Black Catholic Women
Who Shaped The Faith

FOUR WOMEN WITNESSES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

THE LEGACY

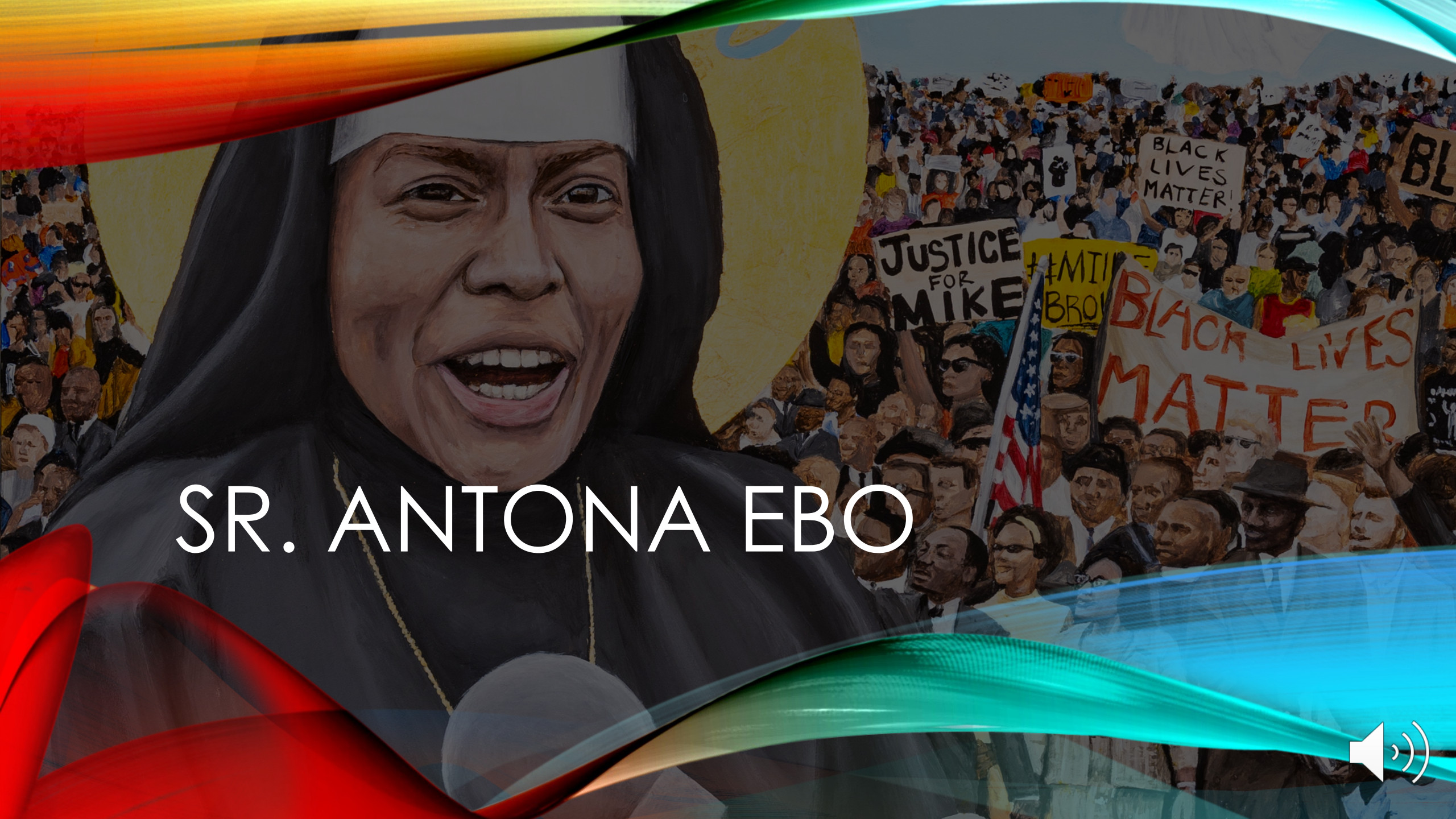
- Long before there were black priests in the United States, there were black Catholic sisters.
- Since 1824, black women have consecrated themselves to God and dedicated their lives
  - to education and social justice
  - to renouncing an outside world that deemed all black people inferior (and immoral)
  - To refuting the insidious racial and sexual stereotypes used by white supremacists to justify African-American exclusion from U.S. citizenship rights and the ranks of religious life in the Church

~Shannen Dee Williams

THE FOUR

- We have chosen four Black Catholic women who proved to be extraordinary leaders in the fight to end slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and to bring forth authentic racial justice.

