

**Historical Sketch –  
Epiphany Catholic Church  
by Gertrude Turner Waters (1)**

*[Editors' note: Gertrude Turner Waters, a founder of Epiphany Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., wrote this "Historical Sketch" in 1960 for the thirty-fifth anniversary of the parish's founding. She left three much-revised handwritten drafts of her Sketch, as well as a typed version (see "A 1960 Account by Gertrude Turner Waters of the Founding of Epiphany Roman Catholic Church," <https://www.curavirtualis.org/post/holy-trinity-history-pt-ii>). Printed here is a transcript of her third and final handwritten draft, with our parenthetical and italicized notes indicating significant wording changes from the first and second drafts. We have kept Mrs. Waters's language as written in 1960, while acknowledging that "colored" and "Colored Catholics" are outdated terms for people of color and Catholics of color.]*

The beginning of our church is unique as well as being 35 years ahead of the thoughts of many intelligent, religious people.

The reason for the establishment of our church has long been declared passé and out moded by our Beloved Archbishop Patrick J. O Boyle. (2)

Over 35 years ago a group of colored men and women urged by their children decided to raise funds (*one of Mrs. Waters' earlier drafts of this Historical Sketch reads: "raise funds for a church"*) in order to provide religious education as well as a place to worship without being segregated.

Up to this time the Colored Catholics of Georgetown attended The Holy Trinity Church, 36th & N Sts. N.W.

These people were allowed to attend Mass in the gallery screened off on both sides of the Choir.

It was very difficult as well as dangerous (*an earlier draft reads: "The long dark steps were steep as well as dangerous"*) for the older people and young children to climb the narrow, high stairs.

Then too the teen agers refused to attend (*an earlier draft reads: "The teen age*

*groups refused to be segregated*”), being deprived of Sunday School with its activities.

Many parents started sending their children (I being one) to St Augustine Church 15th & M Sts. N.W., a distance of 13 or 21 blocks according to where you lived in Georgetown.

However under the leadership of Good Father Thomas Duffey (3) the Colored Catholics pledged and gave of their meager earnings until enough money was raised to ask for help in starting a church (*an earlier draft reads: “until enough money was raised to start The Epiphany Church”*).

Meetings were held at many homes in the area.

The first meeting was held in Trinity Hall (*an earlier draft reads: “The first three meetings were held in Trinity Hall”*) but it soon became impossible to be admitted to the Hall. Meetings were subsequently held at Mr. Joseph Dodson’s (4) Residence, Mrs. Mary L Turner, (5) Mr. Leander Clifford, (6) Mrs. Eleanor Jackson (7) as well as many others (*an earlier draft reads: “they met first at the home of Mrs. Cecelia Creek”*). (8)

As I recall these people were among the original parishioners (*an earlier draft reads: “Many of the founders of our Church have entered the Great Beyond but there are still many descendants of these good and courageous people still living”*).

Mr. & Mrs. Moses Booth\*, (9) Mrs. Cecelia Creek, Mrs. Joseph Dodson\*, (10) Mrs. Fannie Dodson, (11) Mr. Frank Bowman\*, (12) Mr. William Bowman\*, (13) Mr. Richard Carter\*, (14) Mr. & Mrs. James Penn\*, (15) Mrs. Annie Contee Williams\*, (16) Mrs. Jennie Morse\*, (17) Mr. & Mrs. Leander Clifford, (18) Mr. & Mrs. James Smackum\*, (19) Miss Annie Smackum\*, (20) Mrs. Lettie Smackum\*, (21) Mrs. Cora Morris\*, (22) Mrs. Mary L. Turner\*, Mrs. Lucy Williams\*, (23) Mrs. Eleanor Jackson, Mrs. Mabel Andrews, (24) Mrs. Gertrude T. Waters, and many others. (Stars are for the deceased)

Our first service was held in an old rickety building, formerly a Mortician’s Establishment. 1409-28th St. N.W. (*an earlier draft reads: “Our Original Church was over an Undertaker Parlor at 1409 28<sup>th</sup> St. N.W. It was a rickety old Building with rickety stairs and screechy floors. But the people were happy and determined to make the Church a success. Services were conducted here until our present Church was established.”*)

Our good Priest Father Lawrence Schafer S.S.J. (25) built the Altar and formed a choir (*an earlier draft reads: "we formed a choir, we trained altar boys and we had a Sunday School"*). Mrs. Gertrude T. Waters was the first Sunday School Supt. We had an attendance about 50 children at our first meeting.

