

Mary Narcissa Frederick

Mary Narcissa Frederick (1815?-1908) was one of the first Catholics and first Black Catholics in the city of Louisville. Born into slavery, her more than 90 years of life encompassed the antebellum, Civil War, emancipation, reconstruction, and Jim Crow eras. Her life also coincided with the creation of the Diocese of Bardstown and the diocese's eventual move to Louisville, Kentucky.

Frederick played a prominent role in the faith life of the early Catholic community in Louisville, sponsoring Confirmations, witnessing weddings, and serving as a godmother. She served in these sacramental roles for both enslaved and free Black Catholics and even, in one case, for the baptism of a white girl¹.

In the 1840s, during the last decade of Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget's life, Frederick served the ailing 80-year-old as a maid, cook, housekeeper, and nurse. She was 'hired out' to Flaget during this period by her enslaver, James Rudd (1789-1867). Rudd, another notable early Catholic in Louisville, was a politician, an extremely successful businessman—one of the ten wealthiest in the city—and a great financial contributor to the Catholic Church.

Frederick was a founding member of St. Augustine Parish from its beginnings in the slave balcony and then the basement of the Cathedral of the Assumption. She was a parishioner at the time of the triumphal march from the cathedral to St. Augustine's first church building on 14th and Broadway.

Frederick's story can be pieced together from scattered historical records. A long obituary was written about her in 1908². More details have brought her story to life through research in the archives of the Archdiocese, the Filson Historical Society, news stories, census records, wills, and archeological reports. Frederick lived a remarkable life of faith despite the challenges of slavery and racism. She could rightly be called a mother of the Archdiocese of Louisville and of Catholics Black, white, and brown, lay, religious, and clergy, enslaved and free.

Telling her story – the historical documentation

It is very unusual to be able to tell the story of an enslaved person in any detail. Historians and genealogists frequently talk about "the wall of slavery" preventing the discovery of details, even names, of the lives of the enslaved before 1870. Frederick is exceptional in the

¹ Mary Elizabeth Spalding (b. May 18, 1860), daughter of Ralph Spalding and Mary Ellen Walker (out of wedlock?). Baptized by Fr. J.H. Bekkers at the Cathedral of the Assumption. Thornton and Narcissa Frederick, godparents. Lyons Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

² "White Heart Was Almost a Centenarian," *Kentucky Irish American*. 14 March 1908 (no author).

amount of documentation about her life. This can be partially explained by the stability of her life circumstances—she was owned by the same enslaver for decades and employed by his family after emancipation. She lived at the same address, the Rudd mansion, for five decades of her life.

Frederick's name also remained the same for most of her life. This was unusual. Enslaved persons were given different names (both first and last) by enslavers when they were sold by or separated. They frequently took a new name at emancipation, as well. Frederick was Narcissa's married name, which she took in 1836. Her maiden name, if she had one, may have been Lee or Darein after earlier enslavers. In some late records, her last name is "Rudd," after her last enslaver, James Rudd.

Another reason for the relative abundance of historical documentation for Frederick is the politician, and Benedict Joseph Flaget, the first bishop of Louisville. A remarkable 800-word obituary was written about her in 1908 in the *Kentucky Irish American*, a Louisville ethnic newspaper with a Catholic, Democratic, and of course, Irish American perspective.

The back-page obituary describes an intense outpouring of grief by the Rudd family over Frederick's death. She had been their nursemaid in slavery and freedom. The piece notes that she was 99 years old, which is probably an inflation by a few years, and had a "royal" funeral, her remains carried by the prominent white men of the Rudd family, whom she had nursed as children. In the author's telling, this was proof that white Kentuckians treasured Black lives and should serve as a rebuke to the criticisms of Northerners³.

The obituary, titled, "White Heart Was Almost a Centenarian," gives a clue to the author's views on Frederick's race. He concludes the article with the declaration, "Her skin was black, but her heart and soul were white," which he takes to be high praise. Other examples include, "For an ex-slave, she was remarkably well read," and quote from James Rudd's son John at her funeral. Reflecting on how she had been sold to her father for an enormous sum, "She was worth every cent, and more, too."

Despite this clearly prejudiced commentary, the obituary is a treasure trove of details about her. A shorter obituary and death notice appeared in the Louisville *Courier Journal*. A second valuable set of newspaper articles concerning Narcissa and Frederick Thornton's 50th wedding anniversary appeared in 1886. These were published in the *Courier Journal* and in two Cincinnati newspapers, *The Enquirer* and *The Catholic Telegraph*. These stories noted how unusual it was for an enslaved couple to be married in a church, to never have been sold or separated by their enslavers, and to live to an old age.

