



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Religious Educators of our Children Over the Years

While the religious education of our children has always been the responsibility of their parents (and extended family), there is documented evidence that the Jesuits who visited Libertytown in early years of the Parish, and later the diocesan pastors, provided specific instruction to our young, prior to their receiving their First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

Archive materials from the School Sisters of Notre Dame, however; provide us with our earliest window into the beginnings of formal religious education at St. Peter's. From these records we learn that the religious women from that Order, beginning with Sr. Theophora Foley and Sr. Fidelis de Katow, moved into their new convent on October 25, 1892. This convent was adjacent to the school where they would be teaching – Notre Dame Academy (now occupied by the Parish office staff). Records don't indicate how many sisters were teaching at the school at one time, but in 1935, the number of religious in the community were reduced to three; suggesting that there were at least four sisters in residence in the earliest years. This reduction in staff followed the closing of the high school a few years earlier and "the closure of the Colored School" (education was segregated in the 1930's), at which time the archives indicates that the "Black children [would be] instructed in religion 2 afternoons a week".

Sr. M. Barbara Haus had arrived in 1929 as a novice and was the principal educator for the African American children who enrolled in Notre Dame, until the school closed and afterwards, for their religious faith formation. She remained at Notre Dame for a total of 23 years, perhaps the longest serving School Sister at St. Peter's. Shortly after her death in December 1985, then pastor, Fr. Eugene Nickol spoke of her dedication to the students and the Parish in his homily on the occasion of the 1st Reunion of Notre Dame Academy on April 6, 1986 and several alumnae of Sr. Barbara's instruction attended the reunion.

Over the 85 years during which the School Sisters served St. Peter's youth, no less than 65 religious women provided religious based education to local children – largely parishioners, but also non-Catholics. The School Sisters also provided weekly classes in the afternoons during the week and later after Mass on Sundays for Catholic children who were not enrolled at Notre Dame Academy, as evidenced in an annual report sent to the Archdiocese.



Figure 1 undated photo of the School Sister of Notre Dame at Notre Dame Academy in Libertytown MD



Figure 2 Sister Catherine (Kate) Ann Birch and Sister Catherine Arata, October 1970
Photo Courtesy: Catholic Review

In 1970, when the Parish school closed, both the School Sisters and Pastor Francis Morrison were instrumental in the establishment of the Religion Education Center (REC). Sr. Catherine Ann Birch (also known in later years as Kate Birch), recalled in correspondence with Fr. Nickol, and in a chronicle she wrote for her Order, some of the religious and lay women who assisted the Parish in this transition. From her we learn that she and Sr. Catherine Arata took on the role of preparing and training volunteers to teach the CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) program which would form the foundation of the religious education for our youth going forward. They were joined in the mid 1970's for a short period, by Sr. Mary Susan Ling (Susan Wood) and Sr. Regina Burgan.

Ultimately, Sr. Catherine Ann assisted St. Peter's for over 14 years – the last 7 as director of the Religious Education Center. She returned to reminisce with former students at the invitation of Fr. Nickol on the occasion of the Notre Dame Reunion in 1986. In 2002, five years after her death, the Sister Kate Birch Library (now the Birch Room) was dedicated in space which had originally held *two* classrooms and *four* grades of students!

After Sr. Catherine Ann's departure, Sr. Carrie Schindler from the order of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, was hired to fill the Director of Religious Education role. Sr. Carrie was followed by Sr. Joan May, O.P. in the early 1980's - the last of the religious women to officially serve as Director of Religious Education (DRE) for St. Peter's.

Martha Langdon became the first lay woman to hold those role at St. Peter's. Martha's successor was Carmela (Carm) Douds and it was during her tenure, that religious education was re-organized into separate programs for each of the elementary, middle, high school and adult education programs, and Michelle Armstrong, the first youth minister, was hired. Prior to this time, all religious education – even for adults, resided with a single director; after the re-organization, some programs were coordinated by the same individual but there was no longer a single Director position; instead coordinators work together as a team. Elementary religious education continues to this day, under the direction of a lay woman. Anne Mason assumed the role in 1994, following Carm Douds; and for the past 8 years since 2015, this position has been held by Stacy Wright.

Although the form of the faith formation has changed over the generations, the Parish's commitment, and in particular, the commitment of St. Peter's lay women educators, has never wavered; which is a legacy St. Peter's can be proud of.