

Anne Marie Becraft — Pathmaker
by Peter J. Albert and Bernard A. Cook

In 2017, the oldest building on the Georgetown University campus was renamed Becraft Hall to honor an extraordinary African American woman, “one of the foremothers of social activism in Black Washington.” (1) The building had previously been named for William McSherry, S.J., the Jesuit Provincial and Georgetown president (1837-39) who had overseen the mass sale of 272 enslaved people from Jesuit farms in Maryland to three plantations in Louisiana. Who was this woman?

Anne Marie Becraft (1805-33), a pathmaking African American educator in Georgetown and an early member of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, was the eldest child of William (1778-1859) and Sarah McDaniel (or McDonald) Becraft (1790-1866). Both of her parents were free Blacks. Becraft family tradition held that William Becraft’s mother, a free Black woman, had worked in the household of Charles Carroll of Carrollton – signer of the Declaration of Independence and cousin of the founder of Georgetown University, Bishop John Carroll – and that Carroll had fathered William. Extensive research in the Carroll Papers has yielded no evidence to confirm this nor any record that a Becraft worked in the Carroll household. The comprehensive printed edition of the Carroll papers notes a Peter Becraft as an enslaving tenant from the 1750s until about 1770 on the principal Carroll plantation, Doohoragen Manor, located at Elk Ridge, Maryland. (2)

William Becraft came to Georgetown in the 1790s and appears in Holy Trinity’s pew rent records from 1831 to 1851. He became chief steward at the Union Hotel in Georgetown. Anne Marie’s sister Caroline rented a pew at Holy Trinity from 1851 to 1868. Both William and Sarah Becraft were buried at the parish’s Holy Rood Cemetery. (3)

William and Sarah Becraft’s children, Anne Marie’s siblings, included William (1813-41), James (1816-28), Rosetta (1818-39), Susan (1819-34), Caroline (1819-79), Sara (b. 1821), John Joseph (b. 1822), and Julia Ann (d. 1847?). (Missing dates in this list are due to gaps and omissions in the early records.) Of these children, the baptisms of William, Susan, Sara, and John are noted in our baptismal records; the wedding of

Julia Ann is noted in our marriage records. James and Susan were buried in the College Ground cemetery on the Georgetown campus; William, Rosetta, Caroline, and Julia Ann were buried at Holy Rood; and James and Susan were subsequently moved to Holy Rood from the College Ground. (4)

At age 7 Anne Marie began attending a school for African American children established in Washington by an Englishman named Henry Potter. The next year she enrolled in a different school, newly founded by an English woman, Mary Billing, located on Dunbarton (now Dumbarton) St., across from what is now Dumbarton United Methodist Church. In 1820, Potter took over the Dunbarton St. school – Billing having left to start another school – and the same year, at age 15, Anne Marie began teaching on Dunbarton St. (5)

In 1827, Anne Marie opened a boarding-and-day school for African American girls on Fayette (now 35th) St., just across from Visitation convent. Known as the Georgetown Seminary, it enrolled 30 to 35 students yearly and had the support of John Van Lommel, S.J., assistant, then pastor at Holy Trinity. The school, it is said, was also supported by sisters from Visitation, who provided material assistance and classroom instruction. Fr. Van Lommel himself ran a school for African American boys three days a week in a small house near Holy Trinity. Amid the heightened tensions following Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Virginia, however, and the growing White hostility to educating African Americans, both the Georgetown Seminary and Fr. Van Lommel's school closed in 1833. (6)

While teaching, Anne Marie was also engaged in parish activities at Holy Trinity. Stephen Dubuisson, S.J. (Holy Trinity's pastor, 1825-26, 1831-33), wrote that she "worked trimmings for [the] Alter [sic] and for an Alb." In addition, she served as godmother in at least three baptisms: of Mary Ann Williams in 1822, the daughter of James and Mary Williams, and of George Morris Barker in 1827 and Louis Theodore Barker in 1829, the sons of Andrew and Rebecca Marks Barker. Rebecca Barker, who was White, was raised from childhood at Visitation; her husband, Andrew, was a free Black man. (7)