³ The obituary was likely written by the first editor of the paper, William M. Higgins. Higgins was the son of an Irish immigrant who founded the *Kentucky Irish American* as a "fearless, liberal, and honest publication." It promoted Irish ethnic pride, Irish nationalism, political engagement, and Catholic identity. Though Higgins took a fierce line against the Klu Klux Klan for its anti-immigrant activity, the *KIA* was frequently "guilty of prejudice and intolerance" of Black Kentuckians, according to Stanley Ousley. See his article "The Kentucky Irish American," *The Fillson Club History Quarterly*, Vol 53, No. 2, April, 1979.

A third source of information comes from Catholic sacramental records. Almost uniquely among churches in the South, the Catholic Church offered sacraments to enslaved Blacks and recorded details about the ceremonies and participants. Frederick's family and kinship community continued to receive Catholic sacraments after emancipation, as well

Additional details about Frederick's life are revealed through census records, slave registers, James Rudd's will, city directories, archaeological reports from the Rudd mansion and Cathedral of the Assumption, land registries, and a financial ledger that James Rudd kept about his property, including people he enslaved. None of these documents were written by Narcissa Frederick herself. In fact, none were written by a Black person. All of our evidence of her life comes from the perspective of white enslavers, clergy, government, church, and legal clerks, and journalists. None of her own words survive. Neither do pictures of her.

Born in Chains

Frederick was born in Virginia in the early 19th century in a French-speaking community. Her mother language was French and her first enslaver was a Frenchman named Darein. Nothing is known about him beyond his name. Likewise, Frederick's parents and family are unknown. There was a settlement of French Huguenots in the eastern Shenandoah Valley of the Virginia colony from 1700 to 1750 where she may have been born. Smaller groups of French lived close to Jamestown. These groups of French were tolerated by the British colonists because they had fled persecution based on their religion in France. Like the nearby British, the French enslaved local Indigenous peoples and Blacks brought from West Africa.⁴

Frederick was a tall woman who by the end of her life was described as large. As an adult, she suffered a devastating head injury. She was gored by a wild bull resulting in a fracture and the loss of several pieces of her skull. Her head would be slightly misshapen for the rest of her life and she would be afflicted by constant pain. The injury did not appear to cause cognitive damage. She demonstrated considerable intelligence following the accident, though she wore her head wrapped in a bandage daily. As a child, Frederick learned to read and write in French and to sing French songs. She learned English as an adult and by the end of her life was remarkably well read.

Another Frenchman, a planter named Lee, acquired Frederick and brought her as an adult to Kentucky. She was likely separated from her family through this move. Lee, and Frederick along with him, probably took up residency among a French settlement in Portland or the Shippingport peninsula on the Ohio River⁵. There was a devastating flood

⁴ Frederick's parents could have been descended from the very first slaves brought to Virginia in 1619. Alternatively, she and her parents could have been brought to Virginia from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) following the uprising and independence of enslaved Blacks there in 1803.

⁵ Shippingport became an island in 1825 with the digging of the Portland canal.

on Shippingport in 1832, which probably was the cause of Lee owing a debt of \$10,000 to James Rudd.

After a devastating financial loss, Frederick was only Lee's only remaining 'asset.' Though this debt was a monumental sum (the equivalent of \$300,000 in 2022 dollars), Frederick was given to Rudd before 1833 to settle Lee's debt.

"Confidential Servant"

Frederick was brought into the Rudd family house on Jefferson Street between 2nd and 3rd streets, then the edge of the commercial district of the city of Louisville. She would remain in their household for almost five decades, serving the Rudds in both slavery and freedom until 1880. Called "Mammy Frederick" by the family, she was a so-called "black mammy," a nurse who cared for and raised two generations of Rudd children, over thirty in total. She may have taught them to read and write, how to pray, and given religious instruction.

Her relation to the Rudds was complicated. She had an important position of trust, called a "confidential servant," within their household. She enjoyed some advantages not given to all enslaved people. She worshiped at St. Louis Catholic Church (later a cathedral and then the site of the Cathedral of the Assumption), receiving the sacraments and sponsoring others in their reception of them. She could read and write. She was permitted to marry another enslaved person, named Thornton Frederick, who also resided in the Rudd house. Her family members were not separated from her. Incredibly, she and Thornton were married for 60 years. There is no record of her experiencing sexual violence or whippings, though her enslaver had legal sanction to commit either (and likely would not have recorded doing so).

