

RESEARCH REPORT

HISTORY OF THE

ST. PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

1830-1868

Harpers Ferry National Monument

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I. OWNERSHIP OF THE LAND, 1782-1959

Robert Harper in his last will and testament dated September, 1782, specified:

"I Robert Harper by this present Co—il (I) do ratify confirm sd last will & Testament, and it is further my Last will that four acres of Land most Convenient round my Grave yard Shall be laid off By my Executors & be inti—ly(?) Appropriate to the use of a grave yard and all my Debts due by Bond or Back Debt and all the rents now due from my ferry Be By my Executors disposed of in the best manner Towards Erecting a graveyard and building a Church on sd four acres of Land..." 1

Nothing was done by the Wagers to carry out this stipulation of Robert Harper's will in regards to donating land for building a church until 1831, when the land upon which the Roman Catholic Church was to be erected was donated by the Wager family. The deed transferring the land from the Wager family to the Reverend John B. Gildea reads:

"This indenture made and concluded this 10th day of May, 1831, by and between James B. Wager, G. B. Wager & S. A. Wager of Harpers Ferry of the one part and John B. Gildea (The Priest) of the other part.

Witnesseth that the said Wagers for an in consideration of the sum of One dollar of current money of Virginia to them in hand paid by the said John B. Gildea that or before the sealing and delivering of these presents the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged have granted sold aliened and conveyed and by these presents do bargain sell alien and convey unto the said John B. Gildea his heirs and assigns a certain lot or parcel of land lying and being in the county of Jefferson and State of Virginia at or near Harpers ferry- Beginning at a pile of stone on the side of the hill on which is situated the house wherein the said Wagers now reside (Bldg. 1-A) & in line between the said Wagers & the U. S., thence due east seventy feet to another pile of stone, thence due west to the Govt. line thence along the said line to the beginning corner containing by estimation about ____ square feet, together with all and singular the rights improvements and appurtenances whatsoever thereunto belonging and the reversions and remainders rents issues and profits thereto to have and to hold all and singular the premises with the appurtenances hereby granted unto the said John B. Gildea his heirs and

1. Washington, D. C., National Archives, R.G. 153, Office of the Judge Advocate General, Military Reservation Division, Reservation File, West Virginia Box No. 44, 1 Harpers Ferry (ms), (A copy of the last will, Robert Harper. Berkeley County, Virginia, 26 September, 1782.)

assigns forever. Upon trust nevertheless for the exclusive use, benefit, and behalf of the members of the Roman Catholic Church at Harpers ferry by them to be used and appropriated exclusively for the worship of Almighty God, and if at any time the said lot or parcel of land should be used and appropriated other wise than is hereinbefore mentioned then and in that case this indenture is null void and of no effect and it shall be lawful for the said Wagers or their legal representatives to enter upon the premises herein conveyed. And lastly the said Wagers and their heirs all and singular the premises hereby granted with their appurtenances unto the said John B. Gildea his heirs and assigns shall and will warrant and defend against the claim or claims or themselves and their heirs by these presents. In testimony thereof the parties have hereunto set their hands and seals this day and year first above mentioned." 2

The Roman Catholic Church has retained possession of this land down to the present day. See the 1848 Map on the next page for the location of the church.

On December 16, 1853, Superintendent Benjamin Hager, of the Harpers Ferry Armory informed Col. Henry K. Craig, of the Ordnance Office that the Catholic Church desired to obtain a lease for a lot of the Armory land because:

"The body of the church is on the [Six Acre Wager] reservation, but the Vestry room on the West end, projects over on the Government land. The trustees of the School wish to have the strip they now occupy, and an additional piece to the East of it granted to them as a school lot to build a house upon.." 3

The lot on top of the cliff was thus granted to the church in 1854 as a site for a school and on December 15, 1868 final title to the lot was granted to the church. Title to the school lot has rested in the Catholic Church from 1868 to the present day. See the 1852 and 1869 maps on pages 4 and 5 for the location of the lot.

