

Who Is My Neighbor?

by Peter J. Albert

*He asked Jesus,
“And who is my neighbor?”
(Luke 10:29)*

The 1923 census of Holy Trinity’s African American parishioners, compiled at the request of Archbishop Michael Curley, enumerated 356 adults and 330 children. (1) Most of these Black parishioner families lived in Georgetown – Holy Trinity’s Black congregation was a Georgetown congregation. Many of these families were long-time members of the parish. For example, the Belt family, which we will discuss below, were members for generations, and they were not alone in their long attachment to Holy Trinity. This household-by-household census of Holy Trinity’s Black parishioners evidences both their pride in their community and their commitment to family and church.

Black Parishioners on 36th Street and P Street

A number of Holy Trinity’s African American parishioners lived in the very shadow of the church. Around 1920, for example, twelve families lived in the two blocks between the church and Visitation Convent, up 36th Street and along P Street. Fifteen more families lived in the two blocks west of the church along N Street and down 37th Street. Information on many of these households can be found in the 1920 census or in city directories. (2)

Eight of the twelve Black parishioner households in the two blocks of 36th Street between the church and Visitation Convent can be located in the 1920 U.S. Census. Available records indicate that their houses were built around 1900. Of the eight houses, the five located on the west side of 36th Street (1414, 1426, 1430, 1436, and 1440) ran between 800 and 900 square feet in size, the one on the east side of 36th Street (1415) about 1,100 square feet, and the two on P Street (3524 and 3526) about 1,400 and 1,650 square feet, respectively.

Martha (Ridgely) Belt rented a home at 1414 36th Street, where she lived with her son William, a road laborer, and her grandson Sylvester, a horse team driver. Martha Belt was a widow; she had married Ignatius Belt, a laborer, at Holy Trinity on August 15, 1856. He had died in 1907, his funeral was held at Holy Trinity, and he was buried at Holy Rood Cemetery. Mrs. Belt died in the spring of 1920 and was also buried at Holy Rood. The Belt family will be studied in more detail below.

James Bruce, who worked as a laborer at the Navy Yard, and his wife Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bruce lived at 1415 36th Street along with Lizzie's widowed mother, Maria (Green) Sprigg. The Spriggs had been married at Holy Trinity on June 2, 1889. Before his death, Lee Sprigg had been a stableman. Maria Sprigg died in February 1920 and was buried at Holy Rood.

George Williams and his wife Genevieve (Jackson) Williams rented a home at 1426 36th Street, where they lived with their daughters Helen, Eloise, and Alice, their son Charles, and Mrs. Williams's father, George Jackson. George Williams worked as a laborer for a contractor, Helen Williams as an elevator operator, and George Jackson as a carpenter.

Joseph A. Dodson and his wife Mary Frances "Fannie" (Matthews) Dodson lived at 1430 36th Street with their sons Joseph Jr. and George. Joseph Dodson worked as a street railway laborer. He and Fannie were married at Holy Trinity on July 14, 1902. Some of the planning meetings for the creation of Epiphany Catholic Church were held at their home. (3)

Nathaniel Wise and his wife Rosa (McKay) Wise rented a home at 1436 36th Street, where they lived with their son William. Nathaniel Wise, a road laborer, had previously worked as a waiter at Georgetown College. He and Rosa were married at Holy Trinity on February 20, 1893. Their son William Wise was an elevator operator.

