

Riding the black history trail, again

February is national Black History Month and as such, we will take another ride along the black history trail, highlighting memorable events relating to black Catholic history in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

- The daughter of Baltimore City's State's Attorney, Patricia Jessamy, was a student of the Oblate Sisters' school St. Gabriel, in the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Miss.
- Billie Holiday, the great blues singer, was once a student at St. Frances Academy.
- Camille Cosby, wife of comedian Bill Cosby, was taught by the Oblate Sisters at St. Cyprian School in Washington, D.C.
- Theodore Wilson, a former student of the Oblate Sisters at St. Pius, often catered dinner events for the late Cardinal Lawrence Shehan in the basilica rectory. Teddy, as he was called, was the guiding force behind the effort to start the cause for canonization of Mother Mary Lange.
- Derrick Alexander, who played for the Baltimore Ravens, was a student at Our Lady of Victory School in Detroit, Mich., conducted by the Oblate Sisters of Providence.
- The Ink Spots, before becoming famous, sang as a group on a corner of Stricker Street in St. Peter Claver Parish. They provided the music for the Christmas Eve Mass during the late 1940s at the request of Josephite Father William Murphy.
- The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation was founded in 1845 by Sister Theresa Duchemin, one of the original members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Sister Theresa was also related to the family of John Eager Howard, who was once governor of Maryland. He sold the land where the basilica now stands to the Archdiocese.
- The Franciscans of Glenn Riddle, Pa., came to Baltimore in 1889 to join the Josephites in ministering to the African-American population. The Sisters served in St. Peter Claver for 103 years.

- In the late 1800s, Mother Mary Frances Cunningham, foundress of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, requested permission of Cardinal James Gibbons to teach catechism to the African-American children in the parishes of Baltimore City.
- In the 1920s Archbishop Michael Joseph Curley assigned all the black orphans to the care of the Franciscans of Baltimore City, now called Franciscans of Milwaukee, thus terminating the orphan care by the Oblate Sisters.
- Xaverian Brothers, Jude and Simon, conducted college classes for the Oblate Sisters of Providence in their motherhouse at St. Frances when the doors to the local Catholic colleges were closed to African-Americans because of segregation.
- Through the intervention of St. Katharine Drexel, three Oblates were able to enroll in The Catholic University of America, during the days of segregation.
- The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, when living on Mount Street, conducted a shelter and a school for young African-American girls, a forerunner of the Mother Mary Lange Center in East Baltimore. One of the teachers was an Oblate Sister of Providence.
- The St. Vincent De Paul Society conducted a summer camp for African-American children. That facility also served as a house of formation for the Oblate Sisters of Providence when their novitiate in Catonsville burned to the ground in 1945.
- For years, the corrections officers of the city jail have been working with the Oblate Sisters in their neighborhood outreach programs of Johnston Square. Originally starting with the youth in the area, the group has extended its services to the elderly, with a special outdoor garden program for men called the "Elders Club." Oblate Sister Brenda Motte continues to serve the community in these efforts.
- Located at 610 George St., a monument was dedicated by former Mayor Martin O'Malley in 1990s. It is the site where the first vows of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, an African-American community, took place.

Oblate Sister M. Reginald Gerdes is a historical researcher for the Oblate Sisters of Providence.