

# **Historic skylights being installed in the Great Dome of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

On Monday, November 19, 2001, at 1:45 p.m., media are invited to join Cardinal William H. Keeler, principal architect John G. Waite, and general contractor Henry Lewis as workers complete the installation of four skylights in the Great Dome of the Basilica of the Assumption in Baltimore. (Cardinal Keeler will be available only briefly at 1:45.)

Under the guidance of John G. Waite Associates, Architects and H. Henry Lewis Contractors, the Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust, Inc. is now installing four of the 24 skylights that originally circled the great dome and illuminated the interior of America's first cathedral as envisioned by Bishop John Carroll and designed by American architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. The installation of these skylights mark the beginning of the end of an almost 60 year absence of the great natural light that cascaded into the Basilica's interior when it was dedicated by Archbishop Ambrose Marechal in 1821.

The Great Dome, the most commanding feature of the world famous cathedral, was not a typical dome or set of skylights; instead of a single dome opening directly into the transept's interior, the Basilica dome had 24 skylights located in an exterior wooden dome, the light from which passed through an oculus 22 feet wide at the inner masonry dome. The result was a diffused light, which emanated from a source not directly visible to worshippers in the pews, garnering the term "lumiere mysterieuse" and described as mystical light by early visitors. Unfortunately, the 24 skylights were removed in the 1940's and roofed over.

Utilizing a \$100,000 grant from The Getty Grant Program, one of the top grant making foundations for historic restoration technology in the world, the Trust has applied many state-of-the art methods of non-destructive evaluation and testing,

along with more traditional techniques of measurement and documentation, to better understand and restore Latrobe's ingenious design.

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