The Parishioners gave home entertainments and contributed generously.

The great day finally came for the dedication of the ground at 2712-Dumbarton Ave. N.W.

Father Schaefer lived in a rented house at 2818-P-St. N.W.

He worked diligently in helping the parishioners in their projects. He formed parish societies.

It was during Father Schaefer's pastorage that our present Church was built.

Many friends came to our financial aid. Mrs. Weisner (26) gave the Bell and different People gave the Stations.

Our altars were made from wooden crates, which formerly contained the pews.

Mrs. Mamie Smith (27) and Family gave the Baptismal Fount.

Father Bernard A. Lyons S.S.J. (28) succeeded Father Schaefer in 1931. Father Lyons was with us during the Depression. He suffered greatly. He moved in behind the sacristy in order to economize.

During his pastorage he started Devotions to St. Benedict The Moor

His three hours Agony Services were very emotional and the attendance increased every year.

Rev. Vincent J. Assing S.S.J. (29) became our Pastor in 1937 and he resided at 2439-P St. N.W.

Father Assing started The Miraculous Novena Devotions. He also helped to reduce our heavy debt by introducing several projects.

Father Vincent J. Severino S.S.J. (30) came to Epiphany on Sept. 11, 1943.

A few years later in 1946 our rectory was started.

It was however completed on Feb. 28, 1947.

We had a very fine Sunday School.

Indeed Father Severino was a zealous, pious man. His sincerity shall always be a testimony to his memory.

It was during his pastorage that a Praesidium was formed however it was discontinued in 1947. Mrs. Julia Foster (31) was Pres.

Under the leadership of Mrs. Mabel T. Andrews a Praesidium was again formed Oct. 22, 1951. but subsequently closed when members were forced to move from the Parish.

During Father Severino's pastorage two stained glass windows were donated.

One in memory of a founder, Mrs Mary L. Turner and the other to Mr. Weisner, a friend of the Parish.

Father Chester Ball S.S.J. (32) was our next Priest. The first Colored Priest in Wash. D.C.

He worked dilligently and helped increase the membership. Many people from other churches visited our church to enjoy the splendid music of our Choir. Miss May Smith was the directoress & organist. The choir rendered many Song Services, which helped our Church financially.

After Father Ball left, Father Leo Farragher S.S.J. (33) was sent to us. He won the esteem of all. However we missed the eloquent sermons. of Father Ball. Father Farragher is now at St. Vincent De Paul.

Father Gerard A. McWilliams (34) is our present Priest. He came to us in 1958. He formerly had been the pastor in Bethesda.

Father McWilliams has added two more Masses in order to accommodate more people.

Our rectory has been remodeled and has enhanced the beauty as well as reduced some of the laborious duties of Father McWilliams.

From the beginning of our Church under the late ArchBishop Curley (35) to the present time under the ecclesiastical leadership of Our Beloved The Most Rev. Patrick A. O Boyle D.D, Archbishop of Wash. the parishioners have labored and sacrificed to help our church become one of the most prominent Catholic Churches in the Area.

Our only hope now is that The Religious Instruction for our boys and girls will start again so our little ones in the Parish can learn more about God and be received in our Church. (36)

Document Source: Autograph manuscript, privately held. Transcribed and annotated by Peter J. Albert.

A note on the annotations: The annotation information below is derived, among others, from Cynthia E. Jackson, Dorothy Harris Gray, and Mary B. Waters, “History of Afro-Americans in Establishing Epiphany Roman Catholic Church, Georgetown, D.C.”; “The Restoration of Epiphany Parish in Georgetown”; Holy Trinity Church, Marriages, 1871-1905, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown University Library, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C., [https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557005/MAR\\_1871\\_05.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557005/MAR_1871_05.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y); decennial U.S. censuses; the Washington Star, and the Catholic Standard. We are indebted for their generous assistance with research for documentation for this article to Dorothy Harris Gray and Linda L. Gray, members of Epiphany Catholic Church, and Neville Waters III, whose grandmother Gertrude Turner Waters was a founder of the church and the author of the above account.

