

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF SAINT PETER AND SAINT PAUL

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Soaring at a height of 676 feet above sea level, The Gloria in Excelsis Tower (301 feet high) makes the Washington National Cathedral the highest point in Washington, DC. The Cathedral's official name, the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, memorializes two early fathers of Christianity. Visitors are greeted at the western façade doors by stone depictions of the two saints, carved by Frederick Hart.

French-American military engineer, Pierre Charles L'Enfant, envisioned a national church in his 1791 plan for the layout of Washington, DC, but it was not until 1895 that plans for such a church would begin. In this year, the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland was subdivided, creating the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. The Right Reverend Henry Yates Satterlee was ordained bishop of the diocese and assumed the responsibility of spearheading the Cathedral project. Fifty-seven acres of land atop Washington's highest hill, Mount Saint Alban, were purchased.

After a decade of raising funds, famed Anglican church architects George Frederick Bodley and Henry Vaughan were commissioned to design the Cathedral in the fourteenth century Gothic style. Like all medieval churches, the structure was to be built in the shape of a Latin cross with the high altar in the east. At ground level, the High Altar, the Great Choir, and the nave would make up the longer beam of the cross, while the north and south transepts would create the crosspiece. The eastward orientation of the building follows Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions of having worshippers praying toward the east. Theories for this range from having worshippers pray toward Jerusalem to facing the sunrise, representative of Christ's resurrection on the morning of Easter Day. The Cathedral was to carry five hallmark architectural elements of Gothic style: pointed arches, ribbed vaults, flying buttresses, large stained-glass windows, and ornate decoration.

Construction began with the setting of the foundation stone on September 29, 1907. Called the “Bethlehem Stone,” the foundation stone was a small fieldstone brought from a sheep field near Bethlehem and inscribed with the Cathedral’s founding statement, “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” It was set into a larger block of American granite and can be found under the altar in the crypt-level Bethlehem Chapel. This chapel is directly beneath the high altar on the east end of the Cathedral and has housed a eucharistic service almost every day since its completion in 1912. Following World War I and the death of architects Bodley and Vaughan, the Cathedral hired American architect Philip Hubert Frohman who would guide construction for the next fifty years. Frohman’s design modifications added five more chapels and another twenty-seven feet to the Gloria in Excelsis tower. The eighty-three-year construction started at the Bethlehem Chapel and continued west with the nave and transepts. The project was slowed a few times due to the Great Depression, World War II, and a few funding issues, but never fully ceased. The final capstone was set on September 29, 1990.

Following the fourteenth century Gothic style of architecture, the Cathedral was built using approximately 150,000 tons of Indiana limestone. The weight of the building is supported by a system of vaults, flyers, and buttresses. Wood frames were erected to outline the shape of the ceiling and to temporarily support the weight of the limestone. Boss stones were then placed in the center of each arched section. The vaults, made of smaller stone blocks, were then placed one atop the other from the top of the walls to the boss stones. Once the vaults were in place, the ceilings were completed with even smaller stones called infill. When the mortar dried, this wood frame was removed, causing the weight of the boss stones to be distributed to the vaults and thrusting the weight outward toward the walls. On the exterior of the Cathedral, a series of

buttresses support small bridges of stone, called flyers, which together serve as a somewhat of a counterweight system pushing the ceilings and roof up from the ground.

Two other central features of Gothic Cathedral architecture used in the Washington National Cathedral are stained glass windows and ornate decoration. Glaziers and sculptors from around the world contributed to the 215 stained glass windows and 112 gargoyles and grotesques throughout the Cathedral. More than sixty-five feet high, the north and south “Te Deum” windows are the tallest in the Cathedral and are based on Earl Edward Sanborn’s design and interpretation of *Te Deum Laudamus*, a hymn of thanksgiving and praise. On the western façade, the “Creation” rose window is comprised of over 10,500 pieces of glass and depicts the first moments of creation with a white light center extending out into a multitude of colors in a frame imitating the petals of a rose. While most of the windows portray biblical figures and stories, events and figures from United States history are depicted as well. The Space Window symbolizes the spiritual and scientific connections to the cosmos and commemorates the Apollo 11 moon-landing with a small sliver of moon rock as its centerpiece. Many other American founding fathers, heroes, and events are depicted in the stained glass throughout the Cathedral.

While also serving an ornamental purpose, the gargoyles and grotesques function as deflectors for rainwater. The gargoyle stones extend deeper into the walls and redirect rainwater out by way of pipes running to a spout through their mouths. The grotesques deflect rainwater away from the Cathedral in another way. They are designed to simply bounce the water off the top of their heads, noses, or any other body part. These carvings were also created in tribute to many people, places, and ideas. “Curly Locks,” is a gargoyle portraying a singer holding a lyre and was erected in honor of a former organist and choirmaster of the Cathedral. American

cinematic history is even depicted in the form of *Star Wars*' Darth Vader as a grotesque, placed high upon the northwest tower.

As you enter through the doors of the western façade and move toward the High Altar, much of the artwork in takes you through a biblical timeline narrative, from the creation of man, depicted in stone above the main entry doors, to the culmination of the story in the redemption of the world through the risen Christ at the High Altar. As you make your way through the nave, the stained glass and carvings move your farther along in this narrative. As you reach the crossing before the Great Choir, you will find the rood screen and the ornate Canterbury Pulpit. One of the first furnishings given to the Cathedral, the Canterbury Pulpit was carved from stone that was formerly part of the Canterbury Cathedral's Bell Harry Tower before it had undergone repairs in the late nineteenth century. The rood screen just beyond the pulpit signifies the entrance to the holiest part of the Cathedral, the Great Choir and the High Altar. Carved from oak, the rood screen features a massive crucifix joined by the mourning figures of Mary and John. Beneath the crucifix are carvings of the nine orders of angels.

Beyond the rood screen lie the oak stalls of the Great Choir. On Sundays, the Cathedral Choir is seated here, however, some of the stalls are reserved for certain dignitaries and members of the clergy. At the east end of the Great Choir, two canopied seats are reserved for the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and the Bishop of Washington. At the heart of the Great Choir sits the console for the Cathedrals great organ. Installed in 1938 by the Ernest M. Skinner & Son Organ Company, the great organ is composed of 10,647 pipes.

The High Altar is the focal point of the Cathedral and is large enough to be clearly seen from the back of the nave, one-tenth of a mile away. It is carved from limestone taken from a quarry outside Jerusalem, one which tradition says provided the stones for King Solomon's

Temple. It features 110 figures of saints and angels surrounding the “Majestus” sculpture of Christ, which was carved from Texas limestone. The east-west axis of the Cathedral is slightly off center, so there is not a straight line from the back of the nave to the High Altar. There is difference of approximately six feet. This was intentional for two reasons: altering the axis changes the perspective from the rear of the nave, and medieval Cathedrals contained similar elements of asymmetry to signify the flaws of the world we live in.

From the Indianan limestone to multitude of art works incorporated into the building of the Washington National Cathedral, Bishop Satterlee’s vision of a “house of prayer for all people” is evident in the contributions from all over the United States and the rest of the world. The Cathedral has hosted presidents and speakers from Billy Graham to the Dalai Lama. Entombed within its walls are American heroes such as Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller. Not only has it become a house of prayer for the nation, but has so become a temple dedicated to the culture and history of the United States of America.

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