

National shrine in Emmitsburg honors Mother Seton, first native-born saint of the U.S.

The docent inside the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton clicked his handheld counter twice as two more visitors entered the double doors leading into the domed basilica, tallying the meter to 134.

What brings 45,000 annual visitors to the shrine in historic Emmitsburg, besides “signs along the highway,” is fascination, said docent Paul Clark. Some visit out of curiosity, others because they’re named Elizabeth, and some folks are fascinated by the architecture. Catholics and non-Catholics alike sometimes have underlying personal reasons for the pilgrimage.

“The majority are amazed at what they find,” said the volunteer, in his eighth year serving the shrine three times weekly. “I still don’t get tired of it – it is fascinating! And it’s not a church, it’s the sisters’ home; they open it to the public.”

Visitors on the Daughters of Charity 300-acre property hail from out of state, out of the country and Catholic schools. Twenty percent arrive in tour buses and the rest are walk-ins.

In the breezy October afternoon, all was still until the basilica bells chimed a new hour.

Outside, an occasional visitor strolled the grounds dotted with trees, statues, benches and quiet reflection areas.

Built in 1965, the basilica is the final resting place for St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, whose unpreserved remains are in a small copper casket entombed beneath a side altar.

Mother Seton stood only 4-foot-9, yet she stood tall in many roles as mother of five, wife, business woman, educator, nurse, social worker, writer and converted

Catholic. She became the first native-born U.S. saint when she was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1975.

As the foundress of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, modeled on the Daughters of Charity of Paris, she lived on the property from 1809 until her death in 1821 at age 47.

Visitors are able to tour her two homes – the 1750 Stone House and the 1810 White House.

“There's a lot of history here,” said Lori Stewart, director of communications for the shrine and the Daughters of Charity. “Our goal is to tell the story about her ... she was an amazing woman with an endearing love for the Eucharist. God led her life.”

Adjacent to the houses and behind a large square of stone wall is St. Joseph's Cemetery and Mortuary Chapel, Mother Seton's original burial place until her beatification in 1963. Small white identical grave markers are lined up in neat rows, marking names of several family members and many of the early Sisters of Charity.

Inside the massive building, 7.5 miles of corridors connect the provincial house of the Daughters of Charity to the shrine, St. Catherine's Nursing Center and an assisted living facility for some of the 130 retired Daughters of Charity.

The Seton Retreat and Conference Center is an ideal location for weekend or weekday retreats (groups or individuals), board meetings, workshops, parish council sessions and youth day retreats. Lay and religious groups, and often the faculty of nearby Mount St. Mary's University, conduct their personal retreat programs while renting the facility.

During free time, participants take advantage of the visitor's center, museum, two gift shops and a new chapel, recently created to celebrate the bicentennial of the foundation of the Sisters of Charity in America next year.

The 2009 anniversary will be a special year of rejoicing as the Sisters and Daughters of Charity honor the life and accomplishments of Mother Seton in a year titled Seton Legacy of Charity: Continuing the legacy of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton 1809-2009.

In the making is a 30-minute DVD which narrates the saint's life, and in late spring, the Seton Legacy Garden, a walking path for which memorial bricks are now on sale, will be unveiled.

Jan. 4 will open the bicentennial year after three years of planning. Yearlong events open to the public will include guided retreats and pilgrimages, middle school Leadership Day, and a medal award ceremony.

The Bicentennial Celebration Weekend, July 31-Aug. 2, will feature a series of events marking Mother Seton's journey to Emmitsburg, including a reenactment procession.

The bicentennial year will come to a close in January 2010.

"Our beginning plans were very modest," said Daughter of Charity Sister Vincentia Goeb, director of heritage ministries, "but before long the plan took on a life of its own. The celebration promises to be a wonderful event and a means of either introducing Elizabeth Ann Seton to America or deepening devotion to her."