

**“Climbing the Back Stairs”:  
Segregated Church Seating at Holy Trinity  
by Peter J. Albert**

*Nearly a lifetime has been spent  
trying to understand the reason  
my sister and I had to climb the back stairs  
and sit in the balcony of a Catholic Church  
in order to attend Mass.  
(Neville Waters, Jr.)*

The documents in the Holy Trinity archives tell us that for well over a century – from the founding of the parish down to the exodus of the African American community in the 1920s – both our original church (now the Chapel of St. Ignatius) and our main church (dedicated in 1851) were segregated spaces.

In our original church, built in 1794, pew seating was initially available – for rent – only to White parishioners. Standing-room space was for African Americans and those unable to afford pew rents. (For years, pew rents, entitling one to a whole pew, a half pew, or even a single seat, were a major source of Holy Trinity’s revenue.) (1) The original church was later enlarged, and by the 1820s galleries, accessible by exterior stairways, were added on either side. It was in these galleries that African American parishioners were allowed to rent pews. (2)

1831-33

Although our records indicate that African Americans were renting pews in the galleries as early as 1825, our first itemized record of pew rents being paid by African Americans for seating in the original church dates from 1831-33. This document lists the names of 15 Black pew renters, the amounts they paid, and the payment dates, although it does not indicate the specific pew rented or the length of rental. These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the original church between 1831 and 1833: Becraft [first name not entered in the register], Matilda Boarman, Statia

Brown, Caroline and Mary Butler, Sarah Coakley, Peter Dine, Henrietta (or Harriet) Edelin, Peggy (“of the College”), Henrietta Ross, George Semmes (“College credit”), Ann Shorter, and Ann, Margaret (“of College”), and Mary Smallwood. (3)

Most African American parishioners did not rent pews at Holy Trinity, however, and so they were not included in this or later pew rent rosters. Nor does this record indicate status – enslaved or free – although one can sometimes ascertain this from other sources. For example, research on the renting of enslaved people by Georgetown College shows that at least three of these 15 were enslaved women who worked in the college wash house – Margaret (“of College”) Smallwood, Harriet (or Henrietta) Edelin, and Peggy (“of the College”), who died with fever in 1837. (4) The pew rent record suggests that George Semmes was also enslaved and worked at the college.

#### 1842-51

The second pew rent ledger in our archives listing African American renters in the original church dates from 1842-51. It lists 34 names and, in most cases, the quarterly amount of rent due, the amount paid, the date of payment, and the specific pew rented. Again, there is no indication of status, whether the renter was enslaved or free. How long a pew was rented varied – some pews were held for the entire decade (Ann and John Butler held pew 6 in the East Gallery throughout the period); others changed hands (pew 5 in the East Gallery was rented by Mary Butler from 1843 to 1846, by John Harris from 1847 to 1848, and by Joseph Dodson from 1849 to 1851).

These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the original church between 1842 and 1851 and the years of rental: Will Becraft (1842-51), Mathilda Boarman, by work at the church (1842), Cecilia Boyd (1842-46), Lucy Brown (1843-50), Mary Brown (n.d.), Ann and John Butler (1842-51), Mary Butler (1843-46), Valinda Butler (1843-51), Zachia Butler (1846-50), Elizabeth Chandler (1846-51), Lucy Coakley (1842-51), Sarah Coakley (n.d.), Joseph Dodson (1849-51), Henrietta Edelin (1843-50), William Gracen (1846-49), Harriet Gray (1843-51), John Harris (1847-48), Nellie Harris (1842-43), Catherine Herbert (1847-51), Eliza Jackson (n.d.), Eliza Jenkins, by washing (1842), Margaret Johnson (1842-50), Cecilia Makle (1842-46), Eliza Murray (1842-43), James Pride (n.d.), Eliza Ridgley, (1844-51), Leti Sawyer (n.d.), Mary and James Scott

(1842-51), Samuel Sims (n.d.), Lety Sprig (1842-45), Amy Toy (1843-48), Paul Wilson (1843-51). (5)

Pew rents for African American parishioners ranged at this time from \$8 to \$12 a year, but not all rents were paid in cash – Mathilda Boarman, for example, paid her rent “by work at the church,” and Eliza Jenkins paid hers “by washing.” (6) This was a significant expense – equivalent, for example, to the monthly cost of hiring an enslaved person. Georgetown College, for example, hired Charles Taylor, an enslaved man, for \$10 a month between 1836 and 1842, Joseph Edelin, another enslaved man, for \$8 a month in 1845 to work at the college farm, and Frank Butler, a third enslaved man, for \$9 a month in 1846 to work in the school’s kitchens. (7) Annual pew rents for White parishioners at this time ranged from \$8 to \$20. (8)

