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FEATURED

Many in slave sale cited by Georgetown toiled in Southern Md.

By RICK BOYD rboyd@somdnews.com Updated Oct 3, 2016



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Melissa Kemp is the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Louisa Mahoney Mason, who hid in the woods in 1838 as slaves were rounded up from a Jesuit plantation in St. Mary's County to be sold to a sugar plantation owner in Louisiana. Kemp is now a postdoctoral fellow with the National Science Foundation and at the Harvard University Center for the Environment doing research in evolutionary biology.

Louisa Mahoney Mason had been warned what was about to happen, so on a fall day in 1838, she and her mother were hiding in the woods as most of the other slaves on the St. Inigoes plantation in southern St. Mary's County were rounded up and taken to Alexandria, Va.

From there they were herded onto ships headed to the deep South.

The Jesuits, who owned and operated three plantations in Southern Maryland, and three more elsewhere in the state, had decided to sell 272 men, women and children to Louisiana slave owners, where they ended up working on sugar and cotton plantations.

The list of 93 slaves from St. Inigoes to be sold included a family of 10, including Watt, 45, Teresa 42, and their eight children, ranging in age from 1 to 20.

The 44 slaves to be sold from Newtown, a Jesuit plantation near Leonardtown, included Harry, 65, and his wife, Dina, 68. Others were Susan, 20, and her daughter, 7. There were also two unnamed children, ages 1 and 2.

The 49 people at St. Thomas Manor in Charles County to be sold down the river included Charles, age 75. Also listed are seven women — Anny, Betsy, Matilda, Kitty, Margaret, Crissy and Jinny — and their 19 children, who are unnamed in the document.

Louisa Mason was among a number of slaves who were warned of the sale, likely by sympathetic Jesuits. They ran away and thus escaped the journey south. When the danger was past, Barnes returned to the plantation at St. Inigoes, where she continued in slavery until 1864, when slaves in Maryland were emancipated. She remained with the Jesuits after that as well.

Melissa Kemp is the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Louisa Mason. Her family has always known about their connection to the Jesuits and slavery in Southern Maryland, she said this week. Now she and other descendants of those held in bondage on the Jesuit plantations are learning more, and connecting with each other, spurred by Georgetown University's efforts to atone for its past.

It has long been known by historians that the Jesuits used slave labor on its plantations in Maryland, but the sale that Louisa Mason escaped has gained new attention as Georgetown, which was founded in 1789 and run by Jesuit priests, has undertaken to confront its historical connections to slavery.

Some of the proceeds from the 1838 sale of 272 human beings for \$115,000 — about \$3.3 million in today's dollars — went to Georgetown to help keep the university afloat.

Early this month, Georgetown's president, John J. DeGioia, announced that he would offer a formal apology, and that the university would give preference in admissions to the descendants of slaves whose labor benefitted the university.

This applies not just to the descendants of those sold and delivered to plantations in Louisiana, but to those in Southern Maryland and elsewhere whose ancestors lived and died on the Jesuit plantations before 1838, and to those who ran away to escape the sale that was intended to end the reliance on slave labor on the plantations. The admissions preference is intended to be the same as that given to the children of Georgetown alumni.

The university also will create an institute for the study of slavery and erect a memorial to the slaves whose work benefitted the university. Two university buildings that were originally named for two college presidents who were involved in the 1838 sale will be changed to Issac Hall, the first name on the list of those to be sold to Louisiana, and Anne Marie Becraft Hall, to honor a free woman who founded a 19th-century school for black girls in Washington, D.C.

This attempt by the university to acknowledge nearly two centuries later that these black lives do matter attracted nationwide attention when it was announced.

However, most of the slaves sold in 1838 "were not at Georgetown," said the Rev. Thomas Clifford, a Jesuit priest who is currently the pastor of St. Ignatius Church at Chapel Point, the site of one of the Maryland plantations. Most of those enslaved by the Jesuits did not work for the university itself, but rather for the Jesuit plantations whose output was supposed to help support the university.

Georgetown's involvement was that some of its debts were paid by through the sale of the slaves in 1838, Clifford said.

An 1838 list of the African American slaves that their owners intended to sell includes no last names, though the manifest of one of the ships that transported the slaves to Louisiana lists many of their surnames, including Butler, Harris, Hawkins, Plowden, Queen and Scott, according to a report prepared for Georgetown University.

