

# 2019 AD

## Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Parish

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Reverend Monsignor Charles Pope, Pastor

### Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Parish's African-American History Commemoration Celebrating the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Saint Cyprian Parish Established 1893

**The parish known as Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian can trace its beginnings to two distinct churches—St. Cyprian, established in 1893, and Holy Comforter established in 1904. This is a brief history of St. Cyprian's parish.** After the Civil War, there were large movements of African-Americans from the south into cities, especially to the north, and many came to Washington, DC. Some settled in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. These Black Catholics began to attend St. Peter's Church at Second & C Streets, SE, and it is here that this story begins. Throughout the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, St. Peter's parish continued to grow and prosper, yet the African-Americans who worshipped there were never fully accepted as members of the church community. They were made to sit in the back of the church, use different doors from the white church members, and eventually excluded from the main sanctuary and forbidden to be married or baptized at the main altar. Though there was precedent for African-Americans to break away and form their own churches, the blacks at St. Peter's became frustrated when they were unable to establish their own church because there were so few black priests in the United States. In 1887, Fr. James R. Matthews (who was not African-American) came to St. Peter's as assistant pastor and began to work diligently with the African-American Catholics to create their own parish where they would feel welcomed. Before eventually being transferred, he convinced Fr. J. M. O'Brien to write the Archdiocese of the Catholic Diocese in Baltimore asking to establish St. Cyprian parish. In 1892, Cardinal Gibbons agreed that the time for such a move was right and he had Fr. Matthews transferred back to Capitol Hill.



Fr. James Matthews

**At the same time,** Miss Mary Atkins offered a plot of land at 8<sup>th</sup> Street to Fr. Matthews to be used for a school for African-American children. Fr. Matthews invited the Oblate Sisters of Providence to take charge of the school that was established. By 1894 a larger school building was erected at 310—8<sup>th</sup> Street and named St. Ann's Academy. (In 1964, the school eventually merged with Holy Comforter School, the process went very smoothly.)



On March 12, 1893, the group of African-Americans who had been meeting in St. Peter's hall were officially organized as St. Cyprian Parish and recognized by the Archdiocese of Baltimore. By April 18, 1893, a tract of land at 13<sup>th</sup> & C Streets, SE, was purchased for the sum of \$12,480 with funds raised through donations by parishioners, and loans from the Cardinal, as well as from societies who assist the Black community. The Church and rectory were built on this land. Ground was broken on July 1, 1893, and the cornerstone was laid on September 24, 1893. A ceremony to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of the new church included a parade witnessed by more than 10,000 people. Cardinal Gibbons marched with the parishioners to the site and spoke at the dedication. The pioneering members of St. Peter's Church, who had the courage and vision to establish the parish of St. Cyprian, were rewarded for their dedication when St. Cyprian's opened the door to its new Church building on June 2, 1894, just eight months after the laying of the cornerstone.

St. Cyprian became a thriving force in the community. During the church's first year, there were 1500 members, with 250 children attending Sunday School. That same year over 200 people were baptized. St. Cyprian became the only Catholic parish in the country to provide its members with an adult night school.

During those early years, the parish was blessed by the efforts of many dedicated parishioners who worked closely with the founding Pastor, Father (later Monsignor) James Matthews who served the parish from 1893-1934. In 1943, St. Cyprian was transferred to the Josephites (*organized in 1893 as an American missionary group devoted to evangelizing African-Americans*). Throughout the years, St. Cyprian continued to be the focal point of the Capitol Hill African-American community. In 1966, however, this pivotal force faced a serious challenge when its magnificent buildings needed extensive repairs that proved too expensive to undertake. Fr. Burke, the pastor at the time of the closing, explained that over \$350,000 was needed to repair the buildings and he approached Cardinal O'Boyle and suggested a possible merger with Holy Comforter since this parish had suffered a serious decline in membership. After much deliberation, Cardinal O'Boyle, with reservation, agreed to merge the parishes. Yet it must be said that things did not go smoothly and many parishioners today still express concern over the way the whole matter was handled. The announcement of the closing came suddenly on a Sunday in late August 1966. The parishioners were told that within two weeks their parish buildings would be closed. With two weeks notice, no one had time to raise funds so they had to move to the Holy Comforter Parish building. The St. Cyprian Parish buildings stood empty for five years until 1971 when they were demolished. A plaque commemorating the site of St. Cyprian is located at that site today. In 1966, the blended parish of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian was formed and run by the Josephites. In 1984, the parish was returned to the care of diocesan priests and continues to serve the community. The merged school unfortunately closed in 2007.