



St. Mary's Church,
1742-1760

— HISTORY OF THE ARCHITECTURE —

1742: Erected small log chapel.

1760: Arsonists destroyed chapel.

1761: Laid cornerstone for new stone house of worship.

1762: Dedicated Lancaster County limestone house of worship, attached two-story rectory.

1852: Laid cornerstone for new house of worship.

1854: Completed red brick house of worship and six-room rectory, west of old stone church.

1867: Fire nearly destroyed 1854 house of worship.

1868: Consecrated rebuilt Gothic Revival house of worship.

1881: Dismantled old stone church.

1889: Added new and larger front section to 1854 rectory.



St. Mary's Church, 1762-1854



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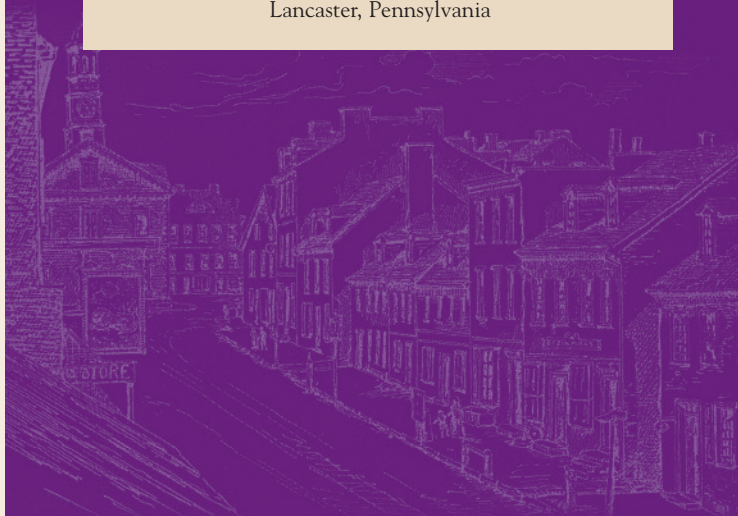
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*St. Mary's
Catholic Church*

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STORY OF THE PEOPLE AND NEIGHBORHOOD

As early as the 1640s, Jesuit missionaries made regular trips to the American Indian villages in and around what would become Lancaster Town. In 1729 Fr. Joseph Greaton made one such visit to what was then called Hickorytown. While in the village, he stayed with the Thomas Doyle family, recent Irish Catholic immigrants. Tradition holds that Fr. Greaton said Hickorytown's first Mass for people of European descent in their home. Ten years later, Fr. Henry Neale requested the establishment of a permanent mission.

To honor Fr. Neale's request, the Catholic Church sent two German-speaking priests to Lancaster in June 1741. Immediately taking on the task of purchasing lots and building a log chapel, Fr. William Wappeler and Fr. Theodore Schneider called their new parish the Mission of St. John Nepomucene. They wrote to their superiors describing the parish as a place ripe for Catholic work where "the opponents" of their faith were divided into "more than 50 sects."

For nearly 20 years, the small Catholic chapel coexisted peacefully with these sects, ministering primarily to Lancaster's "servants, maids, and day laborers." Then, on a December night in 1760, someone lit a torch to the log chapel. It burned to the ground. The town's Chief Burgess announced a reward for information leading to a conviction, but no record of such a conviction has been uncovered.

The congregation stopped only briefly to lament its losses. Remembering that Fr. Wappeler originally wished for a stone church, men of the congregation gathered limestone from nearby fields, cutting it into rectangular forms. When the stone was ready, women came to the construction site on many days. Oral tradition tells us they mixed the mortar while their husbands, brothers, and sons built a new house of worship complete with a 75-foot steeple. The resulting "very fine and commodious structure" served the parish, by then called St. Mary's, for 120 years.

Throughout its first century, St. Mary's stood squarely at the center of a working-class German and Irish community. Although Lancaster was an English-governed town, many of its residents spoke only German. In the mid-

1800s, tensions arose in various congregations over these language differences. At St. Mary's, the differences were resolved during the pastorate of the Irish Fr. Bernard Keenan (1823-1877).

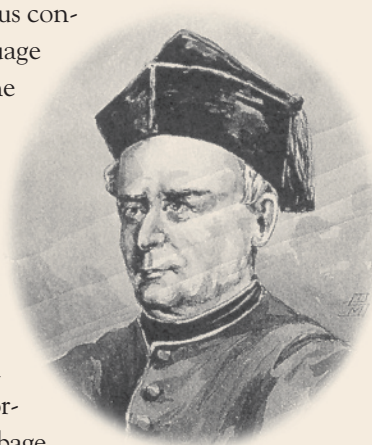
In 1849 he encouraged the establishment of St. Joseph's, "for the use of German Catholics." This house of worship, built at the apex of Cabbage Hill within sight of St. Mary's, is still often called "the German church."

Meanwhile, English-speaking members of the parish moved forward with plans to build a much larger house of worship adjacent to the old stone church. The contractor, Hayden Smith, purchased stones from the site of the original Lancaster jail (present-day site of Fulton Opera House) and used them in the foundation of the new St. Mary's Church.

Consecrated in March 1854, the red brick structure with large Gothic windows faced West Vine St. Its supporting pillars were encased in brick on the building's exterior, providing an unfettered view of the arched interior ceiling.

Fr. Keenan immediately turned his attention to the completion of an adjoining rectory. Sometimes called "The Grand Old Man of St. Mary's," he served the parish for 54 years and had many friends of influence. One of his parishioners was Lydia Hamilton Smith, who is believed to have been a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Smith, the daughter of an African mother and Irish father, lived with the U.S. Congressman Thaddeus Stevens in his house one block east of St. Mary's on Vine St. Fr. Keenan claimed both Stevens and the 15th American president, James Buchanan, as his friends.

In January 1867, another fire—this one caused by a defective heater—struck the parish. Although the church's solid



Rev. Bernard Keenan

brick walls remained standing, the edifice itself required extensive reconstruction. When the restoration, designed by Philadelphia architect Edwin F. Durang, was completed in 1868, St. Mary's had a redesigned Gothic Revival house of worship with twin truncated towers, a new roof, and a wholly refinished interior.

From 1881 until 1910, another Irish priest, the Rev. Dr. Peter J. McCullagh, left his mark on St. Mary's. It was Fr. McCullagh who invited Filippo Costaggini, painter of the frieze encircling the Rotunda in the nation's Capitol, to come to Lancaster. Costaggini painted three large oils above the altars at St. Mary's. Fr. McCullagh also supported the installation of many other works of art, giving this historic house of worship the value and beauty it enjoys at the dawn of the 21st century.

Today, St. Mary's continues its long tradition as haven to a multi-cultural community. In 1982 the parish founded Iglesia San Juan Bautista for its Spanish-speaking members, thus mirroring the German language resolution of the mid 1800s.



St. Mary's Sunday school teachers, 1920s

Earliest Known Record: 1729 celebration of Mass by visiting Jesuit priest
Current House of Worship: Gothic Revival, completed 1854, rebuilt after 1867 fire