



Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS CAMPANILE AND CARILLON

The campanile or bell tower (from the Italian, *campa* for "bell") is situated at the southwest corner of the Shrine. Its placement at this corner came via a rather circuitous route. Designed in 1920 to stand on the southeast corner, it moved to the northeast corner in 1926, and to its current location in 1928. One of the mitigating factors in its placement, was the location of the *Lourdes Chapel*, which is on the Crypt Level, west transept, next to *Our Mother of Africa Chapel*.

Having weathered the Depression, World War II and Korea, the final push to finish the upper church or superstructure of the National Shrine was launched on December 8 of the Marian Year (1953-1954), as part of the centennial celebration of the promulgation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. As the plans and costs for the completion of the superstructure solidified, it was clear that the tower was a luxury that would have to wait. On Sunday, 31 March 1957 this all changed. Supreme Knight, Luke E. Hart, pledged the funds from the Knights of Columbus to build the campanile. Thus the name *The Knights' Tower*.

The height of tall structures in the District of Columbia is often compared to that of the Washington Monument, of which it is said that it is the tallest point in the District; that federal law prohibits any structure to be taller. This is an urban legend. While there are height restrictions in the District, the defining factor is not the Washington Monument. In 1910, the Height of Buildings Act established a range of maximum building heights depending on the width of the street on which a building fronts and whether the street is a business or a residential street. That legislation is still in effect today. Since 1910, the District Board of Zoning Adjustment have exercised their authority to set further height limitations in 15 different areas of the District adjacent to public buildings, and to grant exemptions or waivers, particularly for structures such as spires, towers or domes. In 1954, the architectural firm of Maginnis and Walsh wrote to the District Zoning Commission for an exemption, stating "*the erection of this great church to its designed dimensions will be an asset to the neighborhood, the District of Columbia and the Nation.*" The appeal was successful and an exemption was granted.

Regarding the tower as an aviation hazard: the steady blue lamps visible on the exterior of the campanile are not mandatory warning beacons. True, the architect's original plans and specifications for the campanile called for blinking red beacons at the NE and SW corner of the parapet; and steady red beacons at the lower levels. After having consulted with the C.A.A. authorities (today the F.A.A.) in connection with the Air Safety Officer for the Washington, D.C. area, it was determined that the campanile did not present a hazard, as there were no specific

aircraft patterns in the vicinity of the Shrine. Consequently, neither the red blinking beacon nor the steady red lights were required. Maginnis and Walsh and Kennedy, while agreeing that there was no cause for concern, did not agree with the C.A.A. that the beacons could or should be eliminated entirely. They accepted the recommendation *"that the blinking red and steady red beacon be changed to steady blue lights."*

The limestone walls rise to a height of 272 ft. Above the stone, a pyramid or spire rises 37 ft, and is topped by a 20 ft. gilded cross. The actual height of the tower (329 ft) makes it taller than the campanile of the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice (325 ft), the Leaning Tower of Pisa (188 ft) and Giotto's Tower in Florence (275 ft), but it does not equal the height of the Washington Monument (555 ft.) The geographical location of the tower causes it to rise *nearly* to the height of the Washington Monument. Unlike other towers or campaniles, it was determined from the beginning, that the Shrine campanile would house a precision musical instrument. Thus there *is neither an observation platform nor public access to the tower.*

From the Day of Dedication in 1959 until 1963, the campanile was without bells. In 1962, the Knights of Columbus made an additional gift to the National Shrine for the purchase of the carillon. On the day of the dedication (8 Sept 1963), Archbishop O'Boyle expressed his gratitude in these words *". . . to the members of the Knights of Columbus, in the name of the bishops of the country, I say we are deeply grateful for this wonderful gift. Long after we are gone, this tower and these bells will be paying honor to God and to his Mother."*



10 July 1963 Msgr. Thomas Grady welcomes *Christopher*

14 July 1963 Cardinal O'Boyle consecrates *Mary*

- **Bells consecrated:** **14 July 1963**
- **Bells dedicated:** **8 Sept 1963**
- **Bells re-dedicated:** **10 Sept 1989**



23 July 1963, hoisting the bell into place.



8 Sept 1963, Arthur Bigelow at dedication concert.



1965, Carillonneur Robert Grogan in the cabin in the tower.

