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The Herb
Cottage 1907



The Herb Cottage - On the grounds of Washington National Cathedral

By Peggy Pickard

Mysteries can be solved many ways, but to find the hidden story of old buildings takes more than idle curiosity. It takes diaries, books, archives, personal memories and, above all, patience. All these were used in researching the history of Washington National Cathedral's Herb Cottage, now celebrating its 100th birthday. The truth can be evasive, but the information is fascinating.

It all began in 1902 when Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee was asked to build a great cathedral for the nation in Washington. Mount Saint Alban seemed the perfect location as it overlooked the growing city. Earnest, enthusiastic and filled with determination to advance with thoughtful care, the bishop determined that even before the cathedral construction began, there must be a building for the rites of baptism.

This place would not interfere in any way with the cathedral's construction. Upon completion of an area within the cathedral for baptisms, this free-standing structure would be destroyed completely.

Satisfied with his plan and architect T. Henry Randall's design for a small, octagon-shaped building, Bishop Satterlee moved forward. The decision to install an incredibly beautiful baptismal font, carved from Carrara marble, was significant. In the center of the font, the figure of Christ holding a small child was only one of the elaborate carvings. At each corner, one of the eight Apostles stood, as if protecting the great font. Designed for complete immersion at baptism, the font was lined on the bottom with stones from the River Jordan. They had been gathered and shipped under the supervision of Mr. Herbert E. Clark, U.S. vice consul at Jerusalem.

The baptistery was perfectly conceived for housing the magnificent font, which arrived in due time and was carefully placed in the little building where its generous size fit snugly within the sturdy walls. It was probably moved through the two high-and-wide front doors at the imposing entrance to the completed structure (these doors are now at the back of the building, facing Wisconsin Avenue). Large leaded-glass windows and a soaring ceiling brought warmth and light into the space. Rich scarlet painting on trim brought out the glowing white marble font. It was a combination of structure and art that amazed onlookers.

By now, the year was 1904. The baptistery was complete, not yet landscaped, shaded only by an occasional tree. The soil was red and rough, with equipment for the construction of Washington National Cathedral scattered nearby. From Mount Saint Alban, one could see an occasional farmhouse. Massachusetts Avenue meandered down to the city of Washington, and the Georgetown-Tenley Road (Wisconsin Avenue) dipped into Georgetown, an active community of homes and commercial establishments lining the Potomac River.

On Mount Saint Alban, plans and projects were churning through committees, architects, builders and financial interests. Discussions of landscaping the 59 pristine acres began. The huge, Gothic cathedral would eventually dwarf the little baptistery building, but in 1904 baptisms were held there and visitors relished its unusual shape, sparkling windows and elegant marble font.

In 1907, when the cathedral cornerstone was laid and President Theodore Roosevelt delivered a rousing speech of commitment to the completion of the Washington National Cathedral, the baptistery remained a focal point. Probably there were many visitors to the unusual structure as throngs filled the hill of Mount Saint Alban.

As stone and masonry, builders and workers covered Mount Saint Alban in a frenzy of activity, one woman was asked to assist in making the red clay slopes into a pattern of gardens, paths and shrubbery. Her name was Florence Brown Bratenahl, wife of the first cathedral dean, George C. Bratenahl. As a landscape designer and avid gardener, she was an eager advocate for beautification of the Cathedral Close. She accepted the invitation from the cathedral's second bishop of Washington. Working

with the famous Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., she was instrumental in the development of landscaping plans around the cathedral.

By 1916, Mrs. Bratenahl knew she needed the help of volunteers to accomplish her mission. All Hallows Guild was formed as the organization that would maintain and beautify the cathedral close. This, of course, would include the baptistery landscaping, which was sparse.

There are many descriptions of the beginnings of the gardens on Mount Saint Alban. There is an old, faded picture of the baptistery standing — and looking slightly forlorn — amid the beginning of the stonewalls for the Bishop's Garden. But the most telling factor in the history of the Herb Cottage was the intense desire of the planners to emulate the ancient cathedral gardens of Europe with their herbs, flowers and shrubs of medicinal value.

As a result, the first garden created just to the rear of the future Herb Cottage was planted with rosemary, lavender, marjoram and thyme. The ladies of All Hallows Guild watched as visitors plucked small snippets of herbs before leaving the garden. They asked for live plants in pots. As a result, All Hallows began to harvest the lush garden. Bit by bit, small potted herbs and dried herb packages were gathered. By then, the baptistery had fallen into misuse. Funds were low and needed in order to continue the beautification of the close. All Hallows Guild arranged for the use of the "Old Baptistery," and from the steps of this quaint building, the ladies began selling their herbs and potted plants.

World War I curtailed some activity, but as the gardens grew about the close, the "Old Baptistery" was no longer used for its original purpose. Instead, the volunteers of All Hallows Guild brought their pots and plants into the quiet area, where they could store materials and plants for the next day's selling. A temporary wall around the great font was installed. All Hallows Guild continued its efforts to raise funds for the gardens, and in time — in 1934 — the Guild was asked to become custodian of the little building.

It was renamed the Herb Cottage, and the 30-year-old building became the headquarters for Guild activities. Shelves and proper storage were built and more of the herbs, plants, seeds and other items were made available for sale. It was becoming a thriving marketplace.

The elegant font was eventually removed, though the exact date when that occurred is unknown. A "cottage" garden was growing about the picturesque building, with herbs and flowers and a little fig tree that continues today to bear dozens of delicious figs each year. A stone path was laid and a small dipping pool created in a corner near a comfortable bench.

During World War II, quiet again descended on the now ivy-covered, picturesque structure. Most volunteers were occupied with the war effort, but with peace, the volunteers returned to fill the Cottage with activity. In 1956, according to records, moving walls and shelves very carefully enlarged the interior of the Cottage. Again in 1978 the interior was slightly enlarged to accommodate the increasing flow of visitors, who seemed to welcome the warmth and charm of the Herb Cottage with its array of gifts for home and garden.

"Baby Pan" appeared at the Cottage entryway in the 1960s. Sculpted by the prominent artist Edith B. Parsons, the whimsical little Pan was a gift from the Faulkner family. Today it is a popular spot for photos.

In 1997, the restoration of the interior of the Cottage by architectural firm Horsey and Thorpe brought back the building's warm red trim in 1904. As part of the project, the magnificent leaded-glass windows were fully revealed, and the skylight roof was repaired. A generous bequest from former All Hallows Guild member Phyllis Nitze made this possible.

Restoration of the front entrance to the Cottage in 1999 was a gift from McCall Revercomb, in memory of her husband, Judge George Revercomb.

The "Old Baptistery" that was to be destroyed long ago still stands, still lively with people — visitors, volunteers and tourists. Beloved and cherished by All Hallows Guild, the Cottage stands as a reminder of generations of eager volunteers, of hours in the gardens, of hopes for the future.

History tells some of the building's secrets, but not all. Meantime, more research is planned, which will include the many people associated with its past. The little building is a historic treasure, a very special place on the cathedral close to the many individuals who have helped to maintain its integrity and charm.