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The Experience of the Oblate Sisters of Providence during the Civil War Era

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In this paper, based on a talk delivered during the 2012 Annual Meeting in Miami Gardens, Florida, Dr. Morrow delves into the annals of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and reveals the challenges they faced during the Civil War Era and their strength and ingenuity in finding resourceful solutions to continue in their mission to educate black children and provide much-needed services for slaves and free blacks during this time. Their capacity for commitment and creativity at this time of existential conflict stands as a model even today.

Black and free in a slave society that privileged only whiteness, female in a male dominated society, Roman Catholic in a Protestant society, and pursuing religious vocations in a society doubting the virtue of all black women, the Oblate Sisters of Providence proved exceptional in nineteenth-century America. Organized in 1828, the Oblate sisters dedicated themselves as “a Religious society of Coloured Women established in Baltimore with the [approval] of the Most Reverend Archbishop, [who] renounce the world to consecrate themselves to God, and to the Christian education of young girls of color.”¹

As did all communities of women religious, the Oblate sisterhood followed the ascetic lifestyle which their commitment to

¹ The Original Rule and Constitutions of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, English manuscript copy, RG III, Box 29, Folder 2, AOSP.

the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience prescribed. However, the burden of the systemic racism pervading the slaveholding United States compounded the difficulties this black sisterhood had confronted during their existence of some thirty years. Oblate acceptance of adversity, however, did not require a passive resignation to white society's ascriptions of racial inferiority. Indeed, as they had from their origins, the sisters continued to defy such social derogation by defining themselves as women of virtue who exercised agency in service to others.

Oblate annals entries frequently documented the sisterhood's work in ministering to black Catholics. Not only did the reputation for excellence the Oblate school had earned over time attract pupils from beyond the immediate vicinity of Baltimore, but the sisters continued to serve as role models who attracted young women to religious life. During 1860 alone the Oblate community received five candidates as postulants, or entry level members, while six postulants received the religious habit, advancing to the rank of novice. The annals also noted regularly the sizeable attendance of black Catholics at religious ceremonies in the Oblate St. Frances Chapel.

In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of black Catholics, the sisters addressed their physical needs as well. In April, 1860 the Oblate community opened a Widows and Aged People's Home. This act merely formalized a service the sisters had been providing since their first decade of existence, when they had stipulated the financial and lifestyle conditions under which elderly women could reside in the Oblate convent, thus providing a welcome alternative to the city poorhouse attic accommodations for elderly women of color. Since their establishment the Oblate sisterhood had also housed and educated a number of orphan girls, whom they referred to as "children of the house." While several of these girls

later found employment outside the convent, others joined the Oblate sisterhood.²

On 4 November, the annals entry stated, “On this day we received the sad although not unexpected news that our worthy and kind Director was to leave us and that our beloved Church was to be closed. It is impossible to describe our feelings at such an event...it was truly a mournful occasion.” On 5 November, the annalist pointedly observed, “It was remarkable that it was the anniversary of the death of our beloved Founder that this sudden change took place.”³ For the sizable Oblate membership old enough to have experienced the wrenching communal crises following the death in 1843 of their co-founder and first spiritual director, the Sulpician priest James Hector Joubert, the simultaneous departure of their current Redemptorist director, Fr. Dominic Kraus, and closing of their chapel as a public church could only have reawakened difficult and painful memories of clerical abandonment.⁴

However, the sequence of events over the next several days surely relieved any Oblate concerns. On 7 November Oblate Superior Gertrude Thomas accompanied by one of the sisters visited the Superior of the Jesuits now charged with Oblate spiritual direction. He received his visitors kindly and promised to do whatever lay in his power for the good of the community. He appointed Rev. Peter Miller as Oblate spiritual director. On 10 November the annalist reported, “We had Mass today for the first time by our new Director. He has very kindly allotted twelve pews in Blessed Peter Claver Chapel for the use of the [Sisters] and Children.”⁵

² Morrow, *Persons of Color*, 103, 107, 161.

³ Oblate Annals, 4, 5 November 1860, RG II, Box 34, Folder 4, AOSP.

⁴ See Morrow, *Persons of Color*, chapter 8.

⁵ Oblate Annals, 7, 10 November 1860, RG II, Box 34, Folder 4, AOSP.

