

**Holy Trinity Church:
Its Building and Consecration
by Peter J. Albert**

Holy Trinity's present church was consecrated 175 years ago, on June 15, 1851. The parish had outgrown its original church, which we now refer to as the Chapel of St. Ignatius, and a larger structure was needed to accommodate the needs of the congregation. (1)

Before the construction of the present church, the original church, built in the 1790s, had already been enlarged several times. In his brief history of the parish, Edward Devitt, S.J., records that "to enlarge the church, arches were cut open in the side walls, and the sheds were erected; the people had access to the galleries by means of staircases placed outside. It is said that it looked fairly well from within: but a small brick building, with lateral wooden annexes, and straggling exterior stairways, was not a sightly ecclesiastical edifice. This temporary makeshift gave way to a permanent improvement, when the front of the old church was widened to its present dimensions, and afterwards an addition was made to its length." (2) The galleries, accessible by exterior stairways, were added in the 1820s, and it was in these galleries that African American parishioners were allowed to rent pews. (3)

Father Laurence Kelly's history of the parish records that ground was broken for the new church in 1846 by pastor Peter O'Flanagan, S.J. (1807-56). Father O'Flanagan served as pastor of Holy Trinity from 1842 to 1845, and from 1846 to 1852. Born in Ireland, he entered the Society of Jesus at White Marsh in 1833, was ordained in 1840, and took his final vows in 1843. The cornerstone for the building was set in place on July 8, 1849, at a ceremony presided over by Samuel Eccleston (1801-51), archbishop of Baltimore (1834-51). James Ryder, S.J. (1800-1860), president of Georgetown College (1840-45, 1848-51), a well-known orator and noted anti-abolitionist, spoke at the event. (4)

Fr. Kelly goes on to describe the occasion:

The hour appointed for the laying of the cornerstone was five in the afternoon,

but a heavy rainfall set in at half past four. Prayers were offered at once in the college chapel where the Archbishop's party was waiting, and the clouds cleared away before five o'clock. A procession then started from the College, headed by the students; next followed the German Society of St. Joseph, the Irish Society from Washington, the Jesuit scholastics in surplices and the priests in sacred vestments preceding the Provincial, Father Brocard. Finally came the Archbishop with his attendants. The full ritual was followed and Father James Ryder President of the College, preached the sermon. In the cornerstone which was set at the northwestern corner of the church was enclosed a commemorative document in Latin, translated as follows: 'July 8, 1849, in the 73rd year of the independence of the United States, Pope Pius IX being Supreme Head of the Church and Zachary Taylor, President of the Republic. Since the church of Georgetown, which in the beginning of Catholicity Father Neale of the Society of Jesus had erected to the honor of the Blessed Trinity, on account of the increase in the number of the faithful, and the necessity for the greater dignity in religious services, demanded a more splendid and ampler construction, the means having been contributed by the people in testimony of their piety; Samuel Eccleston, Archbishop of Baltimore, dedicated the site for the Church to be erected and placed the cornerstone of the new structure.' This ceremony so novel to the audience was explained in a pamphlet by Ezechiel Hughes of Georgetown. (5)

The first subscription for the new church raised a reported \$5,292.50, and the newspapers of the time mention several fundraisers, each spanning a number of days, held to assist the project. One benefit, or fair, held in June 1850 and apparently sponsored by White women in the parish, was reported to feature "an excellent BAND OF MUSIC," and "Supper and Refreshments of all kinds and every variety of Fancy and Useful Articles," as well as transportation during the evening between Georgetown and Washington. The *Georgetown Advocate* noted that the fair was "well attended, and the collection of articles offered was not only very extensive but very handsomely arranged. Altogether it has been an excellently managed concern and we are happy to state received a liberal patronage." The paper reported that the fair raised a net profit of \$1,055. (6)

