

John England, First Bishop of Charleston (1786-1842)

By Brian P. Fahey



John England, the first Catholic Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina, was born in Cork, Ireland, on September 23, 1786. He was the eldest son of Thomas England, a tobacco merchant, and Honora Lordan. From 1792 until 1800, during the early years of the relaxation of the penal laws against Irish Catholics, England received his education in Cork's Protestant schools. After initially preparing for a legal career, England chose to study for the

priesthood. In 1802 he attended St. Patrick's College in Carlow, Ireland. He was ordained at St. Mary's Cathedral, Cork, on October 11, 1808, at the age of twenty-two. His ordination at such a young age required a special dispensation. In Cork, he served in various parishes and headed the diocesan schools and seminary. He founded and edited a magazine, the *Religious Repertory*, and he edited a patriotic secular newspaper, the *Cork Mercantile Chronicle*, which was a strong defender of Irish civil and political rights. While editing the newspaper, England associated with Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell and became prominent in the movement for Catholic

emancipation. In particular, England opposed the British government's attempt to veto bishops' appointments in the British Isles.

In 1820, Pope Pius VII appointed England the first Bishop of the Diocese of Charleston, encompassing the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. He was consecrated in St. Finbar Church, Cork, on September 21, and refused an obligatory oath of allegiance to the British government. He stated that his imminent departure for the United States made the oath unnecessary.



Upon arrival in Charleston on December 30, he was met with a string of challenges. The diocese had only three priests to serve the Catholics spread across the vast territory of South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia.

On May 27, 1829, Bishop England wrote,

“My Dear Sir:

“When I was appointed Bishop of the diocese of Charleston, towards the close of the year 1820, I found myself burdened with the spiritual care of three large States, together containing about a million and a half of people, in fact about one-seventh of the whole population of the United States.

“The white people were mainly of English and Irish extraction, with some Protestant and Huguenot families that had come hither from France at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Virginia and the Northern New England States had contributed many fortune-hunters. There were Catholic refugees from the island of St. Domingo; also a few Frenchmen who had succeeded in escaping the horrors of the French Revolution; lastly, a number of emigrants from Ireland and from the State of Maryland.

“In general the Catholics were poor and the objects of immense prejudice, and they had no clergy. Many of the slaves, especially such as had accompanied the French refugees, were Catholics, and nearly all were located at Charleston, Savannah and Augusta. Several Indian tribes, also, were found within the diocese; but they were sadly neglected through lack of priests.

“My jurisdiction extends from 30° 60' to 36° 50' North Lat., and from the Atlantic to 85° 20' west of the Greenwich meridian. It covers the Chattahoochee River and over the Yellow Mountains to 80°, making in all a territory of 133 thousand square miles.

“I found upon my arrival one small brick church in South Carolina; in Georgia, one log and two frame edifices, in all four churches. In South Carolina there were probably two hundred communicants; in Georgia, one hundred and fifty; in North Carolina, twenty-five, a total of three hundred and seventy-five.

“In Georgia and South Carolina there were only three priests. In coming over from Ireland I had brought along, at my own expense, three more whom I had ordained. Those who were already here did not long remain with me. Still I managed to obtain three others, so that I was enabled to assign two to Georgia, three to South Carolina, and I personally attended to the pastoral wants of North Carolina as soon as I had completed my visits to the chief religious centres of the other two States.

“In 1821 I tried to establish a college, hoping thereby to make enough as a teacher to maintain a few theological students; but the Protestant ministers, discovering my purpose, induced those co-religionists of theirs who had entrusted their children to me to withdraw them again.

“Debts hung over all the churches; and yet today I have my seminary, and, despite the pecuniary difficulties that beset me, I have raised many young candidates for Holy Orders. The only help I received was a sum of five hundred dollars, forwarded to me by Pope Leo XII.

“Death deprived me of two of my Irish priests. The two whom they had replaced had left

on account of the exhausting labors of their charge and the lack of the necessaries of life. I then procured three others, but had eventually to dismiss them. I have educated twenty subjects. Eight of them, who received Holy Orders at my hands, are now on the mission working zealously and accomplishing much good. Four are still at the seminary; four others died, a priest, a subdeacon and two not yet in minor orders. Two others who had become priests and two students left the diocese.

“Eighteen to twenty priests would be needed to meet the present requirements of the diocese, as well as a professor of theology to take my place at the seminary, leaving me free to attend my special duties.”

The Catholic community was disorganized and had experienced years of dissension. St. Mary of the Annunciation, the only church in the see city, had been under interdict for three years, and the parish was on the verge of schism. England addressed these problems with tact and energy, earning the nickname “Steam Bishop.”