Oblate appreciation of Fr. Miller grew rapidly in the first months of his spiritual directorship. On 9 March 1861, “the feast of our holy mother and patroness St. Frances,” Miller celebrated Mass in the Oblate St. Frances Chapel “and afterwards gave a very moving and interesting discourse on the great virtues practiced by our glorious patroness. It was the first he had given and was on that account gratefully received and prized.”⁶ The following month, the course of history would impose unexpected changes throughout American society, including the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

The outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861 brought hardship and suffering to Americans in both the North and the South. The state of Maryland remained loyal to the Union, even as many of its slaveholding citizens identified with the Confederate cause. White Catholics—both nationally and in Maryland—expressed their hostility toward black people as emphatically as did their Protestant fellow citizens. The pages of the *Catholic Mirror*, the official publication of the archdiocese of Baltimore, amply documented these white sentiments.

A week and a day after the commencement of hostilities, the *Mirror's* editorial, “The War,” vigorously defended the institution of slavery. It warned New Englanders against “the very common mistake of putting self in the place of the slave and imagining what a terrible infliction it would be.” For white men, “it were indeed worse than death.” These northerners, however, “...quite forget that the slave has been born to his lot, as were his fathers before him and that he feels in it neither degradation nor misery. He is practically better off than the majority of laborers anywhere in the civilized world....He is at home a singularly happy and contented man. He never works so hard during the day but that he is ready to

⁶ Ibid., 9 March 1861, RG II, Box 34, Folder 5, AOSP.

sing, dance, and play the fiddle nearly all night....”⁷ Such assertions pervaded the pages of the *Catholic Mirror* and other Maryland publications throughout the war. Not only do they provide transfixing insights into the racial convictions of the majority of white Marylanders, they also elucidate the social climate in which black people in general and the Oblate Sisters in particular functioned during this time.

Baltimoreans seldom witnessed actual military combat within the city, but the war still affected their daily lives. Significantly, the *Oblate Annals* did not mention the tumult of war that April. The Oblate Sisters followed their community life and conducted their schools as closely as possible according to their accustomed patterns, but war conditions inevitably disrupted the normal course of Oblate life, as the annalist’s occasional references to the events of the war revealed.

The sisters’ response to their first encounter with adverse Civil War conditions demonstrated characteristic Oblate initiative and resourcefulness. On 26 December 1861, the annalist noted, “Owing to the difficulty of receiving payment from the parents of the children, as all Communication is stopped, it was judged advisable by our friends to have a Concert for the benefit of the school.” The first concert occurred the day after Christmas, attracted a large audience and netted \$100 in revenue.⁸ Fund raising concerts, a necessary response which wartime conditions generated, became a staple resource in the Oblate arsenal to maintain financial solvency.

On 10 April 1862 the annalist reported that boarding pupil Britannia Ferguson from Richmond, Virginia—the capital of the Confederacy—had battled a serious illness for several months. She died on Sunday, 20 April. On Tuesday 22 April the annalist

⁷ “The War,” *Catholic Mirror*, 20 April 1861, XII, # 16, p. 4.

⁸ *Oblate Annals*, 26 December 1861, RG II, Box 34, Folder 5, AOSP.

reported, "Brittannia was buried today. Rev. Father Miller sang a Requiem Mass, after which she was put in a vault until some news from her home." This last information constituted an indirect reference to the intrusion of war. Undoubtedly the same cessation of communication and tuition payments associated with the war the previous year prevented reliable communications with the Ferguson family about Brittannia's condition and final disposition.⁹

Occasionally conditions the Civil War created proved positive for the Oblate community. On Sunday, 7 September the annalist stated, "Through the kindness of our good father we had Mass today in our Chapel as on account of the Railroad being destroyed several of the fathers could not get to Frederick." The next day the sisters enjoyed three Masses and Holy Communion "for the same reason above mentioned." The sisters again held a concert to raise funds for the school the day after Christmas. From 22 December through New Year's Day, the sisters also held a fund raising sale which "closed on New Year's day with a general raffle. The Proceeds of the Whole amounted to \$250.00."¹⁰

On 24 May 1863 a benefit concert netted \$84.00. The annalist continued, "We intended to repeat the Concert, but owing to the disturbed state of the City as Martial law was declared we were obliged to postpone it until some time later." The next entry, dated 20 July noted briefly, "Our schools closed today, we had no Exhibition for the reason mentioned above."¹¹ When the military authorities declared martial law, people could not travel freely on the streets, especially after dark. This 1863 concert postponement and cancellation of their annual school closing ceremonies constituted the most direct Civil War intrusions on Oblate activities.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10, 20, 22, April 1862.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 8 September, 26 December, 1862.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14 January, 9 March, 24 May, 20 July 1863.

