

Tour of Old St. Joseph's Church

Welcome to the audio tour of Old St. Joseph's Church in Willings Alley. The tour will take approximately 20 minutes. During the tour I will suggest places that you can pause you MP3 player to learn more about Old St. Joseph's church.

Please walk under the archway as you come in from the alley. The pleasant central courtyard is in front of you, the rectory to your right and the church is directly in front of you. The church is the third church built on this site.

Fondly called "the church in the alley," the original 1733 chapel was built closer to Walnut St than the present church and was entered from Walnut Street. The present church and courtyard in front of you, originally served as the first Catholic burial ground in the city until 1850. Recent excavations have discovered some of these human remains under the courtyard. (May they rest in peace.)

Please walk into the courtyard. Old St. Joseph's was founded by Rev. Joseph Greaton, a Jesuit missionary from Maryland, who built a small chapel on the site in 1733. The site is considered a shrine to religious freedom. From 1733 until the American Revolution, it was the only place in the British Colonies where a public Catholic Mass could take place legally.

The Quaker principles of religious freedom and Philadelphia's prominence as the seat of government until 1800 made Philadelphia the center of American Catholicism in the 18th century. As the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution, Philadelphia was also the seedbed of Enlightenment values that shaped America's religious history. No where else could Catholics enjoy public worship and growth to the extent possible in 18th century Philadelphia. In 1785 the future Bishop John Carroll reported that there were 1,000 Catholics in the city and 2,000 in the surrounding region. Old St. Joseph's was the first urban Catholic church in the British colonies. There were no Catholic churches in *New York, Boston or Baltimore until after the American*

Revolution. Old St. Joseph's sacramental records, among the oldest in the nation, record 8,850 baptisms before 1810.

As you stand in the courtyard facing the church, look to your right and take note of the 1789 clergy house, the oldest building on the site. It was originally a substantial Federal building, 16 feet by X 52 feet, of brick, set in Flemish bond, with seven bays. Attributed to James Corkrin, a member of the Carpenters' Company, it contained two floors with a dormered attic. Two floors of the clergy house remain within the present rectory. (You can still see the end of the original clergy house by a line in the bricks near the white downspout, and you can see the Flemish bond brickwork at the basement level of the building.) The clergy house was the residence of all Philadelphia priests in the new nation, and after 1808, when Philadelphia was made a diocese; it was the site of diocesan governance and the home of Philadelphia's early bishops.

The building you see now is considerably larger than the original clergy house. In 1851, the clergy house was expanded to Willings Alley and two floors were added to accommodate St. Joseph's College, the first Catholic college in the city. At that time the original classic fan-lighted entrance was replaced by the present Italianate doorway. Both St. Joseph's University on City Avenue and St. Joseph's Prep School in North Philadelphia trace their founding to Willings Alley.

Before entering the church, please notice the Memorial on the façade of the church in memory of Rev. Felix Barbelin, S.J., an extraordinary figure in Old St. Joseph's history. He served as pastor here for over thirty years in the mid 19th century. His accomplishments were many -

- He was the first president of St. Joseph's College;
- Founder of St. Joseph's Hospital, the first Catholic hospital in the city.
- Initiator of the first Immigrant Society to care for Irish immigrants
- Founder of both a Catholic school for African Americans, and
- The first national Italian church in America in South Philadelphia.

Please pause your MP3 player and walk up the steps and into the back of the church. Turn your player on when you are in the back of the church.

The present church, was built in 1839 by master builder John Darragh. Visitors often notice the lack of a narthex or gathering space in the rear of the church. Scholars of church architecture have remarked that Old St. Joseph's has neither a façade on the street nor a steeple. It is a modest church built to the limits of its property lines. Its measurements are almost square, 75 feet by 65 feet. Today it is a favorite church in the city for weddings.

Pause your mp3 player and take a few minutes to examine the plaque on the back wall of the church as you enter. It is entitled *The First 100 Years* and has images of the 2nd church built in 1757. ---

Turn your MP3 player back on when you are ready to resume the tour.-

Please walk down the center aisle of the church and notice the altar area. Many changes have taken place in the church interior since 1839, but the altar area with its doubled Ionic columns surmounted by a bold curved pediment on the east wall is original to the church, as is the *Crucifixion* altar painting. It was painted by Sylvano Martinez, a parishioner trained in Portugal, from an engraving by Peter Paul Rubens.