She was beloved by the Rudds. In his 1863 will James Rudd, gave his wife and children "the special charge that Thornton and Narcissa are to be well cared for and kindly treated" and "and not to sell or part with any of [his enslaved persons] except for good cause." The *Courier Journal* claimed that she was "looked upon and loved as a member of the family herself."

An obituary in the *Kentucky Irish American*, sought to portray her as happy in bondage noting that "she had been a slave, but did not desert her former masters after the act of emancipation." She was in her 50s in when the 13th Amendment freed her in 1865. The historical record leaves none of Frederick's own words, so we can only speculate about her experience and decision-making following the Civil War. Perhaps Frederick's feelings might be reflected in these words that another enslaved man used about slavery and his enslaver:

I look upon slavery as a disgrace, and as breaking the laws of God: that no man can keep the laws of God and hold to slavery. I believe my own master was as good a man as there is in the whole South: I loved him in health, and I loved him in death,—

but I can read the Bible, and I do not see any thing there by which he could be justified in holding slaves; and I know not where he has gone to [in the afterlife]⁶.

Isaac Johnson, an enslaved Catholic man who lived in Kentucky, wrote the following:

The present generation knows but little of actual slavery. Attempts are sometimes made to color the Institution to make it appear as though the old days of American slavery were patriarchal days to be desired, to surround the Institution with a glamour as though it possessed great intrinsic merits of value to both races. But we believe that any system of human slavery is always degrading both to the master and the slave.⁷

The Rudds did buy a home for her and Thornton in their old age. Eventually, both of the Fredericks were buried in the Rudd family plot at St. Louis Cemetery. Narcissa's casket was carried by several teary-eyed Rudd children acting as pallbearers. At her funeral, James Rudd's son John remarked that, "she was worth every cent, and more, too of that \$10,000," the debt that she was given to settle. This well-meaning comment reveals the truth about her condition. Narcissa Frederick was property.

Slave #9

Captain James Rudd was one of the wealthiest men in the history of Louisville. He moved to the city—then a town really—in 1808 at nineteen years old and though poor, managed to become a very successful merchant. He bought entire blocks of Jefferson and Main Streets before the population boomed. As part of his portfolio of property, Rudd owned as many as forty-six slaves. In 1850, Kentucky had sixty enslavers who owned more than fifty slaves, so this would have put Rudd in the top one hundred slave owners in the state, or the top one-quarter of one percent⁸.

Rudd engaged primarily in renting their labor to other businesses, rather than in selling the enslaved. He had his enslaved working in his own business, on steamboats and the wharfs along the Ohio. Though his main business was not buying and selling the enslaved, he sent slave catchers after runaways who escaped to freedom in nearby Indiana just across the Ohio River. He also had farms that were worked by slave labor in Harrod's Creek and adjacent to the present Water Company property on River Road. By the time of Rudd's

⁶ David West from King and Queen County, Virginia. Quoted in Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*. Boston: John P. Jewett and Co, 1856. .Pg. 89

⁷ Johnson, Isaac. *Slavery Days in Old Kentucky. A True Story of a Father Who Sold His Wife and Four Children. By One of the Children*. Ogdensburg, N.Y.: Republican & Journal Print, 1901.

⁸ Lucas, Marion B. *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation 1760-1981*. P. 2. "[M]ost whites never owned chattel labor, and as late as 1850 about one-fourth of the 38,385 masters possessed just one slave. Eighty eight percent of Kentucky's" slave owners had fewer than twenty bondsmen in 1850, and about sixty slaveholders possessed as many as fifty, and only five masters owned more than one hundred. The average master had about five slaves."

death in 1867, his estate was valued at almost one million dollars (roughly \$18.5 million in 2022).

Rudd additionally spent 30 years in elected office, including the state legislature as a three-term congressman. He would play a prominent role in the constitutional convention⁹ that crafted Kentucky's third constitution in 1850, which created the strongest legal protection for slavery of any state in the United States. Rudd was a member of Henry Clay's Whig party.

The economy of Louisville in the 19th century was built upon slavery. Fully 20% of city and state revenue came from slavery in some form including buying and selling, insuring, renting, and taking loans against the enslaved.

Louisville's population was rapidly changing during this time, experiencing an influx of Irish and German Catholics. That led to a populist, nativist backlash in the form of the so-called Know-Nothing Party. At the constitutional convention, Rudd forcibly rejected fears that this new Catholics would be anti-slavery. Speaking on the floor he said,

Gentlemen have argued that the institution of slavery is to be endangered by the growth of Louisville, and the kind of population that is forming that growth [namely immigrant Catholics]. And this this population this population has been described as the offscourings of the jails of Europe, as the renegades from the northern and eastern states, and as not desirable citizens of the great state of Kentucky.

