

# Groundbreaking marks 200th anniversary of St. Mary's

Kathy Stoner looked at the grounds of the St. Mary's Spiritual Center and Historic Site and couldn't help but be struck by the magnitude of the date June 15.

"It's going to be huge," Ms. Stoner said of the groundbreaking for a new visitors' center that will mark the 200th anniversary of the dedication of the chapel.

Two hundred years ago to the day, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton arrived at that spot on Paca Street in Baltimore, when a dedication for the Chapel of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple was taking place. It was there that the Sulpician fathers, who had come from France, founded the United States' first seminary, St. Mary's. St. Elizabeth Ann, who lived there in the adjoining house from 1808-09, began a school for girls.

In St. Mary's lower chapel, St. Elizabeth Ann took her vows before Archbishop John Carroll - first bishop of Baltimore and the U.S. - and also helped educate young African-Americans.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien; Bishop W. Francis Malooly, western vicar; Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar; Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar; and Cardinal William H. Keeler, former archbishop, are scheduled to attend the invitee-only groundbreaking. A Mass will be celebrated beforehand.

"It's going to be a very busy week," said Ms. Stoner, a parishioner of St. Philip Neri, Linthicum Heights.

The new visitors' center will include a gift shop and a convention area that could seat up to 50 people. It will include television screens and serve as an entryway to the site for tour groups.

Ms. Stoner, who works in the offices of the spiritual site, has spent the last seven months working at the spiritual center and giving detailed tours of the buildings that were a foundation for the church in America.

In preparation for her position, the Federal Hill resident read numerous books to grasp the history of the Baltimore Catholic experience. It wasn't until she actually saw the building that she could appreciate the French-influenced structure of the chapel, which was the first example of neo-Gothic ecclesiastical architecture in the country.

She said she was in awe, paused and said: "What would have happened had John Carroll not asked (the Sulpicians) to come here to start a seminary? Would we have had any seminaries here for the formation of the young men who were interested in becoming a priest? Or would they have had to go overseas?"

There are several volunteers, referred to as docents, who provide similar educational tours through the grounds at the St. Mary's Spiritual Center and Historic Site.

Ms. Stoner has spent her entire life in the Baltimore area, but never visited the St. Mary's Spiritual Center or the Mother Seton House before joining the spiritual center.

She believes the new visitors' center could draw more people like her.

"I've learned so much about my religion," she said, "since I've been here."

For more information on volunteering at the St. Mary's Spiritual Center and Historic Site, contact 410-728-6464

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