

## ***A Brief History of Bishop John England – Our Namesake***

John England was born in Cork, Ireland on September 23, 1786. He was ordained on October 11, 1808 and quickly became a renowned lecturer. He organized schools for the poor, was appointed as president of St. Mary's College, and served as Chaplain of the Presentation Convent, the Magdalen Asylum, and the city prison. He also had a parish in Brandon from May 1817 until August 1820, at which point he resigned because of being named Bishop of Charleston.

Bishop John England arrived in Charleston on December 30, 1820, to oversee a diocese that included North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. The diocese covered 140,000 square miles and contained approximately 5,000 Catholics scattered over three states. He immediately contacted his flock through a pastoral letter – the first in the history of the American Church – and became a regular visitor who organized the scattered groups, prepared catechists to teach, and urged the building of churches. During these visits he preached in many Protestant churches and started an early ecumenical movement. To continue the spiritual education of his flock, he wrote a missal and catechism for instruction. He never tired of instructing the faithful and giving careful explanation to the doubtful. Bishop England wanted to revive classical learning in his diocese and started "Book Societies" throughout his congregations. He was a prolific writer as well and in 1822 started *The United States Catholic Miscellany*, the first Catholic newspaper in the country. The paper answered attacks made on the Church and contained general catechetical information. Bishop England wrote, edited, and helped publish the paper. In 1825, St. John the Baptist Seminary opened to train priests for the diocese. It had a reputation of excellence as four of its graduates later became bishops. In 1829 Bishop England organized the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy – convent that resides on James Island – to educate and catechize poor children and to care for the sick and orphaned. The sisters started and staffed a small hospital which cared for thousands during the fever epidemics. It was said that Bishop England wore shoes without soles because he devoted so much of himself and his resources to the care of the sick and poor.

Because there was little monetary support in the diocese, Bishop England made trips throughout the states and Europe to ask for money, supplies, and candidates who were willing to come back to help him. While on one of his trips to Washington, D.C., in 1826, he became the first Catholic clergyman invited to address congress. On his return from Europe in 1841, he became ill due to his untiring care of the sick on the ship. However, when he arrived in Philadelphia, he proceeded to preach seventeen nights and then went on to preach four nights in Boston. His health was extremely poor when he returned to Charleston. He died on April 11, 1842. At his death, the diocese had fourteen churches with three under construction, twenty priests, and a Catholic population of approximately 12,000. Bishop John England was mourned by people of all creeds. A line taken from the Catholic Encyclopedia states, "His apostolic zeal, saintly life, exalted character, profound learning, and matchless eloquence made him a model for all Catholics."

Cited work:

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"England, John", Catholic Encyclopedia. 1917 ed.