

THE GIFT OF THE LAND

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Throughout history, land ownership has been the sign and signature of a free people, a nation. Each year, as part of the Great Easter Vigil, we hear the story of the journey of the Israelites from bondage to the “promised land” (Exodus 6: 2-8). The history of the National Shrine is tethered to this ancient biblical doctrine of “the gift of the land.” It begins in the eighteenth century with the emergence of a new nation and the location of its seat of government. The following vignettes describe the generations of this land, its “owners,” the historical events and topography. When necessary, current locations are given in parentheses.

Seat of Government

During the years before and after the War for Independence, the location of the seat of the nascent American government was a contested issue. This was reflected in a nomadic Congress that met in eight locations over a five-year period (1774-79). Although the cities of New York and Philadelphia vied vigorously for the honor of being the capital, George Washington had already surveyed the natural advantages provided by the banks of the Potomac River and determined its location. In fact, Washington was introduced to the advantages of this land while serving as a volunteer aide-de-camp to General Edward Braddock during the French and Indian War (1754-63). At that time, there was a massive flattop rock in the Tiber Creek (Constitution Avenue at the Roosevelt Memorial Bridge), where it is said that the British Expeditionary forces landed in 1755 to begin their ill-fated journey to Fort Duquesne. This spot became known as “Braddock’s Rock.” More importantly, this rock was used as the “key of keys,” the starting point for the earliest land surveys of Washington, D.C. On 16 July 1790, an Act of Congress established both the “Temporary” (Philadelphia) and “Permanent” (District of Columbia) seats of the government of the United States, with land ceded by the states of Maryland (69 sq. mi.) and Virginia (31 sq. mi.), which was “retroceded” or returned to Virginia,



First Settlers Monument

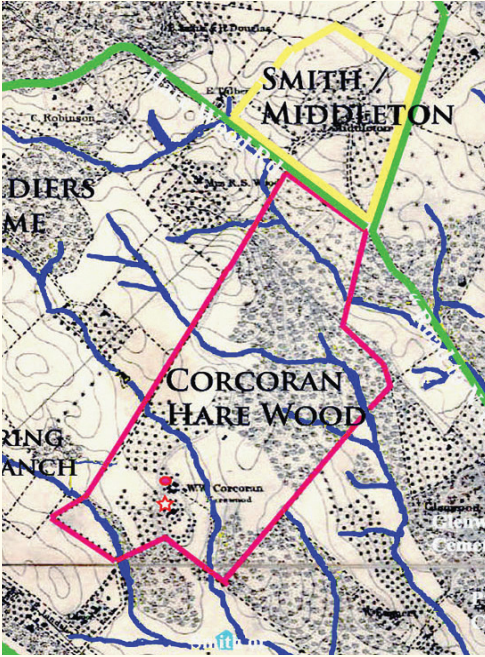
in 1846). With “the gift of the land,” the permanent capital of this new nation was established.

The Federal City of Washington was created from land selected and procured from eighteen estates. Washington negotiated directly with the original landowners. The simple sandstone monument to the *First Settlers of the District of Columbia* (1936) on the east side of the Ellipse at 14th Street, NW, pays tribute to these immigrants who settled what is now the

District of Columbia.

One of the names on the monument that is of interest to the history of the National Shrine is that of Francis Pope (1610-70). Extracts from a Land Patent dated 5 June 1663 verify that “Francis Pope of this Province [Maryland], Gentleman,” owned a 400-acre farmstead along a waterway named “Tiber Creek,” contemporaneous with “Goose Creek.” He was also a member of the early Assembly of Maryland and Justice of the Peace of old Charles County. Perhaps inspired by the name of this waterway or simply as a play on his surname, Pope named his estate “Rome.” Thus, he became the “Pope at Rome, on the Tiber” in Maryland. 352 years later (2015), another “Pope at Rome, on the Tiber” in Italy, who was also named “Francis,” was welcomed to the United States on this land. His drive to the National Shrine traveled the roadways that at one time paralleled the waters of Tiber Creek.

Tiber Creek, which began in the northeast elevations, was the largest waterway in the District. Flowing south, it baptized all that it touched, gaining force, and breadth as it flowed directly through the middle of downtown Washington, where it took a westerly turn before emptying into the Potomac River (near the “key of keys”). The 1861 Boschke map, shown here, is considered the truest map of its time. It shows the Tiber (blue) beginning as little rills on the west side of what is today the National Soldiers Home (NSH). On the east side, near the Corcoran Harewood [Hare



1861 Boschke map

Wood] estate (red) and the Smith / Middleton estate (yellow), acreage of which now comprises the National Shrine, the waterway began its southeast journey. The mouth of the Tiber to the extent of its tidewaters covered what is today the National Mall. In 1815, this free-flowing creek was “channeled” and became part of the canal system of the city. Brick-lined streambeds of the Tiber can still be seen inside the grounds of the NSH and the National Shrine.