## Notes

1. Gertrude Turner was born in Washington, D.C., around 1896 and married Neville Waters, Sr., a member of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, at St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in 1919. She served as superintendent of the Sunday School at Epiphany, as treasurer of the Altar Guild, and as a member of the parish council. A public school teacher in the District for 39 years before her retirement in 1958, she taught at the Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School on 21st St., N.W. She died in 1973.

2. Patrick A. O’Boyle (1896-1987) was the first resident archbishop of Washington, D.C., serving from 1948 to 1973. Mrs. Waters is probably referring to Cardinal O’Boyle’s efforts to integrate Catholic parishes in the diocese. See Morris J. MacGregor, *Steadfast in the Faith: The Life of Patrick Cardinal O’Boyle* (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 166-97.

3. Thomas J. Duffey, S.S.J. (1873-1944), was the first pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Washington, D.C. That parish was founded in 1923.

4. Joseph A. Dodson, a street railway laborer, was born in Washington, D.C., around 1861. He married Mary Frances (Fannie) Matthews at Holy Trinity on July 14, 1902. He died in 1924.

5. Mary L. Turner was born in Washington, D.C., around 1865. She was the mother of Gertrude Turner Waters and a founding member of the Altar Guild at Epiphany.

6. Leander O. Clifford, a laborer in the Washington Navy Yard, was born in Maryland around 1862. He died in 1931.

7. Eleanora Jackson was born in Maryland around 1895. She owned and operated a beauty parlor in Georgetown which served as a meeting place for the exodus community from Holy Trinity. At Epiphany she was a prefect of the Our Lady of Mercy Sodality. Mrs. Jackson died in 1981.

8. Cecelia Dodson Creek, the sister of Joseph A. Dodson, was born in Washington, D.C., in 1867. She married John Creek at Holy Trinity on Oct. 15, 1893, and she died in 1972. At the time of the founding of Epiphany she was working as a domestic.

9. Moses Zachariah Booth, a janitor at the Seventh District police station, was born in Washington, D.C., in 1858 and baptized at Holy Trinity in 1859. He married Mary Elizabeth Oliver at Holy Trinity on Nov. 25, 1880; he died in 1935. His wife, Mary Elizabeth, was born in Virginia around 1865; she died in 1931.

10. Possibly Althea Neal Dodson (1908-92), the wife of Dr. Joseph N. Dodson

(1903-79), an allergist and a physician in the District's public schools. While working for the schools he continued his private practice in the evenings at his home. A founding member of Epiphany, he served on the parish council and sang in the choir.

11. Mary Frances (Fannie) Dodson, the wife of Joseph A. Dodson and the mother of Dr. Joseph N. Dodson and George A. Dodson, was born in Washington, D.C., around 1875. She died in 1964, survived by her two sons, twelve grandchildren, and sixteen great grandchildren.

12. Frank Bowman was born in Washington, D.C., in 1863 and baptized at Holy Trinity later that year. He married Martha Young Green at Holy Trinity on Aug. 6, 1890.

13. William Bowman, the brother of Frank Bowman, was a laborer in the building construction industry and later a porter. He was born in Washington, D.C., around 1875.

14. Richard N. Carter, a cutter in the monotype section of the Government Printing Office, was born in Washington, D.C., in 1876. He served in the army during World War I. Together with James Smackum and Aloysius Marshall, he met with Bishop Michael Curley, the prelate with jurisdiction over Washington, D.C., on Mar. 4, 1923, to propose creating a new parish in Georgetown for the African American members of the Holy Trinity community. After the establishment of Epiphany, Carter was a member there of the Knights of St. John and of the Holy Name Society and served as an usher. He died in 1952.

15. James E. Penn, a laborer at the Navy Yard and subsequently a janitor and stock clerk, was born in Maryland around 1880. He served as a sexton at Epiphany. He died in 1954. His wife Martha, born in Maryland around 1877, died in 1929.

16. Possibly Anna Contee, a printer's assistant in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. She was born in Washington, D.C., around 1888.