- Sr. Antona Ebo
- Mary Louise Smith
- Venerable Henriette Delille
- Mother Josephine Charles



SR. ANTONA EBO

BLOODY SUNDAY

- On Sunday March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers and local police beat and bloodied civil rights activists who had begun a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital. Immediately following the “Bloody Sunday” attack, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a call for church leaders around the country to come to Selma and to join in the struggle for civil rights. (This photo shows John Lewis being brutally beaten)

SR. ANTONA EBO

On March 10th, Sister Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary, took off from Saint Louis, Missouri to Selma on a chartered plane that she joked had been pulled out of mothballs.

As she marched, the protesters were confronted by local police forces. Surrounded by a group of black ministers, who had singled her out from the St. Louis delegation, Sister Ebo declared to reporters:

“I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness.... I’m here today because yesterday [in Saint Louis] I voted.”

SR. ANTONA EBO

- When questions arose from the crowd about her racial heritage, Sister Ebo simply smiled and stated calmly, “Yes, I am a Negro, and I am very proud of it.”
- According to Shannen Dee Williams, her impromptu declaration of black pride said more about her journey than most have realized. For as much as Sister Ebo’s statement was rooted in celebrating her family’s survival of chattel slavery, it was also deeply influenced by her life under Jim Crow segregation. Indeed, long before the savage violence of “Bloody Sunday” called her to Selma, Sister Ebo endured a lifetime of hardships marked by great personal tragedies, crushing poverty and virulent antiblack racism.
- (https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/11/22/sister-antona-ebos-lifelong-struggle-against-white-supremacy-inside-and-outside)

SR. ANTONA EBO

- The March 11th cover of The New York Times featured a photo of Sister Ebo marching alongside other protesters.
- That photo would become an iconic image of the struggle for voting rights.

ANTONA EBO

- Elizabeth Ebo was Born in Bloomington, Illinois to parents Daniel and Louise Teal Ebo. Her grandfather was a Baptist minister, and her family attended the local Baptist church.

- When Ebo was just four years old, her mother died, and her father lost his job as a library custodian soon after. When he could no longer afford to keep their house, Antona and her siblings went to live at the McLean County Home for Colored Children – a fate shared by many black children across the country during the Great Depression.

- As a child, she contracted tuberculosis, and while she recovered in the hospital, she learned about Catholicism from the religious women there. At the age of 18, she converted.

ANTONA EBO

- Ebo had aspirations of becoming a nurse but was rejected by numerous nursing schools on the basis of race. In 1942 she entered St. Mary's Infirmary, a nursing school in St. Louis which was run by the Sisters of Mary (now the Franciscan Sisters of Mary).

ANTONA EBO

- In 1946, taking the name Sr. Mary Antona (from a Sinsinawa Dominican sister who taught her math), she and two other African American women – Pauline Townsend and Hilda Brickus -- entered the all-white order eventually desegregating it.
- Like many pioneering black sisters in white orders, Ebo and the other black sisters endured unconscionable discrimination from her white counterparts and superiors.
- The Sisters of St. Mary built a separate novitiate for its first black candidates to ensure segregation in the dining, training and social interactions of the community. The white superiors also initially barred their black members from entering the motherhouse.
- On June 9, 1947, Ebo and the four other black members of the order professed their first vows in a segregated ceremony at which the archbishop of St. Louis officiated.

- Throughout her life -- both before and after Selma – Sister Ebo was a civil rights pioneer. She and John Lewis were friends. She often spoke up and went to public protests. This was especially true when Michael Brown was murdered.

- Sr. Ebo compares the protests in Ferguson and across the country to the marches held in Selma years ago: “When the young blacks in Ferguson speak, they are rabble-rousers, and that’s what we were called when we went to Selma.” She went on, “We were called rabble-rousers and dupes of the Communists because [then FBI director] J. Edgar Hoover was working so hard to prove that Martin Luther King was not a Christian but a Communist. People who had put their trust in J. Edgar Hoover rather than J.C., if only they would have put their trust in J.C., they would have been on the right side of this thing. It’s the same kind of stuff that’s happening now.”

- She credited the Holy Spirit for guiding her throughout her life and often sang the black spiritual, “I’m Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do.”

A TRIBUTE TO SR. ANTONA

By the Missouri Historical Society

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEJZuTaoFf4

MARY LOUISE SMITH

MARY LOUISE SMITH

- One of the earliest activists against segregated buses in Alabama, Mary Louise Smith was arrested in October 1955 at the age of 18 for refusing to give up her seat to a White person.
- A Black Catholic early pioneer in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Smith was taken to jail six weeks before Rosa Parks rose to international fame for a similar act on December 1, 1955.

MARY LOUISE SMITH

At the time of her incarceration, Smith had just graduated from the St. Jude Educational Institute, a Catholic high school connected to her home parish, Sr. Jude Catholic Church—part of a Black Catholic complex known as "The City of St. Jude." Her father, Frank Smith, rescued her from jail [and]represented her in court without the aid of any of the political organizations in Montgomery.

