

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 15: TROWEL FOR THE LAYING OF THE CORNERSTONE OF ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL

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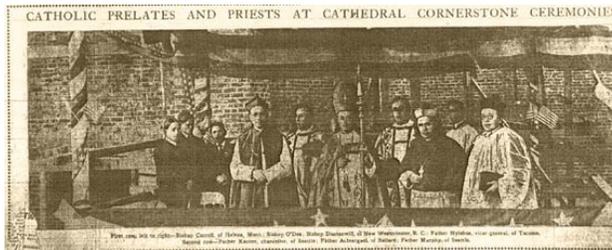
The purchasing of land and the building of various institutions loom large in the history of our local church, and no wonder: our buildings are an outward sign of the ministry of the Church, and they are expressions of the commitment of the Catholic faithful, whose generosity, and even sacrifice, are what make them possible. It is no surprise, then, to find in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle half a dozen gold shovels which have been used through the years at the groundbreaking for various churches, parish halls, schools, hospitals, and convents. More unusual is the object featured here: a solid silver trowel bearing the inscription, “This trowel was used by The Rt. Rev. Bishop Edward J. O’Dea in laying the corner stone of the first Catholic Cathedral in Seattle, Wash. Nov. 12, 1905.”

The laying of cornerstones for significant buildings is a widespread practice: the Jewish, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions all have rites for the laying of a cornerstone or foundation stone. It is also common to have a cornerstone ceremony for notable civic buildings, especially libraries, universities, and statehouses. It continues to be a significant moment today: “The Rite of Laying the Foundation Stone or Beginning Work on the Building of a Church” is the first of many rites in the Catholic rite for the Dedication of a Church and an Altar.

When Bishop O’Dea became the third Bishop of Nesqually in 1896, he was duly installed in the Cathedral of Saints James and Augustine in Vancouver, built just a decade earlier by Bishop Junger. But even at that time, it was clear that Vancouver was the wrong spot for the cathedral church of the diocese. For one thing, it was at the extreme corner of the vast territory, which at that time covered all of Washington State. More importantly, Vancouver was no longer the most significant city in the territory. Bishop O’Dea knew he would need to move; but where? Tacoma? Spokane? Or Seattle?

The Alaska Gold Rush, which began in 1896, helped to settle the question: Seattle boomed as 100,000 prospectors came through the young city en route to the Yukon. By the turn of the century, it was clear that Seattle would be the center of commerce in the Northwest. Bishop O’Dea began planning his move in 1902. By 1905, land had been purchased and an architect selected, and in May of that year the work began.

On November 12, 1905, the cornerstone ceremony took



Above: an image of the clergy gathered for the laying of the cornerstone of St. James Cathedral, November 12, 1905.

Below: the silver trowel Bishop O’Dea used on that occasion. Courtesy of the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.

place, and it was, to quote the *Catholic Progress*, “a red-letter day in the annals of Catholicity.” The building was far from finished, but much progress had been made in a few months: the exterior walls rose to the height of the transepts, and the building was already a distinctive landmark on First Hill. The whole city was invited to the ceremony, and it would seem that the whole city came: the newspaper accounts of the event indicate that some 5,000 people crowded in and around the unfinished building, “jammed too close for comfort during the long ceremony” (*Progress*). It was November, but “charming sunshine” prevailed for the duration, and there was ample music, and a long line of clergy and visiting bishops.

At the high point of the ceremony, Bishop O’Dea went to the cornerstone, which was placed near a wooden cross marking the location of the future high altar. It was an open box a foot square, engraved on each side with a cross. Bishop O’Dea placed into the box the day’s newspapers, coins bearing the date 1905, blessed medals, photos of the two prior cathedral churches of the diocese, and a list of donors to the new cathedral to date. Then he used the silver trowel to seal the cornerstone into its location. There followed a long address from Bishop Carroll of Helena, who “declared that the cathedral when completed would be the most magnificent, largest, and beautiful in the entire Northwest” (*Seattle Times*). The service ended with more music and a general feeling of satisfaction.

Given the numbers in attendance and the extended media coverage of the event, it is all the more surprising that to this day we do not know exactly where the cornerstone was laid. During the Cathedral’s centennial celebrations from 2004-2007, many efforts were made to find it, but without success. It is a mystery that still awaits a solution!

The silver trowel, however, remains. In fact, it was used again at two other key moments in our history as a local Church. In 1930, Bishop O’Dea used it to lay the cornerstone of St. Edward’s Seminary, and two decades after that Archbishop Connolly used the same trowel to lay the cornerstone for St. Thomas Seminary. It is one of the most unique of the “holy things” which link us with the history of our local Church.

—Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy
Want to know more? Read *Journey of Faith, the illustrated history of the Archdiocese of Seattle*, available in the bookstore.