

# Body of first bishop of Mississippi exhumed in Baltimore

The first Bishop of Mississippi recently made his final trip from Baltimore to Natchez, Miss. – 155 years after he died in Maryland.

Born in Baltimore Oct. 4, 1795 to refugees of St. Domingue (now Haiti), Bishop John J. Chanche, S.S., was ordained a priest in the city in 1819, became the president of St. Mary's College on Paca St. in 1834, was named the first bishop of the Diocese of Natchez – the original diocese of Mississippi – by Pope Gregory XVI in 1841.

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

Though he was the bishop of Natchez, the native Baltimorean was buried at the original Cathedral Cemetery in West Baltimore and re-interred at the New Cathedral Cemetery on Old Frederick Road Feb. 11, 1878, but the pastor of St. Mary Basilica, Natchez, wanted his remains moved to the church he helped establish.

“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 a basilica in 1999. “About a year ago we decided that we should try to bring his remains back here.”

At the request of Bishop Joseph N. Latino – bishop of the Diocese of Jackson, which now covers Natchez – Cardinal William H. Keeler agreed this past spring to return the remains of Bishop Chanche to the Mississippi basilica, which was on the verge of completion when he died in 1852.

After months of wrangling with bureaucratic red tape, Ruck Funeral Homes went about the delicate process Aug. 8 of disassembling the monument atop Bishop Chanche's grave, exhuming the body, and placing the remains in a new casket, said Michael J. Ruck Sr., president of the company and a parishioner of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Baltimore.

“We handled this almost like an archeological excavation,” said Mr. Ruck, who is also chairman of the Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust.

Most of the remains were encased in a lead lining, which had been placed inside of the casket when the body was re-interred in 1878, he said.

The entire lead lining was lifted into the new casket, along with a new set of

vestments, zucchetto and a bishops MITRE supplied by Father Ronald D. Witherup, S.S., provincial superior for the Sulpicians of the United States, Mr. Ruck said.

"It was a moving experience," said Anne Lucido, office manager of New Cathedral Cemetery. "Here was a man who did so much in his short life, helped establish a new diocese, build a new cathedral and now he is returning after all of this time."

Both the remains and monument were then flown to Natchez, and are being stored in the parish archives until an official re-interment ceremony is scheduled, most likely in mid-October, Father O'Connor said with a slight Irish brogue.

"We are preparing the final resting place inside of one of the marble altars," he said.

"We feel very blessed by how cooperative and helpful everyone has been in this process. It's been a wonderful experience."