On February 1, 1956, Smith was one of five women named as plaintiffs in the federal civil suit, Browder v. Gayle, challenging the constitutionality of the state and local bus segregation laws. On June 13, 1956, a three-judge panel of the United States District Court ruled that the laws were unconstitutional. The ruling was upheld by the United States Supreme Court on November 13 in a landmark decision, and in December it declined to reconsider. On December 20, 1956, the Supreme Court ordered Alabama to desegregate its buses and the Montgomery bus boycott ended.

This photo is a 2019 photo of Mary Louise Smith being photographed with the statue of Rosa Parks.

But, the Greater Washington Park Community Association announced she will be honored with her own marker on May 19th, 2024 .

MARY LOUISE SMITH

IN HER OWN WORDS

Please listen to Mary Louise Smith talk about her experience of being arrested:

https://www.morethanabusride.com/smith-family-plaque

VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE

VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE

- Henriette Delille was born on March 11, 1812.
- She founded the second religious congregation of Black sister, the Sisters of the Holy Family, in 1842. Her act endures as a critical step in desegregating one of the most important arms of the Catholic Church, its women's religious communities.
- She died Nov. 16, 1862, six months after Union troops occupied New Orleans and two months before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves.

VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE

In 1988, the Sisters of the Holy Family initiated the cause for Henriette Delille's canonization with the Holy See. Pope John Paul II granted the request, marking her as the first native-born African American with a canonization cause. Bestowed with the title "Servant of God," her cause received unanimous endorsement from the United States Catholic bishops in 1997. The process advanced when on March 27, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI declared her Venerable, formally recognizing her profound impact and virtuous life.

HENRIETTE'S EARLY LIFE

Henriette Delille was born to Marie Josephe Diaz, a free Creole of color of French, Spanish and African ancestry. Her parents were Catholic.

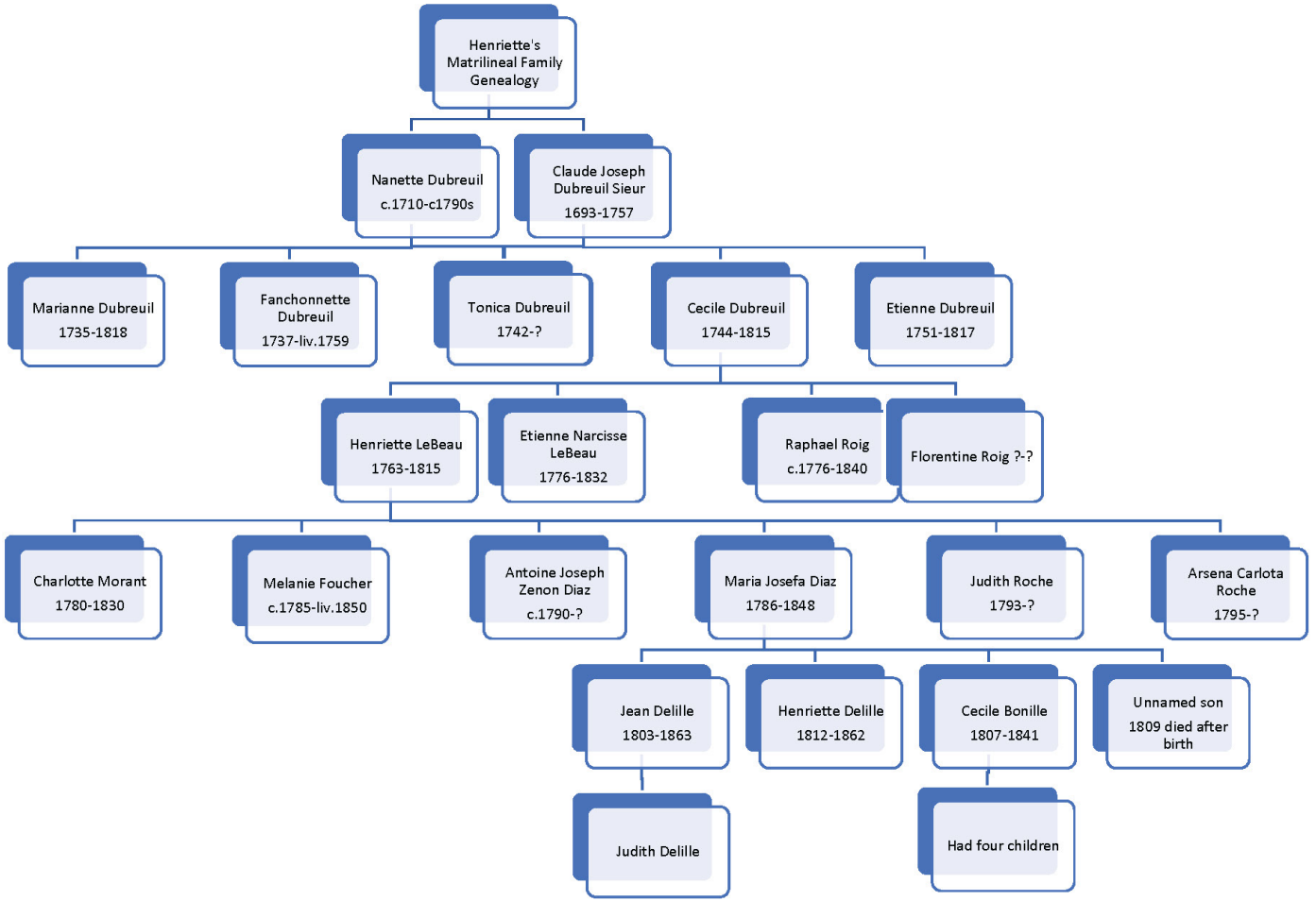
She was the youngest of Marie's four children which included Jean Delille, Cecile Bonile, an unamed son (Bonile), and Henriette Delille.

