



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Fr. William H. “Ironsides” Reaney

Fr. William Reaney's first assignment after ordination was at St. Peter's in Libertytown, where he served from 1889-1892. Halfway through his 3 years, in June of 1890, he was re-assigned to St. Martin's in Baltimore. A committee of parishioners travelled to Baltimore to request that Cardinal Gibbons return him, as he would be instrumental in organizing a school. A few days later he was back in Liberty to a warm welcome and two years later, Notre Dame Academy was established - one of his most significant achievements while at St. Peter's.

He was an excellent horseman and often took part in the jousting event during the Libertytown annual tournament and picnic sponsored by St. Peter's. It is said that he could lean from the saddle at a gallop and pick up a handkerchief from the ground. Being 6'6" probably helped with that!



From Walzel's Imperial Portrait Studios.
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{ 21 E. Balto. Near Charles St. }

William Henry "Ironsides" Reaney c. 1890

While at St. Peter's he oversaw the construction of a grotto for the “tombless dead” in the cemetery. An excellent singer, he also organized a glee club among local African American residents, a number of whom were converts to the Catholic faith through his efforts.

He was born on July 21, 1863, in New York City and the family moved shortly thereafter to Detroit. It is variously said that he was born on Old Ironsides or on the English steamer Ironsides. His nickname “Ironsides” seems to have come from his father having been acting master of the USS Zouave in Hampton Roads, VA, engaging the CSS Virginia (Merrimac) and surviving the encounter, while other Union ships were destroyed. The next day the USS Monitor famously fought the Merrimac to a draw.

He studied at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and was ordained by Cardinal Gibbons at the Baltimore Cathedral in 1888. After having spent 3 years at Libertytown, in 1892 he was reassigned from St. Peter's to become a US Navy chaplain, having

been so appointed by President Benjamin Harrison. He was the second Catholic chaplain in the Navy.

During his career in the navy, Fr. Reaney was stationed on the USS Connecticut, the USS Vermont, and the USS Utah, among other ships, and also at several shore stations as well.

One of his most notable postings was to the USS Olympia, the flagship of Admiral George Dewey. He came on board just after the Battle of Manila Bay in 1898 and was instrumental in the diplomacy with the Archbishop of Manila, who was very anti- American, to resolve the unsettled situation following the battle and the American capture of Manila. The Archbishop was so taken with Fr. Reaney that he gifted him a piano following that trip, which Fr. donated to Sr. Theofora Foley, the superioress of Notre Dame Academy when Fr. Reaney was at St. Peter's, who had since been transferred to a convent in Roxford, Massachusetts.

On its return to the US, the Olympia travelled through the Suez Canal. While the ship was anchored in Naples, he took the opportunity to go to Rome and there he met with Pope Benedict XV, a meeting which was reported in detail in the Baltimore Sun.

In the same manner that he had been active in Libertytown, he continued to promote activities and programs wherever he went in the Navy. He looked out for the sailors and helped them and their families when they were in need. He organized entertainment to keep up morale. He promoted athletics and formed baseball, football, and track teams and boxing clubs. In addition to his horsemanship skills, he was an excellent boxer and is the only person to have ever defeated the champion Navy boxer Tom Sharkey, earning Fr. Reaney the title of the Fighting Chaplain.

He attained the rank of Captain, which was highest rank of any Catholic chaplain to that time.

At his last assignment, the New York Navy Yard, he became stricken with a stomach ailment and was rushed to Polyclinic Hospital in Manhattan where he died from intestinal lesions at age 52, on November 18, 1915. His funeral was at a Solemn Mass of Requiem at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Manhattan, NY, two days later. He is buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Detroit MI.

Chaplain John Chidwick, who was stationed on the USS Maine when it blew up in 1898 in Cuba, eulogized Fr. Reaney, noting, "Can there be anything more glorious, more eloquent, than a man who has two objects in life—one to work for God, and other for his country. For twenty-three years, Father Reaney did that."