



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Mass houses and St. Peter's - before the beginning

In 1649, the Maryland General Assembly had the distinction of being the first colony in the New World to pass the Toleration Act, a law encouraging religious tolerance and granting freedom of conscience to all Christians, including Catholics. 42 years later in 1692, an Act of Religion was passed whereby all the penal laws of England existing at that time against the Catholics were declared to be in force in the colony. No longer could a Catholic house of worship be built and it was a crime for the Catholic religion to be practiced openly. Catholics in Maryland were not allowed to hold public office, practice law, vote, celebrate Mass in public or provide religious education for their children. The legislature installed laws and customs that excluded Catholics from all aspects of public life for nearly a century.

It wasn't until 1776, when the Declaration of Rights was passed – Maryland's first constitution allowing freedom of religion for all Christians - that Catholics would regain these freedoms. Through it all, however; Catholics maintained a presence in Maryland and in Liberty, the name by which Libertytown was known in the early days.

Prior to being permitted to worship in public in a building built for this purpose, Catholics in Frederick County gathered in houses, often in a special room set aside as a chapel by the family residing in the house. Priests would travel by horseback from house to house, in order to say Mass and minister to the faithful. The territory they covered was large – Frederick County originally also included today's Montgomery, Washington, Allegany and Garrett counties plus part of Carroll County, and they also served Martinsburg (then Virginia, now West Virginia) and portions of northern Virginia.



In Libertytown, at the corner of Main and Walnut Streets, stands the "Coale Mansion", built in the late 1700's. According to descendants of the Coale family, Mr. Coale built the house and moved there after his marriage to Catharine McSherry, in 1786. They established a chapel in the upstairs ballroom for use by priests and also reserved a room for the priest to rest and perhaps stay overnight, before leaving for their next destination. At the invitation of the Coale's, priests (Jesuits primarily) would visit to say Mass for local Catholics.

Figure 1 Coale Mansion in mid 1900's

Fr. John McElroy S.J., while pastor of Frederick, was one of the Jesuit priests who traveled to Liberty, staying overnight and celebrating Mass at the Coale's, as evidenced by his 1822 diary entry¹:

Dec 28 1822
Br Redmond returns to the College
to day - Went to Liberty -
Kept Church²⁹ at Mr Cole's house
the first time on Sunday had
about 20 Comm m^rs. - return'd
same day - Fr Redmond much
worse - 30 -
Called to a sick person 12
Miles - returned in the evening

Dec 28 1822

Br [Brother] Redmond returns to the
College[Georgetown] to day - Went to
Liberty.

29

Kept Church at Mr Cole's house the first
time on Sunday had about 20 Commts
[Communicants]. - return'd same day - Fr.
Redmond much worse -

30

Called to a sick person 12 miles - returned
in the evening

Figure 2 Fr. McElroy's diary entry

In 1821, Richard Coale would earmark a portion of his land for use as a Catholic church and finance the cost of the original stone chapel² which would be consecrated in 1823 - St. Peter's Catholic Church.

¹ Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, Box #10/Folder # 14, on deposit at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.

² Ibid.