A seating diagram for the original church from the 1840s shows 18 pews set aside for African American parishioners, nine in the East Gallery and nine in the West. In each gallery the pews were arranged in two rows, five pews in front, four in back. By contrast, there were 98 pews downstairs, on the main floor, reserved for White parishioners. (9)

Despite their segregation, African Americans were committed to the parish. Sacramental registers record their marriages and baptisms, deaths and burials, and pastor Stephen Dubuisson, S.J.’s, meticulous records from the early 1830s give us a window on other aspects of their engagement in parish life. He noted their requests for Masses to be said and the stipends they offered, usually a customary 50 cents – by a “Black girl,” a “Black man,” and a “Black woman” in 1831, by “Chisly, black,” “Cole (black),” “Mary black,” Siah Smith, who was the African American gravedigger at the parish cemetery, and a “Black woman” in 1832, and by a “Black woman” and again by a “Black woman” in 1833. (10)

African American parishioners contributed financially and materially to the parish as well. For example, Pastor Dubuisson’s list of contributors to a special collection “for the expenses of the church” mentions financial contributions from Siah Smith, “a black woman,” and other African Americans whose names we recognize from pew rent records. An undated listing of those “who have been benefactors . . . to Trinity Church” includes, under the heading “Coloured Persons,” this entry: “Rachell Brown several

worked collars. worked bobbinet Vail. Mary Augustine an Alb bobbinet trimmed [sic] with lace. Mary Stepto. 3 plain muslin surplices. Maria Becraft worked trimmings for Alter and for an Alb.” (11)

### 1851-71

Segregated seating continued when the main church opened in 1851. As first constructed, it had no side galleries, and African American parishioners were confined to 30 pews in the rear of the church in a gallery over the main door. There were 164 pews downstairs for White parishioners. This rear gallery had a separate entrance for Black parishioners on the west side of the church. Later, side galleries were added to accommodate African American parishioners, and an undated pew rent diagram shows 42 pews in two side galleries and a small rear gallery where Black parishioners had to sit and 138 pews on the main floor for White parishioners. Even if the galleries did not, in the view of one contemporary observer, “contribute to the internal ornamentation” of the church, they were “indispensable,” he said, “for the accommodation of the colored population.” (12)

The ledgers from 1851 to 1871 list 112 African Americans renting pews for themselves or their families. These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the main church between 1851 and 1871 and the years of rental: Ann Eliza Adams (1867-71), Charlotte Baggett (1859-66), Lewis Beale (1856), Ann Bean (1851), Charlotte Beckett (1857), C. Becraft (1851-68), Charlotte Beggy (1861), Albert Bellows (1863-65), Margaret Bellows (1866-71), Martha Belt, shares with Mathilda Scott (1864-65), Mary Belt (1853-55), Henry Boarman (1860-65), John (Boarman?) (1864- ), Elizabeth Bradley (1851-57), Lucy Brown [cf Lucy Noland] (1858-59), Susan Burley (1867-70), John Butler (1864), Malinda Butler [cf Malinda Semmes] (1856-71), Elizabeth Cardenas (1862-66), Matilda Carroll (1854-59, 1867-69), Theodore Carter (1867-71), Henry Chandler (1867-71), Louisa Chandler (1859-71), Harriett Claggett (1856), Lucy Coakley, from 1855 has two pews (1851-71), Viney (Winifred) Coats (1853-69), Joseph Coffee (1851-53, 1862), Joseph Coffee’s daughter (1865), Joanna Cole (1862-67), Maria Cole (1851-59), Roberta Cole (n.d.), William Coleman (1867-71), Maria Coombs (1852-66), George Cooper (1868), Jane Cooper (1851-52), Maria Cover (1856), Susan

