

**African American Marriages and Baptisms
at Holy Trinity, 1795-1815
by Peter J. Albert**

Rejoice! . . .

*If you were only sensible of yr happiness,
well contented with yr condition!
You are free from innumerable cares of the world
& supposing you live in a regular Christian Family
art in an easy road to eternal felicity in the world to come.*

*(from a sermon to enslaved African Americans
given by John Lewis, S.J., Annapolis, Md., 1761)*

Our sacramental registers – the chronological handwritten records of marriages and baptisms preserved in our archives – give us invaluable glimpses into the lives of our early African American brothers and sisters in faith at Holy Trinity.

The very first entry in our sacramental registers, dated January 1, 1795, records the marriage of Philis to David Thomas. Tellingly, while it stipulates that Philis was “a negro,” a “slave,” and the “property of Elizabeth Doyle” (the widow of Alexander Doyle, a key figure in the founding of Holy Trinity), it leaves unmentioned the fact that David Thomas was a free Black man. His free status is not recorded in our registers until 1801, in the entry for the baptism of his daughter Harriett (written “Harriot”). The record of their marriage reads as follows: *(editor’s note: The spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in the transcriptions that follow are rendered as found in the original.)* (1)

January 1 – 1795

*Married in the College chapel David Thomas to Philis a negro slave property of
Elizabeth Doyle of G. Town –*

Witnesses

James Byrne –

Robin –

Format of the Entries

Between 1795 and 1815 there were 58 marriages recorded in our sacramental registers where individuals were identified as African American, using descriptors like “slave,” “col’d” or “colored,” “property of,” “belonging to,” or the like. (2) These entries follow a more-or-less set formula – date, then the couple’s names, then sometimes a note to indicate whether the individuals were enslaved or free. If enslaved, there was often mention of the person who claimed to own them and who had given them permission to marry. Lastly, the entry recorded the names of witnesses. This entry exemplifies the format: (3)

April 6th 1795

Married Nancy slave property of Wm Digges to Benjimen slave property of Mr Notton with licence from their Masters.

F. N. – (4)

*witnesses Jack a slave
James Spalding*

Permissions to Marry

This formula was soon modified, however, and the fact that the enslavers had given permission for the marriage came to be given more prominence, coming even before the names of the couple being married: (5)

[n.d.] with Licence from respective proprietor[s] Married Jerry, slave of J. Theldkeld, to Margaret slave of Ann Sanders, before Many Witnesses –

Liddy Butler

*Margaret slave of Ann Sanders
Grand Mother of the bride*

In fact, in 1816 Bishop Leonard Neale cautioned a priest in Norfolk, Virginia: “You cannot marry Slaves belonging to different masters without first obtaining leave from

both & a promis not to seperate man & wife afterwards.” (6)

Examples of permissions to marry can be viewed online at the Georgetown Slavery Archive site. These two, for the marriage of William Correy and Mary Coffee, date from 1831: (7)

Washington Augt. 22-1831

Reverend Sir, The bearer William Correy have my permitson to get married to the woman belonging to Miss Eliason

Sarah Waters

I give full permission to the above William to marry my servant woman Mary Coffee.

Maria Eliason

Aug 22d. [1831]

The importance of permissions to marry – and the importance of the sanction of Black marriages by the Church – is evident in the recurrence of the enslaved among the African Americans listed in Holy Trinity’s early marriage registers. Of the 58 marriages involving Black couples recorded in our registers between 1795 and 1815, 43 (74%) were between two enslaved people, and nine more (16%) were between an enslaved and a free African American. Only six (10%) were between two free or possibly free (the records in some cases are unclear) Black individuals – “Nigri sed liberi” (Black but free), as noted in the November 29, 1807, entry for the marriage of Joseph Lee and Mary Countee. (8)

When enslaved African Americans sought permission to marry in the Church, some enslavers might hesitate to sanction such weddings, since “church recognition of slave marriages subsequently bolstered the claims of slaves as they bargained for privileges to maintain their relationships with their spouses.” (9) Consequently, as mentioned above, where permissions could be secured from enslavers, they were carefully noted in the record of the marriage.