A second fair was held in November 1850 by Black women of the parish. The *Georgetown Advocate* reported that it was “very successful,” and that “those who have attended speak in the highest terms of commendation of the management by those connected with this praiseworthy undertaking. From indications falling under our immediate observation, we have every reason to believe, that the Fair surpasses in beauty and value any that has heretofore been held in this place, and that almost as large a profit will be realized from it, as on any former effort of a similar character. . . . Every thing that can be thought of to conspire to the enjoyment of their patrons is done and every inducement offered to those who are disposed to encourage them. The room is tastefully and handsomely decorated, and a good Band is in attendance.” The newspaper mentions a Fancy Table at the fair kept by Sarah E. Becraft and Fanny Prier, “ornamented with a very pretty Arch, constructed by our townsman Mathias Duffy, Esq., the Architect of the new Church,” as well as a Refreshment Table decorated by Joseph Coffee, and a Supper Table. (7)

Contemporary news accounts now move on to the dedication of the church, and do not offer us glimpses of the construction of the building or the workforce involved. But we are fortunate enough to have a lengthy description of the church as it was nearing completion: (8)

We have visited this new edifice, to which attention has lately been directed by a report that it was soon to be the theatre of Jenny Lind’s performances. (9) It is situated on the west side of the same square on which the old church stands, its front looking toward the west. We will describe it as we saw it.

The first view obtained on approaching is of the south side, about one hundred and thirty feet long, the eaves about fifty feet high, the exterior walls in imitation of white marble, the windows tall and narrow, probably twenty feet high and five wide, and semicircular at the top. While the impressions produced by this view are very pleasing, there are two subjects that occasion regret. The first is, that the beautiful range of windows should be interrupted near the west end to give place to a door for the gallery; the second, that this specimen of classic architecture should be also marred by the anachronism of a steeple and spire reaching to the altitude of about seventy-five feet

from the ground – very elegant to be sure, and yet bringing to mind a sentry box or the wheel-house of a western steamboat. (10) The front view presents a pretty portico of Ionic structure, but so shallow as at once to exclude the shade essential to a good effect and all thoughts of utility. These disadvantages, however, are the inevitable penalty of attempts at imitating in modern structures the architecture of the ancients. The invention of glass windows alone called for the thorough improvements that have been made in private dwellings, and which are just as applicable in our more majestic edifices for public uses. But they are the errors of the times, from which the popular demands will not permit the architect to escape.

The interior is throughout admirable in taste and adaptation. Its proportions are about as follows: length 120 feet, width 65, height 40. On entering the main door at the west, the view is highly beautiful. The principal altar occupies the centre of the eastern end, and stands in a recess more detached in appearance from the main portion of the church than is usual. To the right and left of this are two neat vestry-rooms. In front of these rooms, against the partition-wall, are two small altars. Above these altars and vestry-rooms are two galleries, which communicate with each other above and in the rear of the main altar. The northern gallery will be occupied by the organ and choir; the southern, by the scholastics and students of the college. The altars are not completed. The railing enclosing them is neater and more modest than we have usually seen. The pulpit has not been built; and could we govern the matter, it would not be; for we cannot conceive a more desirable position for an orator than the estrade in front of the altar.

The accommodations for the congregation can best be viewed from the altar. As you stand here there appears a slight ascent of the floor toward the western end. This ascent is not more, however, than six or eight inches. There are no side galleries. (11) That over the main door contains thirty pews, designed for colored people, which are, in our opinion, the most desirable pews in the church. On the main floor there are one hundred and sixty-four pews. From the altar they have the appearance of being all of St. Domingo mahogany; but on a near inspection it is found that only the upper portions of the backs are made of this material, the rest being of the best Carolina yellow pine, simply coated with transparent varnish, except the ends next the aisles, and these are of cast-iron bronzed, and of very tasteful pattern. We were informed that two thousand

two hundred persons could be seated in the church, but that the pews were designed for a smaller number. From within, the windows present a lovely appearance; they are of stained glass, of varied combinations, no two being alike. The walls are plastered in imitation of white marble blocks, with the regular projection for Corinthian columns, painted in imitation of Italian marble, the bases of Egyptian. The entablature is of pure white, and of unabridged proportions. The ceiling is very slightly vaulted and painted in most exquisite style in imitation of a dome. Its very slight concavity and skilful painting produce an illusion from which it is hard to escape. Upon it the eye will often dwell in the effort to ascertain the true curves of this intricate canopy.

