

**Connections –
Saint Augustine Parish
and Holy Trinity Parish
by Sybil Templeman Williams and Dena D. Grant**

A light of hope, faith, and charity shined brightly in the basement of Saint Matthew's Church back in the 1850s, where free and enslaved Colored Catholics of Washington, D.C., were forced to worship. The spirit of physical freedom, educational freedom, freedom of fellowship, and freedom of worship was growing strongly.

These individuals did not live in a vacuum but lived in clusters around the city as neighbors, and they worked together in different government jobs at various agencies. W. T. Benjamin, Gabriel Coakley, and Benjamin Coakley, for example, were employed at the Government Printing Office, W. H. Smith at the Library of Congress, and others worked as messengers at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These men were the founding members of present-day Saint Augustine Parish. (1) The men had skills as cabinetmakers, plasterers, and brickmakers. The women worked as dressmakers, teachers, and servants. They socialized together as a community for the betterment of each other, sometimes secretly as in the Colored Union Benevolent Association, founded in 1838, which established Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery in 1870. St. Augustine Parish founder Thomas Bowie was buried in that cemetery.

The light for freedom of worship as a community was also shining over the Georgetown area at Holy Trinity Parish. Holy Trinity parishioners, or members of their families, were also founders of St. Augustine Parish. Henry A. Jackson and his family are among these founders. (2) Joseph A. Jackson was one of Henry's ten children. His wife, Ada Cole, originally worshipped at Holy Trinity. In fact, she is buried at Holy Trinity's Holy Rood cemetery. (3) Her parents were John and Mary Cole. John Cole, like many members of the Jackson family, sang in the Saint Augustine Parish choir. (4) Raphael and Margaret Dodson Cole were Ada Cole's grandparents. Margaret Dodson Cole rented a pew at Holy Trinity between 1872 and 1881. Raphael's brother Benjamin Cole was baptized at Holy Trinity and is buried at Holy Rood cemetery. Ada's great grandmother, Mariah (Marie) was born around 1802 and died in 1881. She lived at 3337

S St., N.W., two blocks from 3336 Q St., N.W. where her daughter-in-law Margaret lived.

Jane Hall and Margaret Gray, two single women who are on the St. Augustine Parish founders' list, are also buried at Holy Rood Cemetery and thus had Holy Trinity connections. (5)

Many members of the Smallwood family are connected both to Holy Trinity and to St. Augustine Parish. Jane Warren, who along with her father Henry Warren is on the St. Augustine Parish founders' list, married John Smallwood. John and Jane Smallwood both had Holy Trinity connections. Henry Warren lived 106 years and in his early days played the violin at the Willard Hotel. Jane Warren Smallwood was a soprano soloist for the Saint Augustine Parish choir, which was directed by John Esputa, who also directed the United States Marine Band. Esputa trained the choir members to perform many classical operettas. Not only did they perform at Sunday Mass, but they also gave concerts to raise money to support the church. In 1873 the members of the Saint Augustine Parish choir formed the Colored American Opera Company, the first opera company of African Americans in the world.

The Coakleys were another large family with Holy Trinity-St. Augustine Parish connections. Lucy Coakley, who was a vendor at the Georgetown Market, and her husband Francis, along with their children, worshiped at Holy Trinity. In fact, Lucy was married there in 1824 and baptized at least eight of her ten children at Holy Trinity. She rented pews from 1842 on in the original church and from 1851 to 1876 in the main church. Her daughter Frances rented a pew at Holy Trinity in the 1880s and 1890s. Francis, Lucy, Frances, and Martha Coakley are buried at Holy Rood Cemetery. (6) Two of Francis and Lucy Coakley's sons, Richard and William, fought in the Civil War. Four of their daughters, Magdalen, Frances, Cecilia, and Martha, were dressmakers like their mother. Magdalen and Phillip Coakley are listed among the founders of St. Augustine Parish. Even though the family struggled to pay the taxes on their Georgetown home, the two siblings contributed to the upkeep of Saint Augustine's.

Education was paramount to the members of both congregations. Ann Marie Becraft of Georgetown and a member of Holy Trinity, opened a school for children of color in a house on Dumbarton Street, N.W. She later entered the convent of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first order of women of color in the United States. She

took the name Sister Mary Aloysius. (7) Eliza Ann Cook, the first principal of Blessed Martin de Porres School, the forerunner to St. Augustine's School, and herself a founder of St. Augustine Parish, studied with the Oblate Sisters of Providence as well. She came from a prominent African American family that opened free schools in the District of Columbia. These women and their families were surely connected with each other.

