



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton



Figure 1 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in a reproduction of a portrait painted by Amabilia Filicchi Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.

Catholics in Libertytown were blessed to interact with some of the major pillars of early Catholicism in the United States. For example, the first US bishop, John Carroll, was involved in the initial discussions about the possibility of a church in Liberty. Fr. John Dubois, who would go on to become Bishop of New York had ministered to Catholics here, as did Fr. John McElroy who completed our first church and later founded Boston College. Very notably, they also interacted with the first American born saint! Some eight decades before St. Peter's would open the Notre Dame Academy, and a decade before our first church building even got underway, a young lady from Libertytown would benefit from the fact that the first free Catholic school for female education staffed by religious women in the U.S. opened here in her county.

“Received the sum of twenty five dollars for three months advance payment for the board + tuition of Miss Sarah Coale,” reads a September 1811 receipt signed by Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton. Future benefactor of our first church Richard Coale and his wife Catharine of Libertytown paid to board their daughter Sarah Coale (who would later marry Thomas Sappington), at Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School at Emmitsburg which had opened in 1810.

Mother Seton and the Sisters of Charity of St.

Joseph order that she founded were pioneers in Catholic education. Their school was financed, governed, and staffed by the Sisters. The school admitted day students from the Emmitsburg area for free, as well as paying boarders from as far away as Philadelphia and New York.

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in New York in 1774 and raised as an Episcopalian. In 1794 she married William Magee Seton. The couple had two sons and three daughters. For a short time, William's import-export business prospered and the Setons had a very comfortable life and social status in New York.

When disruptions in the trans-Atlantic trade resulted in significant business losses for William's firm, bankruptcy resulted. This challenge was compounded in 1798 by tuberculosis which threatened



Figure 2 Receipt for Sarah Coale's board & tuition signed by Elizabeth Ann Seton 9 Sept 1811

William's life. Hoping a better climate would improve his health, William, Elizabeth, and their eldest daughter Anna Maria set sail for Italy on October 2, 1803. When they arrived at Livorno, authorities feared he was suffering from yellow fever, since they knew that New York was experiencing an outbreak at that time. As a result, the Setons were quarantined in a lazaretto (an isolation hospital). William Seton died two days after the Christmas of 1803. Elizabeth was a widow at age 29. Filippo and Antonio Filicchi were business associates of the Setons. Their family befriended Elizabeth and provided gracious hospitality to her while she remained in Italy. It was through the Filicchi family that Elizabeth learned about Roman Catholicism. Elizabeth and daughter Anna, accompanied by Antonio Filicchi, returned to the United States on June 4, 1804. Elizabeth converted to Catholicism in 1805 and tried in vain to support her family in New York as a widow.

She moved to a more Catholic-friendly Maryland in 1808, and was encouraged by Fr. William Dubourg, S.S. to start a school for girls in Baltimore. Soon a wealthy seminarian from Philadelphia, Samuel Sutherland Cooper, generously offered property near Emmitsburg and Elizabeth moved there in 1809. It was that year, while a Frederick County resident, that she began the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, the first community of religious women to be founded in the United States. The following year, Mother Seton and her Sisters of Charity opened St. Joseph's Academy.

Elizabeth Ann Seton died on January 4, 1821, at the age of 46. When she was canonized by Pope Paul VI in September 1975, Elizabeth Ann Seton became the first native-born United States citizen to be declared a saint by the Catholic Church. Today, her remains are interred in a side altar of the Basilica at the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg.

Over the years, St. Peter's parishioners have often noted the proximity of the Seton Shrine, encouraging each other to visit there. In 2002, for example, Ken Vaughn (sic) wrote an article in St. Peter's "Upon This Rock" newsletter promoting this "Pilgrimage in your own backyard." More than fifty years ago, on the 150th anniversary of Mother Seton's death, then-pastor Fr. Francis Morrison offered the 11:00 Mass at St. Peter's on Sunday January 3, 1971 "as a token in the petition for her canonization." He noted that "the cause of her canonization...has been steadily progressing."

In 1990, parishioners Jim and Theresa Conko brought their daughter Christine to a healing Mass at the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton after she had emerged from an 8-month coma following a brain hemorrhage suffered while a senior at Towson University. "On the day of the Mass, Chris opened her mouth for the first time in seven months," reported the Catholic Review. The paper noted that a few days later doctors were able to remove her feeding tube and she ate pudding for the first time since she fell into the coma. "The intention was there, that's part of the miracle," said Jim, who saw his oldest daughter move from wheelchair to walker to cane." Theresa Conko also noted that things started to improve after the decision to bring Christine, who like her mother was a member of our Knights of Columbus Council 13290 Ladies Auxiliary, and who used to help clean our second church, to the Mass at the Seton Shrine.