He assured the convention that these immigrant Catholics would be just as supportive of slavery as he himself and the existing white Catholic slave-owning residents of the state.

A ledger book at the Filson Historical Society catalogues much of Rudd's business dealings in the years of 1830 to 1860. In 1853, he made a list of his 46 enslaved persons. He handwrote the name of each, their age, a family relationship (if any), their value in dollars, and a second dollar amount, probably the amount he has insured them for. On this list, Narcissa is slave #9. He has valued at \$350 and insured for \$250.

James Rudd's slaves were rented out to a brass foundry and machine shop, to work as stevedores on the wharves and various other businesses. According to the analysis of Matthew Salafia in *Slavery's Borderland*, Rudd "hired out anywhere between five to ten slaves annually, bringing in one hundred dollars for female hires and as much as two hundred dollars for male hires" (210). He may have transferred some of them to the farm in the wintertime from the city—a standard practice. We can imagine that Narcissa Frederick received her head injury on one of Rudd's farms.

⁹ "Alexander Scott Bullitt was a chosen delegate from Jefferson County. His colleagues, David Meriwether of Jefferson County; James Guthrie, William Preston and James Rudd; from Louisville, forming a commanding delegation, which from its unanimity and strength of material exerted a large influence in the convention." *Memorial History of Louisville from its First Settlement to the Year 1896*. Volume 1 Josiah Studdard Johnson

Thornton Frederick, Narcissa's husband, was sometimes rented out for a year at a time to work on steamboats plying the Ohio and Mississippi River. Because of the Falls of the Ohio, which provided a barrier to river traffic prior to the construction of the Portland Canal, Louisville was a crucial market for the southern states. The United States banned the importation of enslaved people in 1808. When this happened, Louisville became the main market for an internal slave trade. States in the Upper South became exporters of human beings for the labor-hungry cotton fields of the Deep South.

During Frederick's life, downtown Louisville was bustling with slave markets, slave pens at the court house (now Louisville Metro Hall) for escaped enslaved persons, and enslaved people were marched in "coffles," single file lines of chained people, sometimes hundreds of miles from Virginia and Maryland. Steamboats were loaded with enslaved people being "sent downriver." The shocking sight of the enslaved on a steamboat in Louisville haunted Abraham Lincoln and led to his slow movement towards war and emancipation.

Paradoxically, freedom lay just across the same Ohio River—called the "River Jordan" in Black spirituals calling to mind the Hebrew people's exodus to the Promised Land. Twenty of Rudd's enslaved persons self-liberated in 1850¹⁰. He advertised in the *Louisville Daily Courier* for slave catchers to apprehend these people. One, James Armstrong, twice escaped and was twice captured. After the second time, Rudd sold him.

While showing concern for favorite enslaved persons like Narcissa in his will, James Rudd was an ardently pro-slavery politician. He ran for and won seats in the state legislature on a pro-slavery ticket. He served in the 1849 Kentucky constitutional convention that was codified a permanently enshrine a right to slave ownership (until the 13th Amendment nullified it). He insisted that immigrant Catholic Germans and Irish were not a threat to slave-ownership, encouraging those communities to support slavery. Additionally, he advocated for Kentucky to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy following Lincoln's election¹¹.

He never freed any of his enslaved people. His 1863 will, which expressed such concern for Narcissa and Frederick, was written in the months following the Emancipation Proclamation during a time when the Union army had occupied Louisville for over a year and the North's victory seemed assured. Even in that moment, he did not manumit his enslaved persons or accept the reality of impending emancipation.

Prior to the Civil War, life was difficult for the enslaved persons like Frederick. In 1857, four enslaved persons were convicted of murdering their enslavers. They were acquitted of the crime but held in a Louisville jail following the trial. An angry white mob who did not

¹⁰ 1850 Federal Census Slave Schedule. He owned 37 enslaved persons in two different districts of the city according to this record. In 1860, it was 35. The enslaved lived in at least four different houses.

¹¹ His son John Rudd was arrested in 1864, likely for refusing to serve in the U.S. army. His daughter married a prominent high-ranking Confederate officer named Amos Taylor after the war. *History of the Ohio Falls Cities and Their Counties: General history. History of Jefferson County, Ky. The history of Louisville* Pg. 329 <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=8EPWAAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PA328&hl=en>

accept the verdict gathered outside of the jail. One of the prisoners took his own life before the mob dragged the other three out of the jail. They were lynched on the property of the Louisville courthouse (today's Metro Hall) a few blocks from the Rudd house. This would be a harbinger of a longer campaign of lynchings of free Blacks in Kentucky following the war.

