



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

James McSherry Coale

The building of the second St. Peter's Church (dedicated in 1871, accidentally burned in 2004) was made possible by the generosity of the son of Richard and Catharine McSherry Coale who had donated the land and funding for our first church, dedicated in September 1823. As our parish outgrew the original stone chapel, James McSherry Coale, son of Richard and Catharine, helped see to construction of a new brick church next to it.



Fig 1 James M. Coale

James was born in Libertytown on January 19, 1805, educated at Mount Saint Mary's in Emmitsburg, and later studied law under Richard Potts of Frederick. He was an Elector in the Electoral College for the 1836 and 1840 Presidential elections. As noted in another Key Moment it was James, who had inherited the land where our church sits, who followed through in November 1867 on his late father's intention that the 2 acres be transferred to the Catholic Church. The "better late than never" transfer facilitated efforts to construct the larger church that the growing parish needed.

James further helped make the second church possible through his financial contributions. In the process, he helped persuade the Archdiocese to increase the frequency with which a priest would visit Libertytown. This is something James had appealed for over multiple years, assuring the Archbishop that means for a resident priest's support could be raised in Libertytown. In an April 1868 letter to Archbishop Spalding about the proposed new church building, James noted "it is a pretty big undertaking + I presume I will have to contribute liberally towards it, but when finished I hope it will be a credit to the Archdiocese, + that you will provide either a resident priest as was formerly contemplated, or more frequent attendance than is now given to that place."¹ In his January 17, 1871 letter to the Archbishop, he expressed thanks that pastoral attendance at least twice a month would be provided, noting that with "...this arrangement and the Dedication of the new Church I trust that a new and happy era will be inaugurated."² James also arranged for the new church and steeple to be insured, paying the first year's premium himself. 133 years later we were certainly thankful that detail had not been overlooked!³

¹ 33L7 , James M. Coale to Martin Spalding, 23 April 3, 1868, Abp Spalding Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associated Archives at St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD.

² 36A-E4 , James M. Coale to Martin Spalding, January 17, 1871, Abp Spalding Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associated Archives at St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD.

³ Ibid.

J.M. Coale was already known as someone who could make things happen. Fifteen years after it had started, the competition between the Baltimore & Ohio (B&O) Railroad and the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Canal to be the first to reach Cumberland was over once the railroad got there first. They had both broken ground on the 4th of July 1828 and each started building west...the B&O from Baltimore and the Canal from Washington. By the summer of 1843, the Canal was fifty miles short with a series of unconnected segments ahead. Canal stockholders fired the current president of the C&O company at a meeting in Frederick and named James McSherry Coale as the new head on August 17, 1843. He was able to negotiate a deal with the B&O to transport western Maryland coal by rail from Cumberland fifty miles to canal boats at Dam Number 6, the western terminus of the completed canal. Thus, the company was able to earn some revenue, service some of its debt, and complete construction through to Cumberland. In 1850 a marble obelisk was erected where Wisconsin Avenue crosses the canal in Georgetown in Washington, D.C. to mark the successful completion of the C&O Canal to Cumberland, acknowledging the efforts of company president James M. Coale and the other men who achieved this very significant engineering feat.

Coale also was elected to the Maryland legislature, serving from 1852 to 1862 during the tumultuous period leading into the Civil War, including the debate over whether Maryland would secede from the Union as the states to the south had done. He notably wrote letters to Abraham Lincoln protesting the imprisonment of southern-leaning members of the Maryland legislature during that period. He was appointed a Brigadier General in the Maryland Militia (9th Brigade). Never married, he was noted to be one of the wealthiest men in Maryland and a man of great charity.

Interestingly, James McSherry Coale is also known in the art world, as the young subject of a portrait painted by Frederick Kemmelmeyer, a former Hessian soldier who became an itinerant artist whose works in both oil and pastels span from 1805 to 1816. He painted James McSherry Coale when he was 8 years old in Libertytown in 1811. The portrait, signed by Kemmelmeyer, is noteworthy because Coale was the only Kemmelmeyer portrait subject for whom another image is known. The engraving of Coale as an adult was in the 1854 book *Portraits of Eminent Americans Now Living* by John Livingston.

Coale died on February 22nd, 1882 and is buried in St. Peter's Cemetery.



Fig 2 Portrait of James McSherry Coale painted by F. Kemmelmeyer