

As an historian and member of the Governor's Consulting Committee on Historic Sites, I have been asked to say few words about the importance of restoring one of the great architectural achievements of the 19th century, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption in Baltimore, on this, the 200th Anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone.

Because of the untiring efforts of many people, led and inspired by his eminence Cardinal Keeler, this co-cathedral is being returned to the original intent and design of its architect, B. Henry Latrobe. Working closely with America's first Catholic Bishop, John Carroll, Latrobe fashioned a lasting monument, not only to the Church and its place in American History, but also to Religious Freedom in the United States.

Today we recognize far more than the return of light, glorious light, to a magnificently restored building. We call attention to Maryland's role in advancing the cause of Toleration and Freedom of Worship in America. Today, as the skylights of Benjamin Latrobe's Dome again flood the sanctuary with inspiration from above, a few hours away in St. Mary's City, a brick chapel is also being reconstructed from the ground up to remind us that it was in Maryland in 1649 that the Act of Toleration, drafted by Lord Baltimore with the probable assistance of Father Andrew White, was enacted by the Maryland Legislature. That act became the legal cornerstone of our First Amendment rights and one of the earliest lights in America leading us along the path to religious freedom.

In these days of intense religious and political turmoil around the world, it is important for us to pause and remember the international significance of Baltimore's Basilica of the Assumption, the mother church of religious freedom in America. Since the laying of its foundation stone 200 years ago today, it has witnessed profound changes in the history of its city and of the country. While consecrated ground of one faith, whose restoration is the product of privately raised funds, it is also a public space of inspiring proportions that should forever remind us that to remain strong and lasting as a nation, we must be forever tolerant of those who work with us and beside us in the greatest experiment in democracy ever undertaken on the face of this earth.

It is no accident that the architect of the Basilica, B. Henry Latrobe, and Thomas Jefferson were friends whose work influenced each other. Latrobe's dome for the Basilica symbolized for him and for his friend, the all encompassing and enlightening, spacious protection of the State and the Church, separate and independent, but engaged together in forging a nation in which people of all faiths Two hundred years ago the Baltimore *American and*

Commercial Advertiser published its account of the ceremony of the blessing and laying the first cornerstone of the Basilica ((July 8, 1806, p. 3).

the ceremony of blessing and laying the first cornerstone of the Catholic Cathedral Church, to be erected in this city, was performed according to the rites prescribed in the Roman Pontifical, in the presence of a vast concourse of citizens.

At half past eight o'clock in the morning the right Rever'd Bishop Carroll in his episcopal robes, with crosier and mitre, preceded by a procession of twenty priests and junior ecclesiastics, the priests with surplices and stoles, and the others in surplices, proceeded from the west front up the intended nave of the church to the large wooden cross previously planted on the spot where the high or principal alter is to stand; and the bishop there recited the part of the office appropriated to the consecration of that spot, the procession returned in the same order to the west front, and blessed the first foundation stone, on the south-west corner of the proposed building, sprinkling it with the blessed water, whilst the attending clergy, repeated the 126th Psalm, Unless the Lord build the House, &c; then kneeling he began the litany, which was continued to the end by the same clergy.

The stone being blessed, and placed in its proper situation, the procession moved round the entire foundations of the church, repeating the 5th Psalm, whilst the bishop following, sprinkled them with blessed water, and invoked at three equal divisions, the blessing of Almighty God upon the undertaking. On returning to the place where the stone is laid, the hymn of invocation of the Holy Ghost Veni Creator Spiritus, was intoned and sung to the end, and the ceremony concluded with a prayer, repeating the assistance and direction of the same Divine Spirit. the bishop made a short address to the spe[c]tators, reminding them of the arduous undertaking, which was begun for the glory of God, and the promotion of true religion and sincere piety; encouraged them to imitate the zeal of their predecessors in erecting temples to the Divinity, by which they had contributed to perpetuate the faith of Jesus Christ, amidst all the adversities and storms, with which it had been assailed; and particularly admonished them to make themselves worthy of the favor of Heaven by imitating the virtues of those, who left behind them such lasting proofs of In justice to the immense concourse of spectators, it must be added, that they conducted themselves with the greatest order and propriety.

A bed was formed in the foundation stone before receiving a copper plate with a Latin Inscription thus translated:

The first stone of the Cathedral Church to be erected for the honor of Almighty God. Under the title of Jesus & Mary, was placed this 7th day of July, 1806 by the R. R. John, Bishop of Baltimore.

Not too long ago I had the privilege of a tour through the building from the awe inspiring heights of the dome with its ingenious skylights to the magnificently revealed undercroft of brick which forms the Basilica's foundation and support. During the tour of the undercroft, Mark Potter pointed out the signatures of two workmen, Francis and David Gildea, who in July 1863, in the midst of the Civil War proudly left their names inscribed upon the brick. In many respects Francis and David Gildea are what this Basilica is all about. Father and son bricklayers, they were born in this parish. Francis's father was a bricklayer. His parents were married by Bishop Carroll in 1810 and they would be buried in the Cathedral cemetery. Francis and his wife Susan would have at least nine children, of which only David, a brother and possibly a sister, appear to have survived to adulthood. When Francis died in 1881 at the age of 66 his obituary noted that he "was a bricklayer by trade. He put up a number of important buildings, such as the Baltimore City College, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, male grammar school, besides numerous private dwellings." It did not mention his work with his son on the Basilica, yet it was with pride and a strong hand that he and his son left their signatures on the foundation brick of his church.

It is traditional for craftsmen to leave a record of themselves imbedded in the buildings they help construct and renovate. We find their names high up in the wooden dome of the State House and behind the plaster of private homes. They did not expect their names to be seen by the public, but in exposing the beauty of what they created to reinforce the foundations of this building, we have an opportunity to pause and remember not only the Gildea's but also all the dedicated workmen who raised this Basilica from its foundations towards the heavens.

Two hundred years ago today for the dedication ceremonies, Bishop Carroll chose to have read not only the 126th Psalm in which we will join shortly, but also the 5th Psalm. The 5th Psalm was a favorite of the Calverts, the Lords Baltimore, and founders of Maryland, who chose the final verse to surround their coat of arms, and In Latin it reads:

Scuto Bonae Voluntatis Tuae Coronasti Nos

Lord, wilt thou compass us as with a shield.

As we participate today in these ceremonies in remembrance of those who raised the Basilica from its foundation stone, and in appreciation of those who have brought it back to its intended glory of tranquility and light, let us give thanks, as did those who were here 200 years ago today, for that all encompassing shield that Faith, Bricks, and Mortar can provide us.

Thank you

Edward C. Papenfuse State Archivist July 7, 2006

Sources: *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore), July 8, 1806.

Francis Gildea biographical file, Maryland State Archives

(<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/014500/014588/htm>)