Anne Marie left her school in the fall of 1831 to join the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore. The Oblates, founded in 1828, were the first successful

religious order of women established by and for African Americans. Anne Marie took the name Sister Mary Aloysius in honor of the Jesuit saint Aloysius Gonzaga. Choosing Aloysius as her religious name may have indicated her attachment to the Jesuits, or perhaps her fragile health – Aloysius Gonzaga died at 23.

As Sister Aloysius, Anne Marie taught English, arithmetic, and embroidery to African American girls at the Oblates' school in Baltimore, but having long suffered from what was described as “a chest ailment,” she was forced to enter the Oblate infirmary in October 1833. She died there on Dec. 16. Days later, on Dec. 25, her sister Susan entered the order as a postulant, only to be forced by her own illness – consumption – to leave the community the next year and return to her parents' home, where she died in November 1834. (8)

Notes

1. Tamika Y. Nunley, *At the Threshold of Liberty: Women, Slavery, & Shifting Identities in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill, 2021), p. 104.

2. George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885), 2:195; Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. C. S. Smith (Nashville, 1891), pp. 460-61; Shannen Dee Williams, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle* (Durham, N.C., 2022), p. 30; Mary Jeske, editor of the Charles Carroll of Carrollton Papers, to Peter J. Albert, Nov. 29, 2022; *Dear Papa, Dear Charley*, Ronald Hoffman, Sally D. Mason, and Eleanor S. Darcy, eds., 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, 2001), 1:1, 2:515, 517n, 519, 527, 530, 590, 649.

3. “Galleries – Blacks” in “Receipts – Pew Rent (1831-33),” Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, box 101, folder 14, Georgetown University Archives, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C.; see also “Pew Rent (1831-33),” box 101, folder 9, *ibid.*; Pew Rent Records, 1842-51, Holy Trinity Church Archives, Georgetown Univ. Arch., Booth Center, box 6, folder 3; “Pew rents of

the colored [sic] people,” in Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 4; “Colored Persons,” in Pew Rent Records, 1871-80, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 3, folder 2; burial information for the Becraft family can be found at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/103856629/william-becraft>.

4. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center, pp. 10, 36, 48, 58, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/556990>; Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, pp. 35, 60, 79, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA_1818_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, pp. 29-30, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557004/MAR_1806_71.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Kent Cooper to Peter J. Albert, May 30, June 2, and June 3, 2023. Julia Ann Becraft married Plato Ferris (or Farris), a free Black man, in 1832 at Holy Trinity. Later widowed, she married Daniel Alexander Payne, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1847. She died in childbirth within the year, and her infant daughter died months later. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville, 1888), p. 92.

5. Williams, *History of the Negro Race*, 2:195; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia*, Submitted to the Senate June, 1868, and to the House, with Additions, June 13, 1870. House Ex. Docs., no. 315, 41st Cong., 2d sess., pp. 198-99, 205.

6. Williams, *History of the Negro Race*, 2:195-96; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education*, pp. 204-5; Morris J. MacGregor, *The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1999), pp. 29-30; Sr. Mada-Anne Gell, V.H.M., Georgetown Visitation Monastery archivist, to Peter J. Albert and Bernard A. Cook, Oct. 20, 2021.

7. "Names of persons who have been benefactors and given donations within 5 years. to Trinity Church," Arch. Maryland Province, box 48, folder 5; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, pp. 46, 133, 168; Dorita Sewell to Peter J. Albert, Nov. 6, 2022.

8. Williams, *History of the Negro Race*, 2:196; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education*, pp. 205; MacGregor, *Emergence of a Black Catholic Community*, p. 30; Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill, 2002), pp. 61, 82.