

From Arts & Architecture: William Yardley Memorial Plaque

In 1889, William Yardley assumed the Office of Verger of the first St. John's Cathedral at 20th and Welton Street under Dean Martyn Hart. His tenure as Verger at St. John's ended in February 1918, twenty-nine years later, when he died just five days before his 84th birthday. The Office of Verger was not very common in the United States when William began his service at the age of 55. He would, however, have been familiar with the ancient ecclesiastical role, since he was born in February 1834 in Oldswinford, an ancient parish of



Worcestershire, in the West Midlands of England. He spent more than half his life in the market town of Stourbridge, a municipal borough of Oldswinford, about 15 miles west of Birmingham. William and his wife, Emma (Denston), lived in the High Street of Stourbridge, where they had ten children, and William plied his trade as a grocer.

In the late 1920s, the Vestry of St. John's Cathedral honored William Yardley with a memorial plaque, placed in the rear of the west aisle. In 1929, Yardley's daughter Mary Nellie, who was by then secretary at St. John's, wrote a note to the Vestry, now preserved in St. John's archives. It said, "The Yardley family desires to express their gratitude to the Vestry for their kind thoughtfulness which prompted the planning of the beautiful tablet in memory of our father in the Cathedral he loved so well and where so many happy years were spent in the performance of his duties."

William Yardley's memorial plaque honors the man "*whose faithfulness to duty and Christian demeanour distinguished his office as verger of this cathedral for XXIX years. Obit February 4 1918*"

In 1883, five years before they arrived in Denver, William, Emma, and the children left Stourbridge, and England. Sailing on the *SS Marathon* from Liverpool, they arrived in Boston on the 1st of October, ultimately bound for New York, according to passenger records. After a few years and the loss of their youngest daughter, Elsie, in New York, William and his family set out once again. According to William's February 6th 1918 obituary in the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, the family made their way west to Denver because of the illness of William and Emma's oldest son, William Frank. The 1888 *Corbett and Ballenger's Denver City Directory* lists William and his family living at 1818 Pennsylvania Street. Although the entry gave no occupation for him, the rest of the family had settled into jobs in the young and growing city.

By 1892, William was listed in the city directory as sexton at St. John's Cathedral. Historically, the Office of Verger often came with responsibilities as sexton, including upkeep and maintenance of church buildings, preparations for worship services, and opening graves in the churchyard. Like his ancient counterparts, William's role at St. John's encompassed most of these duties as well as his liturgical and ceremonial responsibilities. The 1894 city directory lists the Yardley family's residence

at 99 20th Avenue, a house within St. John's Cathedral close, where they would remain until 1905, almost two years after the catastrophic fire that destroyed the first St. John's Cathedral in May 1903.

The life of a Verger in the Rocky Mountain west must have been a calm, regular one, all in all. There were times, however, when just by doing his job, William "got his name in the papers." A two-and-a-half-column report in the *Denver Post* for Saturday the 4th of March 1899 details the "Robbery and Desecration of St. John's Cathedral," and mentions that "Sexton William Yardley, who lives back of the cathedral, discovered the burglary" when he went to do his usual 8 o'clock morning rounds to stoke the furnace and put a fire in the fireplace of the vestry room on the north side of the cathedral. He discovered open doors, a hole in one panel of the safe, burned papers, a typewriter broken in half, "silk altar cloths" on the floor, and in short, "the interior of the room...in utmost confusion." Evidently, "the work had been very clumsily done" and, the article concluded, the detectives found the perpetrators and "were on the case less than two hours."