Henriette's father was Frenchman Jean Baptiste Delille Sharpy Henriette never acknowledged him as her father and did not have contact with him. Delille's father appears not to have been present during her life or to have supported her mother to any measurable degree.

HENRIETTE DELILLE ANCESTRY

Delille's maternal great-great-grandfather, Claude Joseph Dubreuil, was a white planter of standing and an engineer who, in fact, built the grand Ursuline convent in New Orleans (where later Henriette would be refused entrance as a religious).

He purchased Delille's great-great-grandmother, the enslaved Nanette (Marie Ann), who bore him several children. Cecile Dubreuil was her great grandmother, Henriette Lebeau was her grandmother. Coming from generations of healers, both Delille and her mother, Marie Josefe Diaz, appear to have been trained as healers.


Henriette's Matrilineal Family Genealogy
Nanette Dubreuil c.1710-c1790s
Claude Joseph Dubreuil Sieur 1693-1757
Marianne Dubreuil 1735-1818
Fanchonnette Dubreuil 1737-liv.1759
Tonica Dubreuil 1742-?
Cecile Dubreuil 1744-1815
Etienne Dubreuil 1751-1817
Henriette LeBeau 1763-1815
Etienne Narcisse LeBeau 1776-1832
Raphael Roig c.1776-1840
Florentine Roig ?-?
Charlotte Morant 1780-1830
Melanie Foucher c.1785-liv.1850
Antoine Joseph Zenon Diaz c.1790-?
Maria Josefa Diaz 1786-1848
Judith Roche 1793-?
Arsena Carlota Roche 1795-?
Jean Delille 1803-1863
Henriette Delille 1812-1862
Cecile Bonille 1807-1841
Unnamed son 1809 died after birth
Judith Delille
Had four children

HENRIETTE DELILLE GODMOTHER & WITNESS

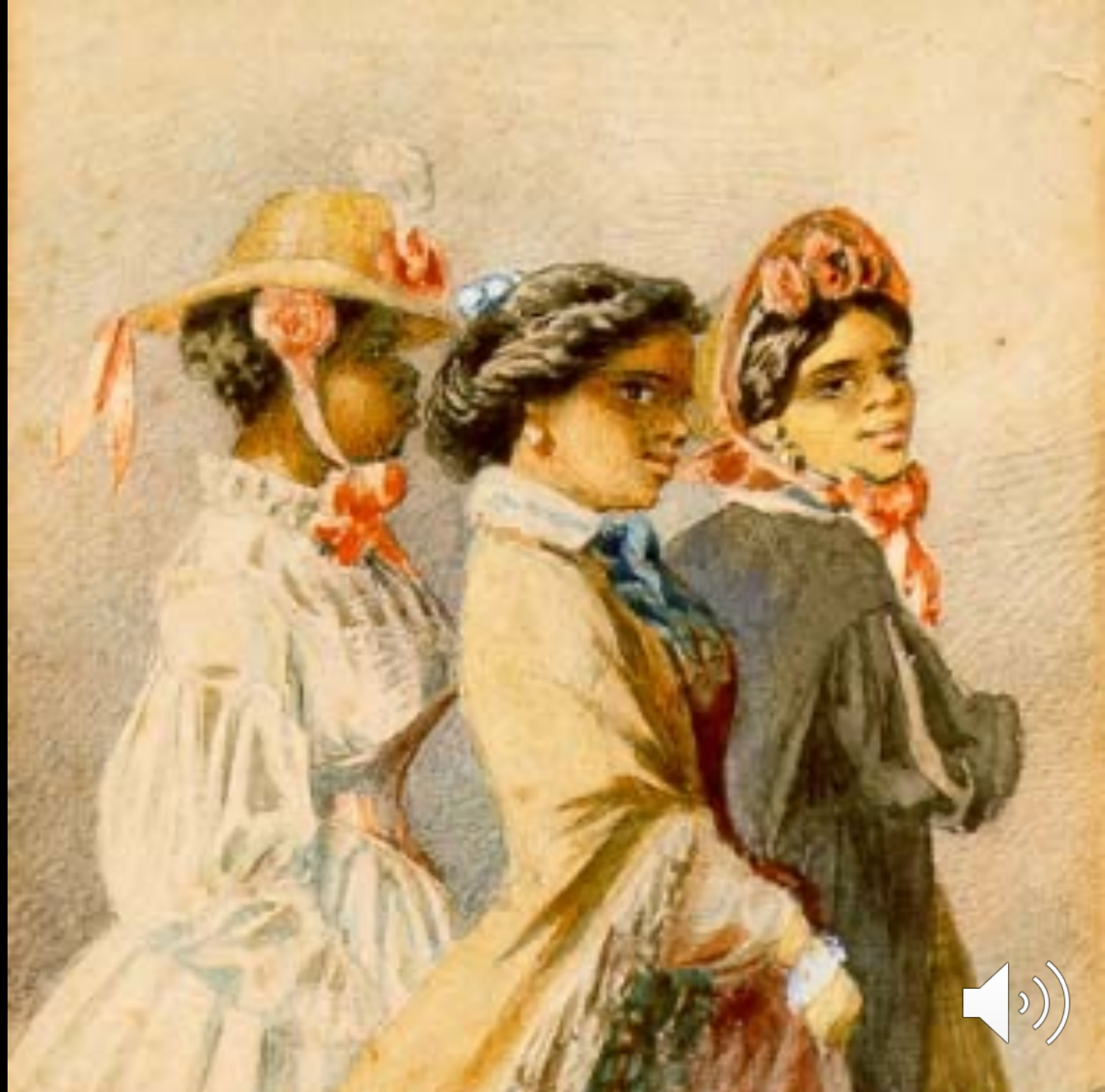
Although many of the official records of Henriette's birth and life are scarce, the name of "Henriette" does appear with astounding frequency in New Orleans sacramental registers beginning in 1827, sometimes with Delille or a variant, sometimes alone.