2. Deed of B. & S., Deed Book 17, pp.6-7, May 10, 1831.

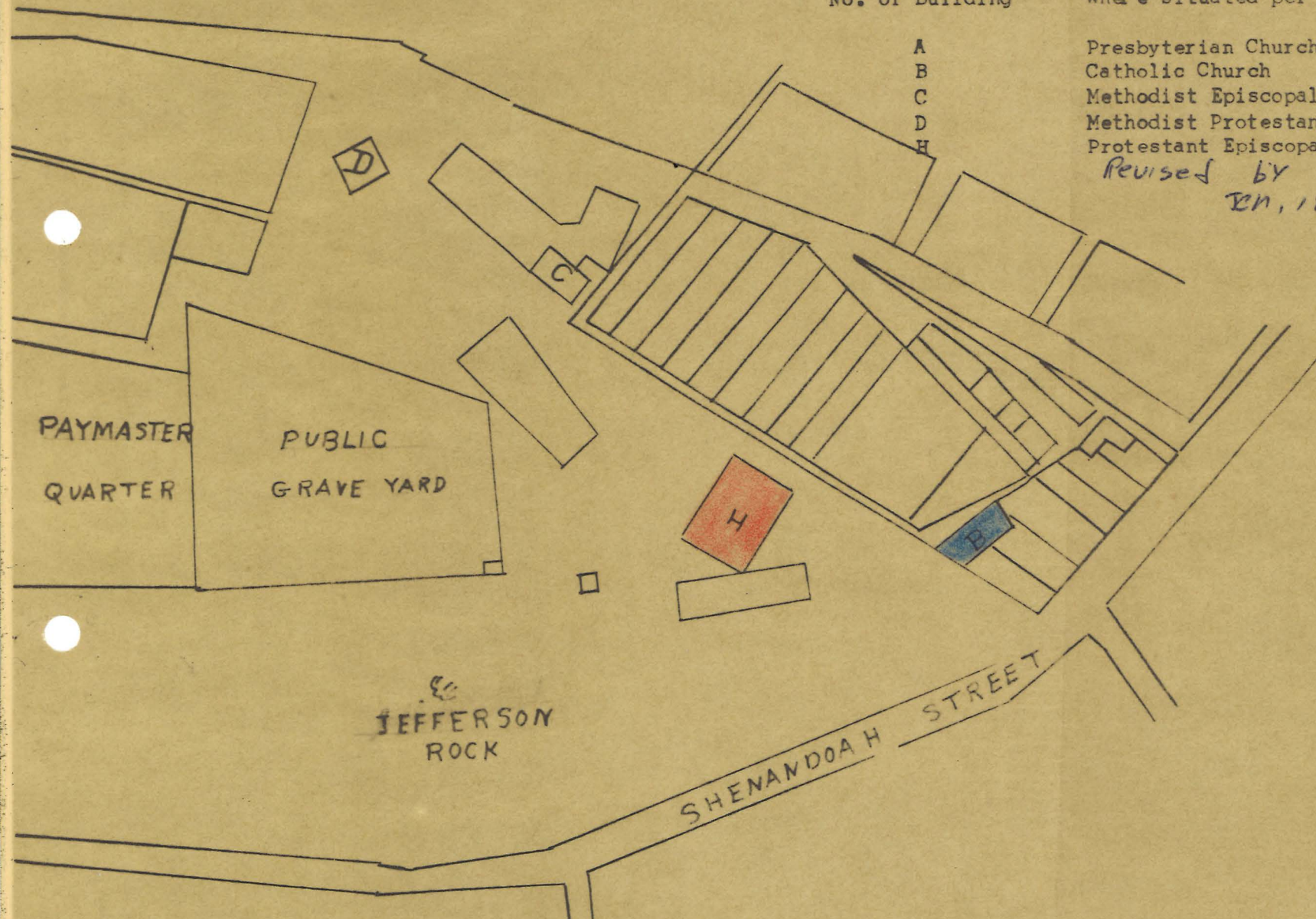
3. Hager to Craig, December 16, 1853, Reel 26, V.2, p.134.