However, the Oblate community also realized their long cherished goal to establish schools for black children beyond the city of Baltimore for the first time in the year 1863. Since 1833 the Oblate Sisters had expressed their missionary zeal and determined dedication “to God in the religious state to work more efficaciously for their sanctification and to contribute all the means in their power for the glory of God and the religious education of the girls of their race.” Therefore they “at all times” stood “ready to go anywhere” that their clerical superiors “should judge the Holy Will of God called them.”¹² Clerical timidity or indifference toward educating black children rather than Oblate commitment explained the thirty year interval before Oblate evangelical fervor acquired a promising field of labor.

On 4 August the annalist recorded, “Our Rev. father director today received an application from Rev. father Barbelin to establish a branch of our Community in Philadelphia. [I]t was a most unexpected proposal which everyone wished might be successful.” From receipt of the initial inquiry to the proposed opening of the school in Philadelphia on the last Monday in August, the Oblate sisterhood allotted only three weeks, demonstrating the sincerity of their pledge to stand “at all times” “ready to go anywhere” to fulfill their teaching mission.

On 26 August the annalist recorded, “The Sisters started today for their new home. Our Rev. Director and Mother went on. It was a very sad parting as it was the first time some of them had left dear St. Frances. We who remained felt quite lost for some days, but happily being very busy we had no time to think.”¹³ Perhaps the oldest Oblate Sisters who had experienced the communal rupture of the 1840s when three members departed from the

¹² Morrow, *Persons of Color*, 72. Quotations from Oblate Annals, Vol. 1, pp. 25, 33, RG II, Box 34, Folder 1, AOSP.

¹³ Oblate Annals, 24, 25, 26 August, 1863, RG II, Box 34, Folder 5, AOSP.

order might have derived considerable comfort from the fact that the departure of three sisters from the motherhouse this time heralded an advancement of the Oblate vision.

On 9 April the Oblate community confronted a significant blow to their mission of education. The annalist reported, "About this time the Sisters' school at Federal Hill [St. Peter Claver] decreasing so much that the Sisters were unable to support themselves; it was decided after mature deliberation to close the school and the Srs. returned home."¹⁴ The Civil War plausibly bore at least partial responsibility for the school's decline. Free black people functioned at the margins of Baltimore's economy and wartime conditions further eroded their employment opportunities, making it difficult for them to earn sufficient discretionary income to afford the modest tuition the Oblate schools charged.

According to its new constitution, the state of Maryland abolished slavery effective 1 November 1864. On 1 March 1865 the annalist reported, "Our Reverend Director seeing the danger to which Catholic children are exposed of losing their faith, employed two of the Srs. to take charge of a Free school so that they might come and learn their religion and at the same time their learning would be attended to. This good father gave for these six months \$75.00. The school numbers already 60 scholars only girls."¹⁵ Although unacknowledged here, contemporary developments in Maryland society plausibly prompted Miller's unprecedented generosity in personally subsidizing a free black school at this particular time. Historian Paul Fuke argues persuasively that during this period in Maryland black people seized the initiative in providing both educational opportunities and social services for

¹⁴ Ibid., 9 April 1864.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1 March 1865.

their own race.¹⁶ In significant ways Oblate educational initiatives resonated with this black community drive. Perhaps Miller and the Oblate Sisters specifically thought of the needs of the newly freed but poor people in opening this free school a few months later. Former pupils of the Oblate St. Peter Claver School, closed the previous year, might also attend this free school.

