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Saving Souls and Selling Them: Jesuit Slaveholding and the Georgetown Slavery Archive

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How should a community remember a shameful past? Since 2014, Georgetown University has tackled this question in regards to its role in and benefit from the 1838 sale of 272 slaves owned by the Maryland Province of Jesuits. The Rev. Thomas Mulledy, S.J., the president of Georgetown College, and the Rev. William McSherry, S.J., superior of the Maryland province, orchestrated the sale of the slaves to two Louisiana sugar planters for \$115,000 (approximately \$3 million today). Some of the money repaid Georgetown's debts; most supplemented the Province's general fund. While Mulledy conditioned the sale on the buyer's promise to provide for the slaves' spiritual needs and to keep families intact, his stipulations were ultimately unenforceable. Those sent to Louisiana suffered a fate familiar to other slaves: death from disease, separation by sale, and isolation from the familiar, including faith.

Maryland Jesuits owned slaves; this was not unknown. Historians R. Emmett Curran, S.J. and Thomas Murphy, S.J. had described the history of Jesuit slaveholding in Maryland and analyzed the Maryland Jesuits' debate about and orchestration of the 1838 sale.¹ In the 1990s and early 2000s, Georgetown students and faculty in the American Studies program built the Jesuit Plantation Project, a digital exhibit about the 1838 sale and Jesuit slaveholding on six plantations in Maryland. The Jesuit Plantation Project featured the key sale documents and slave censuses; it was well-regarded research tool, though it is no longer in existence.

Despite this scholarship, Jesuit slaveholding and this piece of Georgetown's history was misremembered and casually considered. Campus tour guides pointed out buildings built by slaves or with profits from the 1838 sale. Hilltop legend held that the slaves died shortly after arriving in Louisiana, leaving little need to investigate beyond the sale. Slavery at Georgetown was truth and

myth, part of a history long ago about people sold far away.

This changed in 2014 with a series of articles in *The Hoya* by undergraduate Matthew Quallen about how Georgetown specifically figured into the rationale of, the benefits from, and the moral responsibility for the 1838 sale. In 2015, Georgetown President John DeGioia commissioned a Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to report on the University's historical relationship with slavery. As such, the Working Group revisited the extensive records from the sale, one of the best-documented large slave sales of the period. Their findings informed the [formal report](#) submitted in September 2016, which provided historical context and recommendations on how Georgetown might address the contemporary legacies of slavery.

Today, the work of understanding and uncovering Georgetown's slaveholding ties continues through [The Georgetown Slavery Archive](#). Led by history professor Adam Rothman, the Slavery Archive is a digital repository of primary documents related to the 1838 sale, the history of Jesuit slaveholding in Maryland, and the people directly affected by Jesuit slavery, both those enslaved and their modern descendants.

Visitors to the Georgetown Slavery Archive can navigate to individual items several ways. First, the items are grouped in five thematic collections: Descendants' Stories; Maryland Province Slaves in Louisiana; Slavery at Georgetown College; Slavery in the Maryland Province; and 1838 Sale of Maryland Jesuit Slaves to Louisiana. The "Inventory" page, which lists each item by a unique identifier and title, allows users to search for a specific artifact. Those who want a more general start to their tour might begin at the "Gallery" section, which includes a selection of items representing the breadth and diversity of the

items in the Archive. The creation of these different entry points speaks to the Archive's diverse users: scholars and students with specific questions; those curious after watching or reading a news story on slavery and Georgetown; and the genealogically-driven tracking of an ancestor's path. Transcriptions are available for most items and each can be downloaded as a high-resolution PDF file.

The items of the Archive are diverse and highlight not only the unique experiences of slaves with Jesuit masters but also reflect the fears familiar to all enslaved Americans. They include records of slaves' baptisms, marriages, and burials performed by Jesuits; a runaway slave advertisement taken out by John McElroy, S.J. that offers a \$30 dollar reward for the capture of Isaac, a literate slave who fled Georgetown College; the November 1838 manifest of the *Katherine Jackson*, a ship that carried many of the slaves sold from their place of birth, Maryland, to their place of death, Louisiana; and payroll agreements between plantation owners and their former slaves for contract labor after the Civil War.² The documents reveal the experience of slaves as Catholics (as most were) and as chattel.

