

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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THE IMPENDING DOME; OR, THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE REAR ADMIRAL'S FUNERAL

One of the most notable features of Messrs. Heins and Lafarge's Italian Renaissance design for St. James Cathedral was the graceful dome just over the crossing. The dome rose to a height of 40 feet above the level of the roof; lined with windows, it flooded the center of the building with light. From the outside, the copper-covered dome formed a striking crown to the cathedral which could be seen from all over the city. It was also an architectural marvel, its weight being supported not by heavy piers but exclusively by the exterior walls. As the Progress reported in 1904, "The great dome will be borne by the side walls entirely and when in place it will be a beautiful piece of mechanical construction. This dome, as well as those of the towers, will be constructed of steel, terra cotta, and brick, and covered with copper. They will be practically indestructible."

Beautiful as the dome was, not everyone liked it. George Mahoney, a real-estate developer, was against it from the start. Even before construction began, he warned Bishop O'Dea that domes were risky and unsafe, and this one particularly so. And when Bishop O'Dea went ahead with the plans in spite of Mahoney's advice, the latter swore he would never set foot in the new cathedral. And he was true to his word. When his old friend Rear Admiral W. J. Thompson died in August of 1909, Mahoney served as a pallbearer, but stood on the front steps of the cathedral throughout the funeral Mass, refusing to go inside.

In the meantime, Bishop O'Dea was learning that domes could cause problems even before they collapsed. The acoustics in the new Cathedral were hopeless. It is said that none but the most stentorian could make themselves heard in the building. By October of 1910 Bishop O'Dea was writing to Mayer and Co., a prominent manufacturer of stained glass, to inquire about the cost of "a window to be placed in the base of the dome of the Cathedral, to cover it at the bottom, to thereby add to the acoustics and enhance its beauty." He suggested that the window might be done in blue, red, and clear glass, with the figures of the twelve apostles in a rosette. The scheme came to naught, however, as LaFarge, the architect, resented the project and refused to meet with the representative from Mayer Studios! So Bishop O'Dea contented



St. James Cathedral, under construction in 1906.

himself with purchasing the latest technology, an acoustical "shell" to be mounted above the ambo.

But the drama of the dome was far from over....

—Corinna Laughlin

Special thanks to Martin D. Murphy, Superintendent of Calvary Catholic Cemetery, for permission to use the story of the Rear Admiral's funeral from his history, While Silent, They Shout: Catholic Cemeteries in Western Washington, 2000.

MY CATHEDRAL

When St. James Cathedral was opened on December 22, 1907, the cross on the west façade of the Cathedral was surrounded with electric lights, forming a beacon

which could be seen all over the city. A sailor by the name of Richard Saxe Jones wrote this poem which he dedicated "To Bishop O'Dea. My little contribution to your dedication of our Cathedral."

Its light I see,
'Tis a signal for me,
The beacon by which I steer.
O'er the silent sea,
In the mountain's lee,
The way to the wharf is clear.

Its light I see,
'Tis a signal for me,
The cross of the Living God.
O'er the world's deep sea,
It outlines for me
The pathway I should have trod.

Its light I see,
It beckons to me,
From the summit of all the hills.
A welcome it sings,
Good tidings it brings,
My soul with the Truth it fills.

Oh, welcome the Cross!
Without dimming or loss
Let it shine as the sailor's star.
To bring ships to buoy,
To bring souls to joy,
Let its light ever greet us afar.

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