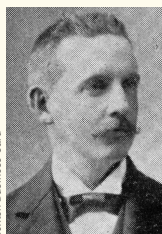


THE CHRONICLE OF THE FOUNDATION STONE

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On 16 May 1920, as the festivities for the blessing of the land came to a close and evening settled over the white-corded outline of the National Shrine, there lingered a faint whisper, not of a hope or a dream, but of an actuality. The land had been blessed and on September 23, the foundation stone—not a “corner” stone but the actual *first* stone—would be laid.



Sexton Business Card

James Joseph Sexton, a Connecticut monument maker, and a Knight of Columbus, had heard of the plans for the dedication of a foundation stone for the National Shrine. Writing to his pastor and brother Knight, Rev. Michael J. O'Connor, Sexton asked for his

assistance in securing the honor of donating this first stone:

As a fitting tribute to Almighty God for His goodness to me during the last fifty years of my business career I wish to present in the name of my family and myself the [foundation] stone of polished granite suitable for the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, to be laid September 23rd, 1920. I ask you to convey my request ... to His Eminence Cardinal Gibbons through the Right Reverend Thomas Joseph Shahan, D.D. (27 April 1920).

With his offer accepted, Sexton went prospecting for “the largest and most beautiful” piece of granite. He found it in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, “right in the mountain side.” Not leaving anything to chance, he had the granite block “taken out while [he] was there.”

The return trip to Stratford, Connecticut, was more than just a delivery; it was the first leg of a hallowed pilgrimage. The 300-mile route followed “part of ... the road Paul Revere rode.” Upon arrival in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the truck “circled the very spot where General Washington took command of the Continental Army in 1775.” In part, this was a tribute to his “Great Grand Uncle, General [John J.] O’Sullivan [Sullivan], one of the Green Mountain Boys, [who] was on Washington’s staff at the time.” From there, they traveled to Lexington, site of the famous “shot heard around the world,” then on to Woburn, Massachusetts, whose militiamen fought and died at Lexington. Woburn was also the home of the tile factory of the Rafael Guastavino

Co., creator of the “timbrel arch construction,” which, in the coming years, would be used in the construction of the Crypt Church. As they traveled the Boston Post Road, they “viewed all of the granite markers placed on the route of the Continental Army” (14 Sept 1920).

Back in his shop, Sexton shaped the block of black New Hampshire granite into a 3.3-ton quadrangular stone (5 ft. x 3 ft. and 2.4 ft. deep). Sexton was more than pleased, “I believe it is the finest stone ever placed in any building in America for [this] purpose.” With the remnants, 100 small samples were cut and polished as mementos for the attending dignitaries. Larger “handsome pieces” were prepared for Cardinal Gibbons and Bishop Shahan. The largest “sample” was for the Vatican museum.

In mid-June, Sexton was ready to cut the inscription into the stone. He wrote to Shahan stating it would be cut in Roman lettering “just as you suggested,” a Latin text written in the finest prose of early Church and Roman epigraphs:

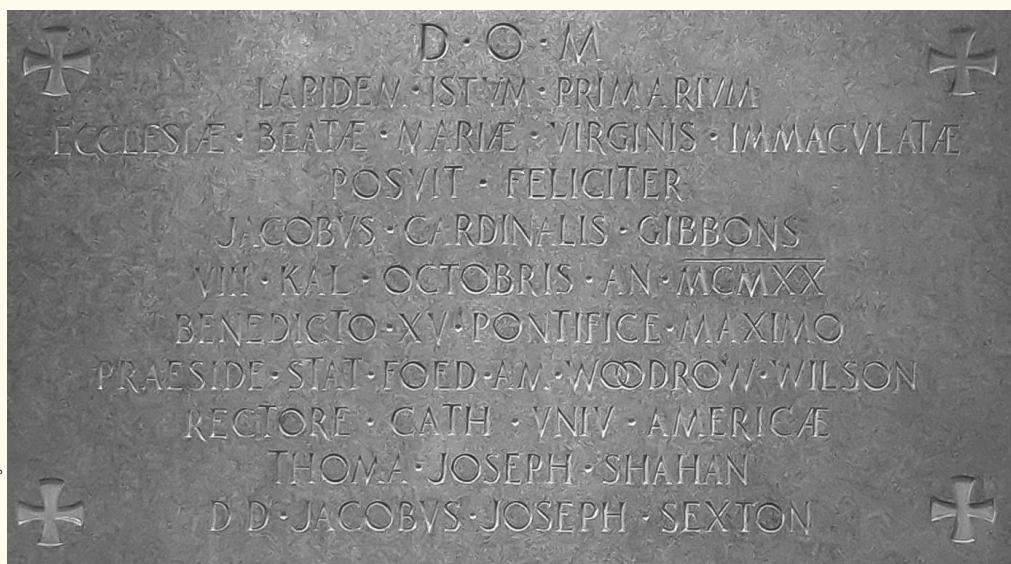
*D[eo] * O[ptimo] * M[aximo] / Lapidem
Istum Primarium / Ecclesiae Beatae Mariae
Virginis Immaculae / Posuit Feliciter /
Jacobus Cardinalis Gibbons / VIII [ante
diem] Kal[ends] Octobris An[no] MCMXX
/ Benedicto XV Pontifice Maximo / Praeside
Stat[uum] Foed[eratum] Am[ericae]
Woodrow Wilson / Rectore Cath[olica]
Univ[ersitatis] Americae / Thoma Joseph
Shahan / D[one] D[edit] Jacobus Joseph
Sexton.*