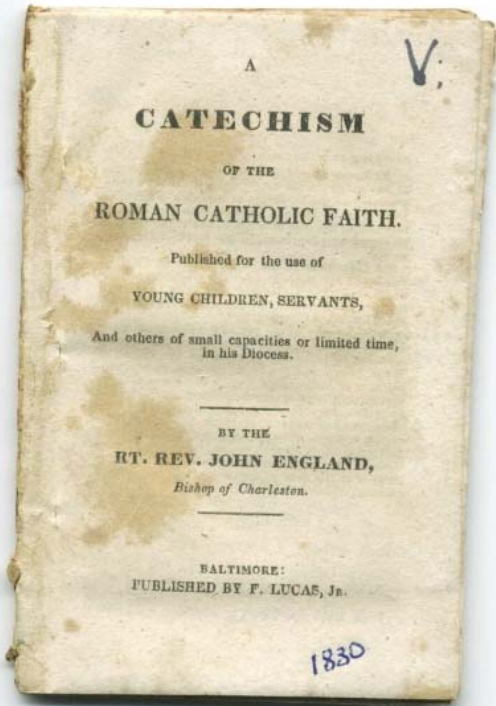
Father J.J. O’Connell, a contemporary, described England as a man “of medium size, regular and manly features...



strong-set jaw, and eyes blazing and flashing like crushed diamonds... he walked down Broad Street with the independence of a king.”

Bishop John England’s passion and drive led to lasting accomplishments. He issued a pastoral letter, the first by an American bishop. He traveled repeatedly to all corners of his huge diocese, established new parishes, and recruited priests. He founded a philosophical and classical school for boys as well as the Seminary of St. John the Baptist in Charleston. The seminary educated nearly fifty priests, four of whom later became bishops. He met

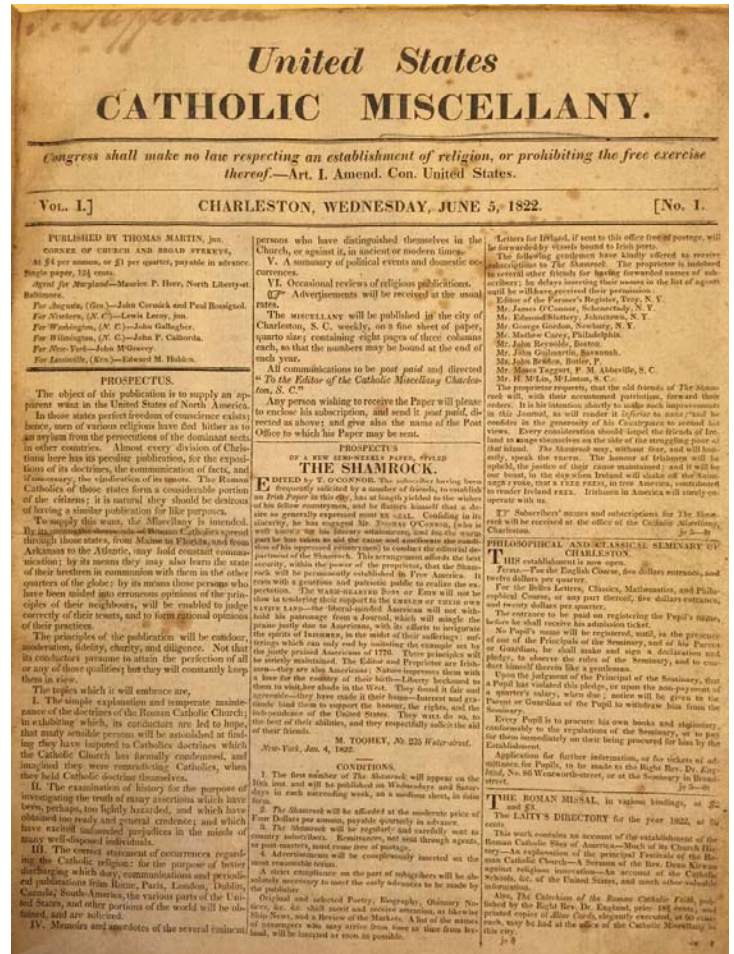
with several bishops in the north, President James Monroe, and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. He founded the Brotherhood of San Marino, the first Catholic society for working men in the United States, and organized the Anti-Dueling Society of Charleston. He made the first English translation of the **Roman Missal** in the United States and published a **Catechism of the Roman Catholic Faith** for use in the diocese.