4. Historic Building Site Survey Report, History of Catholic School Lot, Presbyterian Church Lot, and Jefferson's Lot, Shenandoah Street, 1796-1868, Shenandoah Street, Charles W. Snell, dated February 11, 1959, p.9.

MAP OF HARPERS FERRY
 Prepared in compliance
 with letter to Major Symington
 April 22, 1848.

No. of Building Where situated per map.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| A | Presbyterian Church |
| B | Catholic Church |
| C | Methodist Episcopal Church |
| D | Methodist Protestant Church |
| H | Protestant Episcopal Church |
- Revised by Symington
 Dec, 1851*





No of Building	Where situated per map.
A	Presbyterian Church
B	Catholic Church
C	Methodist Episcopal Church
D	Methodist Protestant Church
H	Protestant Episcopal Church

S. Howell Brown's MAP

MAP OF HARPERS FERRY, 1852

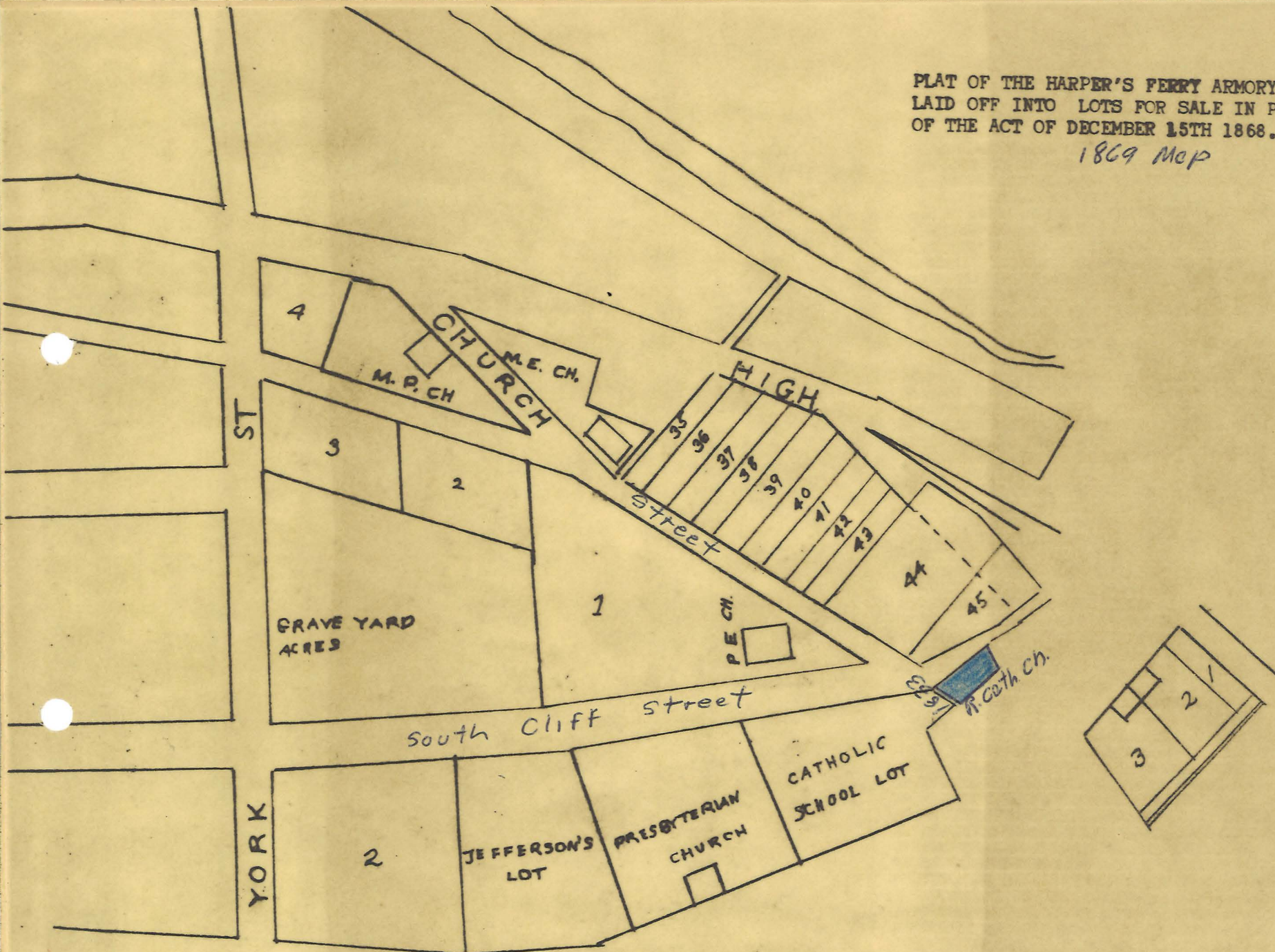
~~PREPARED IN COMPLIANCE WITH LETTER~~
~~TO MAJOR SYMINGTON, APRIL 22, 1848~~

~~S. HOWELL BROWN~~

~~REVISED BY MAJOR SYMINGTON,~~
~~JANUARY, 1851~~

PLAT OF THE HARPER'S FERRY ARMORY PROPERTY
LAID OFF INTO LOTS FOR SALE IN PURSUANCE
OF THE ACT OF DECEMBER 15TH 1868.

1869 Map



In 1852 the Catholic Church asked for and received a lease from the U. S. for a lot on which to erect a parsonage. Lot No. 2, Block D, Shenandoah Street,⁵
This lot was ^{then given by the United States to} ~~also reserved for~~ the church in 1868 but the parsonage was never built.

II. CONSTRUCTION OF ST. PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

About 1830 the Catholics of Harpers Ferry had grown numerous enough to be considered as a parish separate from Martinsburg and it was decided to build a church at Harpers Ferry.⁶

