

Spotlight On Holy Cross History - 140 years

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The origins of Holy Cross parish can be traced back to 1829. That year, Fr. Samuel Cooper was traveling through Lynchburg and stopped to rest. Mrs. Mary Dornin, a prominent Catholic woman in the city contacted him and the first Mass was celebrated in her home. After Fr. Cooper's visit, no priest came to Lynchburg for 5 years.

The building of the Kanawah Canal drew many Irishmen who were employed to work on this project. Over the next decade a movement began to establish a Catholic church to minister to the many Irish Catholic immigrants who were working on the canal and in the area. As the years passed more Catholics settled in the area and in 1838 Fr. Timothy O'Brian came from Richmond and organized 60 Catholic children for religious education. Since there was no building for this purpose the group met at Mrs. Dornin's home.

After many visits from traveling priests and the Bishop to administer the Sacraments of Confirmation and Baptism, and as the population and industries began to draw more and more people to the area, the Chapel of St. Francis Xavier was built in 1843. This small brick building was located on Clay Street. The parishioners stood for Mass because there were no funds for furnishings. At this time, St. Francis Xavier was the mission church of Fr. Edward Fox who divided his time between Wytheville, Virginia and Lynchburg traveling the 130 mile trip(one way) by stagecoach and later by horse and wagon.

During one of Fr. Fox's trips to and from Wytheville, he encountered a family stranded on the trail. According to his statement they had "been beset by marauders" and were unable to get any help, so he gave them his horse and wagon and he continued his journey on foot.

In 1869 the Catholic presence in Lynchburg continued to grow as the city grew rapidly. The area became a hub for railroad and river transportation. Tobacco, textiles and other commodities were in great demand as the country recovered from the Civil War.

Fr. James McGurk became the first permanent pastor in 1869. On May 3, 1871 a lot on the east corner of Clay and Seventh Streets was purchased for \$6,000 and a building of Gothic style was constructed. The new parish consisted of approximately 85 families. The money for the purchase of this building lot came mostly from the parishioners and some from the diocese.

The Lynchburg newspaper, the *News & Daily Advance* on April 14, 1877 had this to say about this new church construction: "*Ground has been broken for the new Catholic church at the corner of Clay & Seventh streets. It will be 50 x 120 feet and will be a handsome structure.*"

Thus began the construction of Holy Cross Catholic Church, where the "*blessed ones gave much and the least ones gave, if only a wisp of hay*" (a journal entry of a parishioner). The building was designed by architect Colonel August L. Forsberg. Colonel Forsberg came to Lynchburg as a result of wounds received during a battle. He remained in the region designing buildings all through the area.

The church interior consisted of 104 walnut pews which could seat approximately 800 comfortably (in the original interior configuration). The interior of the church was decorated with fresco work in the style of the Italian school of art. Mr. William B. Snead was the contractor and according to the *News & Daily Advance* "the building was the best architectural structure in the city".

The main and two side altars consisted of six different kinds of polished marble imported from Italy with two life-sized, kneeling angel sculptures on the ends of the altar facing inward. The frescoes over the arch of the Sanctuary represented cherubs along with 2, 9 foot high angels, with one angel holding a crown of stars and the other holding a wreath of lilies. Stenciled around the interior in Gothic letters were the words to the Lord's Prayer. The sanctuary was elevated several steps above the church floor.

Colorful stenciled frescoes surrounded the windows and adorned all the walls and the ceiling. Over the decades and with various renovations, as well as water damage, all these frescoes were painted over. Behind the original, multi-tiered marble altar, was a painting depicting the Crucifixion in bold colors. During an early renovation this painting was replaced with the present cross. With the addition of electricity, all the gas lights were also replaced.

The magnificent stained glass windows, original to the church construction, also date from 1879. These windows present the richest variegation of colors and are full of appropriate ecclesiastical emblems. The names of some of Lynchburg's first Catholic donors are etched on the glass at the bottom of each window. Before the church was air conditioned the windows opened at the bottom for air circulation but they were permanently sealed and protected from the elements with a full glass panel attached to the outside of each window. The largest stained glass window is situated over the original tower entrance and depicts the Holy Cross in white glass.

The Blessed Sacrament chapel to the rear of the church (present day) contains round stained glass windows depicting the four Evangelists and their religious symbols: St. Matthew represented with an angel, St Mark represented with a lion, St. Luke represented with an ox, and St. John represented with an eagle. The ceiling in this area is stenciled and painted blue which was the original design. The existing altar in the chapel is made of a large piece of marble from the original main altar.

