The Butler Sisters

by Bernard A. Cook

African Americans, both enslaved and freed, were members of Holy Trinity parish from its inception. In the early nineteenth century perhaps a third of Holy Trinity's parishioners were Black. (1) According to Mary Beth Corrigan, "Between 1800 and 1845, blacks accounted for one out of three baptisms and one out of four marriages at Holy Trinity in Georgetown." (2)

The faith and zeal of Black Holy Trinity parishioners, despite the racism they confronted, is astonishing. The service of Black women as godparents of both enslaved and free Black children – between 1795 and 1845, Black women comprised over 90% of all the Black godparents at Holy Trinity – reflected the esteem, trust, and affection in which they were held and underscored their important role in the Black community. (3) Two freed African American women who served as godparents, Lucy and Liddy Butler, had a significant impact upon the parish during its early years. They, and many other Butlers, were members of the parish from its earliest years.

The Butler family had won their freedom after protracted litigation. Lucy and Liddy Butler were apparently great granddaughters of Eleanor, "Irish Nell," a White indentured servant who had married Charles Butler, an enslaved man, in a Catholic ceremony in 1681. Members of the Butler family petitioned the Maryland Court of Appeals for their freedom on the basis that their great grandmother was a free White woman. After protracted litigation, the Court granted their appeals. (4)

The historian William Warner writes that Lucy and Liddy Butler "did more to bring together a strongly committed Black Catholic community than the combined efforts of the church itself or the white laity." (5) During the parish's first quarter century, the two sisters served as godmothers to 65 of the Black children, both enslaved and free, who were baptized in the parish. Between 1795 and 1804, members of the Butler family were sponsors at over 40% of the baptisms of Black children at Holy Trinity where the names of sponsors were recorded. (5)

Lucy Butler died on November 25, 1821, and was buried the next day in the College Ground Cemetery. (6) That burial ground, also known as the Trinity Burial

Ground or the Old Burial Ground, was established in 1818. It was located on Georgetown's campus, about 100 feet north of where Copley Hall stands today. Before burials in that location ended in 1833, it is estimated that some 1,000 Holy Trinity parishioners and persons enslaved by the university were buried there. During the construction of Copley Hall, the disused burial ground was uncovered. Some human remains discovered at that time and, in 1953 during further construction at the university, were reinterred at Holy Rood Cemetery or at Mount Olivet Cemetery, but the historian Carlton Fletcher believes that as many as 850 bodies were never removed and remain under Red Square and adjacent buildings. (7)

Liddy Butler, who died on January 28, 1834, at the age of 80, was buried in the new parish cemetery, then called the Upper Grave Yard but later, with subsequent additions, named Holy Rood Cemetery. (8) The records of Holy Trinity parish list 500 African Americans, free and enslaved, buried in Holy Rood. However, Carlton Fletcher estimates that the actual number of African Americans buried in segregated sections of Holy Rood is closer to 1,000. (9)

The tradition of women standing as baptismal sponsors continued well into the nineteenth century, with 72 Black women serving repeatedly as godmothers at Holy Trinity down to 1845. Twelve of these women served as sponsors to children in from eight to sixteen different families. Nor was their parish leadership limited simply to serving as godmothers – 35 of them were members of at least one of the three parish voluntary organizations, and 10 belonged to all three. (10)

Notes

1. William W. Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors: Catholics and Catholicism in the National Capital 1787-1860* (Washington, D.C.: 1994), p. 88.

2. Mary Beth Corrigan, "Making the Most of an Opportunity: Slaves and the Catholic Church in Early Washington" in *Washington History* 12 (2000): 98, citing Margaret H. McAleer, "The Other Congregation: Patterns of Black Catholic Worship at

Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, D.C., 1795-1845," unpublished seminar paper, Georgetown University, 1986, pp. 14 and 25.

3. McAleer, "The Other Congregation," pp. 31-32.

4. More about the Butler family and Irish Nell may be found in the Maryland State Archives at msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/000500/000534/html/00534bio .html and in Aaron B. Wilkinson, "Blurring the Lines of Race and Freedom: Mulattoes in English Colonial North America and the Early United States Republic," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013, pp. 135 ff., escholarship.org/uc/item/1hv4k2bc. It cannot be determined when Lucy and Lydia Butler gained their freedom. According to *O Say Can You See, Early Washington D.C. Law and Family*, one Lucy Butler gained her freedom from Benedict Wheeler of Charles County in 1790, and another achieved her freedom from James Atwood of Montgomery County in 1792. A Lydia Butler gained her freedom from James Carrico of Charles County in 1790, a second achieved her freedom from Nicholas Swingle of Washington County in 1792, and a third filed a freedom suit against Anne Digges in 1788. See https://earlywashingtondc.org/families/butler.

5. Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors,* p. 91; Holy Trinity Church, Marriages and Baptisms, 1795-1805, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557003/MARB1795_0 5.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-1834, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/556990.

6. Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, p. 10,

https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA_1818_67
.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

7. Carlton Fletcher, "Burial Grounds of Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, D.C."
Newsletter of the Catholic Historical Society of Washington (July–September 2002).
gloverparkhistory.com/cemeteries/holy-rood-cemetery/holy-rood-cemetery/; Fletcher,
"Holy Rood Cemetery," *Glover Park History: Historical Sketches of Glover Park, Upper
Georgetown, and Georgetown Heights by Carlton Fletcher,*
https://gloverparkhistory.com/cemeteries/holy-rood-cemetery/holy-rood-cemetery/;
Fletcher*, "*Slave Burials in Holy Rood Cemetery," *Glover Park History: Historical
Sketches of Glover Park, Upper Georgetown, and Georgetown Heights by Carlton
Fletcher,* https://gloverparkhistory.com/cemeteries/holy-rood-cemetery/slave-burials/,
and "Holy Trinity Catholic Church (Washington, D.C.),"
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Trinity_Catholic_Church_(Washington, D.C.).

8. Holy Trinity Church, Deaths 1818-67, p. 57.

9. Carlton Fletcher*,* "African Americans Buried at Holy Rood Cemetery," *Glover
Park History: Historical Sketches of Glover Park, Upper Georgetown, and Georgetown
Heights by Carlton Fletcher,* https://gloverparkhistory.com/cemeteries/holy-rood-
cemetery/african-americans-buried-in-holy-rood-cemetery/.

10. McAleer, "The Other Congregation," p. 34.