

**Holy Trinity's African American Community  
and the Cholera Epidemic of 1832**

**by Peter J. Albert**

*A New Grave Yard was bought by Fr. S. Dubuisson,  
on the 14th. of August, 1832 . . .*

*The first Range . . . lies South of the Centre Alley . . . & is for White People  
who can afford but half pay.*

*The 2d. Range . . . lies South of the 1st. Range . . . & is for White People  
who can afford to pay full price for the use of the Ground . . .*

*The first range north of the Centre Alley is for White people  
who cannot afford to pay for the use of the Ground . . .*

*The 2d. range . . . is for Coloured people  
who are able to pay . . .*

*The 3d. range . . . is for Coloured people  
who can only afford to pay half . . .*

*The 4th. range . . . is for Coloured people  
who cannot pay for the ground.*

(Deaths. Holy Trinity Church Congregation. Georgetown, D.C.)

In the summer of 1832, Washingtonians read with horrified fascination the news of a deadly cholera epidemic sweeping inexorably towards them. First reported in Asia in 1829, the disease had arrived in Moscow by 1830, in Poland and Germany by 1831, and in London by early 1832. Jumping the Atlantic barrier, it was in New York by June 1832 and in Philadelphia by July. "We collect in our columns to-day all the information we can lay our hands upon relating to the dreadful malady whose appearance may now be daily expected among us," a Washington newspaper reported to its readers. (1)

Cholera's symptoms were terrifying – acute diarrhea, spasmodic vomiting, painful cramps, then chills, dehydration, and a darkening and puckering of the skin. Death could come within hours of the first onset of symptoms. Killing roughly half of those who became infected, its causes were a mystery, and there were no known remedies. (2)

“To see individuals well in the morning & buried before night . . . is something which is appalling to the boldest heart,” wrote one observer. (3) Newspapers advised their readers to avoid tobacco, alcohol, “miasma” or unhealthy air, all fruits and vegetables, and any excitement, “for that will bring on the disease.” (4)

While it claimed fewer victims than tuberculosis or malaria, and its grip on Washington was brief (it had vanished by November), the disease was “novel and terrifying.” The city’s Irish and German immigrant communities were devastated, and the African American community was hard hit as well. (5)

*The Daily National Intelligencer* reported the first cases in the city on Aug. 22, 1832. Holy Trinity’s records, kept by pastor Stephen Dubuisson, S.J., noted the first cholera death in the parish on Aug. 29 with the passing of George, an enslaved man. (6) Although the parish at this time was roughly a third Black, Fr. Dubuisson’s records indicate that 50% of the parishioners who died of cholera during the epidemic were African American. (7) Even after the epidemic had ended, during the remaining years of the decade, some 44% of those who died in the parish and were buried at Holy Rood Cemetery were Black – a figure suggestive of the long-term impact of the epidemic on the African American community. (8)

Who were the African American parishioners who died in the 1832 cholera epidemic? Here are Fr. Dubuisson’s notations, together with the fragments of information available from the 1830 census: (9)

*August*        29        *George – black – servt of Miss Jane Sewall – chol.*

*September*    4        *Clare – black – servt of Mr Jos. Semmes – chol.*

“                    “        *Jenkins (Dennis) – black – free – chol.*

(The 1830 census recorded Dennis Jenkins as the head of a household of 5 free African Americans: a male and a female between 24 and 35, a female between 36 and 54, and two females over 55. The census recorded ages in spans of years. For Black individuals, enslaved or free, the age categories were under 10, 10 to under 24, 24 to under 36, 36 to under 55, 55 to under 100, and 100 and over.)