The original church had no statues. Few early Catholic churches had statues because of the lack of trained marble sculptors in the new nation. The first statue installed in the church was *St. Joseph and the Christ Child*; it is on your right as you face the altar. It was carved in Rome and installed in 1847. The statue to your far right as you face the altar is Jesus of the Sacred Heart, installed in 1885. To your left as you face the altar is the statue of the renowned Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. It was installed in 1923. Please walk to the left side of the altar and notice the plaques mounted on the wall.

The first bronze plaque memorializes Old St. Joseph's as the founding site of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1833. Founder Mary Frances Clark and three companions arrived that year in Willings Alley and knocked on the door seeking a priest. Fr. Terence Donaghue, also from Ireland, welcomed the little group, became their

mentor, and a few years later moved with them to Dubuque, Iowa. Today the Sisters of Charity B.V.M. conduct ministries of education and social justice in 25 mid-western states and three foreign countries.

The other plaque recognizes the Marian devotional or Sodality groups within the diocese. These groups were financial benefactors of the 1904 renovation of the altar area. The present altar rail, brass gates, and mosaic tile floor of the sanctuary were installed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1854 promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Old St. Joseph's under the leadership of Father Barbelin established the sodality movement within the Philadelphia diocese.

Notice the stained glass windows throughout the church

These unusual yellow and gold stained glass windows are called "mosaic" windows. Stained glass scholars consider them "stained glass windows for churches who cannot afford figurative windows." Their presence reminds us that Old St. Joseph's was a poor parish for much of the 19th century.

There are however two significant stained glass windows: the curved sanctuary window above the altar, *Angels Adoring the Eucharist*, and the large window to the left of the altar, *The Coronation of Mary*. Both were designed in 1886 by one of Philadelphia's foremost stained glass studios, Alfred Godwin & Co. The benefactors of the sanctuary window above the altar were Theodore and Frederick Tack, local merchants. The benefactor of *The Coronation of Mary* was the Thomas McCormick family. The McCormick's held the first pew on the left side of the church from there they could easily admire their window every time they attended Mass!

Much of what you see today is a result of renovations made in 1886. That year Old St. Joseph's received a generous bequest from financier Francis A. Drexel, who was baptized and married in this church. Francis A. Drexel was the father of St. Katharine Drexel. The gallery was cut back to its present configuration and the present cast iron columns were installed. The original Gothic arched windows were replaced by round headed ones. And

it was in 1886 that the ceiling painting, *The Apotheosis of St. Joseph*, was painted by Filippo Costaggini, a native Italian, who later completed the frescoes in the U. S. Capitol Rotunda.

If you look up to the choir loft at the back of the church, you will notice an imposing organ case that stands over 20' tall. This organ was original to the church and was built by Henry Corrie, an English organ maker who according to scholars, "belongs to the American Organ builders' Hall of Fame." From 1824 until his death in 1858, Corrie built magnificent organs in New England and the Middle Atlantic states, primarily for Episcopal and Catholic churches. The organ case was originally painted in an oak grain with gold leaf decorations.

At the rear of the center aisle, please notice the alto relievo, high relief, entitled: *Religious Freedom*. This relief was realized in 1983 for the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of Old St. Joseph's Church as a national shrine for religious freedom. The theme of the Exodus was chosen so that all who visit the shrine might feel welcome – Jew, Moslem, Christian and others alike. The sculpted *Stations of the Cross*, in baso relievo, or low relief, that frame the church were completed in 1981 and blessed on Laetare Sunday (Rose Sunday) of that same year. Both works were designed and sculpted by Philadelphia artist Anthony Visco, director and founder of The Atelier for the Sacred Arts.

To the right of the Exodus relief there is a plaque entitled "Continuity and Change" which has pictures of the present church throughout the nineteen and twentieth centuries. Notice in the photo of *St. Joseph and the Christ Child*, St. Joseph once had a halo of gas lights! Next to this plaque is a framed letter from George Washington to the Catholics of the United States. This concludes your audio tour. Please take a moment after you turn off your MP3 player to read these displays.

Thank you for visiting Old St. Joseph's Church. Since 1992, Old St. Joseph's Historic Preservation Corporation has been committed to faithful stewardship and preservation of

this historic site. For further information, please take a brochure from the back of the church and visit our pamphlet rack in the courtyard vestibule. If you would like to make a contribution to the continued preservation of Old St. Joseph's Church please place your contribution in an envelope that you will find , near the black offertory box at the back of the church.. Please place your envelope in the black offertory box. For more history about Old St. Joseph's Church, visit our website, www.oldstjoseph.org/history
Thank you.