In 1829, he founded the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy "to educate females of the middling class of society; also to have a school for free colored girls, and to give religious instruction to female slaves ; they will also devote themselves to the service of the sick," and later recruited other religious communities to the diocese.

England held modern views on education and free expression. His ideology was strongly influenced by his experience of British persecution of Irish Catholics. He embraced American democracy and envisioned a free church in a free society. He became an outspoken advocate for freedom of religion and separation of church and state. When he founded the

first regularly published American Catholic newspaper, the *United States Catholic Miscellany*, in 1822, he incorporated the first amendment of the American Constitution into its banner.

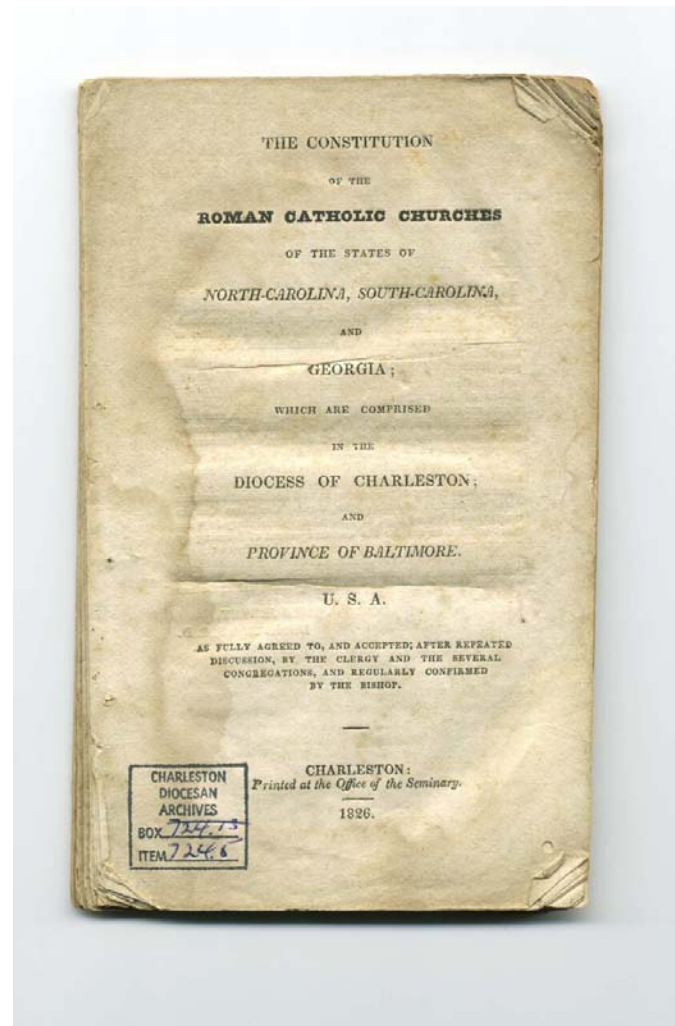


On January 8, 1826, a month prior to finalizing his American citizenship, England became the first Catholic priest to address the United States Congress. There, he asserted that Catholicism and the American Constitution were compatible: "I would not allow to the Pope or to any other bishop of our church, outside



the Union, the smallest interference with the humblest vote at our most insignificant balloting box."

To reconcile traditional Catholicism with American democracy, England established a diocesan **Constitution**. Under these new regulations, parishes elected lay vestries to take care of the church's financial and physical needs. Lay delegates and clergy met in annual conventions to deliberate and pass resolutions for the bishop's approval. This system was successful in promoting Catholic unity and support for the church.



The Vatican acknowledged England's skill of diplomacy and appointed him Apostolic Delegate from 1833 to 1837 to negotiate an agreement with the Haitian government of President Jean Pierre Boyer. In negotiations he attempted to secure internal freedom for the Catholic Church in Haiti. At the time, his negotiations failed. But in 1860, Haiti signed a Concordat with the Vatican that contained substantially the same terms.

England personally abhorred slavery but stated that the church permitted the continued servitude of descendants of those originally enslaved. He hoped American slavery would not continue, but he saw no quick end to it. He worked to improve the condition of blacks, slave and free. In 1835, he established a Charleston Academy for free black youth, but threats of white mob violence forced its closure.

Affable and sophisticated, England was well received in South Carolina society. He was active in the Charleston Library Society and the Literary and Philosophical Society, serving as curator of the latter's natural history museum. His health declined during 1841, and he died in Charleston on April 11, 1842. He is buried in the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Charleston.

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