

Our Story

A SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORIC ST. FRANCIS XAVIER CHURCH

St. Francis Xavier Church in East Baltimore was the first Catholic Church in the United States officially established for Negroes. The church was purchased on October 10, 1863 and dedicated February 21, 1864, with a group of Black San Domingo refugees, who were Catholic, and the Sulpician Fathers, who had fled the French Revolution and settled in Baltimore.

The Sulpician Fathers arrived in Baltimore in early 1790. Soon after the Sulpicians had settled at St. Mary's Seminary on Pennsylvania Road (now Pennsylvania Avenue); there arrived in Baltimore a large number of Negro Catholic refugees. According to the Maryland Gazette, date: Thursday, July 11, 1791, the arrival in Baltimore at Fell's Point, six ships, being a part of the French fleet which sailed from Cape Francois on June 23, 1793. Aboard the ships were between 500 and 1000 Negroes, slave and free. Most of the free Blacks were wealthy and educated. Whether slave or free, the refugees were Catholic and spoke fluent French.

After they settled in Baltimore, the Black refugees began to attend Mass in the basement of St. Mary's Seminary. The Sulpicians who also spoke French administered to the religious needs of the Haitians. The basement chapel was set aside for the Blacks' exclusive use. Father Louis Dubourg, a Sulpician, assisted the newly formed congregation several years before he was appointed president of Georgetown College in 1796.

Father Tessier, who became the Rector of St. Mary's Seminary, took charge of the Parish in the basement chapel. He had the help of Father Nogat who taught catechism in French to children. In 1803, Father Nogat was called to France but Father Tessier stayed on as the parish priest for 30 years.

By 1827, Father Tessier was aided by another Sulpician, Father James Nicholas Joubert de la Muraille, who had been a soldier and a tax collector in San Domingo before he became a priest. In 1828, Father Joubert helped to form a religious community of "Colored Sisters" now known as the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

Since slavery was the established order of the time, the only education that many of the Blacks received was from the Catholic Church. A school was started and the Oblate Sisters were the teachers. In 1836, the Oblates moved to Richmond Street. St. Francis Parish also moved with the Sisters to Richmond Street. About 1847, Father Anwander, a Redemptorist priest, took charge of the religious activities at the convent and school.

Several years later, the Jesuits invited the Negro Catholics to attend service at St. Ignatius Church, Madison and Calvert Streets. Again, the basement of the church was set aside for exclusive use of the Blacks. Under the guidance of Father Peter Louis

Miller, SJ, the basement chapel of Blessed Peter Claver was filled to capacity at every Mass. Father Miller with the assistance of Father Michael O'Connor through the authority of the Jesuit Society, purchased a building on the southeast corner of Calvert and Pleasant Streets in October 1863. Father Miller, age 58, died in 1879, fifteen years after the church was turned over to the Mill Hill Fathers, later to be known as the Josephite Fathers. St. Francis Xavier Church was dedicated February 21, 1864.

Further, on November 17, 1871, there arrived in Baltimore, from Mill Hill, England, four priests and their founder, Cardinal Herbert Vaughn. These priests were known as missionaries and assigned to St. Francis Xavier Church in December 1871. Immediately activities around the church showed a marked increase. On Sunday mornings there were three Masses instead of two, a priest house was opened and completely furnished on Courtland Street. A home for the aged poor was started and an orphanage was operated. A night school was opened for adults; an industrial school was held in the basement of the church and a lending library was held in the priest house.

Although some of the organizations of St. Francis Church had a short life, there was a consistent effort on the part of the priest and parishioners to better themselves spiritually and educationally. On Sundays, the priest would urge the congregation to send their children to the day and Sunday school in the basement of the church and to come to night school themselves.

The parents helped in the endeavors of the parish by giving oysters suppers and fish fries and other activities to buy books and pencils for the school children.

By 1894, the Mill Hill Fathers had formed an order named "The Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus," known as the Josephite Fathers.

Father Charles Uncles, a Black priest and a Baltimorean was one of the original members of the Josephites.

St. Francis Xavier Church moved from Calvert and Pleasant Streets in 1932. The church took up residence on Eager and Caroline Streets and in 1968 moved to its present location, Caroline and Oliver Streets.

Agnes Kane Callum
Historian for St. Francis Xavier Church
Baltimore, Maryland