

Elizabeth Clovis Lange (c. 1784-1882)

Mother Mary Elizabeth, Foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence

by Sister Elizabeth Ann, S.J.W.

Elizabeth was born in the French colony of Haiti. Her parents, Annette and Clovis, had fled Haiti before the revolution and settled in Cuba. Elizabeth and her mother came to the United States in 1817. By 1827, Elizabeth had settled in Baltimore, MD. At this time in its history, the city of Baltimore had a large number of French-speaking people. Some of these refugees had fled France during that country's revolution. Many had come from the French colonies in the West Indies. The French-speaking Haitians consisted of blacks and whites, wealthy and poor, educated and illiterate.



By the time Elizabeth settled in Baltimore and began her work, the Sulpician Fathers (also refugees from France) were caring for the spiritual needs of the Haitians and other French refugees. Unfortunately, religious activities, like social activities, were segregated. The Haitians of African descent had to meet in the basement of the Church. Elizabeth recognized the lack of educational opportunities for black children and especially black, Catholic children.

While Maryland's law did not actually forbid the education of blacks as some states did, neither was it encouraged. The only schools for blacks were inadequate and privately run. Elizabeth, along with a fellow refugee, Marie Magdalene Balas, opened a school for girls in their home. However, money was scarce, and the school had to close.

But Elizabeth had found an enthusiastic supporter for her work in Father James Hector Joubert, a Sulpician priest. Not only did he encourage her educational goals, he also encouraged and supported her religious goals. For Elizabeth desired to serve God as a consecrated religious. Elizabeth's race would determine her next move, since only white women were admitted into religious communities at this time. So, with the approval of the Archbishop of Baltimore, Elizabeth founded a new community, the Oblate Sisters of

Providence. Elizabeth and two companions began their novitiate in 1828 and made their first vows in 1829. Elizabeth became the Superior and took the name Mother Mary Elizabeth.

Starting a religious community in the best of circumstances can be difficult, but Mother Mary Elizabeth had the added burden of being a black woman. The new community had to endure scorn and contempt for the work they were trying to do.

In spite of the hostility they encountered, the Sisters established a school for black children with money raised from members of the Haitian community, white and black.

As the school enrollment grew, Mother Elizabeth began to look for a larger building. Sometimes, rents on houses were raised to dissuade the school from opening in a "white" neighborhood.

Eventually, a friend of the young community sold them a house, that was named Saint Frances of Rome Academy. The Academy "is the oldest continuing educational facility for black children in the U.S."¹ The school was founded to serve the educational and spiritual needs of black children and became the first teacher training institute in Baltimore for black women.²

Although their primary apostolate was teaching, the summer of 1832 saw the outbreak of a cholera epidemic. Mother and eleven of her sisters, along with other religious communities, volunteered to nurse the sick. When city officials publicly recognized the religious communities who had volunteered their services, the Oblates were not included.

Resented by many white residents of Baltimore, "the struggling but determined order"³ of Sisters persevered through good and hard times. During the 1840's, the Sisters had to take in washing and sewing to help support themselves.



As the order grew, Mother Elizabeth oversaw the establishment of schools in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Her order expanded into the Caribbean and Central America before her death in 1882.

Mother Lange's cause for canonization was begun in 1991.



Haiti

The country of Haiti is familiar to most Americans as an island of great poverty. But it was not always like that. In the 1700's, Haiti (then known as San Domingo) was the most prosperous French colony in the western hemisphere, supplying other parts of the world with sugar and coffee grown on its large plantations. Unfortunately, the prosperity and power enjoyed by a small percentage of wealthy landowners came at a high price: the enslavement of thousands of black men, women, and children. The slaves on Haiti, like slaves everywhere, had no protection from daily brutality and degradation. In 1791, the frustration and bitterness of the slaves exploded into a civil war. The slaves lashed out against their former masters in a revolt that caused bloodshed and destruction throughout the island. In large numbers, black and white Haitians fled the country, often settling in the United States. Not until 1804, did Haiti become an independent country. However, being a "black" republic resulted in the other slaveholding areas of the Americas isolating the country. This isolation would last for many years and caused a once prosperous colony to become poor and impoverished.

However horrible the revolt, it resulted in many blessings to the new country of the United States. Fleeing the terrors of the Haitian Revolution, a man and a woman came to America and became Saints. They were black refugees in a country that tolerated slavery. Both rose above their situation and chose the "more excellent way" of St. Paul, the way of love. **Elizabeth Lange** founded the first black Roman Catholic women's congregation in the United States. **Venerable Pierre Toussaint** purchased the freedom of many slaves, while he himself was still a slave.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1: "Mother Lange Canonization Effort Picks Up Momentum," *Josephite Harvest*, 103, no. 4 (December, 2000): 4.
- 2: Elaine Breslaw and Joan Anderson, "Notable Maryland Women; Elizabeth Clovis Lange, (c. 1784-1882): Founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence," available from <http://users.erols.com/bcccsbs/bbpoh/ecl.htm>
- 3: Darlene Clark Hine, "Elizabeth Clovis Lange," *Black Women in America; An Historical Encyclopedia*, (Carlson Publishing Co., 1993).

Pictures used with permission from Mr. Louis Diggs: <http://www.louisdiggs.com/oblates/>
Drawing by artist Carey Winters '91