Davis (1867-71), Georgiana Dockett (1867-71), Joseph Dodson (1852-57, 1864-66), Mary Francis Dynes (1857), Ann Maria Dys (1855-59), Mary A. Ferguson (1856-57), Caroline Gray (1854, 1856-65), Elizabeth Gray (1855-57), Harriett Gray (1852-55), Emily Grinnell (1867-71), Mary Gustus (1856-66, 1868-71), Eliza Hamilton (1867-71), Jane Harris (1858), Sarah Harrison (1856-59), William Hatton (1865-66), Jane Hawkins (1863-65), William Herbert (1851-60), Jane Hogan, half pew – three seats (n.d.), Hannah Johnson, one seat (1863), Louisa (Lucinda) Johnson (1851-54), Margaret Johnson (1851-65), Lilian Jones (1866), Lucian Jones (1867-68), Theresa Lee (1851-55), John Libous (1855), Ann Magruder (1851-69), Warner Mahoney (1851-53), Sela Makale (1856-64), John Marshall (1867-71), Mary Martin, one seat (1859-62), Jeremiah Mitchell (1867-71), Mary Montgomery (1851-71), Albert Francis Moore (1871), Albert Murray (1866-67), Eliza Murray (1853-56, 1865), Fanny Neil (1856-57), Julia Neill (n.d.), Eliza Nolan (1855-57), Lucy Noland [cf Lucy Brown] (1851-53), Frances Norman (1863-65), Charlotte Powdon (1866), Martha Pryor (1867-70), Ann Ridgeley (1855-66), Eliza Ridgeley (1858), Mary Riggs (1867), Catherine Robertson, one seat (1859), Henrietta Ross (1857-70), Louisa Ross (n.d.), James Scott, two pews (1851-71), Mathilda Scott (1864-65), Malinda Semmes [cf Malinda Butler] (1851-56), Kate Silus (1867-71), Louis Smackum (1864-66), William Smallwood (1851-55), Francis Smith (1859), Lewis Smith (1855-57), Sarah, Helen, and Mary Ann Smith (1854-55, 1857-60), Esther Solomon (1860-71), Elizabeth Stangs (n.d.), Mary Stewart (1865-71), Mary Taylor (1851-63), Henry Thomas (1868-71), Ignatius Tilman (1857-71), Ann Tolson (1862-66), James Webster (1864-65), Albert Wheeler (1868), Harriet Williams (1862), Paul Wilson (1851-57), Rebecca Wilson (1857-62), Thomas Woodward (1867), Ellen Worthy, one seat – servant of Mr. Simpson (1857-59), Antony Young (1851-55), Catharine Young (1855-64), Elizabeth Young (1857-71). (13)

Several of these can be identified as enslaved from emancipation records. Some, like Ellen Worthy, who rented a single seat in a pew from 1857 to 1859 and is described in her 1862 emancipation papers as “a house servant” about 40 years old, appear in pew rent records only during the period of their enslavement. (14) Others continued to rent pew space after their emancipation, for example Viney or Winny (Winifred) Coates, described by her enslaver as “an excellent plain cook” about 40 years old, who rented a

pew between 1853 and 1871, (15) Esther or Hester Solomon, an “intelligent, active and religious” woman about 60 years old, who rented a pew from 1860 down to 1875 when she left Georgetown, (16) and Ignatius Tilman or Tilghman, about 40 years old, who had been enslaved by the Sisters of the Visitation in Georgetown, and who rented a pew between 1857 and 1875. (17) Annual pew rents for African Americans in 1851 ranged from \$14 to \$20, for Whites from \$10 to \$32. (18) Several paid a lower rent in consideration of their services to the parish – Frances Norman, for example, was credited \$4 for work “cleansing the Church” and William Hatton was credited \$5 “because he goes around with the purse & promised to carry messages to Col’d people occas[ional]ly.” (19)

#### 1871-80

The ledgers from 1871 to 1880 list 72 African Americans renting pews for themselves or families. These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the main church between 1871 and 1881 and the years of rental: Eliza Adams (1871); C. Becraft, dead; Margaret Bellows (1873-76); Elizabeth Boardman (1880-81); Sarah Boudin, shared (1872-81); Melinda and John Butler (1871); Melinda Butler (1872-77); Matilda Carroll (1874-76); Susan Carroll (1880?); Ann Carter, one seat (1874-76); Theodore Carter, left town (1871-72); Henry Chandler (1871-73, dead); Hillary Chandler, dead; Louisa Chandler, dead; Chaney Charles (1879); Annie Chase, one seat (1877-78); Lucy Coakley (1871-76); Barry Coakwire, one seat (1874-77); Viney Coates (1871); Margaret Cole, shared (1872-81); John Crawford (1873); Martha Daggs (1874-76); Susan Davis (1871-77); Georgiana Duckel (1871, 1873); Maria Fisher, one seat (1880); Fanny Ford (1878-81); Rose Ford (1875); Mary Gordon, one seat (1877); Emily Grinnell (1871-76); Mary Gustus (1871-80); Mary Hall (1875-76); Ellen Hamilton (1871, 1876, 1879); Rachel Henson (1878); Henrietta Hunt, one seat (1881); Margaret Johnson (1875-76, 1878-81); Lucian Jones; “collects and blows the organ” (1871); Mary Jones (1879); John Lee (1873-81); John Marshall (1871); Mary Marshall (1873-79); Georgiana Mays, shared (1872-81); Mary Middleton, shared (1874-75); Cecelia Mitchell (1880); Jeremiah Mitchell (1871); Mary Montgomery (1871-76); Albert F. Moore (1871-77); Martha Peter (1879); Martha Pryor (1871); Henrietta Ross, left town (1871-74);