Just as the Oblate annals did not note the beginning of the Civil War in April 1861, they did not mention the end of hostilities in April 1865. The only annals entry for the month of April that year remarked, “We had the happiness of having a low Mass today in our Chapel so that the Srs. might make their Easter [duty]...,” as befitted the concerns of a community of women religious.¹⁷

The Civil War had imposed unanticipated obstacles on the routine of Oblate life, ranging from the disruption of lines of communication to the imposition of martial law. In correspondence with a Freedmen’s Bureau official in 1867 the sisterhood disclosed, referring to themselves in the third person, “During the war they clothed, fed, and furnished with books 8 children from Southern States, whose Parents were unable to transmit funds, and since the

¹⁶ Richard Paul Fuke, *Imperfect Equality: African Americans and the Confines of White Racial Attitudes in Post-Emancipation Maryland* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 88. In addition to this source, for insightful and detailed treatments of both black agency in effecting freedom and the obstacles black people encountered in the process see Fields, Barbara J. *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). For excellent primary source collections documenting the black experience during the Civil War era, see C. Peter Ripley et al, editors, *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Ira Berlin et al, editors, *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992); and Ira Berlin et al, editors, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 Series I, Vol. II, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Oblate Annals, 13 April 1865, RG II, Box 34, Folder 5, AOSP.

close of the War they have been unsuccessful in receiving pay.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the sisters responded to these difficulties with resourcefulness, instituting fund raising concerts to augment dwindling tuition payments. Furthermore, under adverse wartime conditions the sisters succeeded in advancing their education mission on two separate fronts. They opened their first Oblate colony outside Baltimore in Philadelphia in 1863 and a free school in Baltimore in 1865 to accommodate pupils from both the financially constrained antebellum free and the newly emancipated but impoverished black populations. Not only had the Oblate Sisters of Providence survived the Civil War as a viable and functioning community of black women religious educators, but they also stood poised at the dawn of the Reconstruction era to expand the services they offered to their people as they encountered the realities of freedom in postwar American society.

* * *

April, 1865 through early 1867, the era of Presidential Reconstruction following the Civil War, boded ill for most black people in the United States. Presidents Lincoln and Johnson adopted policies to restore the sundered Union as quickly and painlessly as possible by imposing minimal demands on the former Confederacy to effect political reunion, property restoration—with the notable exception of human property—and minimal federal intrusion in the conduct of state affairs. The welfare of black people proved of low priority to these administrations. In Maryland the former slaveholding elite soon enforced Black Codes and manipulated apprenticeship laws to remove black children from

¹⁸ Oblate Sisters of Providence to William Howard Day, Esq., Superintendent of Freedmen’s Schools, 22 October 1867, Records of the field offices for the states of Maryland and Delaware, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1892, RG 105, Microfilm Roll # 4, Target 1: Office of the Assistant Commissioner Correspondence, Unregistered Letters Received, October 1865 - November 1868.

their parents, which threatened to eviscerate any substance from the meaning of freedom for black people.

An informative depiction of continuing negative white Catholic feeling toward black people appeared in the *Catholic Mirror* editorial, “The Future of the Negro,” in the 2 December 1865 issue. The author asserted, “If the negro race can be elevated in the scale of being, we look to the ministers of the Catholic religion to solve the problem and achieve the good work.” He further lamented, “But slavery which did so much to civilize the race is among the dead fossils of the past, and the negro is thrown upon his own resources to decide the question of his capacity for self-government. We know that he is unfitted by habits, education, or a previous appreciation of the civilizing arts of freedom, to discharge the duties of the citizen, or to lift the slave into the intelligent member of society.” Insisting that “The Catholic Church can soften the rudeness of his heart, and elevate him to a standard of comparative equality with the white race—Nature has not made him *even in possibility*, the equal of the white man [emphasis his]...,” the author concluded, “hence if he ever reach that comparative equality..., we maintain that the Catholic Church alone can qualify him....”¹⁹ Neither in their blanket dismissal of black capabilities “to lift the slave into the intelligent member of society” nor in their conviction of the Catholic Church’s mandate to regenerate the black race did the editors once consider the seminal mission of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

Even during this difficult period black individuals and groups continued to exert agency to improve conditions for themselves and others. Contemporary white witnesses documented the substantial accomplishments of black people, particularly in the field of education. The 1866 report of a white organization

¹⁹ “The Future of the Negro,” *Catholic Mirror*, XVI, # 48, 2 December 1865, p. 4.

observed, “But most of all we have been cheered by the eagerness to learn manifested by the Colored People, and by their willingness to contribute toward the payment of the expense of their own education.” Of \$27,800 “total amount of certain receipts” for the coming year, black people in Baltimore and the counties had provided \$11,800.²⁰

Oblate annals entries during the summer months following the end of the war heralded several first experiences for the sisterhood. On 7 August the annalist referred to the original St. Frances School for Colored Girls founded in 1828 as the Academy for the first time. The recent establishment of the Oblate free school probably encouraged this new characterization. Starting in 1867 Fr. Miller and several of his Jesuit colleagues associated with Loyola College would upgrade the Oblate school’s curriculum to effect substantive as well as this nominal change.

