

# The Oblate School for Colored Girls

## Historical Background

In 1790, Baltimore's free African American population outnumbered Baltimore's slave population. By 1820, there were 10,326 free African Americans and 4,357 slaves living in Baltimore. By 1860, the number of free African Americans in Baltimore had grown to 25,680 free blacks in comparison with 2,218 slaves. This large free African American population created a vibrant community of mariners, caulkers, stevedores, and other tradesmen.<sup>1</sup> Free African Americans faced strict rules and racism in Baltimore. Despite these problems, they created organizations that helped to improve their lives and community.

In the early 1800s, most free African Americans who were living in Baltimore were not educated. The education of slaves was illegal in Maryland, and even though there was a large population of free African Americans, there were few opportunities for free blacks to become educated. People also did not encourage the education of free African Americans because they feared that education and the close relationship between slaves and free blacks might lead to slave revolts.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1800s, religious organizations in Baltimore such as Sharp Street Methodist Episcopal Church's Free African School (1802), Daniel Coker's Bethel Charity School (c. 1812), St. James Protestant Episcopal Day School (1824), and William Lively's Union Seminary (1825) created schools for African American students.<sup>3</sup> These schools served a valuable service, but they could not meet the demands of Baltimore's growing free African American population.

On August 22, 1827, Father James Hector Nicholas Joubert de la Muraille, a Roman Catholic Sulpician priest from St. Mary's Seminary, was assigned to teach Sunday school classes to African American members of St. Mary's Lower Chapel (the chapel where African American members of the church held religious services). According to Joubert, the students "needed someone to direct them and to make them

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<sup>1</sup> Bettye Gardner, "Ante-bellum Black Education in Baltimore." *Maryland Historical Magazine* Vol. 71, No. 3 (1976): 360.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Batts Morrow, 45-6.

study,” so he decided that it might be a good idea to start a school that would educate young African American girls.<sup>4</sup> Joubert was introduced to two African American women who were members of the Lower Chapel and ran a small, private school for San Domingan children—Elizabeth Clarisse Lange and Marie Magdelaine Balas. Joubert asked them if they would help him develop, run, and teach at a school for free African American girls.

Lange and Balas agreed to help Joubert, but they also told him that they were interested in establishing a sisterhood of African American Roman Catholic nuns and asked for his help. After receiving approval from Archbishop Whitfield, Joubert, Lange, and Balas made plans for the opening of a school and the creation of a religious sisterhood that would be called the Sisters of Providence, later known as the Oblate Sisters of Providence.<sup>5</sup> During the school’s first year, the sisters began their novitiate. The sisters stated in the school’s constitution that they would give their lives to God and to the Christian education of young African American women. On June 24, 1828, Elizabeth Lange was named Mother Superior of the sisterhood.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier that month on June 13, 1828, Joubert, Lange, and Balas also opened the Oblate School for Colored Girls at 5 St. Mary’s Court.<sup>7</sup> Approximately nine students started at the school on opening day, including five boarders and four day students. The school met in a rented building at 5 St. Mary’s Court. The sisters used the building as a classroom and home for students and teachers, as well as a convent for the sisterhood. By November 19, 1828, the school had grown from nine to forty students, including boarders, day scholars, and full-time students.

The student body of the Oblate School varied in age, wealth, and religion.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, the school became a model for female education, teaching similar subjects to those offered in schools for young white girls.<sup>9</sup> The girls who attended the Oblate School studied subjects such as reading, language, writing, math, French, religion, sewing, and

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<sup>4</sup> Willa Young Banks, “A Contradiction in Antebellum Baltimore: A Competitive School for Girls of “Color” within a Slave State,” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 99, No. 2, Summer 2004, 134.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, 138.

<sup>6</sup> Banks, 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> Banks, 136-7; Morrow, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Banks, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Gardner, 365., Banks, 144.

other home skills.<sup>10</sup> The school continued to improve and add new subjects each year, such as geography. By 1853, the school had even changed its name from the Oblate School for Colored Girls to St. Frances School for Colored Girls, later St. Frances Academy. As the school continued to grow, so too did the sisterhood. St. Frances Academy and the Oblate Sisters of Providence still exist today, fulfilling their original missions by educating young students.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gardner, 364., Banks, 136-137.

<sup>11</sup> Banks, 153.