In these records, "Henriette" is listed again and again as a godmother to slave or free children of color. The tradition of godparenting was passed down through consecutive generations. Through the decades, the women in Henriette's family trained a multitude of children in the faith.

Henriette also served as a witness to marriages performed between slaves, between free people of color, across these groups, or between their members and white persons. Except for marriages between free people of color, these marriages were illegal.

PLACAGE

Under Spanish and later French slavery, free women and girls of color living in the Louisiana territory had few legal rights and limited options outside marriage and the pervasive system of concubinage known as placage. Under that system, white European or Creole men entered formal long-term relationships with free and enslaved Indigenous, African, and mixed-race women and girls.



PLACAGE

Although segments of society, including the Church, publicly condemned these civil unions, they were commonplace in New Orleans and elsewhere by the late eighteenth century.

Young Catholic women and girls of color would be formally presented to prospective European or white Creole male suitors, who were also often Catholic. If a match were secured, a contract would be drawn up, usually between the girl's mother and the suitor, stipulating financial support, housing, and sexual relations.

HENRIETTE DELILLE IN A PLACAGE SYSTEM

Henriette was expected to carry out a traditional life. Her sister (Cecile Bonille entered into placage with Samuel Hart, a wealthy Austrian businessman who had a separate white family in addition to four children with Bonille.)

Although no marriage records have been discovered, records indicate that Henriette did give birth to two sons by the time she was 24. Both died at or before the age of two, one right after the next. Shortly after the death of her second son, she was confirmed in the Catholic Church and moved in earnest toward a very different kind of life.

HENRIETTE DELILLE AND THE SSF FOUNDRESSES REJECT PLACAGE

- Henriette's decision to create a religious community that would offer greater freedom for women of color to meet the needs of children and people of color was met with great resistance from her family.
- According to Shannen Dee Williams, extant Church and community records make clear that the SSF foundresses understood placage to be sexual slavery, restricting free women and girls of color-already limited or barred from entering marriage and religious life-from living lives of virtue and contributing to attacks on the moral character of Black women and girls.
- Most, if not all, of the women who entered the order before 1865 were products of placage and thus had firsthand knowledge of its exploitative nature.

HENRIETTE DELILLE
A SHREWD BUSINESSWOMAN

Contrary to popular conceptions of the elegant and pampered quadroon class from which Delille is said to have emerged, her family life seems to have been one of economic uncertainty and frequent hardship.

Her mother, Marie Josefe Diaz, suffered from an incapacitating mental illness, and Henriette and her siblings became self-supporting at an early age.

Henriette grew to become a shrewd business woman using her inheritance to buy property and ensure the future of her ministry to people of color.

OBSTACLES TO ENTERING RELIGIOUS LIFE

Although Henriette's family all identified themselves as white in the census, Henriette embraced her identity as a black woman and refused to "pass for white." As a result, when she wanted to enter religious life, she was refused entrance into the Ursuline and Carmelite communities.

Thus, when Henriette founded her community, she established the first religious community rooted in New Orleans. Other orders who established themselves in New Orleans came from Europe.