Mason, Hill, Diggs, Dorsey, Greenfield, Mahoney and Merrick are among the other surnames of those enslaved by the Jesuits on their Maryland plantations, according to Adam Rothman, a history professor at Georgetown and also a member of the university's Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation, whose recommendations helped lead to the initiatives announced Sept. 1 by the university's president.

The report was unsparing of actions by the university and the Jesuit plantations before Maryland slaves were emancipated in 1864. Not all of the Jesuit slaves were sold to Louisiana in 1838 — some escaped, some were elderly and some remained behind because they were married to spouses on other plantations and the Jesuits had promised not to separate families, Rothman said this week. “There are definitely families [descended from those slaves] still in Southern Maryland,” he said.

Those who can demonstrate that their ancestors were enslaved by Jesuits on these plantations may be eligible for the preference in admission to the university, Rothman said.

Some of the families enslaved were split apart, as some family members, such as her own, escaped the sale, Melissa Kemp said. Some descendants in Louisiana and Maryland have taken DNA tests to re-establish this family connections, she said.

There is now a lot of information about the 272 slaves sold in 1838, she said, but little understanding of the others enslaved by the Jesuits. She encouraged their descendants to come forward. “Their ancestors also made contributions to Georgetown,” Kemp said, “even if they were not part of the sale.”

Kemp grew up in Woodstock in Baltimore County. Louisa Mason had two grandsons, Daniel and Gabriel Bennett, who were educated by the Jesuits at St. Inigoes and then offered jobs at Woodstock College, a Jesuit seminary from 1869 to 1974. Daniel Bennett was Kemp’s great-great-grandfather. According to a 1958 article in the Baltimore Afro-American, Gabriel Bennett, Daniel’s brother, was born at St. Inigoes in 1872 and arrived at Woodstock College as chief chef in 1898. He died in 1973 at age 100, and so was able to pass down family history to younger generation during his long life.

Kemp knows that members of the Butler, Barnes and Hawkins families from St. Mary’s County also settled in Woodstock because of the Jesuit connection.

The Georgetown reconciliation project “is definitely a good move forward,” Kemp said. The university’s working group didn’t include any of descendants of Jesuit slaves, but has kept Kemp and others whose ancestors were slaves informed of its work, she said.

The group has “done tremendous work,” she said, but Kemp and others want Georgetown’s efforts to continue.

“Both sides need to be in continuing dialogue,” she said.

Memorializing the lives of those who were enslaved is important, she said, because otherwise, “learning about slavery, you lose the human connection.”

Some of the Louisiana and Maryland descendants are organizing the GU272 Foundation to promote education, racial healing and reconciliation, Kemp said, and hope to do that in partnership with Georgetown and the Maryland Province of Jesuits, which owned the slaves centuries ago.

The offer of preferential admission to Georgetown isn't of direct interest to Kemp, who has already earned a doctorate from Stanford and is now pursuing postdoctoral work in evolutionary biology at Harvard University. But she has encouraged her younger cousins to do well in school “because there is this university that may accept you.”

Georgetown ties admission offers to financial aid packages based on family income, so aid would be available to these descendants. But the problem, Kemp said, is that some of the descendants of Jesuit slaves in Maryland and Louisiana live in “communities that are not very wealthy” and that don't offer schooling that would prepare them to meet Georgetown's admission standards.

As for the Jesuit plantations in Southern Maryland, much of the property has been sold by the Maryland Province of Jesuits to the state and federal governments. Part of St. Inigoes plantation is a now state forest, and part of it is occupied by the Navy facility at Webster Field.

Much of Newtown is now Newtowne Neck State Park, surrounded by Breton Bay in Compton.

Part of the Charles County plantation, listed in the 1838 records as St. Joseph's Manor, is now Chapel Point State Park near Port Tobacco, and part is the site of St. Ignatius Church, which is now celebrating its 375th anniversary.

Those plantations, which encompassed thousands of acres, were created largely by land grants shortly after the establishment of the Maryland colony in 1634. The labor on the Jesuit plantations was initially supplied by indentured servants, but around 1700, as the number of indentured servants dwindled, the Jesuit plantations, like many others in the region, turned to slavery.

The history of the Jesuit plantations is complex, covering as it does decades during which open Catholic worship was prohibited in the Maryland colony and a time when the Jesuits were suppressed by the pope, between 1773 and the early 19th century. The period when slaves were

held by the Jesuits also includes the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, both of which brought economic hardship to Southern Maryland.

