

Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Bishop John Dubois

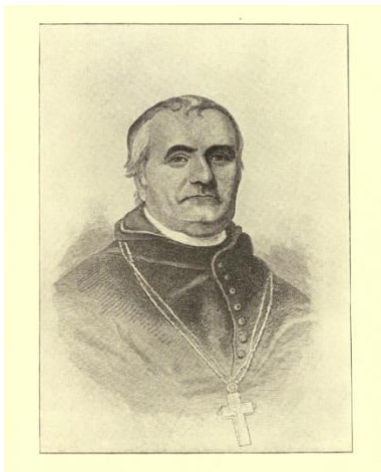


Figure 1 John DuBois

Courtesy: Memorial volume of the centenary of St. Mary's Seminary of St. Sulpice, Baltimore, Md., 1791-1891

Bishop Jean (John) Dubois was born in Paris in August 1764. In 1791 he escaped the massacre of clergy during the French Revolution, by fleeing to America with the assistance of forged papers from classmate Maximilien Robespierre. Upon his arrival in Norfolk Virginia, he presented letters of commendation from Lafayette (whose wife was once one of Dubois' parishioners) to prominent Virginians, including James Monroe with whom he resided briefly. He is reputed to have learned English from Patrick Henry; was a confidante of Thomas Jefferson; offered Mass in the Virginia statehouse and founded Mount St. Mary's College (now University) and Seminary in Emmitsburg. He also helped Elizabeth Ann Seton establish the Sisters of Charity (known today as the Daughters of Charity) and became the third bishop of New York.

In 1792, in the middle of those interesting if not impressive chapters of Dubois' life, Bishop John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the United States, appointed him to Frederick Maryland, the 2nd largest city in Maryland. Records indicate that at that time, then Fr. Dubois may have been the only priest between Frederick Maryland and the Mississippi; but at a minimum, he would have regularly ministered to Catholics residing in Frederick and Montgomery counties, Western Maryland, Martinsburg West Virginia and Virginia. As such, Fr. Dubois was most probably the priest who stopped at Richard and Catharine Coale's home to celebrate Mass for the Catholics in Liberty(town) during this period.

During Fr. Dubois' tenure in Frederick, he was known for his untiring ministry to his people. Fr. Dubois would journey 20, 40 and 60 miles on horseback and sometimes on foot, to carry the consolation of religion to the ill or dying. After the exhausting fatigues of his ministry in town, he would "scour the countryside in quest of souls", purportedly entering into minute details of instructing and catechizing the children and servants.

Six years after arriving in Frederick, Fr. Dubois discovered what at least two previous pastors of St. Peter's were also to discover; that the church building which served their community was no longer sufficient for the needs of their faithful. In this case, the building which was no longer adequate, was a house church, also known as a Mass house. Now that the republic of the United States of America had become a reality, the days of penal laws limiting the ability of Catholics to build public houses of worship were gone. The time had come for a permanent church and in 1800, Fr. Dubois oversaw the commencement of the building of St. John's Catholic Church – the 1st Catholic church in Frederick County. Fr. Dubois left Frederick in 1806 and in 1808 founded Mt. St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg in affiliation with the Society of St. Suplice, which already operated St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. He continued to serve Frederick and surrounding areas until 1811, when Fr. Maleve arrived. In 1826, the Vatican appointed Fr. Dubois 3rd Bishop of New York, where he remained until his death in December 1842.

Bishop Dubois' achievements during his 17-year tenure as Bishop of New York were many and impressive. In what is today the Archdiocese of New York, he established six new parishes in New York City and a new parish in each of four towns. He approved and encouraged the creation of a school for young ladies that became Mount St. Vincent Academy. He assisted the Sisters of Charity in establishing St. Peter's School for Girls. He inaugurated the first parish elementary school at St. Peter's in lower Manhattan. He sponsored the founding of two orphan asylums. He built St. Joseph Seminary in Nyack, New York and he both renovated and expanded St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. One of his greatest achievements, however, was that he survived in the face of "trusteeism" in his parishes and the bitterest of anti-Catholicism in New York and across the nation. "Trusteeism" was an arrangement whereby the finances and administration of parishes were in the hands of lay parishioners, many of whom had little respect for the bishop and all of whom thought themselves free to accept or not accept, support or not support, the clergy whom the bishop named to serve them. On one occasion, when the trustees of the cathedral threatened to withhold his salary, he made this memorable reply "I am an old man, and do not need much. I can live in a basement or in a garret. But whether I come up from the basement or down from the garret, I shall still be your Bishop."

He is buried on Mott Street under the steps leading to the front doors of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City; a location which went unnoticed for nearly 134 years until diocesan historians became curious about the whereabouts of his remains and went searching for them. When the late Edward Cardinal Egan, then Archbishop of New York, asked the then pastor of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral, "Why there?"; the Archbishop was told, "They say he wanted it that way. He felt he had been walked over for years and arranged to let it continue."