COLORED SISTERS OF THE HOLY FAMILY

The Holy Family Convent at New Orleans has eight Catholic Schools in Louisi
The students are taught Industrial Art, Embroidery, Music, etc., and beco

VOWS

On October 15, 1851, Henriette Delille, a free woman of color in New Orleans, embarked on a remarkable journey. Leaving her residence on Bayou Road, just beyond the French Quarter, she made her way to the Chapel at Ste. Marie de l'Archeveche on Chartres Street to profess religious vows.

The archbishop, Antione Blanc, and her steadfast supporter, Fr. Etienne Rousselon, were present to receive her profession. Henriette, draped in her percale blue dress with a rosary around her neck, walked alone to the communion rail, and declared vows of poverty, charity, and obedience. This marked the culmination of a journey she had initiated in 1836 when she dedicated her life to serving the enslaved and free people of color in New Orleans.

Henriette's house with Saint Augustines in the background

Ste. Marie de l'Archeveche

SLAVEHOLDING SSF MEMBERS

At least two of the early Sisters of the Holy Family (Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin) also owned enslaved people through inheritance. Because many of the earliest SSF members (whose names are lost to the historical record) left the order after Delille's death in 1862, the extent and nature of the order's slaveholding may be irrecoverable.

However, it seems clear that the Afro Creole sisters did not themselves buy or sell enslaved peoples or use physical violence to control their enslaved property. Nor did the SSF order support the Confederacy during the Civil War as white slaveholding Catholics did. Records reveal only that Delille owned at least one human being while in religious life, and Gaudin owned at least two people during her lifetime. The two seemingly inherited their enslaved human property from their families. While Delille made clear provisions in her last will and testament for the protection and emancipation of Betsy, the enslaved woman in her "possession," it is unclear if Gaudin did the same.

SEGREGATION OF STUDENTS

While the SSFs educated free and enslaved Black (as well as a few white) children before the federal abolition of slavery in 1865, the SSFs enforced separation between free and enslaved in their school like most white congregations engaged in this work during the period.

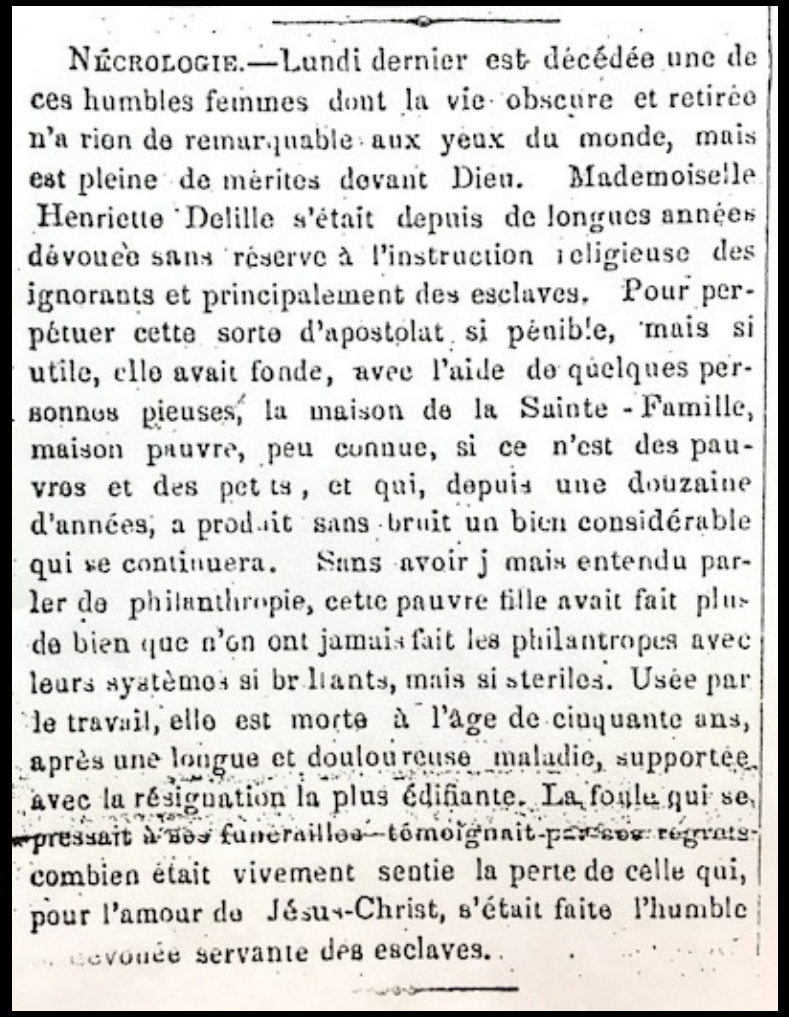
Sister Mary Bernard Deggs noted that the SSF's decision to instruct free and enslaved children separately was in response to complaints from free Afro-Creole parents who did not want their children educated on an equal basis with enslaved children or those "whose mothers had been slaves."