The whole effect of the edifice, both without and within, with the exception of the perhaps hyper-critical objections we have preferred, is pleasing in a very high degree. There is much elegant taste displayed throughout. The proportions are in good keeping, and a quiet order seems to prevail that cannot fail to impress every one most agreeably. The execution of the work appears to us to be perfect. Literally, this church is built upon a rock, and the superstructure has been made to correspond with its firm foundation. We are informed that its cost will not exceed twenty-two or twenty-three thousand dollars. If so, it is certainly a cheap edifice.

Mr. Matthew Duffy is the architect and builder; Mr. John H. Plant, the bricklayer; Mr. Beckert, plasterer; Mr. Finch, painter; the artistic painting of the ceiling, &c., by an amateur, a scholastic at the College, whose name we have not learned; the many excellent iron castings, by Mr. Snyder.

Mathias (var. Matthias or Matthew) Duffy (var. Duffey or Duffie), who was described as “a very useful citizen of our town, and one of the most skilful architects in the District,” died in April 1852 at the age of 50, less than a year after Holy Trinity’s church was dedicated. He was the architect and builder of Holy Trinity’s church as well as St. Matthew’s church at the corner of Fifteenth and H Streets, N.W., in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated in 1840. His father, Bryan Duffy, also a contractor, donated material for the plastering of Georgetown College. (12)

Mr. Plant, born in 1811 or 1812, died in 1886 and was buried from St. Aloysius

Church. Mr. Beckert was probably George Beckert, a Master Plasterer who also worked during the 1850s at the Smithsonian Institution. Mr. Finch was probably John S. Finch, a Master Painter who was born in the 1820s and died in 1889. Contemporary accounts also mention an altarpiece for the new church, carved out of solid mahogany, presented by the archbishop of St. Domingo to the archbishop of Baltimore and then donated to Holy Trinity. Some two hundred sixty years old, it was emblazoned with the old coat of arms of the Spanish monarchy. The organ for the church was built by Henry F. Berger of Baltimore. Robert Hays of Baltimore carved the Ionic capitals atop the pillars at the main entrance to the church. (13)

The dedication of the church was a spectacular event. Richard Jackson, author of *The Chronicles of Georgetown*, who was present, writes: (14)

Doctor Ryder again preached a very impressive discourse from the II Chronicles; his text was: "The appearance of the Lord in a dream unto Solomon at the completion of the temple"; and then came a faithful description of what a true worshiper of the Saviour ought to be, and which, to our mind, was never more faithfully portrayed. There was present, on the occasion, a large company collected from far and near, consisting of all classes and denominations, among them many Protestants desirous of seeing the imposing ceremonies and solemn services. The clergy, all attired in their proper vestments and bearing the holy cross, marched up one of the aisles of the church sprinkling the holy water with hyssop, and, upon arriving at the altar, Haydn's Mass was sung and chanted by the choir. The procession then passed through the aisles again sprinkling the holy water; the music was superior to anything of the kind ever heard in our town at church dedications.

Since the See of Baltimore was vacant, with Bishop Samuel Eccleston having died at the end of April 1851, Bishop Armand-Francois-Marie de Charbonnel (1802-91), the bishop of Toronto (1850-60), presided at the dedication. Music was provided by the Columbia Musical Association and vocalists from Philadelphia and Baltimore, as well as the Holy Trinity choir. (15)

The day concluded with Vespers and an address by Bishop Charbonnel, who

“pointed out the use of the Building and the Altar that had been raised and dedicated this day, with his earnest hope that in it the Sabbath day would be kept holy, and the great object not to be forgotten, ‘to train up a child in the way he should go, and he will never depart from it’; and lastly, and not least, the duty of the parent to the child to see it so carried out.”

The bishop concluded with this prayer: “May our differences in our creeds never sever our friendships,

“And that party names may never more
The Christian world o’erspread,
But that Gentile, Jew, and bond and free
May be one in Christ, their head.” (16)

Notes

1. Laurence J. Kelly, S.J., *History of Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, D.C., 1795-1945* (Baltimore, 1945), p. 24; Edward I. Devitt, S.J., “History of the Maryland-New York Province, XIII, Holy Trinity Church,” *Woodstock Letters* 64 (1935): 35-36.