The annalist continued, “Through the kindness of our good father he sent for two girls who formerly belonged to them, one he will send to Phila[delphia] so that she may attend to the house work and at the same time the Srs. will teach her and the other will remain with us.”²¹ As stated earlier, the Oblate annals rarely referred to worldly affairs such as slavery and the Civil War explicitly. Throughout the antebellum period virtually all of the white sisterhoods and orders of priests in the archdiocese of Baltimore had participated in and profited from the institution of slavery. The formerly enslaved status of several of its members proved the only association connecting the Oblate sisterhood to slavery.²² Nevertheless, this simple statement that the Oblate

²⁰ *Second Annual Report of the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People* (Baltimore: J. B. Rose & Co., November, 1866), 4, 8, 4-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1865.

²² For an analysis of the Catholic Church’s position on slavery see Morrow, *Persons of Color*, 79, 116-17, 250-51, 256-57, 68-70, 211-12.

community would absorb and educate two women the Jesuit priests had formerly owned constituted another example of Oblate commitment to assist their people in the challenging transition from slavery to freedom.

New candidates continued to increase the membership of the Oblate community during 1866. Julia Brown arrived from St. Louis on 15 May “well recommended by...the Srs. of Mercy.” From Washington, D.C., Sally Adams entered the sisterhood on 26 July “highly recommended by...the Sisters of Charity with whom she has been living.” Oblate annals did not specify the nature of the relationship between either Brown and the Sisters of Mercy or Adams and the Sisters of Charity which informed their respective recommendations of these candidates’ suitability for religious life. As religious orders had owned slaves in both St. Louis and the nation’s capital, these sisterhoods plausibly might have recommended their former property for Oblate membership.²³

On 30 August the annalist mentioned for the first time a signal event which directed the Oblate sisterhood on a new mission trajectory. She stated, “About this time preparations were begun to open the Orphan Asylum that our good father [Miller] had for some time been seriously thinking on.” While Miller had conceived the idea of the orphan asylum, early on in the process he had sought and gained the cooperation of the Oblate Sisters to staff it.

The severe dislocation and rupture of black families which the war, emancipation, and subsequent significant migration of the formerly enslaved, rural black people to urban centers like Baltimore had occasioned certainly warranted the necessity of the orphan asylum. As they had in establishing schools, black people seized the initiative in providing social services for their own, but available black resources remained insufficient to meet the

²³ Oblate Annals, 15 May, 26 July 1866, RG II, Box 34, Folder 5, AOSP.

daunting need. Fuke explained, “Clearly black Baltimoreans did the best they could under difficult circumstances. Equally clearly, they did so without a lot of help from the white community. Indeed, whites tended in the end to consign responsibility for social problems to those most affected by them—blacks themselves.” Significantly, in this discussion of black agency Fuke featured the Oblate Sisters’ orphan asylum as an iconic example of black self-help.²⁴

On 7 October 1866 the Second Plenary Council convened in Baltimore for two weeks with much pomp and circumstance. The daily parade of visiting prelates and dignitaries proved especially significant for the Oblate community on 7 October when Archbishop Jean-Marie Odin of New Orleans visited them to request an Oblate mission in his city. Miller specified that Odin “should pay the Srs. passage and have a house ready for them. He said that as soon as he arrived home he would attend to it.”²⁵ The three assigned sisters departed for New Orleans on 9 February 1867.

The following month Odin penned a very interesting and revealing letter to his friend, Archbishop Spalding of Baltimore, concerning the Oblate Sisters. He reported, “Our Oblate Sisters arrived in good health....Our colored population as well as the white people appeared pleased with the introduction of the sisters in our city. They will have, I am sure, a vast field for usefulness. We have already eight or ten schools for the Africans which succeed well. Several of our white teachers have overcome the prejudices of the country and devote themselves to the instruction of the colored race. Their efforts are pleasing to the community which

²⁴ Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 126-27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 October 1866.

feels the necessity of retaining that class of people in the country for field and housework.”²⁶