On May 5, 1830, subscriptions were opened for the erection of a Catholic Church at Harpers Ferry, the article in the Virginia Free Press announced: "Subscriptions have been opened at Harpers Ferry, for the erection of a Roman Catholic Church at that place; and it is stated that liberal contributions have been made by persons of other denominations, as well as by members of that Society."⁷

The cornerstone of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church was laid in 1830 and construction was started in that year.⁸

The church was still unfinished on May 12, 1831, since proposals were invited for the completion of the church, "Proposals will be received for the carpenter work yet unfinished of the Catholic Church at Harpers Ferry. Persons wishing to undertake the work, can leave their propositions with Mr. Fitzsimmons."⁹

5. Snell, Charles W., "History of Lots No. 1 to 7, Block D, Shenandoah Street, 1796-1865," dated January 30, 1959, pp.13-14.

6. History of Saint Peter's Church, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and Missions by Reverend F. Joseph Magri, M.A., D.D., and Walter E. Dittmeyer, P.D., Centenary 1830-1930, p.6, unnumbered page book.

7. Virginia Free Press, May 5, 1830, p.3, c.1.

8. History of St. Peter's Church, 1930, p.6, Unnumbered page book.

9. Virginia Free Press, May 12, 1831, p.3.

St. Peter's Catholic Church was the third church to be erected at Harpers Ferry and was the only church at the ferry not located on government land. It was finished in 1833 and consecrated in that year according to an article in the Virginia Free Press.

"The new Catholic Church at Harpers Ferry was consecrated on Sunday last, by Archbishop Whitefield of Baltimore, aided by the Rev. M. Gildea, and two other clergymen from Maryland, indisposition prevented us from witnessing the ceremony, but we learn that it was interesting and imposing.