Witnesses

The witnesses of record at African American marriages were usually members of

the Black community, although enslavers might also serve: (10)

[April 9, 1804] with licence from respective Masters Viz Charles Boarman & George Fenwick Married Sam & Henny before their Masters & many other witnesses

Enslaved and free African Americans might both appear as witnesses at marriages: (11)

April 3. 1803 with Licence from their Master James Neville married Richard procter & Liddy Green before these witnesses

*Liddy Butler
slaves – Pol, Suck &c*

Some members of the Black community served as witnesses at more than one of the marriages recorded in our sacramental registers. Liddy and Lucy Butler, for example, who appeared so often as sponsors in Holy Trinity's baptismal records, were called upon again, with Lucy a witness at three marriages and Liddy at five. Various members of the enslaved community at Holy Trinity (Anastasia, Charles, Edward, Milly, Samuel, and Susanna, for example) also apparently served more than once, although this is difficult to establish definitively since only their first names are given in the record. Of course, members of the bride's or groom's families also served as witnesses: (12)

April 13, 1800

Married with permission from Master & Mistress Viz Mr Joseph Semmes & Miss Mary Doyne. George. & Monica before the following witnesses

*Charles Pater [father] spouse
Anne Mater [mother] spouse
Ralph Butler &c –*

Sometimes an entire family or the larger community might witness a wedding:
(13)

May 3d 1801

Married with liberty from Mrs Mary Fenwick her two slaves William & Sarah before the greatest part of ther family –

Or, again: (14)

1807 April 12. Married with liberty from respective owners (Viz Mr Clemt Sewall & Miss Eliza Lee) jerard & lucy before a great number of persons in Trinity Church

as also before Richard Queen.

Ignatius Clarke –

Children

Holy Trinity's sacramental registers record the baptisms of over 260 African American children born in the years between 1795 and 1815, and being able to link the names of children with their parents enables us to begin to reconstruct the outlines of individual Black families in this period. (15) For example, we can find in the registers the baptisms of as many as three of the children of David Thomas and Philis, who was now enslaved by Elizabeth Doyle's brother, Adam King, a parish trustee. Since Philis was enslaved, her three daughters were born into slavery: (16)

Augt.20.1797 Baptized Maria Eliza 2 months o[ld] born of Thomas a freeman & Phiniss [Philis] a slave of Adam King

God Mother. Lucy Butler

[June 7. 1800] Baptized Hariot born May 3. 1800 of David Thomas free man & Philis slave. Propty of Adam King

God Mother Catherine Dingo

*April 26. 1807 – Christened Sarah Ann born April 1806 (Batized by Bishop Neale.)
Father named David Thomas a free man. Mother Philis slave property of Adam King*

God Mother Henny Ware

Enslaved or Free

While over 60 of the children's parents in the baptismal registers in this period were designated as free, over 240 were designated as enslaved, and coupled with their names in the registers are the names of their enslavers. For example: (17)

*June 18. 1815. Baptised Jane black daughr of Math. and Jany belngng to Bp. Neale
[born?] June 12. 1815.*

God Mother Mary of Mr. Franck Fenwick

As we saw exemplified in the marriage records quoted above, in the marriages of Benjamin and Nancy, Margaret and Jerry, Mary Coffee and William Correy, Henny and Sam, Monica and George, and Lucy and Gerard – in fact in the cases of a quarter or more of the enslaved couples – the husband and wife were held by different enslavers.

The baptismal registers from 1795 to 1815 also indicate that some 60 of the Black parents were free. Sometimes both were free. For example: (18)

April 4 [1798].

*Baptized Charles Thomas born February 27, 1798 of Gustavus & Patty Thomas free
negros living George Town*

Sponsors George Sibore

Patience Sibore

But in many cases, only one partner was free and the other was enslaved, as we saw, above, with David Thomas and Philis. We see it again here: (19)

February 26. 1797

*Baptized Jered a slave born of Gustavus Butler, a free man, & Linder slave servt. to Mr.
Arnold Newton G.T. The child born 30 January 1797.*

God Mother Lucy Butler

And here: (20)

[c. Sept. 11, 1803]

Thomas born 20 June 1803 of Thomas slave & Ann Robison a free woman

Sponsors George & Patience Siboure

And here: (21)

7 April. [1812] baptized John Silicy Son of John Slicy belonging to Mr. Clarke, and of Betzy Slicy free, born last good Fridy.

God Mother Lithy Buttler

Godmothers

Also important to note here are the godparents, usually godmothers, enslaved or free, whose presence often signified important relationships that insured ongoing care of children in case of their separation from parents. (22) It was not unusual for the same woman to be named a godmother in multiple baptisms – between 1795 and 1815, for example, Patience Sibore was named a godmother in 18 baptisms, Lucy Butler in 21, and Liddy Butler in 22.

These names on the fading pages in our archives offer us traces of the lives of many of the African American co-founders of our parish. Occasionally a name recurs – we find David Thomas and Philis, for example, in the marriage register and, as parents, in the record of several of their daughters' baptisms, and Lucy and Liddy Butler served repeatedly as godmothers. Since few of them appear in the federal censuses, our sacramental registers offer some of the only evidence we have of the living fabric of relationships that knit together the African American community at Holy Trinity.

