

Research uncovers new information about Mother Mary Lange

Many bits of misinformation have cropped up around Mother Mary Lange, the pioneering woman who founded in Baltimore both the Oblate Sisters of Providence (the first sustained religious community for African American women) and St. Frances Academy (the first Catholic school in the United States for black children).

Sharon Knecht, archivist for the Oblate Sisters of Providence, has recently helped complete extensive research that sheds new light on Mother Lange's life.

As many in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and around the world pray for Mother Lange's canonization, the Catholic Review separates fact from fiction.

Place of birth

In recent years, many people believed Mother Lange was born in Haiti. While there are no birth certificates or baptismal records, Knecht is confident that Lange's actual birthplace was Santiago, Cuba.

The archivist said the most compelling evidence of Mother Lange's Cuban roots is found in a memoir written by Mother Theresa Willigman, an Oblate Sister of Providence who had lived with Mother Lange for 44 years beginning at age 5. The memoir states that Mother Lange was born in "Santiago de Cuba," where there was a large French-speaking community.

Mother Willigman's memoir notes that Mother Lange "always delighted to tell the young Sisters of the customs and processions carried on in Santiago."

When Mother Lange came to Baltimore circa 1813, Knecht said, she naturally gravitated to the French-speaking community of Haitian immigrants who arrived after the Haitian revolution.

"No federal census lists her birthplace as Haiti," Knecht said, noting that two censuses say directly that Mother Lange was born in Cuba.

For more than a century, it was accepted that Mother Lange was born in Cuba. It wasn't until the 1990s when, for reasons that are unclear, some began to assert Haitian roots.

Mother Lange's age

With no birth certificate, it is difficult to say when Mother Lange was born. Two census records indicate that Mother Lange was born in 1794, while one says 1786 and another, 1783. Mother Lange's death certificate says she was born in 1787. Knecht said it is most accurate to say Mother Lange was born circa 1794. She died Feb. 3, 1882, at St. Frances Convent in Baltimore.

Ethnicity

While some believe that Mother Lange was of mixed racial heritage, Knecht said Mother Lange was likely of African descent. The archivist noted that when Mother Lange's remains were exhumed from New Cathedral Cemetery in Baltimore and transferred to Our Lady of Mount Providence Convent Chapel in 2013, scientific testing showed them to belong to a woman of African heritage.

Ministry in Baltimore

The timeline of Mother Lange's ministry in Baltimore has sometimes become blurred over the years. Knecht pointed out that after leaving Cuba, Mother Lange first went to Charleston, S.C., and then Norfolk, Va., before making her way to Baltimore by 1813.

Together with Marie Magdalene Balas (later Sister Frances), Mother Lange operated a school in their home in Fells Point. In 1828, the two women met with Sulpician Father Nicholas Joubert, who proposed they start a religious community of women of African descent whose primary mandate was to teach girls of color. They began a school in a rented house near St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street. The school later became St. Frances Academy, the oldest continuously operating Catholic educational institution for African-American children in the United States.

Mother Lange and three others took their first vows as Oblate Sisters of Providence

on July 2, 1829.



Sharon Knecht

Also see:

St. Frances Academy students re-enact Selma march