Cecilia (Dodson) Creek, the sister of Joseph A. Dodson, rented a home at 1440 36th Street, where she lived with her daughters Louise and Sadie and her niece Ada Dorsey. Cecilia Creek, Louise Creek, and Ada Dorsey all worked as domestics, Sadie Creek was a clerk in an insurance office. The 1910 U.S. Census reported that Mrs. Creek was working as a "servant" at Visitation Convent. She was a widow; she and her husband John Creek had been married at Holy Trinity on October 15, 1893. On the

occasion of her hundredth birthday in 1967, the *Catholic Standard* reported that she was “the last living founder of Epiphany Church in Georgetown,” and that “it was at her home at 1440 36th St., N.W., that the founders met and planned the beginnings of the new parish.” All five of her children were baptized at Holy Trinity, the *Standard* continued, and she had worked as a maid at Georgetown Visitation for many years. (4)

Two households of African American Holy Trinity parishioners living on P Street across from Visitation Convent in 1923 can be located in 1920 census:

Peter Colbert Sr. and his large family rented a home at 3524 P Street. The family included Mr. Colbert’s daughters Eleanor, Louise (and her husband William North and their son Leo), and Beatrice, as well as Mr. Colbert’s sons Peter Jr. (and his wife Cora and their daughters Beatrice and Ursuline), Marshall, Lawrence, Dorie, and Walter. Mr. Colbert and William North worked as waiters at Georgetown University; Eleanor, Louise, and Peter Jr. worked in the home – Eleanor and Louise as laundresses and Peter Jr. as a presser. The elder Beatrice Colbert worked as a domestic. Mr. Colbert had married Mary Julia Smackum at Holy Trinity on November 28, 1889; she died in August 1913 and was buried at Holy Rood.

Letty “Leticia” Smackum and her mother-in-law Mary Agnes (Marshall) Smackum rented a home next door at 3526 P Street. Both women were widows. Letty Smackum worked at home as a laundress. She had married William Smackum, who worked as a plasterer, around 1892. He died in January 1918 and was buried at Holy Rood.

Mary Agnes Marshall Smackum, the mother of both William Smackum (Letty Smackum’s husband) and Mary Julia Smackum Colbert (Peter Colbert Sr.’s wife), had married Charles Adam Smackum at Holy Trinity on June 11, 1868. A day laborer, he had died in November 1909 and was buried at Holy Rood. She died in July 1924; her funeral was held at Holy Trinity and she was also buried at Holy Rood, leaving behind her five children, 15 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

Black Parishioners on N Street

Available records indicate that the houses on N Street were also built around 1900; some have since been demolished. Of the seven still surviving, one (3608) is about 840 square feet in size, five (3606, 3607, 3613, 3624, and 3626) run to around

1,100 square feet, and one (3628) is about 1,400 square feet. Most of the houses on this block were rentals in 1920.

Mabel Curtis Beason lived at 3606 N Street and worked as a waitress at Georgetown University. A widow, she lived with three children – Percy, a laborer, Vincent, a milk wagon driver, and Gladys – as well as her widowed mother, Martha Virginia Jackson Curtis, and a nephew, Joseph. Mrs. Beason had married William H. Beason at Holy Trinity on September 18, 1901. Her mother, Martha Curtis, died in 1922 and was buried at Holy Rood.

Camille (or Carmelia) Hall lived at 3607 N Street. She was a nurse.

Walter Bowman, a laborer, rented a home at 3608 N Street together with his wife, Sylvesta Warton Bowman, his sister-in-law Elsie Washington, and Mrs. Washington's two children Wilbur and Effie.

Joseph M. Coffey, a laborer, and his wife Charlotte "Lottie" (Boyd) Coffey lived at 3613 N Street. They were married at Holy Trinity on September 22, 1897. When she died in 1930, Charlotte Coffey was buried at Holy Rood.

William Edward Morris and his wife Cora (Coffey) Morris rented a home at 3622 N Street together with their five children: Bernice, Hattie, Elizabeth, Cora, and Edward. William Morris worked as a building porter and Hattie Morris was a dress maker's apprentice. Cora Coffey Morris was the sister of Joseph M. Coffey, who lived at 3613 N Street.

James William Torney and his wife Isabelle lived at 3626 N Street with their four children: James, Sadie, Joseph, and Evelyn. Mr. Torney worked as a framer, Isabelle Torney was a clerk. Of their children, James was a chauffeur and Joseph was a government clerk. Boarding in the house was Lavinia Davis, who worked as a maid.

