

The Old Baptistry—The Herb Cottage

By Kate Hundley

A plaque beside the front door to the Herb Cottage briefly describes the origins of the small octagonal building also known as the Old Baptistry. Designed by architect Henry Randall and built in 1904, the structure joined the Little Sanctuary as a temporary home for the sacraments while plans for the Cathedral were underway. In a letter to a colleague, Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee explained that “the Cathedral of Washington ought not to begin with the building itself, but with a spiritual foundation of living souls. I feel that the very first part of the Cathedral to be erected would be the altar, and the font, for the two sacraments, which Christ himself ordained.” Bishop Satterlee’s emphasis on availability of the sacraments is understandable, but the resulting baptistry is an architectural curiosity.



The Cottage in 1904

Though the architectural style of the Cathedral is firmly English Gothic, the form of the Old Baptistry has more in common with fourth-century Jerusalem than fourteenth-century England. In part, this can be explained by the initial assumption that the small building was temporary and would be removed once the Cathedral’s permanent baptistry was built. The size and style were also dictated by limited available funds. Bishop Satterlee first attempted to build a baptistry in the style of a small cross-shaped Gothic church, with a groined roof and a balcony for the choir. Due to budgetary constraints, the bishop asked his architect Henry Randall to prepare an alternate set of plans.

Although an octagonal baptistry was not Bishop Satterlee’s first choice, it hearkens back to the first centuries of Christianity. Early baptisteries were usually round or octagonal, with the font in the center. The number eight carried special significance for early Christians, and was often associated with resurrection and eternity. Like many baptisteries of the fourth and fifth century, the Washington Cathedral baptistry is a freestanding, octagonal building with west-facing doors; the vestibule opens into a large room which used to house an octagonal full-immersion font. Although the building is now entered through a door at the northeast side, its original entrance was located at the west. The former vestibule is now the Herb Cottage stock room, but the large doors are still in place. Before construction of the Bishop’s House (now Church House) baptismal candidates would have walked the gravel path from Wisconsin Avenue to the western doors of the baptistry.

The placement of the original doors carries a special significance. According to early Christian tradition, the west was associated with the world, with Satan, and with the impurities of a pre-Christian life. Early baptismal candidates would enter via the western doors, then turn to the west and renounce the devil and his works. Candidates would then proceed east through the vestibule into the main room of the baptistry. This segment of the early Christian ritual was probably not enacted on the Cathedral Close, but it is interesting to note that the Old Baptistry’s architecture reflects the ancient practice.

Separate baptisteries were the norm from the fourth through sixth centuries, but as infant baptism became more popular, the demand for a large font decreased. The sacrament also became available throughout the year, which meant that large structures were no longer required to accommodate the Eas-

The Old Baptistry—The Herb Cottage (continued)

tertime crowds. Church architecture naturally reflected these liturgical changes. By the Gothic period, baptisms were held either in the narthex of the church or within a small chapel. Initial plans for the permanent baptistry at Washington Cathedral called for a separate structure, but after much discussion, the decision was made to maintain Gothic consistency and place a small font within a dedicated area of the Cathedral itself. With the construction of the south transept, the permanent baptistry could be completed.

In the intervening years, All Hallows Guild had begun to use the Old Baptistry building to sell herbs and gift items. The full-immersion font was removed and dismantled, but the eight apostles originally surrounding the font have been preserved. Though the south transept baptistry makes good Gothic sense, it's fun to imagine the Old Baptistry building as a place of ancient ritual, drawing on the traditions of the early church.



Bishop Chane Blessing the Cottage on the 100th anniversary of building of the Cottage—

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