Even as Odin assured Spalding of the Oblate Sisters’ safe arrival and welcome to New Orleans, he revealed the limiting parameters within which he—and by extension white society in general—expected them to exercise their “usefulness.” His reference to the freed people as “Africans” expressed the alienation and foreignness with which much of white society still regarded black people, who had resided in this country for centuries, frequently on the most intimate of terms with its white citizenry. The arrival of the Oblate Sisters may have pleased the white and black populations of New Orleans for diametrically opposed reasons. Black people may have envisioned an Oblate education as providing essential tools toward realizing the potential of emancipation, culminating in full participation in American society. White people—including those several teachers of the colored race Odin cited above—may have interpreted their role as contributing to controlling “that class of people” which necessity compelled them to retain “in the country for field and housework,” that is, to serve white society’s needs as they had under enslavement, not to enjoy the fruits of inclusion in the American polity. In significant ways Odin’s letter echoed the duality regarding black people plaguing not only the Catholic Church in the United States but also much of white American society: they considered black people in, but not of, both Church and society and capable at most of a “comparative equality” with the white race, the parameters of which white people intended to define exclusively.

²⁶ 36A Q6, Jean-Marie, Archbishop of New Orleans to Most Rev. Dear Sir, 1 March 1867, AAB, AASMSU.

The years 1867-1877 formed the era in United States history known as radical or Congressional Reconstruction, a period when the federal government for a time acted more assertively in formulating policies and establishing institutions to safeguard the interests of the recently emancipated black people. A reinvigorated Bureau of Refugees, Abandoned Lands, and Freedmen—or Freedmen's Bureau—constituted a widely recognized and reviled iteration of federal intervention in the South. Although Bureau involvement in labor contracts, the administration of justice, land disbursements, and relief allocations proved controversial, its efforts in the field of education remained its signal and most enduring success.²⁷ The Oblate Sisters of Providence shared with the Freedmen's Bureau an interest in the education of black people.

The 1867 Oblate schools closing exercises precipitated an extraordinary sequence of events. The Moses Lake family of Annapolis had actively participated in the informal lay black Catholic support network of the Oblate Sisters since the 1840s and they demonstrated their continuing devotion to the Oblate mission by inviting a special guest to the sisters' 1867 closing exercises. What he witnessed on that occasion so impressed the noted black publisher, educator, and racial spokesman, William Howard Day, that he wrote an article about it the following September. Day

²⁷ For thorough discussions of the Freedmen's Bureau and education see, among others, Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Random House, 1979); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Ronald Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1980); Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

served as Superintendent of Schools for the Freedmen in Maryland and Delaware for the Freedmen's Bureau in 1867-68.²⁸

Day pronounced himself "exceedingly gratified with the appearance of the various Departments and the ability and urbanity of the Teachers." While averring, "Being a Protestant, we could not be expected to endorse all the views held and taught in the Academy;" Day nevertheless avowed, "but we feel that it is due to the energy, efficiency, and thoroughness exhibited in the Departments visited to say that we wish our Protestant friends had Church Schools half so good." Day concluded, "Only those who have lived in Maryland during the dark days of Bondage can fully realize of how much service this School has been.... While white schools (so called) shut out colored young ladies, this and other similar schools under the control of the Catholic portion of community opened their doors and threw around the colored girls that protection which others denied. It is not strange therefore, that colored young ladies of excellent families have flocked to this and similar institutions....The sisters of Providence have set a noble example which it would be suicidal in Protestants not to follow."²⁹

As impelled by their dire financial straits as encouraged by Day's highly favorable review of their efforts, the Oblate Sisters wrote an extraordinary letter to Superintendent of Freedmen's Schools Day in October. This letter remains particularly informative as one of the few extant expressions of how the Oblate Sisters interpreted their historic mission and current active role in ministering to the freed people to persuade a federal bureaucracy

²⁸ For a thorough discussion of Day's life and significant accomplishments, see R. J. Blackett, "Marching On: The Life of William Howard Day," chap. In *Beating Against the Barriers: The Lives of Six Nineteenth-Century Afro-Americans* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 286-386.

²⁹ "The St. Frances Academy," *Zion's Standard and Weekly Review*, 4 September 1867 [newspaper title identified in Oblate correspondence to Day cited below], Vertical File 446, AOSP.

of the legitimacy of their unprecedented request for governmental assistance.