For the founders of what came to be St. Augustine Parish, their school was the first consideration. In 1858 they established a school in the old Smothers Schoolhouse, located at the corner of 14th and H Streets. Since only those who could afford to pay were charged, fundraisers and donations were the order of the day. In 1864, Gabriel Coakley and his wife Mary approached President Abraham Lincoln for permission to have a big fundraiser on the lawn of the White House. Mary Coakley was a dressmaker for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and worked in the White House. President Lincoln gave his consent, and the event, popularly known as the Strawberry Festival, was held on Monday, July 4, 1864. Some 1,500 people from the city attended the fundraiser, including the Catholic Sunday Schools from Saint Matthew's, Saint Patrick's, Saint Aloysius, Saint Peter's, St. Dominick's, and Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, and Sunday School Associations from Baptist and other Protestant churches. In October 1864 construction was started on two buildings, located on 15th Street just above L Street, to house a school and a chapel named after Blessed Martin de Porres. The first Mass there was celebrated on February 11, 1866. (8)

Many African American parishioners initially chose to remain at Saint Matthew's, but the congregation at Blessed Martin de Porres soon numbered nearly 200 adults, and on July 23, 1867, Fr. Felix Barrotti was appointed pastor. By the early 1870s the congregation had grown to some 1,500 members and the little chapel, even with the addition of an annex in 1867, was proving much too small for all the members of the parish. With a promise of financial help from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, it was decided that a new church had to be built. The cornerstone of the new church – Saint Augustine's – built on the site of Blessed Martin de Porres Church, was laid on June 14, 1874. The church was dedicated on June 11, 1876. (9) This was accomplished by many fundraisers led by Mary Harrison and men like John West, a plasterer who performed much of the manual labor. This strong sense of community fellowship made the lives of

the city's Black Catholics meaningful and eased the burden of the work, for how else could you explain the fact that they worked a long hard day and then in the evening would come together on the many tasks that they performed for the church. They had choir practices and concerts to perform. They had picnics and festivals to organize. They were involved in the local Republican party. They established many organizations within the church – the Holy Name Society, the Colored Catholic Male Benevolent Society, Blessed Martin's Educational Society, the Sodality, the Association of Sunday School Teachers, the Rosary Society, the Ladies Mutual Relief Association, the Ladies Tobias Society, the Catholic Beneficial Society, the Knights of St. Augustine, and the Children of Mary to name a few.

Under one roof they were a family of one.

Notes

1. For a list of the Founding Members of the Congregation, see Morris J. MacGregor, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1999), p. 520.

2. Ibid.

3. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/136502172/ada-b-jackson>, memorial page for Ada B. Cole Jackson (1873- Aug. 30, 1907), Find a Grave Memorial ID 136502172, Holy Rood Cemetery, Washington, D.C.

4. MacGregor, *Emergence of a Black Catholic Community*, pp. 496, 161.

5. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/103179098/jane-hall>, memorial page for Jane Hall (1831-Mar. 29, 1891), Find a Grave Memorial ID 103179098, Holy Rood Cemetery; <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/195609615/margaret-gray>, memorial page for Margaret Gray (1858-Dec. 23, 1903), Find a Grave Memorial ID 195609615,

Holy Rood Cemetery.

6. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/198874371/francis-d-coakley>, memorial page for Francis D. Coakley (1799-Nov. 8, 1875), Find a Grave Memorial ID 198874371, Holy Rood Cemetery;

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/141633207/frances-ellen-coakley>, memorial page for Frances Ellen “Fannie” Coakley (unknown-Feb. 16, 1906), Find a Grave Memorial ID 141633207, Holy Rood Cemetery;

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/142784284/martha-s-coakley>, memorial page for Martha S. “Margaret” Coakley (1843-Mar. 28, 1912), Find a Grave Memorial ID 142784284, Holy Rood Cemetery; District of Columbia Deaths, 1874-1961,

<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F7T6-PWG>, Lucy Coakley, Aug. 12, 1879, District of Columbia, United States, citing reference ID 21312, District Records Center, Washington D.C., microfilm 2,135,669. See Peter J. Albert, “Climbing the Back Stairs,’ Segregated Seating at Holy Trinity,” above.

7. See Peter J. Albert and Bernard A. Cook, “Anne Marie Becraft – Pathmaker,” above.

8. MacGregor, *Emergence of a Black Catholic Community*, pp. 1-4, 34, 40-41; *Washington Evening Star*, July 5, 1864.

9. MacGregor, *Emergence of a Black Catholic Community*, pp. 43, 51, 63-64, 79, 82, 88.