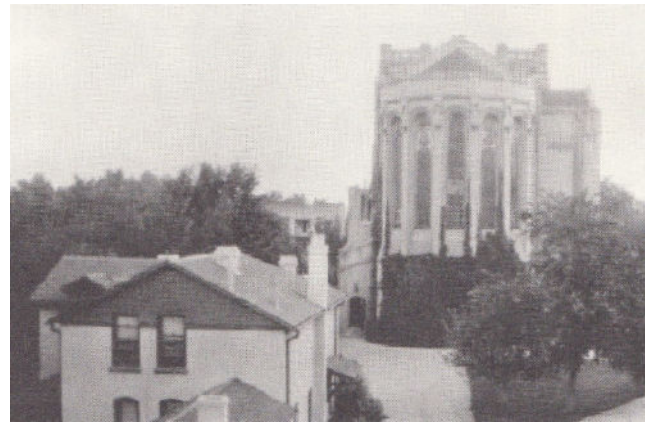
Another testimony to the Yardley family's attachment to the first St. John's Cathedral appears in a brief article in the *Denver Post* for June 6th 1903. The article chronicles the "most romantic wedding of the week," the wedding of Ethel Yardley, William's and Emma's daughter, and Edward Hanley, "performed by Dean H. Martyn Hart in the rooms of St. John's Cathedral, in spite of the condition of the building [because] both bride and groom had been members...for a long time and it was their cherished desire to be married there."



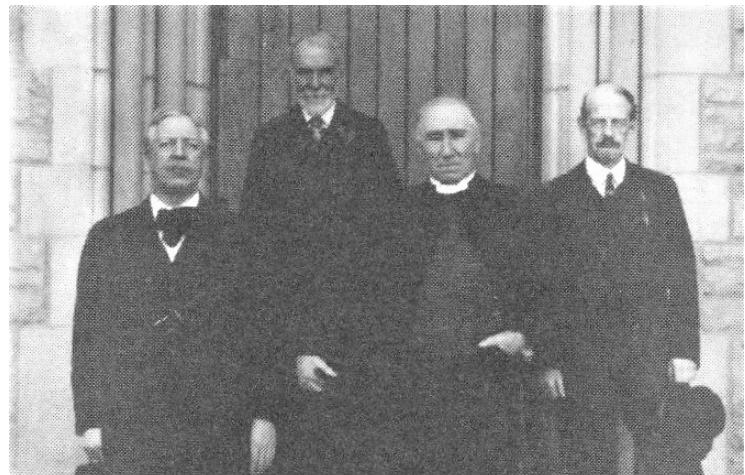
The chapter house on the new cathedral's site was opened for use as the temporary worship space in 1904, the year after the catastrophic fire. William, Emma and several of the (now adult) Yardley children moved to the house at 1324 Washington Street. The "sexton's house" stood roughly where the parking lot behind the apse is now located, and next to the Deanery at 1328 Washington Street. William became sexton and Verger, with the chapter house under his care, as the new cathedral was being constructed alongside.

The new cathedral was opened in the autumn of 1911, and the first service took place on Sunday November 5th. William was now Verger at a splendid Gothic Revival cathedral, not all that

dissimilar, except in age, to St. Mary's, Oldswinford (below), William's English home, and likely the church where he was baptized. For the next 14 years, then, as the family spread to Illinois and New York, and to husbands and houses in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, William continued his work as sexton and Verger at St. John's.



William's physical presence and his devotion certainly became an integral part of life at St. John's Cathedral, as is evident in this picture of William behind Dean Hart, who is flanked by Adam Owen, bass soloist, on the Dean's right, and Henry Houseley, organist and choirmaster, on his left.



William Yardley died on February 4th 1918. On Wednesday the 6th at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, funeral services for William were held in his beloved cathedral. Bishop Irving Johnson and cathedral staff officiated. Henry Houseley and Dr. John Gower, former cathedral organist, provided the music for the service. William and Emma Yardley are buried at Denver's Fairmount Cemetery. The grave marker reads:

In loving memory of William Yardley Feb 9 1834 – Feb 4 1918
and

Emma Denston Yardley May 29 1838 – August 21 1924.

"The memory of the just is blessed" is inscribed at the base of the stone. Mary Nellie and Charles Herbert, two of their children, are also buried in the same plot, and memorialized on the reverse of the grave stone.

There is perhaps no better way to close this brief history of a life of service than to quote the Gospel of Matthew, 25:23—
"Well done, good and faithful servant."