The Thomas Family

It is through the sacramental registers, for example, that we can discover that the Thomas family was part of the fabric of Holy Trinity for over a century. David and Philis's

daughter Eliza (enslaved by Mr. King; she was later manumitted and the 1830 census recorded her as a free woman) married George Plant (enslaved by Dr. Thornton) at Holy Trinity in 1817, and at least four of their children were baptized here, Mary Henrietta in 1818, John Washington Alexander in 1824, George Alexander in 1827, and Matthew in 1830. Two other children who appear in our death records – George, “a child” who died in 1822, and William who died in 1831 at the age of nine – were buried in the College Ground Cemetery on the Georgetown campus. (23) David and Philis’s daughter Harriett Thomas married Thomas Jefferson, a free Black man, at Holy Trinity in 1828. Their twins, born in 1829 (George Washington and Mary Eliza) were baptized here. Harriett died after giving birth and was buried in the College Ground. Her daughter Mary Eliza Jefferson married Georgetown butcher Theodore Chisley at Holy Trinity in 1853, and their daughter Elizabeth was born around 1856. Theodore died in 1861, but Mary continued to work as a domestic and later roomed a block from the church. Her neighbors included Epiphany parish founders James Smackum, Cecelia Creek, and Joseph Dodson. She died in 1918, and both she and Theodore are buried at Holy Rood Cemetery. (24)

Shepherds of the Community

We see the pattern of trusted Black women accompanying their flocks at baptisms and weddings, and assisting them in other ways as well – for example, by placing advertisements on their behalf in local newspapers (25) – was echoed in other Black Georgetown communities besides Holy Trinity’s. In 1842, for example, a group of free African American and Native American women formed the Female Union Band Society to help members financially in the case of illness, and with a grave plot and a stipend to cover funeral expenses in case of death. The leadership of African American women was echoed again in the role of Getrude Turner Waters, Cecelia Dodson Creek, and Eleanora Jackson among others in the founding of Epiphany Catholic Church.

Holy Trinity’s early sacramental registers thus offer us invaluable fragments of evidence, enabling us to discover clues to the lives of the African American co-founders of our parish and their families, hints of their extensive networks of relationship. Looking in these records we can only see, as it were, through a glass dimly, but they enable us,

nevertheless, to begin to discern the presence of our Black brothers and sisters from so long ago, and the shape of their lives here in our parish as it grew.

Notes

1. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., p. 1, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557003/MARB1795_05.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

2. See “African Americans Identified in Holy Trinity Parish Marriage Records, 1795-1869,” <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/HT-Black-marriages-chron.pdf>.

3. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, p. 5.

4. Francis Neale, S.J.

5. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, p. 70.

6. “Bishop Neale to Fr. Lucas on the Regulations for Slave Marriages, April 1816,” Georgetown Slavery Archive, item 360, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/404>.

7. “Permissions to Marry, 1831-32,” Georgetown University Library, Georgetown Slavery Archive, item 441, <https://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/521>.

8. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections,

Washington, D.C., p. 3,

https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557004/MAR_1806_71.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

9. Mary Elizabeth Corrigan, "A Social Union of Heart and Effort: The African-American Family in the District of Columbia on the Eve of Emancipation," Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1996, p. 247.

10. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, p. 112.

11. Ibid., p. 102.

12. Ibid., p. 60.

13. Ibid., p. 77.

14. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, p. 1.

15. See "African Americans Identified in Holy Trinity Parish Baptism Records, 1795-1805," <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/HT-db-Black-baptisms-chron.pdf>, and "African Americans Identified in Holy Trinity Parish Baptism Records, 1805-1818," <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/HT-db-Black-baptisms-1805-chron.pdf>.

16. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, pp. 24, 87; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, p. 25, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/556990>.

17. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, p. 58.

18. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, p. 39.

19. Ibid., p. 18.

20. Ibid., p. 106.

21. Ibid., Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, p. 42.

22. Mary Elizabeth Corrigan, "A Social Union of Heart and Effort: The African-American Family in the District of Columbia on the Eve of Emancipation," Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1996, p. 274.

23. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, n.p.; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, pp. 72, 90, 146, 178; Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, pp. 12, 50; *District of Columbia Free Negro Registers, 1821-1861*, ed. Dorothy S. Provine, 2 vols. (Bowie, Md., 1996), registration no. 1388.

24. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, p. 19, 90; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, p. 175; Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, p. 38; *National Republican*, Oct. 12, 1861; burial information for Mary Chisley can be found at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/252264921/mary-j-chisley> and for Theodore Chisley at https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/178631294/theodore_chisley.

25. See, for example, the advertisement placed by Lucy Butler for the services of a wet nurse in the community in the *Daily National Journal*, Feb. 3 and 8, 1826, and the *Daily National Intelligencer*, Feb. 9 and 11, 1826.