

Pennsylvania Avenue: Corridor of African American Catholic History

Once a major venue for entertainers of national repute, Pennsylvania Avenue holds a rich history for African-American Catholics. Here one finds the “Mother Church” for African-American Catholics in West Baltimore, the site of the original seminary for the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and a monument recognizing the formation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

A tour of the “Pennsylvania Avenue Heritage Trail” takes visitors through Baltimore’s premier historic African-American neighborhood. For Catholics, St. Peter Claver Church sits near the top of the trail with St. Joseph Seminary near its base. The two are intertwined.

The growth of the African-American population in West Baltimore during the 1880s and segregation, a fact of life in the Catholic Church in Baltimore, made it evident that a church was needed for black Catholics who were far removed from St. Francis Xavier in East Baltimore.

In 1888, the Mill Hill Missionaries, later becoming an American religious community, obtained the Western Maryland Hotel, located at the end of the 600 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. In that year, the first superior of the Mill Hill Josephites fulfilled his vision, establishing the building as St. Joseph Seminary to prepare seminarians for evangelization among African Americans. Father John R. Slattery’s vision also included a church in connection with the seminary. “The two go together,” Father Slattery wrote, “the church is an outgrowth of the Seminary with its chapel (the church) for sacred exercise in pastoral theology and ceremony.” Thus, one mile north of the seminary, at the juncture of Fremont and Pennsylvania Avenues, Father Slattery’s purchase of a building, an adjoining lot and house, became St. Peter Claver Church.

Oblate Sister of Providence Reginald Gerdes wrote, “St. Peter Claver Parish can rightfully be called The Mother Parish of West Baltimore African-American Catholics. Founded (on Sept. 9, 1888) by the Mill Hill Josephites this church,

specifically for African Americans was the first of its kind in West Baltimore.”

The extended families of St. Peter Claver Church have seeded the pews of the predominantly African-American Catholic Churches in West Baltimore. In recognition of her leadership and service, St. Peter Claver Church was named a Baltimore City Historic Landmark and is now a site along the Heritage Trail, along with what became of the Josephites’ seminary.

St. Joseph Seminary is now located in Washington, D.C., but its former building in West Baltimore tells another tale of African-American Catholic history. It has been remodeled into the Charles Uncles Senior Apartments, named for the Mill Hill Missionary who was the first African American priest educated and ordained in the United States. Father Charles Randolph Uncles was one of the five original Mill Hill Missionaries who remained in the United States to establish the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart as an American religious community in 1893. The Society, known as the Josephite Fathers and Brothers, with its headquarters in Baltimore, maintains their sole apostolate to provide for the spiritual, educational and social needs of African Americans.

The Josephites are not the only religious community to have a place on the Heritage Trail. Now less than a short block to the west of lower Pennsylvania Avenue rests a monument where a house once stood at 610 George St., the location where the four charter members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence made their promises on July 2, 1829. Now a community park, in February 2000 the community witnessed the mayor of Baltimore place a monument and plaque commemorating the location where the first order of women religious of African descent made their first vows.

Today the African-American community is restoring historic Pennsylvania Avenue, already reviving celebrations like the Easter Parade, restoring culture through Jubilee Arts at the Harris-Marcus Center, reinventing property like the Sphinx Club as the Negro Baseball Museum and Café, along with continued revitalization of housing.

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