mission in Groveton.

St. Louis Chapel was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies on the First Sunday of Advent in 1941. The dedication sermon was delivered by the Very Rev. Louis Motry, dean of the school of Canon Law at Catholic University. For more than a quarter of a century, Father Motry had taken a keen interest in parochial work in this part of Fairfax County.

As the years went on, the population of the area around St. Louis Chapel began to grow rapidly. By 1949, it was obvious that St. Louis was ready to become a separate parish in its own right. In preparation for this Msgr. Stephens, the pastor of St. Mary's, the mother church, purchased the present rectory. Father Albert P. Campbell was appointed the first pastor of St. Louis and he entered into the new parish in the fall of 1949.

Under Father Campbell and his successor Father Michael Igoe, and finally under the present [1956] pastor Father Eugene Walsh, the once small congregation of St. Louis has grown phenomenally. To meet this growth land upon which the present school and

convent were erected was purchased in August 1955. Today in the parish, we can count over 750 families containing more than 2500 parishioners. Instead of the monthly Mass remembered by the older parishioners, we now have five Masses each Sunday.

Back in 1927 Father Smet, who had left St. Mary's to become vice-rector of the American College Louvain, Belgium, wrote thusly to one of this former parishioners in Groveton: "I hope that you and the other friends of the little chapel do not think that I have forgotten you ... I do hope that the monthly Mass and the Sunday School are still kept up. Some day the 'the desert will blossom'". Looking upon this beautiful school and convent today [1956], we feel that Father Smet's hopes have been realized. His little chapel has indeed blossomed from its humble beginnings, blossomed for the greater honor and glory of Almighty God.

Follow-up Note:

In the spring of 1956, final arrangements for the sisters to staff the new St. Louis School were completed. The community of the Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, which had its mother-house at St. Elizabeth's Convent in Allegany, New York, agreed to send sisters beginning with the September 1956 term. [Saint Francis of Assisi established three orders. The *first order* was for friars, which he called the Friars Minor meaning the "Little Brothers." The *second order* was for the nuns, which he and Saint Clare of Assisi established and he named it for her, the Poor Clares. The *third order* was established for laymen and women, which is known as the 'Third Order of Saint Francis' or, more formally, the Secular Franciscan Order. Outside the Catholic Church, there is the Anglican Society of Saint Francis, which is a Franciscan religious order consisting of men and women, lay and ordained, married and single. This order is divided into five provinces: Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, North America, and South America.] Their Order was young at the time and was of American origin. It was established in 1859 by Very Rev. Pamphilius da Magliano [Pamfilo di Magliano] of the Order of Friars Minor, who together with a small band of fellow Franciscan Priests had come from Italy to work in the Diocese of Buffalo. He soon realized the need for an institution of learning for young girls and it was not long before he saw this project get underway. From the two sisters who first took the brown habit of St. Francis, this religious order of women has grown to over one thousand nuns. The first establishment taken over by the Sisters was the Village School in Allegany. St. Louis School was their first foundation in Virginia. Four sisters will take care of the first and second grades, which opened St. Louis school. Additional sisters would arrive to supplement this original group, as each year a new grade would be added to the school. It was the expectation that by the time all eight grades were opened in the school, as many as sixteen to twenty four sisters would be needed.