

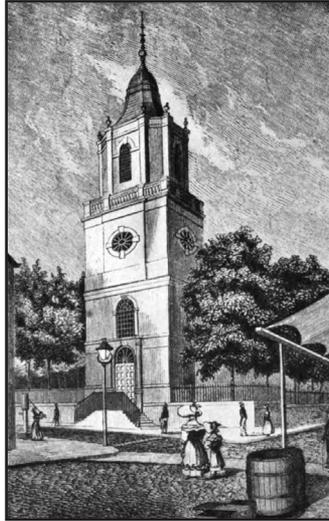
# St. Peter's Church

*"Mother Church of Old Catholic New York"*



*New York State's first Roman Catholic parish  
established in 1785*

# Welcome



St. Peter's Church was, "truly the rock upon which the present Archdiocese of New York with its hundreds of churches, schools and other institutions were founded", wrote Leo Raymond Ryan. St. Peter's Church was a center of early American Catholicism, established five years before the establishment of the present day United States government. St. Peter's Church is the first Roman Catholic parish in New York State and predates the first Bishopric in the United States.

The parish served as a safe haven for needy immigrants, New Yorkers suffering during the yellow fever epidemic, and downtown neighbors in the aftermath of 9/11. During her long history, the parish became connected to many admirable and influential Catholic New Yorkers including our first American saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton, and several in line for sainthood.

# Our History

## ***EARLY NEW YORK CATHOLIC COMMUNITY***

During English rule, Catholic worship was prohibited. Following the Revolutionary War, New York City served as temporary capitol of the newly-independent United States. This prominence brought many foreign ambassadors and businessmen to the city, some of whom were Catholic, as were several members of Congress. A small group of Catholic city residents began attending Mass privately at the home of Don Diego de Gardoqui, the ambassador of Spain. Father Farmer, a pioneer and tireless missionary tended to the beginning flock. As the congregation grew, they launched a plan to build a church of their own, under the leadership of Father Whelan, a member of the Capuchin Order from Ireland. In 1785, Fr. Whelan reported that the pastor needed to know six languages spoken by the congregation of English, French Dutch (i.e. German), Spanish Portuguese and Irish.

## ***A HOUSE OF WORSHIP***

The growing Catholic group of New York sought the help of the French consul, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. The counselor arranged the lease of the present site for a church from the Protestant Corporation of Trinity Church. The cornerstone was laid on October 5, 1785, led by Ambassador de Gardoqui. By the spring of 1786, the congregation had collected enough money--including a gift of 1,000 silver dollars from Spain's King Charles III--to begin construction. On November 4, 1786, a Solemn High Mass was offered in the new church. By 1795, Trinity Church cancelled the parish back debt and transferred ownership of the land to the trustees for 1,000 pounds.

## ***A LEADER IN EDUCATION***

St. Peter's made history in 1800 by establishing the first free Catholic school in New York State to teach both secular subjects and Catholic doctrine and morality. At first, the teaching staff was composed entirely of lay persons. Then in 1831, the Sisters of Charity, an order founded by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, took charge of the girls' school. In 1873, the Christian Brothers began teaching the boys. Sadly, the parish school closed in 1940, after 140 years. It succumbed to the same forces that were to close many parish schools many decades later: a changing neighborhood, few residents, fewer Catholics and mounting costs. In one sense, however, the parish continued to fulfill an educational mission. In 1943, it launched St. Peter's Catholic Lending Library,

offering a more than 4,000-volume selection of literature, philosophy, theology, social science and history materials.

### ***A GROWING CONGREGATION***

The congregation were a willful and independent group but after a tumultuous start, the capable Dominican Father William O'Brien was appointed pastor and led a 20 year ministry (1787-1807) that saw remarkable growth. By 1836, St. Peter's congregation had grown so large that some parishioners had to stand outside during Mass. On October 26, the cornerstone for a larger church was laid. This second church became eligible for consecration in 1885, 100 years after the original founding, as all debt had been paid. On September 3, 1837, the first Mass was celebrated in the basement of the new church. In 1893, the parish had 20,000 members.

### ***FEARS***

In 1806 on Christmas Eve, a mob gathered at St. Peter's intent on disrupting the congregation celebrating midnight Mass. There were pockets of hostility towards Catholics, led by Protestants and atheists who were concerned about Popish foreign influence, but their fears gradually subsided.

### ***EPIDEMICS***

When the mosquito borne yellow fever epidemic swept New York in waves, Father William O'Brien's ministries were endless. It is reported that for two whole months, such were the demands of his time, that he never entered his bed. Hundreds of St. Peter's Church parishioners perished. Father O'Brien and his assistants Fr. Matthew O'Brien and Fr. Michael Hurley were commended by New York's secretary of the Board of Health for their courageous care of the sick. Venerable Pierre Toussaint, a long-time parishioner, came to the aid of many with the yellow fever affliction and crossed quarantine lines to tend to patients suffering from cholera. He brought many victims into his home, where he nursed them back to health.