Susan Rurley (1874-75, 1879); Mary Shepherd, one seat (1874-75); Kate Silus (1871-77); Seth Smackum (1874-79); Mary A. Smith (1871); Maria Snowden (1875-78); Esther Solomon, left town (1875); Julia Sprigg, one seat (1877-78); Mary Steward (1871-78); Mary Swailey, left town (1873-75); Annie Swan, shared (1874-75); Henry Thomas, dead; Ignatius Tillman (1871-75); Sarah Turley, half pew (1878-79); Nellie Warren (1875-78); Cecelia Wharton, half pew (1879); Albert Wheeler, given up (1871); Aurelia Williams (1878-79); Thomas Woodward (1871); Woody William (1878); Robert I. Wilson, given up (1871-76); Catherine Young (1874-75); Elizabeth Young (1873-76). (20)

While this number appears substantial, two rented only a half pew, five shared the pew rent cost with another parishioner, and eight rented but a single seat. Four left town and five died. Eight pews went unrented, and many renters could not continue their payments during the depression of 1870s – eight stopped paying in 1875, 11 in 1876, six in 1877, and seven in 1878. In lieu of payment, Lucian Jones, who had previously paid his pew rent in cash, pumped the bellows for the organ then left the parish. Elsewhere in the ledger we find such notations as “Mary A. Smith is Poor” or “indulgence” when no payment was forthcoming, “given up” or “left town” when the pew was abandoned, or, in the face of continued non-payment, “Taken from him.” Annual pew rents for African Americans at this time ranged from \$8 to \$20, for Whites from \$8 to \$40. (21)

#### 1888-96

After the side galleries were removed in the 1880s, the rear gallery or balcony was expanded, and African American parishioners were required to relocate there. (22) At this time there were some 700 African Americans at Holy Trinity, (23) but few of them rented pews – 15 in 1888 and only 10 between 1889 and 1896.

These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the main church in 1888: Ellen Auden, Moses Booth, Rachel Brown, Frances Coakley, Barbara Coffee, Martha Curtis, Josie Evans, Catherine Foster, Mary Gordon, Mary Marshall, Mr. Queen, Lucretia Smackum, Lizzie Smith, James B. Thomas, Catherine Young. (24)

These are the names of the African Americans who rented pews in the main

church from 1889 to 1896: Rachel Brown, Frances Coakley, Martha Curtis, Josie Evans (dead), Charles Henry Gordon, Mary Gordon, Ellen and Mary Lee, Cecelia Mitchell, Lucretia Smackum. (25)

Pew rentals dwindled, but segregated seating at Holy Trinity persisted into the 20th century.

Years later, Neville Waters, Jr., whose mother Gertrude Turner Waters was a founder of Epiphany Catholic Church, put the long night of segregation at Holy Trinity into perspective when he wrote:

*Nearly a lifetime has been spent trying to understand the reason my sister and I had to climb the back stairs and sit in the balcony of a Catholic Church in order to attend Mass.*

*However, I do realize that was one of the reasons my mother, Mrs. Gertrude Turner Waters, and some of her Catholic friends, left the then segregated Holy Trinity Church, and helped establish Epiphany Catholic Church, ten blocks away. Their faith had been tested but they never considered leaving the Catholic Church. They only wanted to be able to worship, in the structured, religious teachings of the Church, without being humiliated or attempts being made to give them feelings of inferiority.*

*Black Catholics have such a strong feeling of religious faith that acts of racial discrimination have been turned into a more fervent love of God, self and other human beings. In this instance, the Black Catholics added one more Catholic Church to the Georgetown neighborhood, and provided more opportunities for religious vocations in what was then the Archdiocese of Baltimore and Washington.*

*Even though the Black, segregated parishioners told themselves, "We, who sit way up here in the balcony, are closer to Heaven," they were motivated by the same need and desire for freedom to worship, that was one of the main reasons that our great nation was explored and settled. (26)*