Josephine (Beall) Taylor rented a home at 3628 N Street with her two children, Edward and Virginia. Mrs. Taylor, a widow, worked as a laundress; her son Edward worked as a laborer. Mrs. Taylor had married Charles Henry Taylor at Holy Trinity on December 23, 1878. When she died, in 1937, she was buried at Holy Rood.

The 1923 enumeration of the African American members of Holy Trinity mentions Charles and Mary (Onley) Smackum as living at 3618 N Street, although this cannot be corroborated in the census or city directories. The two were married at Holy Trinity on

September 30, 1896. Charles, who worked as a laborer, was the brother of Mary Julia Smackum Colbert (Mrs. Peter Colbert, Sr.) who lived at 3524 P Street before her death in 1913; over the course of that decade Charles Smackum had lost four other siblings as well, Agnes in 1910, Arthur in 1914, and William and Henry – the latter in the flu epidemic – in 1918. Charles Smackum was the son of Mary Agnes Marshall Smackum, who lived at 3526 P Street. James A. Smackum, probably his cousin, was one of the three African American members of Holy Trinity who met with Bishop Curley in March 1923 to ask him to approve the creation of a new African American parish in Georgetown.

The Belt Family

As mentioned earlier, a number of these families had been members of the parish for years. The Belt family, for example, who lived at 1414 36th Street, a block from the church, were part of the congregation for over 100 years. The names of some Belt family members appear in civil records, but Holy Trinity's sacramental records are our main source of information about the Belts.

The earliest members of the family mentioned in our records are John and Henrietta (Henny) Belt. The first U.S. Census to give their ages, in 1850, says he was born around 1790 and was working as a laborer, she was born about 1791. John lived into the 1850s and was a witness in 1851 at the wedding of his daughter Eliza Ann; Henny lived into the 1870s.

In 1816, when they first appear as parents in our baptismal records, John was enslaved to Tench Ringgold (Ringgold was U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia from 1818 to 1831; the 1820 U.S. Census shows 18 enslaved people in Ringgold's household). Because Henny's children were listed as free, she was probably free herself, since the children's status followed their mother's. In 1832 John was still noted in our baptismal records as enslaved, but to a different man, Dr. Peregrine Warfield of Georgetown (Warfield does not appear in the 1830 Census; the 1820 U.S. Census shows three enslaved people in his household). An 1832 baptismal record notes Henny as free, as does the 1830 U.S. Census. The 1850 U.S. Census notes both John and Henny Belt as free.

Over the course of two decades, 11 Belt children were baptized at Holy Trinity – Thomas and Mary in 1816, Ellen in 1818, Henrietta in 1820, Eliza Ann in 1822, Agatha in 1826, Elizabeth in 1827, Rosan in 1830, Ignatius in 1832, Teresa in 1834, and Martha in 1836. (5)

Of John and Henny's son Thomas Belt, we know only that he stayed in Georgetown; the 1850 and 1860 U.S. censuses record him as free and as a laborer.

John and Henny's daughter Mary Belt was noted as free in our baptismal records; three of her children were baptized here – William Henry in 1835, Mary in 1836, and Mary Magdalen in 1838. Henny Belt, their grandmother, was godmother for all three. (6)

John and Henny's daughter Ellen Belt, also noted as free, married Richard Ford at Holy Trinity in 1835, with Henny Belt as witness. (7) Ford was enslaved to Enoch Moreland in 1835 and then, two years later, to a Mr. Moulding. (The 1830 U.S. Census shows one enslaved person in Moreland's household; Moulding does not appear in the census.) Six Ford children were baptized at Holy Trinity – William Henry in 1837, Richard in 1838, Henrietta in 1844, Agnes in 1849, Louis in 1851, and William in 1853. (8) Henny Belt was godmother to all but the last. Ellen Belt Ford, but not her husband, appears in the 1860 U.S. Census along with her son Richard, working as a laborer, and a daughter, Martha.