DEATH

Along with Juliette Gaudin, and later Josephine Charles, the three were joined off and on by other women and numbered fourteen by 1862.

In that year, shortly after the siege of New Orleans by the Union army, Henriette Delille fell ill of exhaustion and died.

Her obituary in the November 18, 1862, issue of *Le Propagateur Catholique* (under the editorship, ironically, of the same Napoleon Perche who, later as archbishop, sought to have the sisters stripped of their habit) eulogizes Delille as "the humble servant of slaves."



Nécrologie.—Lundi dernier est décédée une de ces humbles femmes dont la vie obscure et retirée n'a rien de remarquable aux yeux du monde, mais est pleine de mérites devant Dieu. Mademoiselle Henriette Delille s'était depuis de longues années dévouée sans réserve à l'instruction religieuse des ignorants et principalement des esclaves. Pour perpétuer cette sorte d'apostolat si pénible, mais si utile, elle avait fondé, avec l'aide de quelques personnes pieuses, la maison de la Sainte-Famille, maison pauvre, peu connue, si ce n'est des pauvres et des petits, et qui, depuis une douzaine d'années, a produit sans bruit un bien considérable qui se continuera. Sans avoir jamais entendu parler de philanthropie, cette pauvre fille avait fait plus de bien que n'en ont jamais fait les philantropes avec leurs systèmes si brillants, mais si steriles. Usée par le travail, elle est morte à l'âge de cinquante ans, après une longue et douloureuse maladie, supportée avec la résignation la plus édifiante. La foule qui se pressait à ses funérailles témoignait par ses regrets combien était vivement sentie la perte de celle qui, pour l'amour de Jésus-Christ, s'était faite l'humble dévouée servante des esclaves.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HENRIETTE DELILLE

Shannen Dee Williams on Henriette Delille and Mother Josephine Charles (minutes 20:00– 27:03) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WvxJULJKRQ

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWbvF6B0E3M (A short history of Henriette Delille)
- https://tripodnola.org/episodes/henriette-delille-and-the-sisters-of-the-holy-family/ (another short history)
- An interesting look at early property records of the SSFs https://clerkofcivildistrictcourtnotarialarchives.wordpress.com/2021/12/21/sisters-of-the-holy-family/

MOTHER JOSEPHINE CHARLES

MOTHER JOSEPHINE CHARLES

Cofounder of the Sisters of the Holy Family, Josephine was the daughter of a German father and a free mulatto woman, born in New Orleans in 1816.

Josephine Charles joined the community shortly after Delille and Gaudin made their vows in 1842. During Delille's lifetime, the order opened a school, an orphanage, and a home for the aged. They catechized slaves and taught free children of color, and, in 1853, nursed both black and white people in New Orleans through the worst of the cholera epidemics the city had until then endured. Later, after Delille's death, Charles would take up leadership in the community while reckoning with exclusionary practices within the community.

MOTHER CHARLES REJECTS PLACAGE

According to historian Shannen Dee Williams, the women who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family, understood placage to be sexual slavery. Josephine Charles, the third SSF co-foundress, seemed to make clearest that the order was formed as a direct act of protest against slavery and sexual exploitation. Charles, the daughter of an Afro Creole mother and German father, fiercely resisted her older sister's attempts to groom her for potential suitors at a quadroon ball.

After the Civil War, Charles, by then the congregation's leader, mortgaged several properties inherited from her father in an effort to sanctify sites in New Orleans associated with racism and slavery, especially the abuse of Black women and girls.

RESTORING DIGNITY

One of the earliest properties that the order purchased under Charles's leadership, for example, was a former slave traders' pen on Chartres Street that the SSF used to establish their St. Mary's Academy for Girls in 1867.

As SSF historian Sr. Mary Deggs explained in her 1894 journal, "Many sins had been committed at that place, not only sins, but the most horrible crimes. It must have been the will of God that our sisters should buy the place to expiate the crimes that had been committed there."