## Notes



1. In the 1790s, pew rents paid for the cost of building our original church. In the 1830s they represented 50% of parish revenue, and as late as the 1860s they still comprised 45% of parish income. By 1900 they represented only 28% of parish revenue, however, and by 1924-25 only 7%. Laurence J. Kelly, S.J., "Some Notes on Holy Trinity, Georgetown," Archives of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, box 101, folder 11, Georgetown University Archives, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C.; "A Sketch of the Cash Receipts, [1831-33]," Arch. Md. Prov., box 101, folder 1; "Statement of Accounts of Trinity Church, Georgetown, DC. from Ap.1st 1865 to Ap.1st 1866," in Ledger 1865-73, box 6, folder 6, Holy Trinity Church Archives, Georgetown Univ. Arch., Booth Center; "Statement Sent to V Rev Father Provincial . . . Jan 1 1901," and "Annual Statement, July 1, 1924 to July 1, 1925," in Annual Reports to the Provincial, 1890-1949, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 12, Georgetown Univ. Arch., Booth Center.

2. Laurence J. Kelly, S.J., *History of Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, D.C., 1795-1945* (Baltimore, Md., 1945), pp. 18, 21; Kelly, "Some Notes on Holy Trinity"; Aloysius Rocoffort, S.J., "An Essai on the history of Trinity Church in Georgetown D.C.," Arch. Md. Prov., box 81, folder 2; in a letter of July 25, 1834, to former Holy Trinity pastor Stephen Dubuisson, S.J., James Lucas, S.J., the current pastor, refers to the rental of pews in the gallery as early as 1825 (Arch. Md. Prov., box 100, folder 6). Margaret McAleer writes, "Narrow stairs were constructed on the outside of the church, requiring Black parishioners to exit the church during the service and reenter below during communion" ("The Other Congregation: Patterns of Black Catholic Worship at Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, D.C., 1795-1845," unpublished seminar paper, Georgetown University, 1986, p. 10).

3. "Galleries – Blacks" in "Receipts – Pew Rent, [1831-33]," Arch. Md. Prov., box 101, folder 14; see also "Pew Rent, [1831-33]," box 101, folder 9, *ibid.*

4. Elsa Barraza Mendoza, "Catholic Slaveholders, Enslaved People, and the Making of Georgetown University, 1792-1862," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University,

2021, pp. 4, 115, 178, 241 n. 83; see also pp. 9, 102.

5. Pew Rent Records, 1842-51, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 3.

6. Ibid.

7. Barraza Mendoza, "Catholic Slaveholders, Enslaved People, and the Making of Georgetown University," pp. 185-88.

8. Pew Rent Records, 1842-51, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 3.

9. Church seating diagram, n.d., Pew Rent Records, 1842-51, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 3.

10. "Masses," Arch. Md. Prov., box 101, folder 9.

11. "Trinity Church – G.T. D.C. Contributions as Extra-Help, for the expenses of the church," Arch. Md. Prov., box 48, folder 5; "Names of persons who have been benefactors and given donations within 5 years. to Trinity Church," *ibid.*

12. "New Roman Catholic Church in Georgetown," *Republic*, Nov. 7, 1850; Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, pp. 24-25; undated church seating diagram, in Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 3, folder 1; Rocoffort, "Essai."

13. "Pew rents of the coulored [sic] people," in Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 6, folder 4.

14. Dorothy S. Provine, *Compensated Emancipation in the District of Columbia: Petitions under the Act of April 16, 1862* (Westminster, Md., 2008), petition no. 564.

15. *Ibid.*, petition no. 103.

16. Ibid., petition no. 597.
17. Ibid., petition no. 569.
18. "Pew rents of the coulored [sic] people," in Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, box 6, folder 4; Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, box 3, folder 1.
19. "Pew rents of the coulored [sic] people," in Pew Rent Records, 1851-71, box 6, folder 4.
20. "Colored Persons," in Pew Rent Records, 1871-81, Holy Trinity Church Arch., box 3, folder 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Kelly, *History of Holy Trinity Parish*, p. 27.
23. Undated memorandum, "Black Catholic Chronology Maryland and Washington, D.C.," privately held.
24. Pew Rent Records, 1881-1888, Holy Trinity Church Arch. box 3, folder 3.
25. Pew Rent Records, 1889-1896, *ibid.*, box 3, folder 4.
26. Neville R. Waters, Jr., "The Reason," *Black Catholic News*, Oct. 1985.