John and Henny's daughter Henrietta Belt, noted as free, had at least two children baptized at Holy Trinity before she married – Anna Maria in 1837 and Martha in 1845. (Henny was godmother to Anna Maria.) (9) In 1850 she married Benjamin Ross, who was free, at Holy Trinity, (10) and their family appears in the 1860 U.S. Census – Benjamin and Henrietta Ross, their children (Louisa, E. J., and Martha), Henrietta's mother Henny, and Martha Belt, born to Henrietta before she married Ross.

When John and Henny's daughter Eliza Ann Belt married Edward Dyer at Holy Trinity in 1851, Eliza's father John Belt appeared as a witness at the ceremony. (11) Eliza Belt and Edward Dyer do not appear subsequently in our records.

John and Henny's daughters Agatha and Elizabeth Belt do not appear in Holy Trinity's records after their baptisms; Rosan Belt is listed there as "dead." Teresa Belt died at the age of six months and Martha Belt at 18 months; both are buried at Holy

Rood Cemetery. (12)

John and Henny's son Ignatius Belt, who worked as a laborer, married Martha Ridgely at Holy Trinity in 1856, and five of their six children appear in our baptismal records – Charles Alexander in 1862, Margaret Genevieve in 1867, Joseph Lorenzo in 1868, Ignatius Armstead in 1870, and William Henry in 1871. (13) Only Ignatius Armstead and William Henry survived into adulthood. Ignatius Belt died in 1907, Ignatius Armstead Belt in 1911, and Martha Ridgely Belt in 1920; all three are buried at Holy Rood Cemetery. Ignatius Armstead Belt's sons Henry Sylvester (born 1895) and James Orville Leroy (born 1898) were both baptized at Holy Trinity. (14) Henry Sylvester Belt served as a private in the Army in World War I and, when he died, in 1967, he was buried at Baltimore National Cemetery in Catonsville.

Sacramental records, then, enable us to piece together the outline of the Belt family's history – their matriarch Henny Belt who was godmother to at least nine grandchildren, their struggle with the specter of enslavement as they walked from slavery into freedom, their grounding at Holy Trinity for baptisms, marriages, and burials, and above all their ongoing commitment to faith and family. Let us remember them. Let us call them by name.

Notes

1. See Peter J. Albert, "The Founding of Epiphany Catholic Church (1923-26)," and "A List of African American Parishioners at Holy Trinity in 1923," below.

2. Information in the following paragraphs is drawn largely from U.S. census returns, city directories, Holy Trinity marriage records archived at Georgetown University, and Holy Rood burial records.

3. See "Historical Sketch – Epiphany Catholic Church," by Gertrude Turner Waters, below.

4. *Catholic Standard*, Feb. 2, 1967. Gertrude Turner Waters wrote that after it was no longer possible for the planners of the Epiphany community to meet at Holy Trinity, they first met at the home of Cecilia Dodson Creek and then began meeting elsewhere.

5. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., pp. 62, 72, 15, 42, 117, 145, 177, 210, 246, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/556990>; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1835-58, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., p. 22, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/556991/B2_1835_58.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

6. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1835-58, pp. 2, 37, 66.

7. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., p. 40, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557004/MAR_1806_71.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

8. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1835-58, pp. 40, 66, 168, 236, 261, 304.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 177.

10. For documentation of Benjamin Ross's certificate of freedom, registered in 1834, see *District of Columbia Free Negro Registers, 1821-1861*, ed. Dorothy S. Provine (Bowie, Md., 1996), registration 1179; Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, p. 80 [82].

11. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, p. 82 [84].

12. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1805-34, p. 177; Holy Trinity Church, Deaths, 1818-67, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., p. 296, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA_1818_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

13. Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1806-71, p. 104; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1858-71, pp. 112, 259, 293, 320, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/556992/B3_1858_71.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1871-80, p. 12, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/556993/B4_1871_80.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

14. Holy Trinity Church, Baptisms, 1889-1900, pp. 310, 411, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/556995/B6_1889_1900.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.