

A Journey Through Time

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Columnist Linda Reno is a historian and genealogist specializing in Southern Maryland history. Mrs. Reno is a member of the St. Mary's County Historical Society, St. Mary's County Genealogical Society, Charles County Genealogical Society, Maryland Historical Society and the Maryland Genealogical Society. She has authored many books and articles on local history. We hope you will enjoy these articles and welcome your comments and suggestions for future subjects.

By Linda Reno
Contributing Writer



Photo Courtesy of Georgetown University Library
Father Charles Raley, 1904.

Charles Norman Raley, son of James Thomas Morgan Raley and his wife, Julia Ann Blackistone Hammett, was born in St. Mary's County, December 17, 1869.

At the age of 14, he entered the seminary and in 1901 was ordained a priest in the Society of Jesus. Father Raley had a long and successful career. He was a professor and later vice president at Georgetown University; a Chaplain in the Navy during World War I; and then afterwards was sent to California where he served several congregations until his retirement in 1950.

Throughout the remainder of his life, he maintained his relationship with the U.S. Navy. The parish at Wilmington, California said "It was this association with the Navy that aided Father directly and the people of the parish indirectly for when the men of the fleet saw the disrepair; it was the sailors who put the first electric lights in the rectory. This led Father Raley to say and repeat on many occasions, what God does not provide for me in Wilmington, the U. S. Navy will."

Suffering with crippling arthritis, Father Raley entered St. Francis Hospital in 1953 where he remained until his death on July 15, 1962. He is buried in the Jesuit Cemetery at Santa Clara University.

But this story isn't really about Father Raley's career, but rather what happened to him and some of his fellow students from Woodstock College in 1891. At that time, the Jesuits owned a large house called St. Inigo's Villa near the current church (just outside Webster Field) and used it for retreats and/or vacations. Pete Himmelheber tells me that what little of this house is left "is now falling into the St. Mary's River."

At the Villa on the evening of July 3, 1891 a storm struck and blew down a tent. "Seeing that the tent was about to be blown down, a number of the scholastics ran to the ropes to save it, but the guy ropes and poles supporting the tent were snapped like pipe stems and the students who were struggling with the tent were lifted from the ground and dashed among the torn and broken remnants of the tent. Then, as if satisfied with its work of destruction, the storm quickly subsided, and by 8 o'clock the stars were shining brightly and not a cloud could be seen."

While it was unnerving, no one was hurt. By 10 p.m., everyone was in bed for the night, or so they thought. Another storm struck--this one much worse than the first.

"The windows were open and a refreshing breeze contributed to the enjoyment of the night. Like the breeze of the

early evening, it was the forerunner of a storm, which came on rapidly, and soon the rain drops that commenced to patter on the roof increased in number and volume until water was coming down seemingly in bucketfuls. At the same time it began to drive in at the windows which had been left open, wetting the beds which stood beneath and arousing their occupants. The rays from a single oil lamp threw a dim light over the room."

"The students endeavored to move their beds to a dry place. The storm was accompanied by very little lightning and thunder, and no danger was apprehended, as the scholastics stood around the room in groups quietly talking. While thus engaged there came a blinding flash of lightning and a crash of thunder. For an instant the whole interior of the room was made light as day and then enshrouded in darkness. The concussion was so great that the light in the lamp was extinguished. It was relighted, and those who first recovered from the shock began to investigate the damage."

Lights were taken up to the dormitory where were found six students all lying on the floor in different parts of the room. One of them was Charles Raley, but he was one of the lucky ones. Three students were instantly killed and another, burned badly on his body and arms, required hospitalization. One of those killed was initially missing but several hours after the storm his body was found "close up under the eaves."

One of the injured students said he felt as if he had been struck a heavy blow; that he was lifted into the air, thrown backward, and then hit the floor head first.

The lightning tore a hole about two feet long in the roof and the current passed into an iron rod running the length of the room. The killed and injured were in different parts of the room. "The scholastics were standing in groups and strange to say, one man from each group was the target of the lightning, the others escaping unhurt."

Those killed were buried that Sunday at St. Ignatius Church, St. Inigoes. Their bodies could not be returned to their families because "[they] were so horribly burned as not to be able to keep them."

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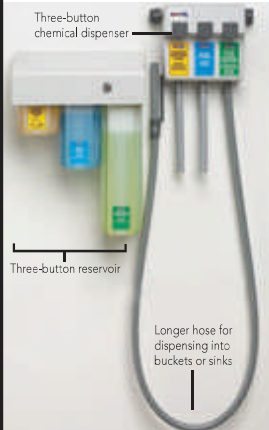
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