That is to say:

[To] God, the Best, the Greatest / This First Stone / of the Church of Blessed Mary, Virgin Immaculate / Happily placed by / James Cardinal Gibbons / on the 8th Day [before] the Kalends [1st] of October [i.e., on the 23rd of Sept] in the Year 1920 / Benedict XV, the Supreme Pontiff / the President of the United States of America / Woodrow Wilson / the Rector of Catholic University of America / Thomas Joseph Shahan / the donor of this gift [stone] James Joseph Sexton.

It bears noting that some authors and publications have mistakenly stated that the date is wrong. *The date on the foundation stone is correct.* The inscription was misread.

Sexton was extraordinary in his sense of history. The trip to Washington, D.C. became a continuation of the historic pilgrimage begun



Foundation Stone

on the mountain in New Hampshire. Sexton intended to deliver not only a “first stone” but also a touchstone of American devotion and of Americana. To that end, he wanted as many people as possible to see the stone, “the many thousands who may never again have a chance to see it.”

The Pilgrimage to Washington began on Wednesday morning, September 15, with a high Mass sung by Father O’Connor at the parish church of St. James in Stratford. The truck and stone, decorated with silk American and Papal flags, was parked in front of the main entrance for all to see and touch. For this “creditable trip” of distance and tonnage, Sexton acquired a “new [Nash] truck, all highly painted in green, and gold.” A placard on the side of the truck said it all: “From the White Mountains of New Hampshire to Washington, D.C. Ceremonial Stone for the Shrine.” The following morning, they left for Washington.



19 Sept 1920, Sexton, Pace, Shahan, McKenna

Among the many stops, the reception in New York City was the most enthusiastic. The

newspapers and “Moving Picture Photographers of New York City” reported the arrival of the stone on Saturday, September 18. The truck was escorted by a bicycle squad of police as it made its way down 5th Avenue towards the Cathedral of St. Patrick. People lined the avenue blessing themselves, some tried to touch or even kiss the stone as it passed in front of them. At the cathedral, Archbishop Patrick J. Hayes and Mayor John F. Hylan welcomed the pilgrims to New York City and the Archbishop blessed the stone. The reception was particularly remarkable considering the Wall Street bombing just three days earlier. The original plan was for Archbishop Hayes and Mayor Hylan to receive the stone on Wednesday at twelve-noon in front of the Sub-Treasury (Federal Hall National Memorial), and to lay a wreath where Washington took his first oath of office, across from the J. P. Morgan building—the exact date, time, and place of the explosion. Thirty-eight people were killed, and the wounded were in the hundreds. The perpetrators were never found. It was later learned that a scheduling conflict saved the stone from destruction and the participants from certain injury or death. Many days later, while reflecting on the trip and the tragedy in NYC, Sexton wrote to Shahan, “This really proves that we were under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Our Heavenly Father.”

In Philadelphia, the stone passed in front of Independence Hall before arriving at the cathedral where Archbishop Dennis J. Dougherty, chairman of the National Shrine Building Committee, gave his blessing. Sunday, September 19, the last day of the journey began in Baltimore with the reception by Cardinal Gibbons. Sexton had acquired this “new truck” specifically for this trip. So later that afternoon,

The Chronicle of the Foundation Stone

outside of Washington, Sexton met the two sales managers of the area Nash dealership and they “piloted” the “gigantic motor truck” to its destination. The foundation stone arrived at the site of the National Shrine and was received by Bishop Shahan around 4:30 that afternoon.

It was calculated that during this four-day journey, over one million people viewed the stone, including 100,000 “children of the schools, public and parochial.” The trip was quite an accomplishment.

