

Key Moments in St. Peter's History

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

Grotto of Lourdes at St. Peter's

“I am the Immaculate Conception.” That declaration of the Virgin Mary in response to a question from an uneducated and sickly youngster, Bernadette Soubirous, in Lourdes, France on March 25, 1858 is engraved on the tablet that caps the replica Grotto of Lourdes on the hill

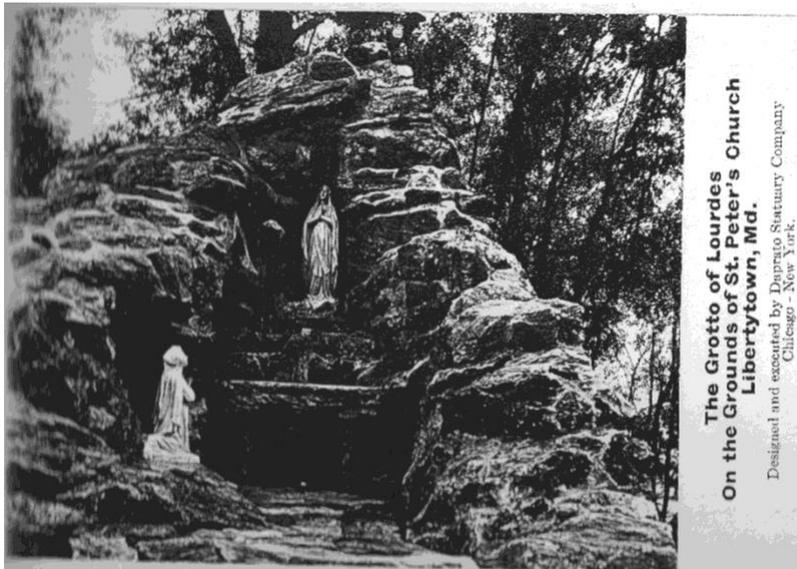


Fig. 1 A photograph of the Grotto used by the statuary company following construction in 1914.

overlooking our church. That apparition occurred a dozen years after the Catholic bishops of the United States of America at the First Council of Baltimore in 1846 chose Mary under the title of her Immaculate Conception, (whose feast is celebrated on December 8) as the patron saint of our nation.

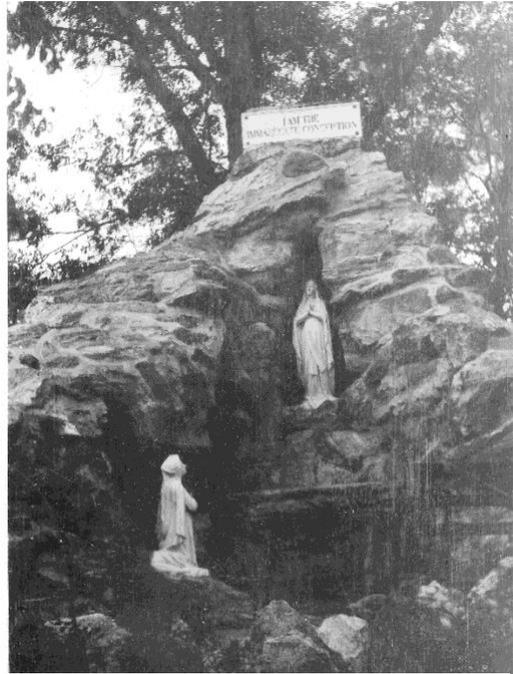
Former St. Peter's pastor Fr. Samuel Kavanagh commissioned the building of the "Grotto of Lourdes" in 1914 to replicate the grotto in

France. It was constructed on a small tract of land adjoining the cemetery, which was donated by James Sappington of S. and Mittie V. Sappington, his wife. In March 1914 *The Citizen* newspaper of Frederick reported that “this tract is wooded with excellent oaks and pines and will be made into a small park, and the grounds developed most beautifully. A life size statue of St. Joseph will be erected, and upon a knoll will be erected a grotto, in native stone. The grotto will be erected by the congregation.” This was at the same time, according to the article, that Fr. Kavanagh was having the marble Communion rail and marble pulpit added inside the church.

The grotto project was managed, and the statues of Our Lady and St. Bernadette fabricated by the Daprato Statuary Company of Chicago and New York. Founded by the Italian immigrant Daprato brothers, the company, now Daprato Rigali Studios, has worked on churches,

courthouses, hotels, banks, theaters, and other iconic structures throughout the country. An engraved tablet on the left side of the grotto was dedicated by Fr. Kavanagh to the memory of Martha J. Riddlemoser who had died in January of 1914, leaving today’s equivalent of \$12,000 to St. Peter’s at the time of the grotto development.

Over the years, the grotto has seen some updates. The engraved “I am the Immaculate Conception” tablet was added many decades ago on top of the original grotto. In August of 2013, the Knights of Columbus built the current altar at the front of the grotto. Local Boy Scouts improved the path with gravel and railroad ties. Stations of the Cross have been erected along the steps leading to the grotto. And ever since the landscaping ministry was formally established in 2008, it has been a labor of love for parishioner Ray Santullo to ensure that the grotto remains a beautiful and peaceful corner of our church campus; clearing fallen limbs, removing leaves and weeds and generally ensuring that Mother Nature doesn’t take over this corner of the campus.



*Fig. 2 St. Peter’s Grotto of Lourdes in 1958.
Note engraved tablet added on top.*

Before Notre Dame Academy/St. Peter’s School closed, the students would process by the Grotto enroute to the May Crowning of Mary’s statue inside of church. Today, whether used for quiet individual reflection, or for the communal

remembrance of local veterans, as the Knights of Columbus organize each Memorial Day, our parish has been blessed by the efforts of those who envisioned, constructed, and maintained the site for more than a century.



Fig. 3 The Grotto pictured in 2022. Note altar added at front.