

St. Mary's County a fertile ground for black Catholics

November is Black Catholic History Month within the United States. In celebration of this month, I offer this story about St. Mary's County, a fertile ground of faith among African-American Catholics.

The history of St. Mary's County is a rich and deserving record.

It is educational and enlightening, as well as interesting. There is no limit as to what one can learn about this historical place. Its origin was settled by folks who were seeking religious freedom, including the Calverts, who were the proprietors. At this time Catholics were in disfavor with the Church of England; therefore, they had to sequester their religious activities. Preparation was made for the mobility and the settlement of Maryland. Maryland was named in honor of Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles II of England. St. Mary's County was named for the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Mary's was the first county of Maryland and the first capital until it was moved to Annapolis in 1696. St. Mary's is the mother county of Maryland.

On Nov. 22, 1633, the pioneers boarded the Ark and the Dove bound for their new home in Maryland. The Dove, the larger ship, had a capacity of 400 tons, while the Ark, a smaller ship, had the capacity of about 75 tons. They left Cowes, Isle of Wight, England, and sailed passed Cape Verdes, Canary Islands and the coast of West Africa and out into the Atlantic. A furious storm arose that forced the ships to separate. The storm was so fierce that it was thought that the Dove was lost. The Ark continued on its journey and dropped anchor in Barbados. There the crew repaired the damage the ship sustained during the storm. They purchased provisions for the last part of their journey. One day, the ship that they thought was lost docked in the harbor at Barbados – the Dove was safe. The storm was so fierce that the Dove returned to England to wait for fair weather. The Ark and the Dove joined up again, stopping at several islands to purchase supplies.

They stopped for the last time at Port Comfort, Va., in February 1634 before heading for the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River. The ships pulled into St. Clement

Island where the passengers disembarked. They were grateful for their safe journey, and they prayed and chopped down several trees and made a cross. Within the group there were three indentured blacks: Mathias de Sousa and Francisco identified as "mulatto," and John Price, a Negro. The indentured servants with the help of others built a makeshift altar and were acolytes while Father White celebrated Holy Mass on March 25, 1634, the feast day of the Annunciation, which is now celebrated as Maryland Day. This was the first Roman Catholic Mass celebrated in the English-speaking North America. This, too, was the origin of black Catholicism in the country. This date precedes Florida, which was colonized by Spain and admitted into the Union in 1845. Louisiana was owned by the French and did not become a part of the United States until 1803. It is not known nor is it documented when the island was named St. Clement; however, it is known that St. Clement was the first successor to St. Peter. He is known as Pope Clement I and his feast day is Nov. 23.

On Nov.15, 2008, the Office of African American Catholic Ministry will sponsor a Black Catholic History Bus Tour to St. Mary's County. Both Sister Reginald Gerdes, O.S.P., and I will serve as tour guides. For more information call 410-625-8472.

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