



Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Fr. Samuel Joseph Kavanagh

Fr. Samuel Kavanagh was much beloved by the parish and by the community during his pastorate at St. Peter's Church, which encompassed 21 years, virtually his entire priestly career.

He was born on September 10, 1862, in Kildare, Ireland. He emigrated to the United States in the latter part of the 1880's and became a naturalized U. S. citizen. It is stated that he was from Washington, D. C., and received some of his education in the local parish schools. He went to St. Charles College in Howard County where he received a classical education and then studied for the priesthood at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, where he was ordained on December 21, 1901.

The Baltimore Sun reports on December 24, 1901, that Fr. Kavanagh was to be assigned to St. Peter's Church, succeeding Rev. John Norton. One of the first things that he did was to ask Bishop Alfred Allen Curtiss, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, formerly Bishop of Wilmington DE, to come out to Libertytown to consecrate the Church. Cardinal Gibbons, who was also present for the consecration preached the sermon.

Fr. Kavanagh was dedicated to the beautification of and improvements to the campus. One of his interests was in maintaining the beauty of the cemetery. Notice was taken in several "Libertytown Items" columns in The Citizen over the years, including one on September 5, 1913, which called it "the handsomest [cemetery] in the State." Fr. Kavanagh regularly walked in the cemetery, no matter the season, saying his Office or praying the Rosary.

Early in his pastorate, the 1st Church, which had been serving as the Parish Hall, was torn down. The stones were used for the foundation of the new Parish Hall (now Sappington Hall) which was completed in late 1905.

1908 saw new steps added in the front of the church and in 1910 new stained-glass windows that were imported from Germany were installed in the church. Also in 1910, Fr. Kavanagh contracted for some



Figure 1 Samuel J. Kavanagh c. 1902

major improvements and maintenance on various buildings on campus, to include roofing the rectory with galvanized steel, painting the entire rectory inside and out, painting the church and the Parish Hall/Opera House, and papering the rooms and hall in the rectory.

After the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912, Fr. Kavanagh dedicated the newly installed Calvary Statue to those who died in the tragedy. The dedication took place on April 19, making it, most likely, the first memorial to the Titanic dead in the United States.

The Church itself received major attention in 1914. A handsome marble communion rail in memory of Greenberry R. Sappington and a pulpit of the same marble were installed. Additionally, a new and elaborate sanctuary lamp was installed.

The Citizen of March 21, 1914, reports that a small tract of land was purchased adjacent to the cemetery. It is wooded with oaks and pines and this will become a park. A life-sized statue of St. Joseph will be erected, and a grotto will be constructed by the congregation.

The only parishioner to be killed in action in World War I, William Bunke, was memorialized with a Creche placed to the left of the stairs ascending to the front of the church, under the direction of Fr. Kavanagh. The memorial depicts the Nativity of Christ, surmounted by a Statue of St. Joan of Arc, the patron saint of France.

Reports in various news journals over the period of his pastorate note ever increasing crowd sizes at the annual tournament and picnic sponsored by the church. The News of August 7, 1920, reported that the crowd was estimated to be between 4,000 to 5,000 people. It was held at Pine Mountain Park, near Libertytown, which was barely able to contain so many attendees. A substantial amount of money was raised for the parish.

And, yes, the religious bases were also taken care of. One example is Confirmation on August 28, 1910. Cardinal Gibbons came to Libertytown to officiate the Sunday morning service. He confirmed a large class. He preached to a sizable congregation about the solemnity of the sacrament the candidates had just received and urged temperance on the boys and extracted a pledge from them to refrain from alcohol until they were 21. Afterwards, there was a large reception in the Opera House.

He refused personal gifts. People would then donate statues to the church. At one time there were 26 statues in the church!

Fr. Kavanagh had suffered from heart disease, and in mid-April 1923, his condition worsened, and he was taken to Bon Secours Hospital in Baltimore, where he died on April 24, 1923. A Solemn High Requiem Mass was held at St. Peter's Church in Libertytown at 11 AM on Friday, April 27th. There is a notice in the obituary that a train leaves from Baltimore to Union Bridge at 8:05 AM for those who might want to go to his service.

He was such a beloved man in the community that at the time of the service, all the businesses in Libertytown closed so the workers could attend. The first person he converted was an African American from Virginia. This man travelled from his home in Virginia to Libertytown, a much more daunting task in 1923 than today, to attend the service, saying, "He is a saint." These words were echoed by many others of the large congregation attending the funeral, some of whom had come from as far away as New York, Baltimore, and Washington. Monseigneur Markham, a friend of Fr. Kavanagh from boyhood, gave the sermon, saying, the greatest memorial to him "was the mark left on the hearts of those whom he served. His life shows what faith and zeal can accomplish."

He was laid to rest near the Statue of the Blessed Mother in the cemetery. There is a plaque on the statue memorializing his name.



Figure 2 Cardinal Gibbons and Fr. Kavanagh, to the right of the front steps of the 2nd Church. Photo by Bachrach and published in The Baltimore American, July 11, 1915

He spent his entire priestly life in the service of St. Peter's and its parishioners. Twice he had been placed on notice to move to another assignment. Both times he pleaded with the current Archbishop to remain at St. Peter's. Both agreed to permit him to stay. Much of what we see on campus today is of his making. He gave his life to St. Peter's. Let us rejoice and be glad.



Figure 3 Fr. Kavanagh, standing in the cemetery he beautified, next to the Sacred Heart Statue where the 1st church stood. This statue was later replaced with a statue of St. Peter in the 1950's and was then moved to the patio of the current church in 2008.

Circa 1920

Photo courtesy of Charles Riordan