As the years progressed and downtown Washington developed, the deforestation along the banks of the Tiber and its appropriation as an open sewer caused many to seek relief from the swampy mugginess, disease carrying mosquitoes, and contaminated water. In 1861, *The Washington Chronicle* reported that residents of “downtown” found the northeast countryside to be “one of the most charming rural retreats in the vicinity of Washington” (April 14).

Turkey Thicket and Sidney

Thomas Jefferson, the newly elected third president (1800-12), invited his friend Samuel Harrison Smith (1772-1845) to be part of the “capital move” from Philadelphia to Washington. The famed founder and editor of *The National Intelligencer* and later president of the Bank of Washington came to the capital in the fall of 1800 within days of his marriage to his second cousin, Margaret Bayard (1778-1844), the daughter of Colonel John Bubenheim Bayard, who fought with General George Washington at Valley Forge. Smith was

the semi-official spokesman for the Jefferson administration and reporter for Congress.

The new residents of the Federal City found the wooded lands where the Tiber began, prime real estate. In 1804, Smith signed an initial “bond of conveyance” with the Duley brothers, Jonathan and William, for a tract of land. As Jefferson noted in a letter to his granddaughter, this was “a neat little box ... a few miles from the city” (28 June 1805). [See map on left.] Situated upon the highest point overlooking “downtown,” the tract of 160 acres was known at the time of its purchase as “Turkey Thicket.” Smith changed the name to “Sidney” [Sydney] in honor of Algernon Sydney, an English politician, republican political theorist, and opponent of King Charles II of England, who was executed for treason. Sydney along with the English philosopher John Locke, were believed to be the originators of the American ideal of liberty.



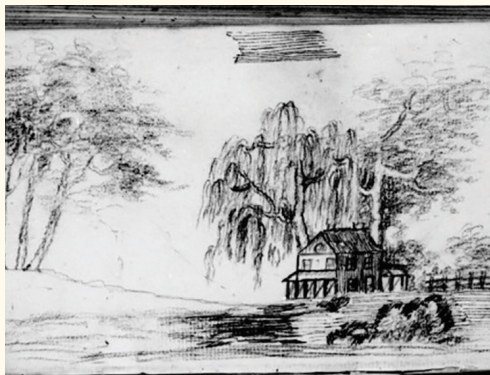
Painting of Margart Bayard Smith by Charles Bird King ca. 1829.

Margaret Bayard Smith, (portrait on left by Charles Bird King ca. 1829), an avid letter writer and diarist, wrote to her sister of her delight with their country “retreat.” *At five this afternoon, we got a*

hack, and visited our [country] retreat. ... I am delighted with it. A good house on the top of a high hill, with high hills all around it, embower'd in woods, thro' an opening of which the Potomack, its shores and Mason's Island are distinctly seen. I have never been more charmingly surprised than seeing this retreat (1803).

The rustic and verdant location, with its bucolic breezes and appetizingly sweet, cool air, was idyllic. Mrs. Smith was so enchanted with Sidney that “[she was] always at her country house (Jefferson, 29 June 1806). Sidney soon became the venue for country day trips and “getaways” not only for Jefferson, who enjoyed the salubrious spring water, a gift of the Tiber, but also for many of the political and social elite of Washington, including the Madisons (James and Dolley), and Henry Clay of Kentucky, at that time Speaker of the House.

As noted by Mrs. Smith, the estate sat upon an elevation of “little mountains and towering



Sketch of Sidney. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Margaret Bayard Smith Papers.

Emancipation Proclamation, one evening while he was at the Soldiers' Home, which adjoined the Middleton estate on the west boundary, the future home of the National Shrine.

In 1885, James Cardinal Gibbons purchased the "Middleton estate," the site selected for The Catholic University of America and by extension thereof the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In an interesting twist of fate, it was a former slave, Frederick Douglass, the Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia (1881-85), who verified the sale and transfer of the property. At the time of its purchase the title stipulated the purchase by its earlier name, "Turkey Thicket."

During the commencement exercises of The Catholic University, June 1909, Rector Thomas J. Shahan (future founder of the National Shrine) said, "The University found Northeast Washington an undeveloped section of the city. Gradually this section has developed [in tandem with the university] ... until Brookland ... was rightly accounted among the most desirable parts of our beautiful city."