Each item reveals the tension between Maryland Jesuits' dual identities as Catholics and as slaveholders, between feelings of responsibility for the souls and salvation of their slaves and the pull of profit and custom. Jesuit Joseph Moberly's February 5, 1815 letter to Georgetown president John Grassi, S.J. is a prime example. "It is better to sell for a time, or to set your people free", Moberly wrote, "1st. Because we have their souls to answer for — 2nd Because Blacks are more difficult to govern now, than formerly — and 3rd Because we shall make more & more to our satisfaction."³ Some Jesuits were opposed to slavery and advocated manumission on moral grounds; some believed the anti-Catholic sentiment in antebellum America should not be accelerated by also appearing to be abolitionists. Many, like Moberly, considered slaves' spiritual salvation and their market price as coexisting concerns for the Society.

In addition to exhibiting evidence of Jesuit slaveholding in the 19th century, the Archive also illustrates how the long arc of American slavery

bends into the 21st century. The collection "Descendants Stories" brings past and present together through the stories of the descendants of the 272 who learned how their faith and their family history intertwined in Maryland with the Jesuits. Through the newspaper articles and interviews included and linked to in this collection, site visitors might see slavery not only as a historical problem but as a contemporary American and Catholic challenge. By connecting the historical documentary artifacts with the descendants' narrative ones, the Archive facilitates an appreciation for the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain that resonates across the centuries.

How should a community remember a shameful past? The Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation stressed the obligation to remember not only the institution of slavery at Georgetown but also the slaves themselves. Buildings once named for the organizers of the sale are now named for Isaac Hawkins, the first person listed on the list of slaves to be sold in 1838 and Anne Marie Becraft, an educator and founder of a school for Black girls.⁴ By preserving the artifacts of the 1838 sale and Jesuit slaveholding in Maryland, the Georgetown Slavery Archive, too, memorializes those who were enslaved, catechized, and sold by Jesuits for Georgetown and other modern Jesuit institutions.⁵

The Georgetown Slavery Archive is a growing digital resource for scholars, students, descendants, and anyone interested in the people bought, baptized, and sold by Maryland Jesuits. As a digital exhibit, the Archive will grow as new items are found. It will continue to tell the stories of the enslaved people who helped build — in every sense of the word — Georgetown University.⁶

Notes

¹ R. Emmett Curran, “‘Splendid Poverty’: Jesuit Slave Holdings in Maryland, 1805 – 1838,” in *Catholics in the Old South*, eds. Randall Miller and Jon Wakelyn (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 125-147; Thomas Murphy, *Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717-1838* (New York, Routledge, 2001).

² *Baptism of Sylvester, 1819*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/80>; *Slave Marriage, 1795*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/11>; *Fr. Neale’s Register, St. Thomas, 1827-1832*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/62>; *Runaway Ad for Isaac, 1814*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/51>; *Manifest of the Katherine Jackson*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/2>.

³ “*We Are in the Dark as Long as We Keep Slaves*,” in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/66>.

⁴ *Census of Slaves to Be Sold in 1838*, in The Georgetown Slavery Archive, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/items/show/71>.

⁵ *What We Know: Report to the President of The College of the Holy Cross, The Mulledy/Healy Legacy Committee, 18 March 2016*, in The College of the Holy Cross, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.holycross.edu/sites/default/files/files/mulledy-healy/mulledycommitteereportfinal.pdf>. Approximately \$90,000 from the 1838 sale went into the Maryland Province formation endowment. In the March 2016 report on its own connection to Rev. Mulledy and the sale of the 272 in 1838, The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts acknowledged that though it was not founded until 1843, it, too, “as a work of the American Jesuits, eventually benefited from this sale.”

⁶ The Georgetown Slavery Archive has been made possible with the support of Georgetown President John J. DeGioia, the Office of the President, the Booth Family Center for Special Collections, the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, the Jesuit Plantation Project, the National Archives at Fort Worth, the Georgetown Memory Project, Patricia Bayonne-Johnson, Louis Diggs, John LaRue, Yong Lee, Sharon Leon, and Melanie Ricketts.