RESTORING DIGNITY

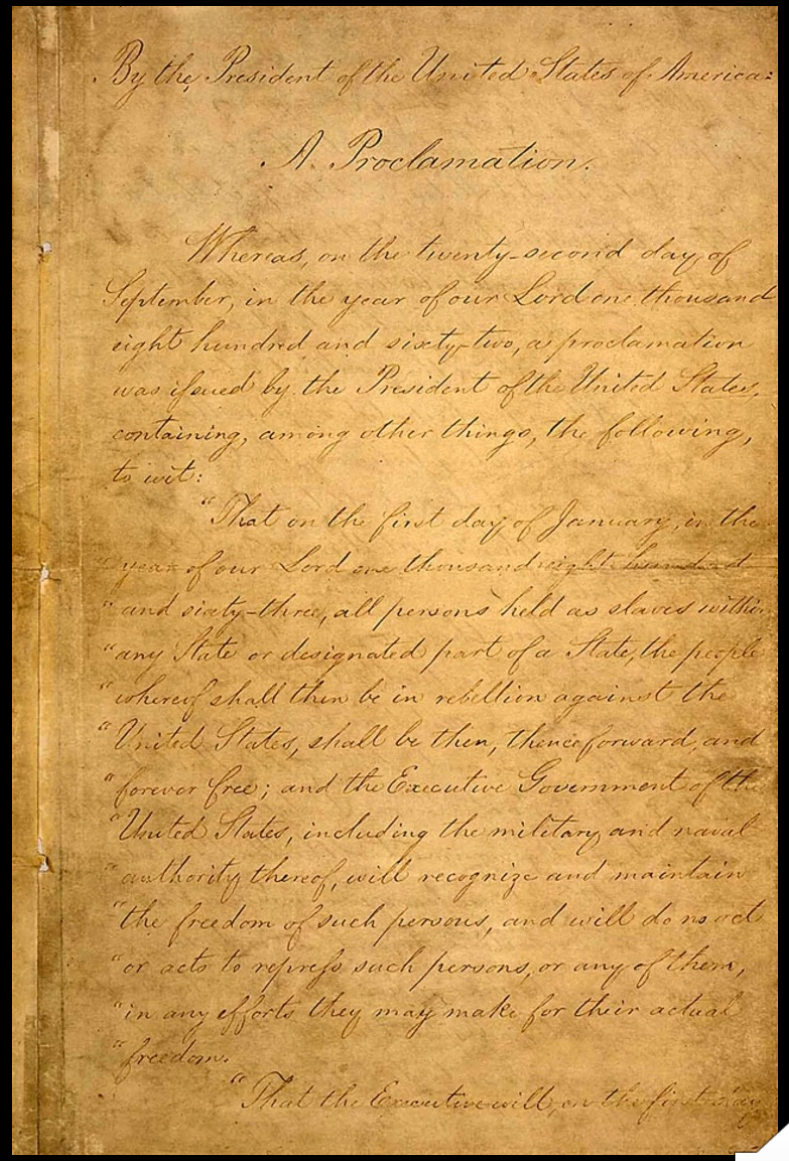
In 1881, Charles also purchased the French Quarter's Orleans Ballroom, which had hosted some the city's most (in)famous quadroon balls during slavery.

According to SSF Historian Sr. Mary Deggs, the Orleans Ballroom had been "a den of sin." However, from 1881 to 1955, the site served as the new home of the SSF motherhouse and their St. Mary's Academy.

EMANCIPATION AND A SPLIT

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free.

After Henriette Delille died in 1862 the community faced difficulties and divisions over the question of admitting former enslaved women.



By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

"That the Executive will, on the first day

Within a system of hierarchies of color and status, The SSFs initially employed a restrictive admissions policy based on color, class, and previous condition, accepting "only those of free and well-known families" and, according to Deggs, refusing "an Indian, red skinned."

Upon Emancipation, some members of the SSF resented the redrawing of the color line in ways that classed them with those who had emerged only recently from bondage.

The division caused the community to split and many left the order at that time.

MOTHER JOSEPHINE CHARLES MOVES THE COMMUNITY TOWARD FULL INCLUSION

Mother Josephine Charles did not own enslaved people and was passionate about justice. She helped solve the crisis with a monumental decision.

Under the leadership of Charles and another member, Sr. Elizabeth Wallace (pictured), the order ended its exclusionary policy in 1869 by admitting a formerly enslaved woman, Cloe Preval (later Sister Mary Joachim). This required their strong leadership and the intervention of the order's second spiritual director, a new archbishop, for whom Preval worked as a cook.

THE BATTLE OVER THE HABIT

Ecclesiastical authorities in New Orleans forbade SSF members from wearing habits (clothing to signify their consecrated status) during the early decades of their existence.

According to one SSF source, Antoine Blanc, who became the first archbishop of New Orleans when it was elevated to an archdiocese in 1850, prevented the sisters from wearing habits and making public vows to illustrate the Church's opposition to abolitionism, since some anti-Catholic nativists and proslavery ideologues promoted the myth that Catholic enslavers readily freed women who expressed a desire to enter religious life.

According to another community source, the order's first spiritual director advised the sisters to avoid wearing a traditional habit so as to appear without pretension and avoid threatening the status of white nuns, and other white women.

THE BATTLE OVER THE HABIT

In an especially egregious episode, New Orleans archbishop Napoleon-Joseph Perche, one of the Church's strongest advocates for southern secession and slavery's continuation, responded violently at the sight of a young novice sister sent by Mother Josephine Charles to model the SSF's long-desired habit and ask for its approval.

According to SSF oral and written history, Perche yelled, "What do you think you are?" and accused the young sister and her congregation of being "too proud" before sending her out of his office crying. Only after the intervention of the SSF's second spiritual director did Perche begrudgingly approve the SSF habit. Thus, In the 1870's or early 1880s, the SSF finally won the right to wear habits.