The introductory sentence stated their purpose succinctly by explaining, “The very flattering notice in the *Zion’s Standard and Weekly Review* of September 4, 1867 of our Academy, and the zeal you have shown in the moral and intellectual education of the children of our race lead us to hope that the reports herein enclosed will be favorably received by you, and that you will by your influence endeavor to obtain from the Freedmen’s Bureau some pecuniary aid to enable us to continue the good work in which you yourself are so deeply interested.” The sisters emphasized the non-denominational nature of their ministry, stating that “During the 38 years of the existence of our schools the number of Pupils was at least 1500 scholars of whom 800 at least were of a different denomination from that of the Sisters.”³⁰

The description of the Oblate free school, begun in 1865 “to further the advancement of our race and rescue many children from ignorance,” stated that the school enrolled 50 to 70 pupils annually and incurred among other expenses the \$1500 purchase price of its building. The following year the orphan asylum opened “to rescue from want and misery many young children left helpless by the ravages of war or poverty” and received female orphans of all religious denominations from infancy to sixteen years of age. It currently housed 25 inmates and purchasing and furnishing the orphanage had cost the community \$3300. The letter specifically noted, “We have depended upon the charitable collections of the

³⁰ Oblate Sisters of Providence to William Howard Day, Esq., Superintendent of Freedmen’s Schools, 22 October 1867, Records of the field offices for the states of Maryland and Delaware, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1892, RG 105, Microfilm Roll # 4, Target 1: Office of the Assistant Commissioner Correspondence, Unregistered Letters Received, October 1865 - November 1868.

Colored people for the maintenance and clothing of the orphans.”³¹

Assuring Superintendent Day that “the Sisters have never received one dollar of assistance from the State or General Government,” they nevertheless reasoned “that the Free School and Orphan Asylum seem to fall under the class of schools which since the war the General Government has so nobly maintained in this and other States.” The letter further revealed, “The teachers in the Free School and Orphan Asylum receive no pay for their services, being supported by the labor of their hands by sewing, etc and by the revenue from the Academy or Boarding School.” The letter then disclosed that “the debts of the various schools amount to \$8000 and the income from the Academy is only about \$4000, leaving us struggling for the maintenance of the Free School and Orphan Asylum.” In a final plea for Day’s intercession on their behalf, the sisters stated directly, “The continuance of the Free School and Orphan Asylum must depend upon the very precarious collections from our poor race, unless your influence and charity shall come to our assistance by obtaining for us some substantial recognition from the General Government.”³²

Although four days after receiving their correspondence, Day dutifully referred this Oblate manifesto to his superior, Major General E. M. Gregory, assistant commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the sisters received nothing from the Bureau. They did, however, continue to maintain their charitable institutions with the income they derived from their own labors, academy tuitions and fees, and the “very precarious collections from our poor race.”

For the remainder of the Reconstruction era the Oblate Sisters confronted and surmounted several challenges. In 1870 they

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

learned the unexpected news that the city of Baltimore planned to extend a street right through their property. After forty years of living on Richmond Street, the Sisters had to move to a new home. The city paid the Sisters enough money for them to begin but not to complete construction of a new residence on Chase Street. The Oblates moved their convent, schools, and orphanage to Chase Street in 1871. St. Frances Academy remains at this same location today. Then, because of a lack of support, the Sisters reluctantly closed their schools in Philadelphia in 1871 and in New Orleans in 1873.

The Sisters, pupils, and orphans had appreciated Fr. Miller's love and concern for them over the years and they thanked God for His constant Providence toward them in the person of Fr. Miller. They worried, however, that Miller's constant exertions on behalf of the black community compromised his frail health. They had watched anxiously as he succumbed to the ravages of tuberculosis. Finally, on 26 September 1877, Fr. Peter Miller, S.J. died. Everyone in the St. Frances community cried out in grief and sorrow. The Sisters said, "We felt for the second time in the life of the community entire Orphans."³³ After Fr. Miller's death the Oblate Sisters encountered an uncertain future and new challenges.

The year 1877 proved critical for the United States as well. When Reconstruction ended that year, the Federal Government surrendered the black freedmen to the control of their former owners. The southern states worked to rebuild their world without slavery, but one which still separated black and white people as much as possible. As southern states passed laws to deny freedom and citizenship rights to the former slaves, the rest of the nation looked on in silence. The Oblate Sisters and their education mission

³³ Oblate Annals, 26 September 1877, RG II, Box 34, Folder 9, AOSP.

formed part of the solution black people developed on their own to confront the continuing challenges of freedom.

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