The Church is a very neat edifice, built upon ground given by the Wager family. It does great credit to the indefatigable Pastor, under whose auspices it was commenced and finished, and to the community who contributed to its erection, - It stands upon the western hill, and adds much to the village by way of ornament." 10

After the consecration of the church it was in almost continuous operation up to the present time.

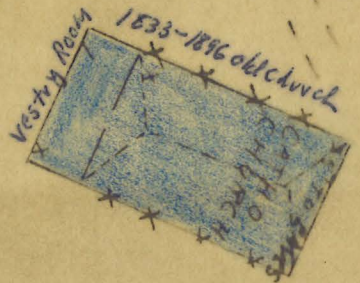
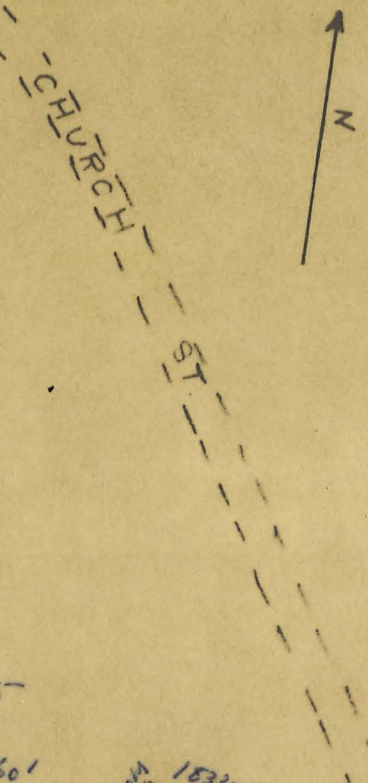
11
The dimensions of the church were 38 by 75 feet. The original church had four large arched windows on either side with an additional window in the one story rear vestry room. There were five additional windows in the front of the church, three arched and two round, together with the door. There was also a steeple at the front of the church. These details are shown on the Sanborn-Perris Map, 1894, on the following page.

The interior of the building was rather simple compared with the remodeled church interior of today. It originally had a high arched ceiling and a beautiful pulpit with the image of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus in her lap.

The church was a one story brick building on a stone foundation with a false front. Four stone steps led up to the door. It was 25 feet to the

10. Virginia Free Press, May 9, 1833, p.3, c.1.

11. Sanborn-Perris Map of Harpers Ferry, November, 1894.



SANBORN-PERRIS MAP CO.
HARPERS FERRY
NOVEMBER, 1894

SHENANDOAH STREET

12
eaves. By 1894 it had a slate roof.

In 1896 the church was remodeled and considerably enlarged to its present dimensions of 39 by 90 feet as shown on the Sanborn 1907 Map of Harpers Ferry which appears on the following page.

The Catholic School was located to the west of the church on a ledge of rock along the edge of the cliffs. It was formerly sixty feet from the old church but the remodeling and enlarging of the church brought the two buildings closer.

III. USE OF SAINT PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1833-1861

St. Peter's Church has been used from 1833 until the present day as a Roman Catholic Church. A list of the pastors who served St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church from its establishment through the end of the Civil War include Reverends John B. Gildea, Richard Vincent Whelan, John O'Brien, Joseph Plunkett, Andrew Talty, and Michael A. Costello. ¹³

The 1860 Census reveals that Reverend Costello was 26 years of age, born in Ireland and was at that time living in the house of William J. Stephens located on Wager Lot No. 5 ¹⁴ in the Wager Ferry Lot. The Reverend Dr. Costello remained at the church to protect it during the Civil War and thus it was the only church to escape serious destruction or desecration.

