

Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

The 1st St. Peter's Church – No good deed ... or at least, not a timely one...

Richard Coale, Sr. earmarked 2 acres of his land for a church and adjoining cemetery on or about 1821.

Construction of the church was well underway when Archbishop Marechal, Baltimore Archbishop at the time wrote to Fr. John McElroy, S.J., who was overseeing the construction. That letter, written in June 1823, was very clear as to the necessity of having the land on which the Church was located, transferred from Mr. Coale, prior to the church being blessed:

As to the church at Lib'yTown, if it be finished, and in order to remove all uncertainty, I hereby authorize you to bless it, but before performing the sacred ceremony, I request you to see the deed made, you mentioned in one of your letters. For I am positively charged by the H[oly] See never to consecrate any building to Div[ine] Worship, without having previously take the necessary steps of procedure, lest it should ever be converted as now in Ph[il]a[delphia], to schismatical purposes, or made use of against Episcopal rights.¹

Newspaper accounts confirm that the consecration took place in 1823 and land records confirm that the property didn't transfer from the son of Richard Coale to the Archbishop, until 44 years later. So why the delay?

The answer may lie in part with the laws of the state of Maryland.

It wasn't until 10 years after the consecration, in December 1833, that the Maryland Assembly passed a law, (Chapter 308 of the Act of 1832) specifically permitting any person to convey to the Archbishop, any parcel of ground, provided that the property conveyed could not exceed two acres and such property could only be used for a Church lot, parsonage and burial ground. Prior to this time, the laws in Maryland did not contain a provision authorizing the Archbishop to hold title to church property.

¹ Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, Box #10/Folder # 14, on deposit at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.

This Act became law in December 1833. For reasons not memorialized (but possibly related to Richard Coale, Sr.'s advancing age and health - he died 6 months later at age 73), the transfer the land did not take place as may have been expected. 34 years later, in 1867, discussions on the need for a larger church were underway and one can only imagine everyone's surprise when it was discovered that neither the Archdiocese nor St. Peter's, owned any of the land occupied by the stone chapel or cemetery.

Shortly thereafter, on November 7, 1867, James McSherry Coale (who inherited the land following his father's death), formally transferred the original 2 acres earmarked by his father Richard, to the Most Reverend Archbishop Martin J. Spaulding. Included with the deed which was delivered to the Archbishop, is a hand-written letter signed by James – which holds a key to some of the delay:

"It was certainly the intention of my father, Richard Coale, Sen'r, deceased, in his lifetime to convey and secure the 2 acres of ground including the present Church building for the objects and purposes mentioned & provided for in the conveyance now made, and probably the execution of the deed by him was postponed at the instance of others, with a view to the procurement of the Act of 1832 Ct 308 which was proposed in March 1833 the year before his death. He having died without it seems fulfilling his intention in this regard I have now made the conveyance but to him belong the honor and merit of this charity."

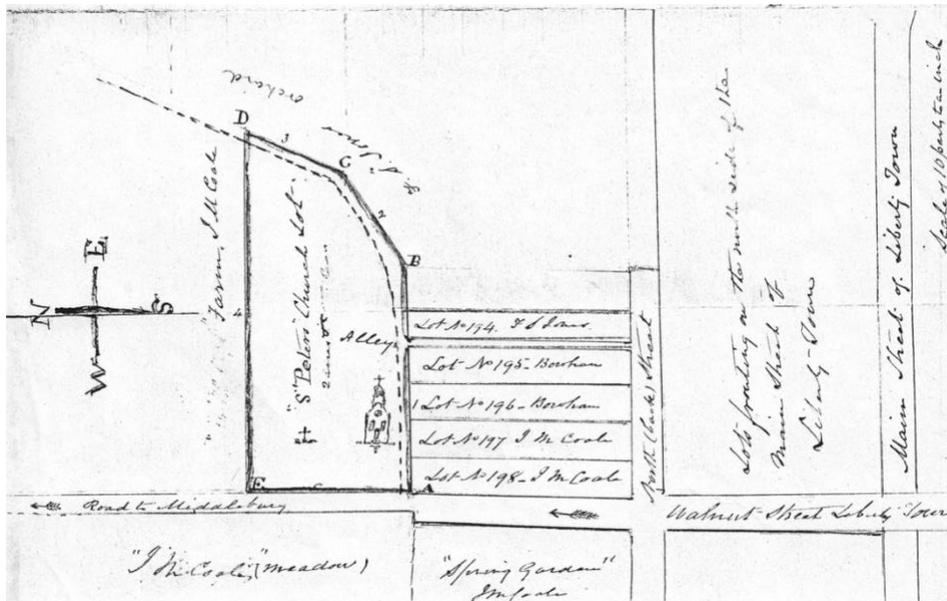


Figure 1 Hand drawn plat of Parish and surrounding property c.1867

Also included with the deed and letter, was a sketch drawn by James, identifying the land being given to the Archbishop and other surrounding parcels.

It is interesting to note that much of the surrounding property shown in this sketch has since been donated to, or purchased by, the Parish.

So James, the dutiful son, completed the task begun by his father, giving his father the rightful credit for the gift. Clearly, some deeds take longer to accomplish than others.