



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

A series of historical highlights from the first 200 years of St. Peter – Libertytown.

Father John McElroy, S. J.

The priest who saw to the completion of the first St. Peter's church was one very busy Jesuit. He was also responsible for building other local Catholic churches and schools before moving onto important roles from Mexico to Massachusetts.

John McElroy came to the US from his native Ireland as a young man in 1803. He was ordained a priest in 1817 at the age of thirty-five. He was sent to Frederick in 1822 to aid the ailing pastor of St John the Evangelist Church, Fr. Francis Maleve, S.J. the successor to Fr. John Dubois, S.S. After arriving, Fr. McElroy, S.J. stayed with Fr. Maleve until he passed away a few days later, on Oct 3, 1822. Fr. McElroy was subsequently named pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church. St.



Figure 1 – Photo of a painted portrait of Fr. John McElroy. Courtesy St. John the Evangelist in Frederick, MD

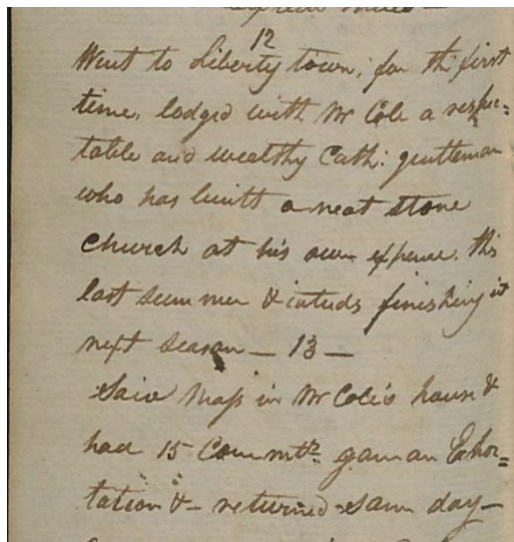


Figure 2 Fr. McElroy's journal entry on Nov. 12, 1822 noting his first visit to Libertytown.

Peter's was a mission of St. John's, as was St. Joseph's on Carrollton Manor.

While here, Fr. McElroy continued to build the church in our community...both figuratively & literally.

Fr. McElroy's journal notes that he made his first visit to Liberty on Nov. 12, 1822, and saw our original church, still under construction: "Went to Liberty town for the first time, lodged with Mr. Cole [sic] a respectable and wealthy Cath. Gentleman who has built a neat stone church at his own expense this last summer + intends finishing it next season." He also noted that he stayed at the home of Richard Coale that night and

said Mass the next day for fifteen communicants, where he gave an exhortation, before returning to Frederick the same day.¹

Fr. McElroy closed out 1822 with his December visit to Liberty on the final Sunday of the year. In 1823, he was able to oversee the completion of the first St. Peter's church that Fr. Maleve had begun. Fr. McElroy accompanied Archbishop Ambrose Maréchal to Liberty on Sept. 28, 1823 as the Archbishop consecrated the church and Fr. McElroy then celebrated Mass in it.

Among his other achievements while serving in Frederick County, he established St. John's Female Benevolent and Free School in 1824 (which became the Frederick Academy of the Visitation) and five years later founded St. John's Literary Institution (now Catholic Prep). He was also responsible for building the present St. John's Church in Frederick that was completed and consecrated in 1837.

Father McElroy left Frederick in 1845 to become the Army's first chaplain in the Mexican American War. Two years later, at age sixty-five, he accepted the challenge of establishing a Jesuit college in Boston, Massachusetts. With the contributions of Irish immigrants, he obtained property for a campus and erected a college building, a Jesuit residence and a church. The charter for Boston College was issued in 1863 and Father McElroy became its first president at age eighty-one.

A decade later he came back to Frederick where he died in 1877. At the time of his death, he was the oldest Jesuit in the United States. He and seventy-eight other Jesuits are buried in St. John's Cemetery. "There is hardly a work carried on today by the Catholic Church in this country of which Father John McElroy did not in some way lay the foundation," wrote a friend of Father McElroy, yet no word of his ever indicated that he considered himself more than "a simple priest and an unprofitable servant." His memory lives on locally through the Fr. John McElroy Award presented annually by Friends of Catholic Education to recognize individuals who have advanced Catholic school education throughout Frederick County.

The image shows a handwritten log of visits for December 1822. The page is titled "December 1822" and "P. McElroy". The log is organized into columns for dates, locations, and names. The entries are as follows:

Date	Location	Name
1	In St. John's	Fr. McElroy
2	In ditto	
3	In St. John's Baltimore	
4	In " "	
5	In St. John's Wash. D.C.	
6	In " "	
7	In McAnnison's	Fr. McElroy
8	In Special Wood	
9	In " "	
10	In St. John's	
11		
12	In ditto	
13	In ditto	
14	In ditto	Fr. McElroy
15	In ditto	
16		
17		
18	In ditto	
19		
20		
21		
22	In St. Joseph's	Fr. McElroy
23	In Frederick's	
24		
25	In do 3 maps	Fr. McElroy
26		
27		
28		
29	In Liberty	Fr. McElroy
30	In " "	
31		

Figure 3 Fr. McElroy's log of visits notes his trip to Liberty on Sunday Dec. 29, 1822

¹ Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus on deposit at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.