During the years the Jesuits held people in bondage they justified it for various reasons, including the salvation of those they enslaved, as the Rev. Thomas Murphy makes clear in "Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717-1838," published in 2001.

When the Jesuits decided to end the practice of slavery it was for purely economic reasons, said Mike Smolek, cultural resources manager at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, which includes Webster Field. In 1815, Brother James Mobberly, "a fairly brutal overseer" at St. Inigoes, Smolek said, wrote a justification for why the Jesuit plantations should get rid of their slaves, explaining that it was not profitable.



Mobberly argued that having free tenant farmers work the land would be less expensive — and less trouble — than keeping the slaves "because Blacks are more difficult to govern now, than formerly," he wrote in a letter to Georgetown's president.

In 1820, a priest named Peter Kenney visited the Jesuit plantations to report on conditions. At St. Inigoes those enslaved told him how much they disliked Brother Mobberly. He observed that the Jesuits were whipping slaves, and recommended that the practice of whipping pregnant women be prohibited. He said that tying up women in the parlors of priests to administer whippings was "indecorous" and should be stopped.

The 1838 sale was controversial within the Catholic church itself, according to the report of the Georgetown working group. Some Jesuits favored keeping the slaves, explaining it as a religious obligation. Others said the plantations and slaves should be sold and the money invested in Jesuit

works.

A smaller group advocated for some form of emancipation. Jesuit authorities in Rome were inclined toward emancipation, but after lobbying by American Jesuits they agreed to the sale.

But the Jesuits in Rome placed conditions on the sale of slaves to Louisiana: Families were not to be divided. The continued practice of the Catholic faith by the slaves was to be ensured. The money raised from the sale of the slaves was to be used for endowment, not for operating expenses of the university or paying down the debt.

“In the end, none of these conditions was fulfilled,” according to the report.

The terms of the sale were that the slaves were to be well treated, “but they weren’t, really,” said Clifford, the priest at St. Ignatius Church. Their new owners in Louisiana had money problems.

The slaves “labored under dreadful conditions on cotton and sugar plantations,” according to the Georgetown report. “Many were sold again,” some multiple times, breaking up families.

A Jesuit priest who visited the plantations where the slaves lived in 1848 reported that “their owners had neglected their religious instruction” and asked for funds to build a Catholic church for them.

“The University was party to a great harm that was inflicted over an extended period of time on a large number of people, whose human dignity was fundamentally disregarded for the sake of the University’s balance sheet,” the Georgetown report said.

Even in the context of the years before the Civil War, when slavery was widespread in Maryland there were “less shameful, even good alternatives that were rejected and moral resources that were neglected,” the report added.

Julia King, professor of anthropology at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, is preparing an archeological report based on research at Newtowne Neck State Park, a 776-acre property that was purchased by the state from the Maryland Jesuits in 1999.

The Newtown Manor House still stands near St. Francis Xavier Church in Compton and remains the property of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington. It was built of brick in 1789, and the roof was raised in 1819. The Jesuits were building in a land of poverty, King said. “The craftsmanship of the

brick work is extraordinary," she said. "It was the work of a skilled mason, who was very possibly enslaved." The bricks were made at the plantation, and the mortar was made of oyster shells.

At Newtown in 1717 there were 15 slaves, she said. In 1819 there were 43, and five years later there were 56 slaves. Some of them probably slept in the attic of the manor house, and some may have slept in the basement. King and students from the college investigated the the archaeological remains of other sites where slaves lived and worked, many of which were abandoned in the years around the time of the 1838 slave sale.

The Jesuits kept records, but those who were enslaved are faceless, King said, often just first names on a census of men, women and children to be sold to plantations in Louisiana. "Their archives are these [archaeological] sites," she said

Clifford told his parishioners at St. Ignatius Church that Georgetown's documents about its ties to slavery were coming out. Many knew about the past of the Jesuit plantations, "but some people didn't know that the church had slaves," he said.

These enslaved people were living in very poor conditions on the Maryland plantations, Clifford said, and the truly terrible thing was selling the slaves to Louisiana, which broke up families. It's valuable for the university and the church to recognize their past, he said, and Georgetown's initiatives provides a new opportunity for reconciliation. He's been involved in previous reconciliation endeavors to confront that past, but "it's always tricky to find people we can reconcile with ... we don't know how to find them."

What's most interesting to him now, Clifford said, is that "we have descendants who have identified themselves. It makes it more tangible."

In some ways, reconciliation is more difficult and challenging because the descendants of those held in bondage by the church "are right in front of you," he said.

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