17. Jennie Morse, a dressmaker, was born in Maryland about 1875.

18. Emma D. Clifford, the wife of Leander Clifford, was born in Washington, D.C., around 1868; she died in 1928.

19. James Aloysius Smackum, Sr., born in Washington, D.C., in 1871 and baptized later that year at Holy Trinity, worked variously as a broom maker, upholsterer, and clerk. He was a member of the Knights of St. John at Epiphany. Smackum died in 1938. His wife, Mary, was born in Kentucky around 1872, and the two married in 1893. Mrs. Smackum died in 1927.

20. Cecelia Annie Smackum, the sister of James A. Smackum, Sr., was born in Washington, D.C., around 1868. At the time of the founding of Epiphany, she was working as a domestic for a private family. Miss Smackum died in 1936.

21. Lettie Smackum was born in Washington, D.C., around 1865. She worked as a laundress for a private family.

22. Cora Morris was born in Washington, D.C., around 1875.

23. Lucy Williams was the sister of Mary L. Turner. She died in 1928.

24. Mabel Andrews (1889-1971), the sister of Gertrude Turner Waters, was a public school teacher in the District. At the time of her retirement, she was teaching at the Wendell Phillips School on Olive St., N.W., in Georgetown, which she had attended as a child.

25. Lawrence E. Schaefer, S.S.J. (1886-1970), himself a carpenter, served as pastor of Epiphany Roman Catholic Church from 1924 until 1931.

26. Barbara Sauter Wissner (1874-1950), the widow of Frank J. Wissner (1874-



1926). He was a Washington, D.C., attorney and the publisher of *The Georgetown Courant*.

27. Mamie Odile Smith was born in Virginia around 1899. Her husband, Ernest C. Smith, was a Baptist minister.

28. Bernard A. Lyons, S.S.J., died in 1959 at the age of 68. He served at Epiphany from 1931 to 1937. Epiphany had 455 parishioners in 1931.

29. Vincent J. Assing, S.S.J., died in 1992 at the age of 89. He served at Epiphany from 1937 to 1944. In 1937 Epiphany had 115 children in the Sunday School and had 414 parishioners.

30. Vincent J. Severino, S.S.J., died in 1976 at the age of 83. He served at Epiphany from 1944 to 1952. His annual stipend from the parish was \$150.

31. Julia Smackum Foster, daughter of James and Mary Smackum, was active in a number of Catholic lay organizations, including the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Alumnae and the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Knights of St. John. She also served at Epiphany as superintendent of the Sunday School. In 1971, on a trip to Rome sponsored by the Alumnae, in an audience with the pope, she advocated for the canonization of Mother Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Mother Drexel was later beatified (1988) and canonized (2000) by Pope John Paul II. Mrs. Foster died at the age of 70 in 1982. Her obituary recorded that her favorite expression was "It was a party, and the best one yet."

32. Charles Chester Ball, S.S.J., died in 1970 at the age of 56. He served at Epiphany from 1952 to 1958. In 1952 there were 511 parishioners at Epiphany.

33. Leo J. Farragher, S.S.J., died in 1999 at the age of 88. He served at Epiphany in 1958 as interim pastor.

34. Gerard A. McWilliams died in 1976. He served at Epiphany from 1958 to 1968. He was the first diocesan priest to be the pastor of Epiphany.

35. Michael Joseph Curley (1879-1947) served as archbishop of Baltimore from 1921 to 1947 and as the first archbishop of Washington from 1939 to 1947.

36. Dorothy Harris Gray later said this about the decline of African American membership at Epiphany: "At Epiphany in the sixties, we had a white priest stand in front of the altar facing his congregation and tell us that we should go to the church that's closest to our homes. Then he said that he hadn't been around this many colored people before, and he was uncomfortable. As a result, the Black parishioners started to leave Epiphany. I was in the choir, and my friend was the organist. We lost our renowned choir. We lost our Sunday school and all of the other activities that we used to have in the church. That's what happened to Epiphany. I was a witness. I was there." (Kathleen Menzie Lesko, Valerie M. Babb, and Carroll R. Gibbs, *Black Georgetown Remembered: A History of Its Black Community from the Founding of "The Town of George" in 1751 to the Present Day*, 30th anniversary edition [Washington, D.C., 2021], p. 167).