

St. James Chapel --- the Church in the Park

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In 1886, Bell and Tainter manufactured the first practical phonograph, Frances Hodgson Burnett had a best seller with her novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, President Grover Cleveland appointed Delawarean Thomas F. Bayard as Secretary of State, and Richard W. Crook began work on Brandywine Springs Amusement Park. 1886 was also the year that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Wilmington sold to the City and Mayor two houses and one chapel for \$14,000, property that was destined to be part of Brandywine Park.

The story of how the city ended up owning a Catholic chapel began nearly two decades earlier. In 1868, Protestant mill owner, James Riddle, who organized Riddle Chapel for his Protestant workers, approached three local Catholic businessmen about establishing a similar place of worship for his Catholic employees. The sponsorship and leadership of these benefactors, James Bradford, William Bowe, and Edward Mahoney, resulted in the construction of "a neat frame structure, . . . surmounted by a cupola on which [was] a large cross." In October 1869, the Diocese dedicated St. James Chapel at the corner of Lovering Avenue and DuPont Street.

In 1870, the Bishop of Wilmington purchased land adjacent to the church on Lovering Avenue and, the following year, the congregation constructed a rectory next to the church. The parish proved an active one, in 1872, opening a night school for both Catholic and Protestant boys, an effort to bring education to children who spent their days working in nearby mills. In September 1879, the church, extending another hand of assistance into the community, established "St. James Protectory" for dependent boys and, by the end of the year, the Franciscan sisters who operated the "orphan asylum" under the direction of Sister Mary Rosalia had nearly a dozen youngsters in their care.

Early in the 1880s, potential difficulties loomed for the chapel and its establishment on Lovering Avenue. In 1883, the Bishop sold a section of land west of DuPont Street to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The B&O, having lost its lease on tracks it had previously used through Wilmington, wanted to establish its own line for an east coast route. Its land purchase from the church was one

parcel of many that were strung together to create the corridor along which the B&O tracks would be laid.

Not unexpectedly, having a railroad immediately next to the church was more than a little disruptive. After assembling the necessary land, the B&O laid out its new route, spanned the Brandywine with a steel truss bridge, and, in July 1886, ran the first freight train along the new tracks. Two months later, the first passenger train followed the same route. Parish records describe the result: "the clanging bell, the piercing whistle, the snorting steam and crunching wheels of the vibrating trains rumbling by, shattered the rustic peace of the neighborhood, and endangered the slender foundation of Saint James." Before 1886 had turned into 1887, the bishop of Wilmington had sold the chapel and two adjacent houses to the city, finalizing the sale on November 24, 1886. The following July, ground was broken for St. Ann's Church on Union Street and the new church, serving the St. James congregation, was dedicated in December 1887. In 1888, the Diocese moved St. James Protectory to Reybold, near Delaware City.

Because the St. James parcel stood on the edge of Brandywine Park, the city turned it over to the Board of Park Commissioners and, in their 1895 annual report, the Commissioners refer to the property without indicating the use to which the structures were being put. The Board, which had land holdings at other sites around the city, generally allowed structures to remain "until such time as the Park Commissioners deem their removal advisable." Thus, although the Diocese had vacated the buildings, they were not immediately demolished in order to add the land to Brandywine Park. Indeed, the Park Commissioners' 1907 annual report recorded that "the old church near the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad has been repaired and will be used as a workshop and storehouse."

By 1909, however, the railroad determined that it needed a new bridge across the Brandywine. With time, the loads being carried over the 1880s bridge grew increasingly heavy and eventually the structure was inadequate for the weight of

the trains crossing it. The company approached the Park Commissioners about a land swap, proposing that the Commissioners release a section of parkland east of the existing railway line in exchange for land that the railroad would vacate on the north side of the Brandywine. Thus, as a result of the decision to build a new railroad bridge, the Park Commissioners, in 1909, demolished the storehouse that had been St. James Chapel to make way for the new span.

Contemporary descriptions of the chapel's location are frustratingly vague, identifying the building as being on Lovering "below DuPont" or on DuPont "near the corner of Lovering." Part of the confusion arises from the failure of sources to designate on which corner the chapel stood. In addition, changes in road alignment that occurred

first with the installation of the original B&O line and then again with the reorientation of the railroad's route add to the difficulty of knowing where the building stood. A map in the 1895 annual report of the Board of Park Commissioners, however, makes clear that the chapel was on the north side of Lovering where the present south approach to the B&O Railroad tracks now lies.

Today, trains rumble across the site where people in the 1870s knelt to pray and few drivers traveling along Lovering Avenue, passing under the B&O overpass, and turning right onto the Augustine Cut-off Bridge appreciate that they have passed the site where once stood an institution of faith, outreach, and education for laboring families in 19th-century Wilmington.