- “ 6 *Sarah – black – servt Mrs Widow Semmes – chol.*  
(The census recorded Eleanor H. Semmes as the head of a household of 9 White individuals and 4 enslaved persons.)
- “ 7 *Leonard – (Butler) – black – a servt of Mr Birth – chol.*  
(The census recorded James Birth as the head of a household of 6 White individuals, 2 enslaved persons, and 1 free African American.)
- “ 8 *Butler (Frances) – coloured – free – chol.*
- “ “ *Brooks (Henrietta) – black – free – chol.*
- “ 9 *Hull (William) – chol.*  
(The census recorded William Hull as the head of a household of 2 free African Americans: a male and a female between 10 and 23. Fr. Dubuisson’s notes do not mention that Mr. Hull was an African American.)
- “ “ *Woodward (Silvester) – black – free – chol.*  
(The census recorded Sylvester Woodward as the head of a household of 6 free African Americans: a male and a female between 36 and 54, 3 children under 10, and a female between 10 and 23.)
- “ 10 *Butler (Phillis) – black – free – chol.*
- “ “ *Ignatius – black – servt of Capt Scott – chol.*
- “ 13 *Henry – black – servt – of Mr Waring – chol.*  
(The census recorded Henry Waring as the head of a household consisting of 1 White male – himself – and 3 enslaved persons.)
- “ “ *Coffee (Nancy) – black – free – chol.*
- “ 15 *July Ann – black – servt of Mr Eden Clarke – chol.*
- “ 16 *Mary Baptist – black – chol.*
- “ 18 *Downs (Susan) – free – coloured – chol.*  
(The census recorded Susanna Downes as the head of a household of 6 free African Americans – 4 children under 10, a female between 36 and 54 and another over 55 – and an enslaved

- female under the age of 10.)
- “ “ *Ignatius – black – servt of Mrs Manning – chol.*  
(The census recorded Mary Manning as the head of a household of 5 White individuals and 4 enslaved persons.)
- “ “ *Conwell (Elizabeth) – coloured – free – chol.*
- “ 19 *Butler (Sarah) – black – free – chol.*  
(The census recorded Sarah Butler as the head of a household of 3 free African Americans: a female over 55, a male between 10 and 23, and a child under 10.)
- “ 20 *Butler (Harriet) – black – free – chol.*
- “ 23 *Burges (John) – black – free – chol.*
- October 2 *Mary – black – servt of Mr. Smoot – chol.*  
(The census recorded Walter Smoot as the head of a household of 5 White individuals and 6 enslaved persons.)
- “ 9 *Sarah – black – servt of Mrs Elizabeth Fearson – chol.*
- “ 13 *John (Dyson) black – servt of Mr Chew – chol.*  
(The census recorded Samuel Chew as the head of a household of 6 White individuals and 2 enslaved persons.)

Holy Trinity parishioners who died in the cholera epidemic of 1832 were buried in the College Ground, the parish cemetery located on what is now the Georgetown University campus. Land for Holy Rood Cemetery was purchased in 1832, but burials did not begin there until 1833. (10)

## Notes

1. *The Daily National Intelligencer*, June 19, 1832.
2. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 2-3.

3. Quoted in Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, p. 3.

4. *The Daily National Intelligencer*, June 19, 1832; *The United States Telegraph*, June 19, 1832; Stephen E. Maizlish, "The Cholera Panic in Washington and the Compromise of 1850," *Washington History* 29 (2017): 56-57.

5. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, p. 4; Maizlish, "The Cholera Panic," p. 56.

6. Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., p. 52, [https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA\\_1818\\_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA_1818_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). Stephen Lariguadelle Dubuisson, S.J. (1786-1864) served as pastor of Holy Trinity from 1825 to 1826 and again from 1831 to 1833.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-72, 278, 282, 292, 296, 300-301.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-54. Many of these individuals cannot be located by name in the 1830 census. The enslaved were only recorded with hash marks. Nor were White women named, unless they were heads of households, so they, too, were often enumerated with hash marks.

10 Carlton 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/>. See also Fletcher, "Slave Burials in the Old College Ground," *ibid.*, <https://gloverparkhistory.com/population/slaves-population/slave-burials-college-ground-georgetown/>.