The bell at Holy Cross was cast at the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland in 1879. The markings on one side of the bell read: *Church of the Holy Cross, Lynchburg, Virginia 1879*. The outside diameter at the bottom is 3' 11 ½" and the bell weighs 2,000 pounds. Originally the bell sat in a steeple on the top of the church roof and on September 14, 1879, it rang to announce the dedication of the church. The bell was so loud it had to be moved to a campanile beside the church. The campanile was designed by the very talented Edward G. Frye in 1899. The campanile is constructed of buff Roman brick with terra cotta trim and is considered an excellent example of Frye's decorative work. Currently the bell is rung electronically. The base of the bell tower is now a prayer niche and the statues of Our Lady and St. Joseph which once stood in the main church on individual side altars now reside there.

On September 6 1874, Fr. McGurk established Holy Cross Cemetery. The land was originally in Campbell County and the Catholics in the area who were buried in various cemeteries were moved to the new cemetery. Fr. McGurk, seeing the needs of his parish grow became involved in the building of a new rectory for the priests, located where the parking lot and parish life center are today.

Under the guidance of Fr. McGurk the Knights of Columbus #595 was established in 1901 and it remains one of the most vibrant lodges in the United States. The original building for the KOC is currently where Daily Bread is located. The Ladies of Charity was chartered in 1898 to assist with the many outreach ministries associated with this newly established parish, this lay women's ministry is still active today.

In 1879, the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul, began to teach the children of the ever growing Catholic population. Holy Cross Academy was formed and the enrollment was over 200 students with eight teachers. The school and convent was located where the fire department is today. Holy Cross Regional Catholic School is now located on Langhorne Road and this move took place in the 1960s. After the sisters left the area, the convent was used as a retreat center. Recently, the convent, which was located next door to the school on Langhorne Road, was closed and the building sold.

On June 25, 1899 Fr. James Collins one of the young boys of the initial settlers in the area was ordained and celebrated his first Mass at Holy Cross. In 1900 Fr. Joseph Magri said his first Mass and in 1904 Fr. Frederick Lackey said his first Mass at Holy Cross. These three ordained priests had grown up in the midst of the early formation of the Catholic Church in Lynchburg. During the early days of Catholic education in Lynchburg 13 young women from the congregation consecrated their lives to religious life. Over the decades, Holy Cross has nurtured many religious men and women to carry on the spiritual traditions embodied by the early founders.

With the continued growth of agriculture in the region, a wide variety of inventions and textile manufacturing the City of Lynchburg witnessed another great surge of growth. In 1888 one of the City's five shoe manufactures produced 100,000 shoes per day. In 1901 Lynchburg became the fifth largest shoe manufacturer in the world. In the early 1900's candy became the newest growth industry. Candy was manufactured in the city from 1892 until 1956. Boots, hosiery, stockings, socks, blankets, children's clothing and purses were other industries located in buildings all around the city, as well as, wholesale grocery business. Currently, many of these buildings have become loft apartments which reflect their sturdy construction. The Piedmont automobile was built in Lynchburg, producing five vehicles per day and the development of metal roofing and its distribution, improved train travel, and evolution of hydro-electric power were developed and helped put Lynchburg on the map.

From the end of the 1890's until the 1950's the Hill City's growth touched every aspect of life The city became a higher education center with the establishment of Randolph Macon Women's College (Randolph College), Sweet Briar and Virginia Christian College (University of Lynchburg).

The Hill City boasted the second largest flour mill and cast-iron pipe manufacturer in the South and the largest tanning extract mill in the world. During the early 1900s Lynchburg was the third richest city per capita in the United States.

In 1911 Lynchburg General Hospital was opened and staffed. The original location was at the end of Federal Street where it becomes Hollis Mill Road. The hospital's emergency department tended to soldiers who were deployed from the European battle front to the coast of Virginia and then transported to various local military installations. Their medical needs were handled by local physicians and many medical emergency procedures were developed during this time. Virginia Baptist Hospital was opened in 1924 along with the development of the Rivermont Avenue corridor.