12. Sanborn-Ferris Map of Harpers Ferry, Jefferson County, W. Va., November, 1894.

13. History of St. Peter's Church, p.21, unnumbered book.

14. Census of 1860, Reel 10, V.2, p.167; Also Snell C. W., "Historic Building Site Survey Report for the 'William J. Stephens Building' (Wager Lot No. 5), The Ferry Lot Studies," dated August 5, 1958, revised October 3, 1958, p.23.

IV. HISTORICAL PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs showing the St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church will be found in Smith, Philip R., Jr., "Historic Building Report Part I for Bldg. No. 48A, St. John's Episcopal Church," dated October 23, 1958, revised March 6, 1959.

They are:

1. 1859 Photograph, HF-64, p.19.
2. 1861 Photograph, HF-46, p.20.
3. 1862 Photograph, HF-240, p.21.
4. 1861-65 Photograph, HF-6, p.22.
5. 1862 Photograph, HF-11, p.23.
6. 1865 Photograph, HF-449, p.24.
7. 1870 Photograph, HF-55, p.25.
8. 1870-1875 Photograph, HF-43, p.27.
9. 1880-1892 Photograph, HF-379, p.28.
10. 1892-1896, HF-99, p.29.
11. 1896 Photograph, HF-95, p.30.
12. After 1896 Photograph, HF-486, p.31.
13. 1910 Photograph, HF-364, p.32.

Additional photographs will also be found in Snell, Charles W., "Historic Building Site Survey Report, History of Lots No. 1 to 11, Block C, Shenandoah Street, 1796 to 1865," dated January 23, 1959.

14. 1857 Photograph, HF-249, p.110.
15. 1865-66, HF-361, p.112.

One painting will be found on the next page, made between 1869 and 1883, HF-68.

LOOKING DOWN THE POTOMAC RIVER FROM
JEFFERSON ROCK AREA, 1869 - 1884.

HF-68.

Photograph of painting contributed by
Bachrack Studio, Boston.

This painting was made after 1869 and before 1883 or 1884. The painting shows the rear of the Catholic Church before it was remodeled and also the Catholic pre-Civil War parochial school. Note the cupola on the roof of the school. This is also visible in several photographs of the area.



V. HISTORICAL PLANS OF ST. PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

No historical plans of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church have been found.

VI. SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL DATA

A. Ownership of the Land

St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church was granted title to the land on which the church stands by the Wager family on May 10, 1831. The church has retained possession of the lot to the present day.

The church applied for and received from the United States in 1854 a lease to the lot on which the vestry room of the church already rested and on which they erected a Catholic School in 1854-57. Final title to this lot was granted to the church by the United States on December 15, 1868, and has remained in possession of the church to the present day.

B. Construction of the Bldg.

Construction of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church was started in 1830 and the building was finally completed in May of 1833. It was the third church to be erected in Harpers Ferry. The dimensions of the original church were 39 by 75 feet and 25 feet to the eaves. The church had four large arched windows on either side, with an additional window in the one story vestry room attached at the rear of the Church. There were five additional windows in the front of the church, three arched and two round, together with the door. There was a steeple on the front of the church. The church was a one story brick structure on a stone foundation with a false brick front. Four steps led up to the door. By 1894 it had a slate roof.

In 1896 the church was completely remodeled and considerably enlarged.