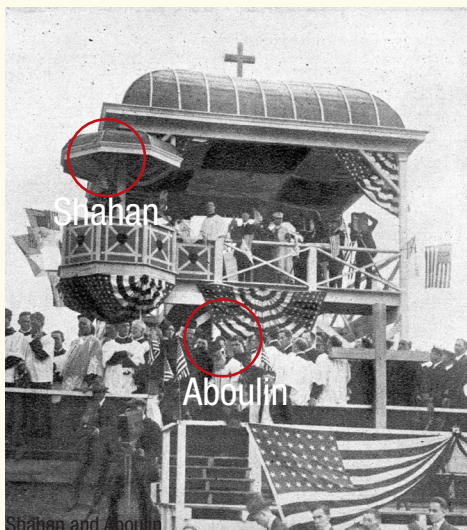
The Day of Dedication was an event of historic proportions for the Catholic Church. As noted in the dedication program, even before the Civil War, Catholics had envisioned a “splendid church ... at the heart of the nation.” With the beginning of such a church now at hand, an invitation ran on three successive days in the local newspapers inviting the public of “Washington and Vicinity ... to be present at the laying of the foundation stone” of the National Shrine, which was to be erected “in memory of our soldiers and sailors and as a glorious tribute to the Blessed Virgin” (*Washington Post* 20-23 Sept 1920). News account would later estimate a gathering of 15,000 people.

Early in the day on September 23, people began gathering at the newly excavated grand basin. Bouquets of gold and white flowers and silk flags provided as much elegance as an excavation site could muster. In the center of the basin, where the walls of the north and east apses would one day meet (Oratory of Antipolo), the foundation stone was suspended by a steel rigging within a white A-frame wooden derrick decorated with American and Papal flags.

At 2:55 p.m., the choir intoned the processional hymn and the march of ecclesiastics, led by the friars of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, proceeded from Caldwell Hall towards the grand basin. Members of religious communities and diocesan priests followed, taking their place below the pulpit on the eastern rise of the basin. Next came the American hierarchy. The 4th degree Knights of Columbus dressed in their regulation silk hats, frock coats, sashes, and swords served as the honor guard for Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, Apostolic Delegate, William Cardinal O’Connell, Archbishop of Boston, and James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore. At the time, O’Connell and Gibbons were the only Americans in the College of Cardinals; Gibbons was the senior churchman. They took their places on crimson colored thrones on the western rise of the basin, surrounded by the American hierarchy.

Special seating was provided for the women who collected the funds for the Shrine, particularly the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, who helped organize this event. Their generous benefaction would span future decades and include the main altar in the Crypt Church and two rose windows in the Great Upper Church. At the ceremony, the Catholic women of America were hailed as “the principal builders of the National Shrine” and applauded for their devotional fervor and diligent fundraising.

From the pulpit, Bishop Shahan welcomed everyone, greeted the dignitaries, foreign and domestic, including Assistant Secretary of State V. S. Merle-Smith, representing the White House, high-ranking officers of the military, and introduced Cardinal Gibbons. Congratulatory telegrams from Pope Benedict XV and from Francis Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, England were read. Shahan then announced the papal gift, the first of its kind to the Church in America, the *Immaculate Conception* mosaic, which would become the hallmark of the National Shrine. Below the pulpit, among the honored guests, was Abbé Jean J. M. Aboulin, C.S.B. (Detroit), who in 1909 took the first practical step towards building the National Shrine by making the first donation: \$1,000.



BNSIC Archives

The Blessing Ritual began as Cardinal Gibbons made his way down the red-carpeted stairs flanked by the Knights of Columbus with their swords at salute. Vesting in a mitre of white silk embroidered in gold, a cope of white moire silk richly embroidered in gold, and the “Hibernian” crozier of Bishop Shahan in hand, Gibbons proceeded to a faldstool on a red and gold carpet. Following the opening prayers, he stood



Blessing the Foundation Stone

and faced the large wooden cross below the pulpit, symbol of the main altar, and sprinkled the ground with holy water. Turning towards the foundation stone, he read aloud the inscription and the prayer of blessing and sprinkled the stone with holy water. As the choir chanted the Litany of Saints, Gibbons traced three crosses on each side of the stone with the silver-plated ceremonial trowel made of donated jewelry, reciting each time: "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Then, placing his right hand on the stone he prayed, "In the faith of Jesus Christ, we place this first stone in the foundation." The stone was lowered into place with the assistance of Sexton, his two sons, 2d Lt. Vincent (Air Corps) and Navy Seaman Leo, and nephew Pvt. William S. Fitzgerald. The Cardinal then spread the first trowel of mortar on the stone. The stonemasons permanently secured the stone to its base and inserted the copper box into the opening on

top. The copper box, the gift of Sexton's wife, Elizabeth, contained the parchment of attestation, U.S. coins, and the membership rolls of Salve Regina. The final act of blessing was the chanting of *Veni creator spiritus*.



Placing the Stone

From the pulpit Bishop John T. McNicholas of Duluth, a distinguished orator of the time, preached the sermon. Archbishop Dennis J. Dougherty of Philadelphia imparted the papal benediction and concluded with the *Te Deum*.

The following day, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, Msgr. Edward A. Pace, General Secretary of The Catholic University of America, celebrated Mass at the site for "our soldiers and sailors, living and deceased." This concluded the two-day event. The foundation stone was then encased in a wooden crate until late 1922, when Bishop Shahan turned "the first sod" to mark the beginning of actual construction. 🙏



Ceremonial Trowel