The choice of the number and the size of the bells was made under the supervision of Mr. Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr. (1904-1986), the Shrine's active architect, in consultation with Mr. Arthur L. Bigelow (1909-1967), Bellmaster and Professor at Princeton, University. The bells were manufactured under a joint contract by the Foundries of Les Fils De Georges Paccard of Annecy-Le-Vieux, France, and Petit and Fritsen, Ltd., Aarle-Rixtel, Holland. Nine months in the making, the 56-bell instrument has a range of two octaves; the bells range in weight from 7200 lbs. to 21 lbs.; the combined weight is 37,150 lbs. It is considered a medium-to-large instrument.

In accordance with the ancient and recognized custom, the inscriptions on the bells envision them speaking in the first person. The text on each bell is according to what the person, for whom the bell is named, might say. Other insignia on the bells are titular. The *Mary* bell strikes on the hour; the *Christopher*, *Edward*, *Francis* and *Virgil* bells strike on the quarter hours. The nine large bells of the 56-bell carillon carry the following inscriptions:

Bell No. 1 / Bb / 7200 lbs.

Title: *The Blessed Virgin Mary* / 3 ½-ton Bourdon; it is taller than the average man

Figurine: The Blessed Virgin Mary

Insignia: Emblem of the Third Degree of the Knights of Columbus. This serves as the official “stamp,” designating the entire carillon as the gift of the Knights of Columbus.

Inscription: *Mary is my name. / Mary is my sound. / Beloved Mother / Queen of Heaven and Earth / Queen of this dear land / for knights to God and country bound / and all who hear my voice / I sing the praises of God.* [Supreme Knight, Luke E. Hart, under whose leadership both the carillon and the tower were donated to the Shrine, requested that the largest bell be dedicated to the Blessed Mother, Queen of Heaven and Patroness of the U.S., thereby expressing the love and devotion of the Knights to her.]

Bell No. 2 / C / 5100 lbs.

Title: *Saint Christopher*

Figurine: Santa Maria – the Ship

Insignia: The Cross

Inscription: *Christopher is my name. / Christ I bear / For Christopher I ring / who placed his hope in Santa Maria / and crossed the sea / to find this new land.* [Named in honor of Christopher Columbus, the “discoverer” of America.]

Bell No. 3 / D / 3600 lbs.

Title: *Saint Michael*

Insignia: Chalice and Stole [= priesthood.]

Inscription: *The Voice of Michael / Praise to the Lord from the heavens / Praise him in the heights / Praise him all you his angels / Praise him all you his hosts.* (Psalm 148) [Named in honor of Fr. Michael J. McGivney (1852-1890), founder of the Knights of Columbus.]

Bell No. 4 / Eb / 3050 lbs.

Title: *Saint James*

Insignia: Scallop Shell or Cockleshell [= pilgrimage; standard reference to the cathedral of St. James De Santiago de Compostela one of three great places of pilgrimage in Medieval Europe.]

Inscription: *The Message of James / Of his own will he has begotten / us by the word of truth / that we may be the first fruits / of his creatures.* (James 1.18) [Named in honor of Supreme Knights James T. Mullen (1882-1886), James E. Hayes (1897-1898) and James A. Flaherty (1909-1927).]

Bell No. 5 / E / 2550 lbs.

Title: *Saint John the Evangelist*

Insignia: Eagle [attribute for John, signifying the elevated inspiration of his Gospel, Letters and Book of Revelations.]

Inscription: *I am John, I sing, to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever . (Rev. 5.13) [Named in honor of Supreme Knights John J. Phelan (1886-1897), John J. Cone (1898-1899), and John E. Swift (1945-1953).]*

Bell No. 6 / F / 2150 lbs.

