

“Rebuild My Church” and a Small Pool of Water

Tekakwitha’s Spring at the National Shrine looked very different in the 1600s than it appears today. More than 300 years ago a small, natural pool of water on the forest floor served as the primary water source for the Kanienkehaka (“Mohawk”) village known as Caughnawaga. Before Caughnawaga, a second, “prehistoric” Native American village was located near the spring and likely used the same water source.



Tekakwitha’s Spring circa 1890

An illustration of Tekakwitha’s Spring as it appeared in 1890 is provided in the book “The Life and Times of Kateri Tekakwitha” by Ellen H. Walworth. Walworth’s illustration is shown above. Walworth’s firsthand account describes the site as “a quiet forest nook, where a clear, cold spring gurgles out from the tangled roots of a tree. Connected with this spring is the story of a short girl-life, pure, vigorous, sorrow-taught.” Walworth continued, “The never failing spring issues from a set-back in the hill and so regular in shape as to suggest an amphitheater. This spring wells out from under an old stump hidden in a clump of trees, whose topmost branches are below the level of the castle site. Its waters rest a moment in a little shady pool, a round forest mirror; then brimming over, break away and wander down the steep descent to the creek.”

Tekakwitha’s Spring is a flowing artesian well, continuously replenished by the fresh, clear water that percolates up from an artesian aquifer located deep below the ground. This is the sacred water used to baptize Saint Kateri in 1676.

The Conventual Franciscan Friars of Our Lady of the Angels Province are among the primary protectors of Tekakwitha’s Spring and the surrounding village sites, forests, fields, and wetlands – working together with our Native American and First Nations friends. The friars have done so faithfully since 1938. True to the Franciscan spirit, the friars respond to the call heard by Saint Francis of Assisi to “rebuild my church.” As a young man, Francis knelt before the crucifix in the ruined little church of San Damiano, and heard a voice seemingly coming from the crucifix: “Repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin.” Francis set about to repair the little church. Later it became clear that Jesus had spoken to Francis not only about the physical church building, but the Church as a whole, both physical and spiritual.

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Falling Into Ruin

Today, Tekakwitha's Spring is in danger of "falling into ruin." We feel the same urgent call to repair it. The old concrete block building and pool, Gothic wrought iron fence, and plumbing pipe handrails served us adequately over the years. The Gothic fence is now a disturbing contrast to local history and ecology. The water pool leaks badly. The bare concrete block building and diamond plate floor covers are no longer worthy of a saint. Some of these structures predate the Shrine. We must restore the spring to current standards of aesthetics, accessibility, and sensitivity to faith, tradition, and ecology. As with the little church at San Damiano, Tekakwitha's Spring is more than the physical structure: It is a sacred symbol and manifestation of creation, faith, spiritual cleansing, and healing.

We are collaborating with various individuals and organizations to begin the process of restoring Tekakwitha's Spring and other key features of the Shrine. Among them are:

- Julia Watson of Studio REDE, an Australian-born landscape designer who specializes in conserving Indigenous and sacred lands around the world,
- Molly Burhans, founder of GoodLands, an initiative to increase understanding and ecological planning of landholdings of the Catholic Church using geographic information technology and community involvement. Molly was invited to the Vatican to discuss her work, which includes having the Kateri Shrine serve as a pilot project,
- Saint Kateri Tekakwitha Conservation Center, a Catholic faith-based land trust and conservation group, and

- You! We will be sure to include you and all of our friends, stakeholders, and supporters in prayers, planning, fundraising, and installation.

All of us with a special devotion to Saint Kateri and who honor this sacred land and water are invited to help restore Tekakwitha's Spring, in a way that

- honors Saint Kateri Tekakwitha,
- respects Kanienkehaka and Indigenous cultures and traditions – past and present,
- cultivates care for creation and reverence for our Creator and Redeemer,
- provides a sacred place of respite, prayer, and reflection, and offers a focal point of peace and healing for all people.

Please join us with your prayers and support.

Yours in Christ and Saint Kateri,

Bill Jacobs
Shrine Director

Join our email list by calling (518) 853-3646 or emailing saintkateri@katerishrine.com.

Join us also on Facebook and Twitter @katerishrine.

National Shrine of St. Kateri Tekakwitha
3636 State Hwy 5, Fonda NY 12068 USA



Saint Kateri, pray for us.