

Frederica Law became first “sister of color” of the Missionary Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception

Though life was somewhat austere at the Industrial School for Colored Children at Harrisonville near Augusta, many of the pupils who attended the Franciscan Sisters' boarding school there later remembered it with affection. Frederica Law, one of the students who shared the sisters' Spartan life and living conditions at the school, was so impressed by her teachers' efforts that she went on to join their order.



Rita H. DeLorme

Said by one source to have been born into slavery, Frederica Law of Savannah ventured to Harrisonville in the late 1870s to study under Mother Mary Ignatius Hayes, foundress of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

English by birth and formerly an Anglican nun, Mother Ignatius (nee Elizabeth Hayes) converted to Catholicism, embraced the penitential life style of Saint Francis and—founding her own order—took a vow of dedication to the foreign missions in addition to vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Ministry to African Americans

Pursuing her missionary calling, Mother Ignatius Hayes traveled to various places throughout the world before settling her order in Belle Prairie, Minnesota in 1873. With her work prospering there, Mother Ignatius began to consider the plight of the deprived and underprivileged freed slave population of the American south. By 1878, the Franciscan foundress and several other members of her community were directing their missionary ministry toward the African Americans on the Isle of Hope and Skidaway Island in Savannah. The Sisters remained at Isle of Hope and Skidaway for only a short time before moving to Augusta to a property bought by Mother Ignatius Hayes as “Trustee of the Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis” with the permission of Bishop William H. Gross of Savannah.

The Barratt property bought by Mother Ignatius comprised over seven acres of land with several freestanding buildings. Concerning this new locale, Sister Mary Angela, one of Mother Ignatius' Augusta sisters, later wrote: “We had three small houses formerly occupied by the Negroes. We took one for our chapel and choir for the sisters, one for the sisters' residence and dormitory, and the other for a school for the Negroes. For our refectory, we had only a shed covered with rough boards.”

Articles of Agreement

The sisters' duties at the boarding school included more than teaching. They were to repair the ramshackle buildings, till the soil and milk a cow owned by the community. Somewhere—between farm upkeep and maintenance—they were to find time and energy to teach the young girls attending their boarding school, among whom was future Franciscan Frederica Law. The children's daily regimen at the boarding school was set out in the “Articles of Agreement” written by Bishop Gross and signed by Mother Ignatius. Students were to attend daily Mass, followed by instruction in household duties such as washing, ironing, cooking and mending, which—in Bishop Gross' words—“form the daily occupation of women.” Additionally, again in the bishop's words, students were to be given “a simple and plain English schooling”.

Feeling the call

While under the Sisters' tutelage, young Frederica Law felt the call to join their order. In her book, *In the Shadow of His Wings*, author Sister Mary Assumpta Ahles, OFM, describes Law in a footnoted entry as “an intelligent and virtuous young woman who was interested in becoming a Religious—a Franciscan Religious.” When Mother Ignatius succeeded in formally establishing her order in Rome, Frederica Law traveled with several other sisters to the Eternal City to enter the novitiate. Along with another postulant, Julie Michaud (Sister M. Margaret) she received her religious habit as Sister Benedict of the Angels at the Shrine of the Portiuncula in Assisi on October 19, 1882. Sister Benedict's life as a religious was to be a brief one. She died on December 30, 1883, of an unknown illness, having made her profession on her deathbed.

Savannahian Zeline Foster of Saint Benedict's parish is the great-great-great niece of Frederica Law, the young African-American woman who followed her dream of becoming a Franciscan Sister to Rome. “We are trying to find out more about Sister Benedict,” Fred Foster, husband of Zeline, says. “What we know is mostly from



Sister Frederica Law, MFIC

Photos from Sr. Mary Assumpta Ahles, OFM, in the Shadow of His Wings.

records the Sisters have. I do know that my wife's grandmother, Mrs. Katie Campbell (nee Harris), also attended the school in Augusta. It's possible that Zeline's mother who is ninety-two may recall something about her aunt or about her own mother, Katie Campbell, who went to school in Augusta, but it isn't likely.” Photos of both Sister Benedict of the Angels and of Katie Harris Campbell, appear in the Franciscan Order's history compiled by Sister Mary Assumpta Ahles, OSF.

“Boarding house food”

When asked some years ago about her time at the Augusta boarding school, Zeline Foster's grandmother, Katie Harris Campbell, told one interviewer that the students ate “boarding house food” which meant that they had “lots of corn bread” and “mush” (corn boiled in water). Campbell added that, as crops came in, this diet was supplemented by various vegetables and fruits. Reminiscences of Mrs. Campbell, who is now deceased, provide insight into the lives led by the Sisters and their charges during the period when Frederica Law (Sister Benedict of the Angels) was at Harrisonville.

The author of *In the Shadow of His Wings*, Sister Redempta, cites the acceptance of Frederica Law into the Franciscan Order as proof of Mother Ignatius Hayes' profound belief in her mission to all people irrespective of race. Frederica Law, as the first African-American to join the Missionary Franciscan Order of the Immaculate Conception and as the first member of that order to die, embodied her own personal beliefs. Buried in Rome an ocean away from all she knew, youthful Sister Benedict of the Angels became a memorable missionary herself.

RITA H. DELORME is a volunteer in the Diocesan Archives.



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Sundays, 5:30 a.m.	WTOC-TV