Title: *Saint Edward*

Insignia: Crown [a sign of distinction, royalty and victory]

Inscription: *I am Edward, I proclaim: Sing praise to God, sing praise, sing praise to our King, sing praise, for our King of all the earth is God, sing hymns of praise. (Psalm 46) [Named in honor of Supreme Knight Edward L. Hearn (1899-1909).]*

Bell No. 7 / F# / 1820 lbs.

Title: *Saint Martin of Tours*

Insignia: Sword Cutting a Cloak [= while on horseback in Amiens in Gaul, Martin encountered a beggar. Taking his sword, he cut his officer's cloak in half, and gave it to the beggar. Later he had a vision of Christ wearing the cloak.]

Inscription: *Martin is my name. I sing: Charity is patient, is kind, charity rejoices with the truth. Bears with all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13) [Named in honor of Supreme Knight Martin H. Carmody (1927-1939).]*

Bell No. 8 / G / 1560 lbs.

Title: *Saint Francis of Assisi*

Insignia: Crossed Arms [= the arms of Jesus and Francis crossed over the Tau, both bearing the imprint of the Crucifixion nails. Francis' arm is in the sleeve of his habit; it honors his receiving the stigmata on Mt. Alverna, September 17.]

Inscription: The Canticle of Francis: *The Most High Omnipotent Merciful Lord, thine is all praise and every benediction—praise and bless my Lord, render thanks to him and serve him with great humility. [Named in honor of Supreme Knight Francis P. Matthews (1939-1945).]*

Bell No. 9 / G# / 1330 lbs.

Title: *Saint Luke*

Insignia: An Ox [symbol of the evangelist whose writings emphasized the sacrificial and redemptive aspects of the life and death of Jesus.]

Inscription: The Message of Luke. *Praise God and say glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will.* (Lk. 2.15) [Named in honor of Supreme Knight Luke E. Hart (1953-1964).]

Bell No. 10 Named / dedicated 1989 / A

Title *Saint Virgil** [Named in honor of Supreme Knight Virgil C. Dechant (1977-2000).]

* Because the bells were already cast and in place, the bell only received a name, neither an inscription nor insignia. ** John W. McDevitt, Supreme Knight (1864-1977) did not receive a bell, as there already was a bell named John.

The bronze cast bells are permanent and do not require maintenance. Such is not the case for either the mechanical action or the clock-controlled electrical equipment, both of which are subject to the effects of age, use, weather, humidity, and pollution. In the summer of 1988, I. T. Verdin Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, the oldest and largest tower bell company in the United States, constructed new action components, clock, control system and keyboard. The new carillon action retained a few of the old parts, but most were replaced. In addition, new features were added through the use of computer technology. On-site installation began in September 1988 and continued through the windy and cold month of December. The restored carillon was heard for the first time on Christmas Eve 1988. On that day, Msgr. Michael J. Bransfield, the 10th Director of the National Shrine, now Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, cabled Supreme Knight Dechant, "Thanks to your generous gift, the bells of the Knights' Tower Carillon will again be ringing out over Washington, summoning the faithful to celebrate Christ's birth."

The two bell chambers are located at the levels of 172 ft. and 223 ft. The cabin of the carillonneur is located at the 200 ft. level between the tiers of bells. In the interest of trivia, the spiral staircase to the cabin contains a total of 208 steps. From this place, the carillonneur can play each of the 56 bells by either striking a wooden baton with the hand (or closed fist) or a wooden pedal with the foot. The volume of each note is determined by the force with which each baton or pedal is struck and/or depressed. There is no electrical assistance for the player. The sound and volume of the carillon rests solely with the strength of the carillonneur. Dr. Robert B. Grogan has been the Shrine Organist and Carillonneur since 1964. Carillon recitals are heard each Sunday afternoon during the summer months at 5:30 p.m., preceding the organ recitals. Please check the Shrine [events calendar](#) for special scheduled performances, e.g., Christmas Eve, 9:00 p.m. CDs / Cassettes of carillon music performed by Dr. Grogan from the Knights' Tower may be purchased through the BNSIC [Gift Shop](#). *Carols for Carillon* (CD-Hudson Recordings OOHHR 991K) and *Classics for Carillon* (Cassette-Hudson Recordings).

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