

Mother Mary Elizabeth Lang (1784 – 1882)

Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, put forth by Archbishop Keeler of Baltimore for sainthood in 1991, was the co-founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1829. The Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP) was the first religious community for women of African descent formed in the United States.

She was born Elizabeth Clarisse Lange in 1784 in a Haitian community in Santiago, Cuba and was educated there. In the early 1800s she immigrated to the United States, settling in Baltimore in 1813 where there was a sizable free African-American community and a fair-sized African Caribbean population, French-speaking people who had escaped the revolution in Haiti. Elizabeth and a friend, Marie Balas, started a school for African-American children in their home.

At the same time a Sulpician priest named James N. Joubert, a native of France who has also fled Haiti, was teaching catechism to African American children at the St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. When he found that so many of his catechism students couldn't read well he approached Lange and Balas about starting a Catholic school.

They said yes, telling him they felt called to consecrate their lives to God. Father Joubert agreed to support them in the formation of a new religious order. On July 2, 1829 the two women were among the three who took their first vows for the new order. Elizabeth was named the first superior general of the order and took the name Sister Mary.

The school they started with four sisters and 20 students became known as St. Frances Academy and continues in operation today as a 210-student Catholic high school serving inner city Baltimore's African American and Hispanic populations.

Despite having the support of Father Joubert and the then-bishop of Baltimore James Whitfield, life was difficult for the black religious order. In addition to the segregation and racism of the day, a cholera epidemic in 1832 took more than half the sisters in the order and in 1840 Mother Mary had to take a job as a domestic at St. Mary's Seminary to help support the religious community. Despite these and other hardships, the Oblate Sisters of Providence worked to evangelize the Black community through Catholic education. In addition to Baltimore the order eventually established schools in 18 states. In 1888 four Oblate Sisters went to Leavenworth, KS, and opened Guardian Angels Home, an orphanage and school for African American children. It served the area for 72 years closing in 1959.

Mother Mary died in 1882 and her remains are at the order's chapel in Baltimore.

A Brief history of Guardian Angels Home orphanage in Leavenworth, KS

In the spring of 1888, a letter arrived at the motherhouse in Baltimore from Reverend Martin Huhn of Leavenworth, Kansas asking the Oblates to take charge of Guardian Angels Home for orphan boys in Leavenworth. The sisters agreed to go, although so far they had only cared for orphan girls. Four sisters were selected to open the mission. One of the sisters, Sister Victoria Messonier had opened the mission in New Orleans

and was experienced enough to handle the difficulties of new mission and conquer them.

Father Huhn met the sisters at the train station and went with them on the omnibus to show them their new home. The Home had been established a couple of years earlier so the orphans greeted their new caretakers with a prepared supper. The Home was situated on lovely grounds, but the house was sadly lacking. It was one story with a short attic, a leaking roof, no furniture and hardly any food. The living conditions were dire but the sisters made the best of it – determined not to let down their new charges.

By summertime another house was found for the mission in Leavenworth and the sisters and orphans moved to better accommodation on Pottawatomie Street. The sisters also opened a school, Holy Epiphany, near the parish church, and lived in the house adjoining it. There were seventy-five day scholars at the school but no orphans. To help with expenses the sisters did sewing and washed the altar linens belonging to the Cathedral. In 1911, a new parish school was constructed at Holy Epiphany and in 1912, a brick building east of Holy Epiphany Church was erected to serve as a home for orphan girls (Holy Epiphany Home for Girls) and the sisters. High school grades were soon added to the school. The girls from Holy Epiphany Home for Girls attended the high school and were taught cooking, home economics, sewing, and embroidery.

Orphans began to arrive in great numbers – even from other states. In August of 1890, Reverend Joseph Shorter became the priest at Holy Epiphany and was also charged with helping the sisters. With Father Shorter's support and direction, the mission began to run smoothly. By 1898, the number of orphans increased to forty boys so the housing accommodations were altogether insufficient. It was decided they should move the Home outside the city. The Whitaker property, containing forty acres, was purchased at the cost of \$8,000 just south of the city. The purchase was largely made possible through generosity of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indian and Colored Missions.

The sisters and the orphans moved to the new orphanage in 1899. There were no lights, no stove, and no conveniences of any kind. The day after they arrived, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth sent them a cow so they would have milk for the orphans. Later they sent a calf and a hog. A kindly German farmer, John Vulwieser, offered to help run the farming on the property for free. With everyone's hard work and dedication, Guardian Angel Home began to thrive. The first peach tree planted on the farm was planted by Father Shorter and the oldest boys in the Home. In the spring of 1900, the first large scale garden was planted with the intention of supplying vegetables for the home summer and winter meals. Each year the canning process increased so that in a few years, all the vegetables needed for the mission were canned by the boys and the sisters. Altar wine was made from the vineyard grapes. Butter was churned at

least three times a week in May, June, and July and saved for winter use. Everyone had a responsibility to make the Home as self-sufficient as possible. By 1909, the mission was doing so well that forty more acres were purchased. A two-story wing was added that housed a laundry, boys' dining room, and a small boys' dormitory.

After Father Shorter died in 1936, Father Matthew Guilfoyle helped oversee the mission. Father Guilfoyle quickly assumed responsibility by building a turkey house and buying a thirty-four acre farm to raise the necessary grain and vegetables for the boys and girls orphanages. By this time there were twenty-five Oblate Sisters of Providence serving in some capacity at the missions in Leavenworth.

By the 1950s, there were fewer and fewer orphans in need of institutional care. A new arrangement concerning orphans was introduced in Leavenworth, Kansas. The bishop thought it best for orphans to be placed in homes rather than in institutions. By 1959, the number of orphans under the Oblates care dwindled to twelve and the sisters closed the orphanage. Reverend Mother William Hundley, OSP and Mother Teresa Shockley, OSP went out to Kansas from Baltimore in the summer of 1959 and closed the mission and orphanage that had lasted seventy-one years.

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