During war time the city's train and bus hubs saw the movement of troops through Lynchburg and the Red Cross set up canteens to serve passing troop trains and handed bags of food to the soldiers as the train moved slowly through the Lynchburg terminals. The area became known as "Lunchburg" a term old Lynchburg residents are most proud of. The development of Smith Mountain Lake brought in engineering specialists and the boating industry flourished. New major industries continue to choose Lynchburg as a base of operations.

In the early 1950s a unique ministry evolved to bring Catholicism to rural Virginia. This ministry was called the Motor Chapel. The customized camper/trailer was a rolling chapel pulled by a vehicle and complete with an altar. The priests traveled throughout the Commonwealth saying Mass. The back of the camper folded down and the altar was then visible. There are parishioners who attend Holy Cross today who came into the church during the time of the Motor Chapel ministry. The story goes that one Mass was celebrated in a lumber yard in Culpepper, Virginia. Holy Cross Church supported these priests during their travels in the area.

As the population of Lynchburg increased dramatically this increase was also felt throughout the communities surrounding Lynchburg. In the mid 1950's Brookneal, Virginia became the location of a major manufacturer of textile fabric used in commercial application. This company transferred and resettled families to the area the majority of whom were Catholic. Brookneal's population of Catholic residents helped build St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church which became part of the Holy Cross mission outreach. The basement of this church hosted parish events and educational classes for the many children in the area. During this time there were three full time priests serving the needs of Holy Cross and these priests took turns saying Mass at the church in Brookneal. St. Elizabeth's was closed in 2009.

Villa Maria Academy (Kriselea) home and property was purchased by the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) in 1952. They then set about to build a beautiful dormitory and living quarters for girls who lived at the facility and also for girls from the area who attended classes during the week: Kindergarten to eighth grade. The sisters lived in the home and taught religion, math, science, as well as, music, art, and theater. The priests from Holy Cross came to the school every day to say Mass and on occasion to teach religion classes. The school provided a safe haven for young Catholic girls until its closing in 1983.

From 1983 until 1988 the church underwent a major renovation to the interior. As a result of this dramatic renovation the old entrance in the base of the front tower entrance was closed and the original walnut pews refurbished and arranged in a new configuration. The largest window, previously hidden by a choir loft, is now a striking backdrop to the redesigned altar which was moved into this new space. The current altar, the ambo, and the baptismal font are made of pieces of marble from the three original marble altar designs. The closet doors in the Commons were once confessional doors and the decorative trim in the atrium in the Commons was the trim used on the choir loft, the gate to the bell tower was once a gate to a home of a parishioner that was behind the church, where the back parking lot is today.

Holy Cross has maintained a diverse presence in the downtown area of Lynchburg. The renovations which have added to the building's exterior and interior have enabled the church to provide many outreach opportunities to the local community as well as provide space for church-wide events, retreats and visiting lecturers. The addition of the Commons, built in 1988, has given a conduit to the community by supporting local agencies with providing monthly meals to the needy as well as

providing a meal of fresh meat and vegetables for each holiday, delivered by parishioners directly to recipient families, thus using the church as the hub for organization and distribution.

The Parish Life Center, dedicated in January 1996, has classroom space, offices and meeting spaces which has given the parish a central location for expanded adult Bible studies and classroom instruction for the youth all under one roof. Our daily and Sunday Masses, religious education programs and expanded faith enrichment services for our parishioners both adults and youth, serve to continue the spirit of our forefathers so many decades ago. Oh! And let's not forget how Holy Cross parish survived the discovery that termites had eaten through the support beams under the floor of the church...that's another story!

Pastors who have served Holy Cross Parish

Rev. John O'Brien 1834-1840	Rev. Oscar Sears 1859 - 1864
Rev. Daniel Downey 1842-1843	Rev. Michael Ferren 1866 - 1869
Rev. Francis O'Donaghue 1843-1845	Rev. James Mc Gurk 1869 - 1909
Rev. Charles Farrell 1845-1846	Msgr. Edward Tearney 1909-1935
Rev. Edward Fox 1846-1850	Msgr. F. Harold Nott 1953 - 1967
Rev. Thomas Mulvey 1850-1854	Rev. Carol Naro 1967 - 1972
Rev. James McGovern 1856-1858	Rev. Charles Ferry 1972 - 1980
Rev. Oscar Sears 1859-1864	Rev. Anthony Warner 1980 - 1992
Rev. Michael Ferren 1866 – 1869	Msgr. J. Kenneth Rush 1992 – current pastor

Listen! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,

I will come in to him and eat with him and he with Me (Rev. 3:20)