2. Devitt, “Holy Trinity Church,” pp. 35-36.

3. Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, pp. 18, 21; Kelly, S.J., “Some Notes on Holy Trinity, Georgetown,” Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, box 101, folder 11, Georgetown University Archives, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C.; Aloysius Roccofort, S.J., “An Essai on the history of Trinity Church in Georgetown D.C.,” Arch. Md. Prov., box 81, folder 2; in a letter of July 25, 1834, to former Holy Trinity pastor Stephen Dubuisson, S.J., James Lucas, S.J., the current pastor, refers to the rental of pews in the gallery as early as 1825 (Arch. Md. Prov., box 100, folder 6). Historian Margaret McAleer writes, “Narrow stairs were constructed on the outside of the church, requiring Black parishioners to exit the church during the service and reenter below during communion” (“The Other Congregation: Patterns of Black Catholic Worship at Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, D.C., 1795-1845,” unpublished seminar paper, Georgetown University, 1986, p. 10).

4. Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, pp. 22, 24, 36; Devitt, “Holy Trinity Church,” p. 36; “O’Flanagan, Peter,” Irish Jesuit Archives. On the death of Fr. O’Flanagan from a severe cold contracted while on a midnight sick call in the wintertime, see Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, p. 36; on Fr. Ryder’s anti-abolitionist views, see “Proslavery Oration by Rev. James Ryder, SJ, August 30, 1835,” in The Georgetown University Slavery Archive, item 80, <https://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/88>; for mention of the groundbreaking, held on Mar. 25, 1846, see “New Roman Catholic Church,” *Georgetown Advocate*, Mar. 7, 1846, although the ceremony is misidentified in the article as the cornerstone-laying.

5. Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, pp. 22, 24.

6. Devitt, “Holy Trinity Church,” p. 36; “Fair” and “A Fair,” June 4, 1850, “The Fair,” June 11, 1850, and “The Late Fair,” June 18, 1850, all from *Georgetown Advocate*.

7. “Fair, For the Benefit of the New Catholic Church,” *Georgetown Advocate*, Nov. 16, 1850. Sarah (or Sara) E. Becraft (b. 1821) was the younger sister of Anne Marie Becraft.

8. “New Roman Catholic Church in Georgetown,” *Republic*, Nov. 7, 1850.

9. Jenny Lind sang not at Holy Trinity but at National Hall in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 16 and 18, 1850.

10. Fr. Kelly’s history of the parish tells us that “a steeple was erected over the front of the church where the cross is now mounted; but as its only support was the wall of the church it caused the roof to leak and it was abandoned” (Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, p. 25).

11. Side galleries were subsequently added to accommodate Holy Trinity’s Black parishioners but were then removed in the 1880s. (See Peter J. Albert, “‘Climbing the Back Stairs’: Segregated Church Seating at Holy Trinity,” trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Article-10-Climbing-the-Back-Stairs.pdf)

12. *Daily American Telegraph*, Apr. 26 and 27, 1852; *Washington Evening Star*, Nov. 30, 1940; Carlton Fletcher, “Bryantown,” in “Glover Park History: Historical Sketches of Glover Park, Upper Georgetown, and Georgetown Heights,”

<https://gloverparkhistory.com/geography/maps-places-features/bryantown/>.

13. For John Plant, see *Washington Evening Star*, Mar. 8, 1886, and the U.S. decennial censuses. For George Beckert, see *Washington Evening Star*, Aug. 26, 1854. For John Finch see the U.S. decennial censuses. For the mahogany altarpiece at Holy Trinity, see “Magnificent Present,” *Georgetown Advocate*, June 22, 1850. For the organ, see “Catholic Church,” *Georgetown Advocate*, May 25, 1850, and “Church Organ,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1851. For the carving of the capitals, see “Splendid Specimen of Baltimore Mechanism,” *Georgetown Advocate*, July 6, 1850.

14. Richard P. Jackson, *The Chronicles of Georgetown, D.C., from 1751 to 1878* (Washington, D.C., 1878), pp. 141-42

15. Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, p. 24; “The Dedication,” *Georgetown Advocate*, June 17, 1851. The newspaper reported a collection of \$321.41.

16. “For the Advocate,” *Georgetown Advocate*, June 17, 1851.