

# Baltimore-born bishop returns to his church 155 years later

One-hundred-fifty-five years after he died in Maryland, Baltimore native Bishop John J. Chanche was interred Jan. 19 at St. Mary Basilica in Natchez, Miss.

Bishop Chanche helped establish the Natchez basilica when he served as the southern city's first Catholic bishop.

Retired archbishop Cardinal William H. Keeler delivered the homily at the re-interment Mass at St. Mary Basilica months after allowing the bishop's body to be moved from its resting place at the New Cathedral Cemetery in West Baltimore.

Born, Oct. 4, 1795, to refugees from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Bishop John J. Chanche was ordained a Sulpician priest in Baltimore in 1819, became the president of the old St. Mary's College on Paca Street in 1834, and was named the first bishop of the Diocese of Natchez by Pope Gregory XVI in 1841.

He died July 22, 1852 in Frederick - presumably of cholera - while en route to Natchez after participating in the First Plenary Council in Baltimore.

The bishop was buried at the original Cathedral Cemetery in West Baltimore and was reinterred at the New Cathedral Cemetery on Old Frederick Road Feb. 11, 1878.

At the request of Bishop Joseph N. Latino of Jackson, Miss., the diocese that now includes Natchez; Cardinal Keeler last year agreed to return the remains of Bishop Chanche to the Mississippi basilica.

"Bishop Chanche had the vision of building what was then our cathedral," said Father David O'Connor, pastor of the former cathedral, which was named St. Mary Basilica in 1999. "About a year ago we decided that we should try to bring his remains back here."

The body was exhumed Aug. 8 by the Ruck Funeral Home, placed in a new casket

along with a new set of vestments, and flown to Natchez, said Michael J. Ruck Sr., president of the Baltimore-area company and a parishioner of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore.

“As Bishop Chanche struggled with the debt incurred in building this church, he found his Calvary, his meeting with the cross of Jesus,” Cardinal Keeler said. “And yet, while burdened with the cathedral debt, he managed to found a number of churches and mission posts.”

A number of prelates from throughout the south attended the Mass.