

Legacy of St. Paul School getting attention

written by Dwain Hebda |



This is the only known photograph of St. Paul School in Pocahontas, the first black Catholic school in Arkansas. Father Eugene Weibel and Sister Agnes Dali, OSB, share the photo with students, circa 1889.

Photo courtesy of Sister Henrietta Hockle, OSB



Siblings Francis Sinnott (left), Sister Mary Anne Nuce, Emma Jeanne Gschwend and Margaret Weyer hold the 100-plus-year-old veil worn by Fannie Creath (1875-1950) during her First Holy Communion when she joined St. Paul Church in Pocahontas more than 100 years ago. Photo by Cindy Robinett

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A ghostly photograph and a 19th century ledger are all that's left of the state's first black Catholic school.

But the one-room structure that once tucked into a corner of St. Paul Church's property in Pocahontas is getting renewed attention thanks to a college professor, parish staff and the Olivetan Benedictine sisters whose courage made history amid the boggy marshes of Randolph

County.

“The sisters were taking a huge step,” said Cindy Robinett, who teaches adult education at Black River Technical College in Pocahontas. “They were very brave to do what they did.”

In 1878, Father John Eugene Weibel arrived at the fledgling parish, determined to bring nuns to the area. It was an intimidating proposition, so much so a popular quip at the time went if a nun was going to come to this malaria and mosquito-infested corner of the earth, she better bring her own coffin.

His first three tries ended with nuns he recruited heading right back where they came from because of the harsh conditions. In December 1887 four Benedictine sisters arrived from Missouri and set about getting schools established: one for white students and one for black students. Reportedly, this wasn't well received locally and the so-called “Colored School” folded after one year amid threats of violence.

At least, that's how the story has always been told.

A ledger from the St. Paul Church archives proves the school actually operated until at least 1909, educating between 50 and 60 students. It came to light when Robinett inquired after old records from church secretary Jennifer Nichols. The professor was ecstatic over “discovery of the lost records” because it provided genealogical information that is rare in many black families.

“Before emancipation, slaves were documented on a bill of sale or deed,” she said, noting the majority of these contain merely a head count and certain broad characteristics as age or gender. “In a few places, a slave's name might be listed, such as in a probate file, in a manner that the slave owner might just as easily have listed his horses.”

Nichols is specific on one point: the ledger was never lost, it's just no one ever asked for it before. However, there is no disputing it as an invaluable piece of the story of the sisters and their German pastor who would not be shaken from their ministry.

“This is important on a number of levels,” Robinett said. “It's important for the community to show what happened here. It's important for descendents of those students to know they were here and they were educated. And, I think, it's very important for Catholics today to know what the sisters were willing to do to carry out their mission.”

Robinett lectures on the subject and has received a grant to continue tracking former students. Her goal is to research the building's exact location and petition for a historical marker.

Sister Mary Ann Nuce, OSB, former prioress of Holy Angels Convent in Jonesboro, likes the positive attention the story brings her hometown and her order. She maintains a unique connection to the groundbreaking black school through a former student who was a childhood neighbor.

“Fannie Creath lived in my great-grandfather's home,” Sister Mary Ann said. “She told me she was part white, part black and part Indian. She learned music from the sisters at the school and she converted to Catholicism as a result of the sisters. Later, she taught music to all the kids in the neighborhood.”

Fannie was born in 1875 and was one of at least two Creath children to attend the mission school. Her father, Thomas Creath, owned property around the area and was involved with a number of local businesses. Civic status didn't exempt the family from suffering the same indignities of other blacks during segregation, as Sister Mary Ann well remembers.

"I did see a time when black people had to sit in the balcony at the movie theater," she said.

When, in one of her first jobs at a local restaurant, the owner told her to tell a black patron she couldn't so much as show him a menu, "It broke my heart to say that to him."

Suffering a stroke in 1949, Fannie Creath convalesced in the Nuce household before entering St. Bernards Medical Center in Jonesboro where she died in 1950. She left several treasured possessions to the Nuces, including her First Communion veil and a photograph from that day.

Sister Mary Ann and her siblings recently donated the items to Eddie Mae Herron Museum and Center. On that occasion, Sister Mary Ann wrote a tribute to their friend who was — and still is — the only black member of St. Paul Church.

"In the evening Fannie would sit on her back porch and watch the sun go down. My sisters would run across the lot and visit with her," she wrote. "I remember that Mother would share our Sunday dinner with Fannie. Mother fried chicken and we would have homemade ice cream. I was thrilled to run across the lot to take this dinner to her."