

Questions and Answers 2/4/2022
Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul
in the United States
Historical Involvement with Slavery

What is the Sisters of Charity Federation?

The Sisters of Charity Federation is a voluntary membership association of 14 congregations of women religious that number more than 2,000 sisters in North America. The Federation was originally founded as a conference in 1947 with membership including the six Setonian congregations that trace their origins to Elizabeth Ann Seton. The Federation expanded in 1973 to include membership of congregations with Vincentian but not Setonian roots.

Which congregations in the Federation participated in this research initiative exploring their history of involvement with slavery?

Six congregations, including:

- Sisters of Charity of New York
- Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States (includes the Province of St. Louise and the Province of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton)
- Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati
- Sisters of Charity of Halifax
- Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, New Jersey
- Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania

These six congregations trace their lineage to Elizabeth Ann Seton and the original Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1809. The remaining seven congregations, including Les Religieuses de Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur, Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, Sisters of St. Martha of Antigonish, and Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island, joined in solidarity in participating in this effort.

Where and when did the early Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States have ties to slavery?

The archived records and documents reviewed to date show that, prior to 1865, the Sisters and Daughters benefited from the labor of enslaved people in Emmitsburg, Maryland; St. Louis, Missouri; and New Orleans, Louisiana.

How were the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States involved with slavery?

Recently reviewed archival documents indicate involvement in slavery by the Sisters and the Daughters.

The research confirmed previously reported findings of at least two enslaved individuals who were owned by Sisters and Daughters in Maryland in 1839, and found documentation of one additional enslaved individual in 1859. The recently reviewed archival documents also indicate

that Sisters received proceeds from the sale of enslaved people on at least two occasions, one in 1819 and another in 1839, as recorded in financial ledgers and letters between the Sisters, Mount Saint Mary's University, and Saint Mary's Seminary.

There is also evidence that the Sisters benefited from the labor of people who were enslaved by Mount St. Mary's University when the Sisters supervised the washroom for the Sulpician Fathers at Mount St. Mary's. In Dr. Catherine O'Donnell's 2018 book, "Elizabeth Ann Seton: American Saint," she notes that "there is no evidence that enslaved people did domestic work for Elizabeth and the other women, and it was the Sulpicians, not the sisters, who served as owners. Yet enslaved people labored on the institution's farm and for the schools" in Emmitsburg.

Further, evidence exists that the Sisters in New Orleans, Louisiana benefitted from the labor of enslaved individuals in the work of Charity Hospital. Although these enslaved individuals were owned by the State of Louisiana, there is some evidence that the Sisters were involved in the decisions related to the sale of enslaved people in 1848.

Finally, in St. Louis, there is documentation of at least one instance of the Sisters benefiting from labor by an enslaved person in the work of Mullanphy Hospital from December 1830 through December 1831.

How many individuals were enslaved? At this point in their discovery, the researchers have confirmed that, combined, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's and the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States utilized the enslaved labor of 31 individuals.

Did Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) own slave(s)?

This latest research found no new evidence that Mother Seton owned an enslaved person. In 1777, Elizabeth Ann Seton's grandfather, the Rev. Richard Charlton, bequeathed Elizabeth a "Negro Boy formerly named Brennus" in his will. She was 3 years old at that time. There is no further record of Brennus, and researchers, including Dr. Catherine O'Donnell, author of "Elizabeth Seton: American Saint," believe Brennus may have escaped during the American Revolution.

Who did this research, and how was it conducted?

In 2019, the Daughters of Charity Provincial Archives in Emmitsburg began researching slavery relative to the history of the Daughters of Charity in the United States in response to inquiries received by its archives. The research continued, although impacted by the pandemic, through most of 2021.

In addition to the Provincial Archives, the following archives were consulted: Mount St. Mary's University, Archdiocese of Baltimore, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Archdiocese of New Orleans, Ascension Parish (Louisiana) Courthouse, St. Louis (Missouri) Courthouse, and Frederick Roots (web archive compendium). We are very grateful to all those who assisted us in this important work.

Why is the Federation sharing this information at this time?

The enslavement of any person is contrary to the law of God, and slavery is an indelible stain on our nation's history. It is important to honestly acknowledge this chapter in the history of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's and Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States, while making a commitment to continue working toward racial equality, so that all of us can be part of the healing process in our congregations, our ministries, our nation and in our world.

What is the Federation's response?

As a first acknowledgement of this chapter in our history, and a symbol of our deep sorrow and remorse, a monument will be erected on the grounds of the original Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's congregation in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Our research will continue and, going forward, we will explore additional, meaningful, actions that will contribute to the work that must be done to bring about significant change in our society.

Suggestions for further reading:

[Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle](#)

Shannen Dee Williams

5/17/2022

Duke University Press Books

[My Research into the History of Catholic Slaveholding Transformed My Understanding of My Church](#)

Rachel L. Swarms

The New York Times

Published 3/16/2021 | Updated June 21, 2021

[Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton: slaveholding saint?](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

5/26/2021

[The Catholic sisters who confronted their own legacy of racism](#)

William Critchley-Menor, SJ

America Magazine

3/5/2020

[The Nuns Who Bought and Sold Human Beings](#)

Rachel L. Swarms

The New York Times

8/2/2019

[Reckoning: White sisters respond to their own racism, to one historian's call for justice](#)

Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

Global Sisters Report

1/8/2018

“How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America”

Clint Smith

Little, Brown and Company (June 1, 2021)

[Book review \(NPR\)](#)

6/2/2021