### ***SEASONS OF CHANGE***

In the neighborhood surrounding St. Peter's, homes gave way to stores and tall office buildings. Immigration trends were reflected in the ethnic background of parishioners. At a celebration in 1921 for

the 137th anniversary of the parish, Monsignor McGean said, "When I came to St. Peter's, I had a flock of some 25,000 souls, most of them Irish. It has dwindled to 7,000 souls of 20 nationalities, most of them Polish Ruthenian." Not all new Catholic immigrants belonged to the Latin rite, so Monsignor McGean offered the use of St. Peter's lower church to Greek-rite Syrian Catholics from 1899 to 1916. By the 1940's, St. Peter's had become primarily a weekday service church.

### **9/11 TRAGEDY**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Father Kevin Madigan, pastor of St. Peter's Parish, showed great leadership and compassion. The church narrowly escaped destruction when landing gear of one of the airplanes came through the roof. Nonetheless, the doors of St. Peter's stayed open to America's



heroes, and the church transformed into a relief supply station while Fr. Madigan celebrated Mass, heard Confession and provided pastoral care to rescue workers. Likewise, the parish's mission at St. Joseph's Chapel in Battery Park City was stripped of pews and became the command center for police, firefighters, and construction workers. Priests celebrated Mass initially in a tent and later in a recreation room on Rector Place. Beloved chaplain of the New York Fire Department, Father Mychal Judge OFM, died while administering last rights to victims at the towers, and surviving firemen carried his body to our altar. The world-recognized World Trade Center Cross was displayed outside St. Peter's on Church Street until it was moved to the 9/11 Memorial.

### **TODAY**

St. Peter's Church has embraced a new role as the center of a growing residential Catholic community in TriBeca, Battery Park City and Financial District. 49 Masses are celebrated each week at three locations.

## **BRIEF TIMELINE**

1785 Cornerstone is laid for St. Peter's Church

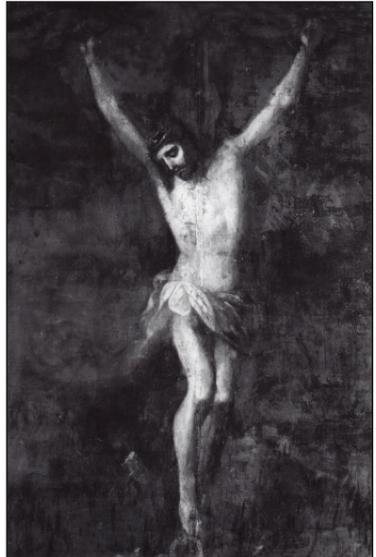
1800 St. Peter's Free School is established for education of Catholic children

1805 Elizabeth Seton, our first American saint is received into the Roman Catholic faith here

2001 After the World Trade Center attacks, the church is a staging area for rescue operations

### ***ART & ARCHITECTURE***

St. Peter's Church has been declared a landmark by federal, state and city agencies. The Greek revival architecture was designed by architects John R. Haggerty and Thomas Thomas and follows the classic monumentality and simplicity of its Roman predecessors. The six-column portico gives the church an exterior of importance and dignity. Over the main altar is The Crucifixion painted by Mexican artist Jose Vallejo. The painting was given to St. Peter's by Archbishop Nunez de Haro of Mexico City in 1789. The pews are made from trees that grew along the Hudson River when Henry Hudson was sailing it. Post 9/11, a Latin inscription was added to the sanctuary which translates to, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it."



## PARISHIONERS OF NOTE

### **Elizabeth Bayley Seton**

*In 1805, the Episcopalian widow became St. Peter's most famous convert. She went on to found the order of the Sisters of Charity and helped start St. Peter's Free School for Girls. She was the first native U.S. citizen elevated to sainthood.*



### **Pierre Toussaint**

*Born a slave in present day Haiti around 1766, Toussaint was freed and became a sought after hairdresser and very influential New Yorker. He devoted his time to raising orphaned children and caring for the sick. The Venerable Toussaint is currently being considered for sainthood.*



### **Mother Adelaide of St. Teresa**

*The Spanish Carmelite, was born in 1817 and baptized at St. Peter's. Her piety and bravery in the face of religious discrimination were exemplary. Her cause for sainthood is also being reviewed.*



### **Father Félix Varela**

*A leading educator, philosopher and activist, he advocated for abolishing slavery and equality for women. He distinguished himself in both America and Cuba. He was a priest on staff at St. Peter's and is currently being considered for canonization.*



St Peter's  
Our Lady of the Rosary  
Parish



Our Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Venerable Pierre Toussaint, who performed many works of charity in the parish, inspire us to a tradition of service to the residents, the many people who work in the area, and the multitude of visitors who come from around the world. We strive to serve our neighborhood in that spirit, with welcome and compassion for all because we are all children of God.

visit our website for more information  
[www.spcolr.org](http://www.spcolr.org)

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