C. Use of the Bldg.

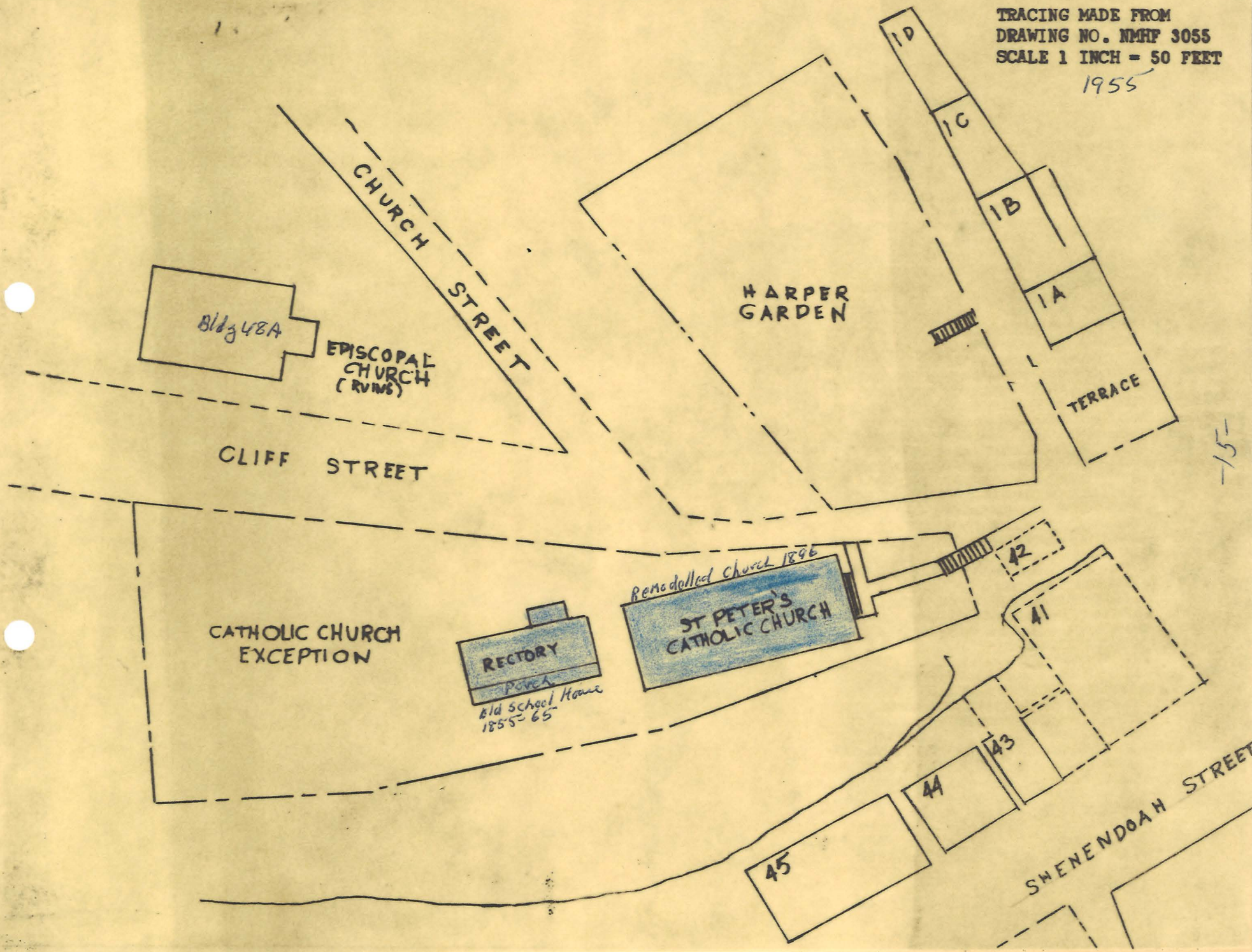
The building has been used from 1833 to the present day as a Roman Catholic Church. It is likely that services were held during the Civil War since the minister remained in the church. It, alone of all the churches of Harpers Ferry, was relatively undamaged during the Civil War.

In 1852 the church applied for and received a lease to Lot No. 2, Block D, on Shenandoah Street from the United States for the purpose of building a parsonage on it. Title to the lot was granted to the church on December 15, 1868, by the United States but the parsonage was never constructed on the property. Instead the old Catholic School was converted into a rectory in 1889.

SIGNED

Philip R. Smith, Jr.
Park Historian
October 23, 1958
Revised March 11, 1959

TRACING MADE FROM
DRAWING NO. NMHP 3055
SCALE 1 INCH = 50 FEET
1955



-15-