

Part two: Black Catholicism has roots in St. Mary's County

St. Clement in St. Mary's County holds a unique position in the history of the Catholic religion and the origin of black Catholicism. When the colonists arrived in 1634, St. Clement was known as Heron Island. The newcomers gave it the name of St. Clement. They also gave Point Lookout the name of St. Michael and the Potomac River was known as St. Gregory. The island consisted of about 400 acres of land. After a few weeks on St. Clement, the colonists moved to St. Mary's City. Father Andrew White, a Jesuit priest, kept a diary of the events that occurred on board the Ark and the Dove. He went about the area evangelizing the Indians and purchasing land from the Indians for the Jesuits. He purchased the land with trinkets, such as looking glasses, beads and other baubles. He also acquired a few slaves.

Father White chose St. Mary's City for the first settlement. He established a church that was little more than a tent. He also had the blacks work with him to build a chapel. The Jesuits had about 200 slaves who converted to Catholicism and who worked in their manors (plantations) around the county. Some of the slaves had special abilities, such as blacksmiths, animal husbandry and plowmen. These slaves were an asset to the manor.

Mathias de Sousa and John Price, the indentured servants, went about trading furs and other provisions with the Indians. Considering their status as furriers, they had a good relationship with the Indians. Most of all they learned to speak the Indian language. They could communicate with the Indians and learned the ways of their newfound friends. In 1640, de Sousa voted in the Provincial Assembly signifying that he was no longer an indentured servant because only freemen could participate in the voting. Very little is known about the life of the black inhabitants slave or free.

Soon after de Sousa's name appeared in the provincial records, then his name disappeared from the history of St. Mary's County. The Negro identified as Francisco has also been lost in obscurity. Through my diligent research, documents could not be found that would even allude to the free blacks.

There were a few blacks who immigrated to St. Mary's County during the first two decades of its settlement. Prior to 1680, most of the slaves came from the West Indies and some from Africa. In 1638, Governor Leonard Calvert pledged his manor of St. Michael's for 14 Negro men slaves and three Negro women. They used the slaves and some free blacks to cultivate their fields. These slaves along with those of the Jesuits were encouraged to practice their religion. Therefore, they faithfully attended Mass and observed the Catholic holidays.

During church service, blacks had certain sections of the church designated for their use. In many cases it was the same church that their free labor helped to build. The priest recorded births, marriages and deaths of the black Catholics. Marriages took place in the field or in the slave quarters. Deaths were presided over by a priest, if one was available. Births were noted and names were given. With the gradual expansion of the free and slave population, black Catholics increased in number. There was in 1700 a large number of black Catholics in Southern Maryland. Blacks, slave and free, through their own resources, assisted in the growth of Catholicism. The priest worked with the new arrivals, baptized and converted them to the Catholic religion. However, baptism did not exclude them from manumission or freedom. From the nurturing of this group, a foundation was laid that assisted in the growth and enlargement of the number of black Catholics.

Agnes Kane Callum is a noted historian in the area of genealogy and a parishioner of historic St. Francis Xavier, Baltimore.