



TOLTON



The Father Tolton Guild Newsletter

FALL 2023

Grave of Father Tolton's grandmother found in an old Catholic cemetery in Kentucky

By Ruby Thomas, *The Catholic Missourian*

On a wintry January day in 2022 at the old St. Theresa Cemetery in rural Meade County, Kentucky, Janice Mulligan laid a simple wreath of magnolia leaves on the grave of Matilda (Hurd) Chisley — a woman who spent her life in slavery and whose grandson is now a saint in the making.

Matilda, who died in 1836 at age 30, was enslaved on a farm belonging to John Henry Manning.

She was also the maternal grandmother of Venerable Augustus Tolton — the church's first recognized Black priest in the United States.

Mulligan, who serves as the associate director of the Archdiocese of Louisville's Office of Multicultural Ministry, said that while standing over Matilda's grave, "her story felt like a part of my family's story."

On that day, Father J. Ronald Knott, a retired priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville, led a small group, including Mulligan, in reciting the Confiteor before the wreath laying.

Knott said he became aware that Matilda's earthy remains were buried in the old St. Theresa Cemetery in Rhodelia. He said he plans to use one of the center's hallways as a museum

where historic photographs and documents from the parish community will be displayed.

In searching for old photos and researching the history of the more than 200-year-old parish, Knott said, "All of a sudden it became clear to me that part of our history" is rooted in slavery.

"I was shocked by it," he said. "I didn't know there were slaves in the parish."

His research shows there were about 50 families at St. Theresa who collectively enslaved about 200 people.



A small group, including Father J. Ronald Knott, Father George Illikkal, Janice Mulligan and Paul Kelt, pray the Confiteor at Matilda Hurd's grave in the old St. Theresa Cemetery on the grounds of St. Theresa Church in Rhodelia, Ky., Jan. 27. Hurd is the maternal grandmother of Venerable Augustus Tolton, the first recognized African American priest ordained for the Catholic Church in the United States and who is now being considered for sainthood. (Ruby Thomas/The Record)

“We need to say their names — Matilda, Maria, Augustus, Sicilia,” he said. “We didn’t even know their names and it’s right there in the baptismal records and in the cemetery.”

His research eventually turned up the baptismal records of Matilda’s children — Charles, Anne, Sicilia, Sicilia Ellen and Martha Jane.

Martha Jane is the mother of Tolton.

“The more I studied, I realized this family was related to Father Tolton,” said Knott.

Their names and the names of the other enslaved people are now displayed on the history wall in the Family Life Center because they were parishioners at St. Theresa, too, he said.

“As people walk down the hall seeing the names of the priests and the (religious) sisters, they’ll see the names of the slaves who made some families here successful,” he said.

“As far as little parishes in the country, St. Theresa was more advanced and well-to-do,” he noted, and it was because of slave labor.

Knott said the parish is still benefiting from the labor of enslaved people who, he believes, quarried the rocks used for the foundation and made the bricks from which the current St. Theresa Church was built.

The church was dedicated in 1861 by Bishop Martin John Spalding.

Knott noted he’s not interested in “shaming” anyone. Instead, he wants to celebrate the contribution of enslaved people to his boyhood parish, learn and pass on the parish’s whole history — “not only white history” or a “sanitized version” of that history — to the younger generation.

If they will stand against “prejudice and bigotry,” they need to be aware of the parish’s history with slavery, said Knott.

Ms. Mulligan agrees that the contributions of enslaved people to the parishes in the Louisville archdiocese should be recognized.

“Having her [Matilda’s] name recognized, especially in the context of her grandson becoming one of the first African American saints in the U.S. ...there’s a legacy and story there, rich and worth telling,” she said. “Her



The grave marker for Matilda Hurd, Tolton’s grandmother.
(Ruby Thomas/The Record)

story and others like it adds a fuller thread and a fuller context to the presence and contributions of African Americans to this American church.”

Part of Matilda’s story takes place on the farm in Rhodelia owned by John Henry Manning and his wife Ann Gough, who were members of St. Theresa Parish.

Matilda married Augustus Chisley, another enslaved person on the Manning farm, said Emilie Leumas, an archivist who serves on the historical commission for Tolton’s sainthood cause.

In 1835, when Manning died, he bequeathed all his belongings — about 1,200 acres of land, personal items such as silver, his watch, his Bible and his 17 enslaved people — to his children and grandchildren, said Leumas.

Details from Manning’s will show that Matilda and Augustus and their children were separated. Their oldest children, Martha Jane, 11, and Charles, 6, were left to Manning’s granddaughter Anne Sevilla Manning.

Leumas noted that by the time the will was read, Anne Sevilla Manning and her family had moved to Ralls County, Missouri.

At some point following the reading of the will, Charles and Martha Jane — the mother of Fr. Tolton — were moved to Missouri to live with their new owner.

“How gut-wrenching that your two oldest children are being hauled away to Missouri,” said Leumas.

When Anne Sevilla Manning married Stephen Elliott in 1839, she would have brought Charles and Martha Jane into her marriage as part of her dowry, Leumas said.

More than a decade later, Martha Jane, now the mother of three young children, including young Augustus, 7 at the time, escaped slavery and fled to Quincy, Illinois, where Tolton grew up and was formed in the Catholic faith.

Leumas said she's not found documents clarifying whether Matilda and Augustus and their children were immediately separated after the will reading. She thinks they were allowed to live together and walk to work on the farm of their new owner, noting that Matilda would have had a 2-year-old and also would have been nursing an infant at the time.

"Working people and your land was a business, and they were looking at it that way," said Leumas.

Matilda died in 1836, a year after Manning's will was read. She is buried a few feet away from a large wooden cross that marks where the old church, a log structure, once stood.

St. Theresa Parish started out in a log cabin on the banks of the Ohio River, an area that was known as Flint Island in 1818. A second log cabin was built in 1826 on what is now the old cemetery grounds.

Knott noted that Matilda is buried among St. Theresa's white parishioners, perhaps because she was baptized.

A cemetery located in a wooded area off a highway about two miles from the former church site was used to bury enslaved people owned by St. Theresa parishioners, as well. Those slaves, he said, may not have been baptized. He is leading a project to find all the headstones in that cemetery.

Father Tolton featured as an 'American Eucharistic Witness'

To help pave the way to the National Eucharistic Congress July 17-23, 2024, the congress is presenting the American Eucharistic Witnesses. Venerable Father Augustus is among them. (See image at right.)

These are holy men and women who lived, loved and served on the very soil upon which we now stand. They all testify — in unique and powerful ways — to what it means to encounter Jesus in the Eucharist and go on mission with him for the life of the world.

Old and young, men and women, representing different cultural families and vocations, these men and women show us — in living color — what holiness looks like.

The congress partnered with American artist Connor Miller, who is creating an original woodcut print of each witness to help people visually engage with this creative new series.



Ft. Augustus Tolton Woodcut Print by Connor Miller

Father Augustus Tolton woodcut print by Connor Miller.

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A number of Father Augustus Tolton items, including prayer cards, books and brochures, are available for purchase at **tolton.archchicago.org**. All proceeds benefit the cause.

Signed and numbered prints of the Father Augustus Tolton Icon are available for purchase **on the website**. All purchases help fund the cause for canonization.