The effort to build a National Shrine began in earnest in 1914. Five years later, the Olmsted Brothers of Boston, landscape architects, submitted their plan for the location of the National Shrine on the "western side of the University property, parallel with Harewood [Road] and five hundred feet from Michigan Avenue." This western boundary was

woods." This elevation was most evident during the War of 1812 and again, almost two centuries later, on 11 September 2001. One could stand on the south steps of the National Shrine and watch the black smoke billowing from the Pentagon.

The Smiths sold the estate in 1835 to James Middleton, who made additions to the original house, which survived until 1970. In 1860, the Middletons listed nine slaves on their estate. The slaves living in D.C., were freed one year prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Francis B. Carpenter, the artist of the oil painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln* (1864), shown below, quoted Lincoln as saying that he finished writing the second draft or Preliminary



Seated, L-R: Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War; President Lincoln; Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy; William H. Seward, Secretary of State; Edward Bates, Attorney General. Standing, L-R: Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury; Caleb B. Smith, Secretary of the Interior; Montgomery Blair, Postmaster General.

marked by one of the branches of the Tiber, which it shared with the Corcoran estate and the Soldiers Home. On 8 December 1948, the National Shrine legally and perpetually incorporated as an independent entity and ownership of this land was transferred to the National Shrine.

Harewood

William Wilson Corcoran born in Georgetown two years before the “capital move” (1798), was a savvy financier and investor. His partnership with George W. Riggs led to the organization of the Corcoran & Riggs Bank, one of the leading commercial institutions of Washington and “the bank of Presidents” (from Lincoln to Nixon). Through the sale of bonds in Europe to help finance the Mexican-American War (1846-48), Corcoran achieved such prosperity that he was able to retire from the banking business in 1854 and focus his enormous wealth on his personal investments and philanthropy.

In 1852, Corcoran purchased a country estate of 191 acres in northeast Washington. Reverend John Brackenridge, the founder of the First Presbyterian Church of Washington and chaplain to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, had owned part of this land. The estate was named “Harewood” [Hare Wood], ostensibly because of the abundance of rabbits on the property and specifically for the one that crossed his carriage path on an earlier visit. John Hennessey Saul (1819-97), the Irish-born American horticulturist and landscape architect, who would later assist in the planning and the development of the National Mall, was hired in 1853 to landscape the estate. In addition to the natural growth of pine and cedar woods, Saul added “trees and plants of other nations and climes.” *Salve Regina*, the early edition of *Mary’s Shrine*, made note of the history and beauty of the landscape of its neighbor. In 2017, the installation of the Rosary Walk and Garden of the National Shrine remodeled a segment of the Harewood estate near its southern boundary. Centuries of growth were groomed and refreshed; new plantings were added to compliment the Saul landscape.

Corcoran asked his friend James Renwick Jr. (1818-95) to design the buildings for the estate (1852-59). A letter from Corcoran to Renwick dated 1856, states that he “would not commence with the farmhouse or lodge” until Renwick returned from New York. Included among the estate buildings was a residence (Swiss Style)



William Wilson Corcoran.
Photo by Mathew B. Brady.

and a “gardener’s lodge.” This “lodge,” which has also been called a “hunting lodge” and the “gatekeeper’s lodge,” is quite possibly the “gardener’s lodge.” In any case, it is not the simple stucco “gate house” at the north end of Harewood Road, built as a second entrance to the Soldiers Home almost thirty years later (1881). The small two-story stone lodge situated at the one and only entrance to the Harewood estate is the only

original building to survive. It is in the French Second Empire or Mansard style (1855-85), named for Francois Mansart, a 17th century French Renaissance architect who popularized the signature double-pitch roof with its steep lower slope. When the Civil War broke out, Corcoran, a friend of Robert E. Lee and a well-known southern sympathizer, feared seizure of his properties and possibly himself. He left for Paris, where he waited out the war. As he had anticipated, the Union Army commandeered the Harewood estate as a field hospital in 1862. It was the last Civil War hospital to close in 1866. The lodge was situated far east of the hospital proper and was tended by “musketed” guards, who controlled access to “Corcoran Avenue” from Harewood Road. Corcoran was never compensated for the wartime use of the Harewood property until 1872, when he reconciled with the government and accepted a nominal price for the land, making it part of the Soldiers Home.



Stone Lodge

The land upon which National Shrine now stands is “settled,” which is to say a change in ownership or its “re-purposing” is unlikely. The history of this votive church is unquestionably tied to the “gift of the land” and the generations of people—both known and unknown—who have inhabited it and enjoyed its natural riches. This land and the National Shrine that stands upon it are repositories of memories, pages in American history and the Church in America. 🙏