



Saint Mary's Catholic Church is the oldest Catholic Church within the present boundaries of Fairfax County. Constructed in 1858 on land donated by the Hamill family, long-time local residents, it was built to serve the needs of the Irish immigrants who came to Fairfax County to work on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. This was the first sizeable group of Catholics to settle in this part of Virginia. The Orange and Alexandria was one of the first railroad lines from the coast to the inland of Virginia; this particular spur ran from Alexandria through Fairfax Court House and out to Bull Run. The railroad line ran approximately a quarter of a mile south of the church. Not long after the church was built, the Civil War began.

Much of the initial fighting took place in northern Virginia. When reports reached Washington about the steady mounting casualties during the Second Battle of Manassas/Bull Run, Clara Barton obtained permission to have supplies sent to the front by train; she and her team came on that same train, arriving on Sunday, August 31, 1862. She tended to the wounded for three sleepless days and nights as violent rains fell. The only dry place available for surgery was Saint Mary's Church. Many soldiers were laid out on the hill stretching away from the church; many who died were buried there. Barton and the doctor remained until the last Union soldier was placed on the train back to Washington. A plaque at the entrance of the church records this event. During this time, the pews in the church were destroyed, serving as firewood for the Federal troops. According to local tradition, when President Grant heard of the destruction of the pews by Federal troops, he personally ordered restitution. Funeral services for General Philip Kearney, killed in the Battle of Chantilly/Ox Hill were held in Saint Mary's church yard. Around 1876, the parishioners of Saint Mary's began the tradition of a Fourth of July picnic; sometime after 1894 the event was switched to Labor Day. This celebration, which still takes place every year, is believed to be the oldest outdoor social function in Fairfax County.



St. Mary's Church

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