



# Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

## St. Peter's Second Church – the Early Years

Just over a century ago, without benefit of Google or digital scanners, St. Peter's pastor Fr. Samuel Kavanagh was having trouble piecing together a key moment in St. Peter's history. As the parish was nearing the centennial of its founding, Fr. Kavanagh was looking for information about the beginnings of the second church, the cornerstone of which was laid on May 23, 1869.

Alas, "there [was] no history or account of the church here" according to one of his letters in 1921. He had written to the Jesuits who ministered to our parish in its early years, but came up dry. While looking for something else, he accidentally stumbled upon Archbishop Marechal's diary recounting the dedication of our first church in 1823. But the history of a half-century later, when the second church was built just a few years after Libertytown's streets had been filled with Civil War soldiers passing through, was elusive. Fr. Kavanagh noted that after "much trouble" he identified that the building of our second church got underway in 1868. He also found the May 23, 1869 date on which the cornerstone was laid. And, thanks to a letter he came upon written by "one lady here to a lady in Chicago," we know that multiple priests concelebrated Mass and Fr. McGuire "preached a beautiful sermon from the church steps to a large crowd" assembled for the laying of the cornerstone.<sup>1</sup>



*Fig 1 An 1880's photo of the second church, before the installation of stained glass windows. Note how the stairs went left and right from the front door. The first church, by this time the church hall, stands at the left edge of the photo.*

In February 1921 Fr. Kavanagh contacted the Archdiocese of Baltimore to schedule the archbishop to help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the second church and the parish's centennial. Fr. Kavanagh also hoped that the archbishop could tell him when our second church was dedicated after completion. He asked this because he knew that the prelate, who was by this time known as James Cardinal Gibbons, was on hand for the dedication fifty years earlier as Bishop of North Carolina, a few years after he was installed in his early 30's as the youngest bishop in the world.<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Gibbons later became the

<sup>1</sup> 139L4, Samuel J. Kavanagh to Albert Smith, 2 February 1921, Card Gibbons Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associated Archives at St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD.

<sup>2</sup> "Remembering Cardinal James Gibbons," Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associated Archives at St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD, <https://stmarys.edu/archives/online-exhibits/remembering-cardinal-james-gibbons/>

Archdiocese of Baltimore's 9<sup>th</sup> and longest serving archbishop, for more than 43 years. Sadly, he passed away just weeks after Fr. Kavanagh's 1921 correspondence. He was here in 1871, though, and after dedicating our second church he confirmed about thirty children and adults.

The second church, the one that burned in 2004, was built because our parish had outgrown the stone chapel that was completed 200 years ago and dedicated in September 1823. The new church was "80 feet long and 50 feet wide, with a well-proportioned steeple in front and presents an attractive exterior," according to a July 1871 column in the Catholic Mirror newspaper. The paper stated that the dedication "was a happy time for the Catholics of Libertytown and vicinity," adding that "crowds of the various denominations were seen wending their way, from every direction, to be present."

As noted in another Key Moment article, James M. Coale donated land and funding for the larger church leaving the original church to serve for another 34 years as the church hall. When first constructed, the second church had stairs that descended to the left and right from the front door instead of straight down toward the street as they have since sometime before 1890.

The second church's first fifty years saw several repairs and improvements. The steeple and windows received a fresh coat of paint as early as 1884. In February 1890 the organ was repaired after ten years of not working. In September 1903 the marble altar was consecrated. The next year, a furnace was installed. Another new set of steps was installed in 1908, and in May 1910 – eight stained glass windows from Germany were installed. The summer of 1910 saw concrete pavement laid at the entrance of the church's iron gates.



*Figure 1 A circa 1890 photo of the second church's interior, in the days before electric light. Note the doors at the end of each pew.*

The season of Lent in 1914 saw the installation of a new marble communion rail and pulpit, as well as a new sanctuary lamp. Two years later the church's interior was frescoed, and in 1918 a new marble altar and a new pipe organ were installed. "A large Estey pipe organ is being installed in St. Peter's RC Church at a cost of sixteen hundred dollars," reported The Daily News of Frederick on January 22, 1918, noting that the Estey company was in Brattleboro, VT. Then, in early 1919, Fr. Kavanagh installed the Peace Altar in the rear of the church "for our boys who served their country, both Catholics and Protestants," as he was quoted in Frederick newspapers. Many of today's parishioners will remember the two large marble tablets, one with the names of Catholics and the other with the non-Catholics who served in

World War I. The one killed in action was William Bunke in whose memory the creche in front of our church was erected.

Our second church continued to develop from its May 1869 cornerstone laying through the next fifty years, all without benefit of electricity!