On a more basic level, Frederick's freedom of movement was sharply curtailed. She would have needed a pass in order to be away from the Rudd house for more than four hours, with a maximum distance of eight to ten miles. She was prohibited from meeting with more than two other Black persons in public. Church bells at First Presbyterian rang at 10PM to begin a slave curfew that lasted until 6AM¹². Any violations of these laws could be met with whippings. Patrols of rough men on the "Night Watch" enforced these rules and wantonly harassed, disrupted, and inflicted violence of enslaved Blacks¹³.

Enslaved Servant of the Bishop

Benedict Joseph Flaget (1763-1850) was the first bishop of the diocese of Bardstown. In 1841, he moved to Louisville, bringing the episcopal see to the city along with him. He insisted that the move was important for the local church, but as a very frail 78-year-old man, it was difficult for him. He had spent decades in bucolic Bardstown, building relationships, and infrastructure including churches, a cathedral, seminaries and colleges. The transition to a bustling city was not a comfortable one for him. A few years prior, he had returned to his native France. His friends urged him to remain there, but he had insisted on returning to finish out his days and to die in Kentucky.

Except for one return visit to Bardstown, he would spend the entirety of the last nine years of his life in Louisville, primarily sequestered in his rectory and the grounds of St. Louis Cathedral. That residence was not completed at the time of his initial move, so he moved into the quarters of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. The co-founder of that Kentucky religious order, Catherine Spalding, operated a school, hospital, and orphanage on the grounds of the church.

Flaget had been a missionary bishop during a time when Kentucky was a wild frontier. His first 'cathedral' was on the back of a horse. He spent his body and spirit in service to Catholic pioneers, often riding a circuit of 30 to 50 miles in a day to minister to them. The Diocese of Bardstown, when he was ordained a bishop in 1808, included all of Kentucky and Tennessee, but Flaget's pastoral responsibilities also encompassed much of the Midwest. In the course of forty years of ministry, he rode widely to visit far-flung settlements, providing the sacraments and a clerical presence. A Kentucky priest called him "the poorest bishop in the Christian world¹⁴."

¹² Crews, Clyde *An American Holy Land*. Pg. 114. [also mentioned in book reconstruction of another's slave life in Louisville]

¹³Pg. 29-30 Lucas, Marion Brunson. *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*

¹⁴ Stephen Badin quoted in Schauinger, *Badin*, 161.

By 1841, he suffered a host of physical ailments. He had lost most of his teeth, become hard of hearing, and endured terrible head pains that caused vertigo. His memory was fading, and he described his state as vegetative. A former student at St. Joseph's seminary describes the difference in his appearance from the prime of his life until the end. "I used to gaze with admiration upon the form and mien of that illustrious man as he with unvarying constancy, when at college, appeared at a fixed hour, on his solemn walk, engaged in devout exercises. Like a boy in wild fancy, I figured that grand form at the head of embattled hosts and wondered what array of marshaled armies could withstand his impetuous charge."

"The last time I saw him was, I think, in 1845. His noble form, so erect in the vigor of manhood, was then sensibly bending under the pressure of age. The saddest of all was the light of his eagle-eyes was extinguished, and he was lead gently along the streets of Louisville by a small boy.¹⁵"

The boy that he describes was likely enslaved. Mother Spalding had two enslaved people living on the grounds of the cathedral during this period, a 28-year-old Black female and an 8-year-old Black male.

During this period, James Rudd also 'loaned' Narcissa Frederick to Bishop Flaget to care for him. Flaget was an enslaver himself, possessing as many as 25 enslaved persons himself in 1830, but many of them remained in the Bardstown area working on farms, in colleges and seminaries, or on loan to religious orders. Flaget insisted that enslaved Black Catholics should have access to the sacraments, be catechized, buried in Catholic cemeteries, and treated well.

He also believed that there was no moral problem with owning human beings. In fact, he believed that slavery was good for Blacks, telling a secretary, "for them liberty is a calamity in its consequences." Early in his episcopacy, he had been willed several enslaved persons by a Kentucky farmer, Thomas Howard. Howard shared advice about enslaved persons that Flaget would continue to quote decades later: "The better they are treated, the less they work. It seems they are made different from other human beings...¹⁶"

Frederick served the elderly bishop as a maid, cook, and housekeeper. She was particularly valuable to him because she was the only French-speaking servant in the city, and a French cook, to besides. Flaget had long survived on a rough frontier diet of such staples as

¹⁵ B. H. McCown in a letter to the editor of the *Courier Journal* on May 1, 1881.

¹⁶ Pg. 61 Lemarié, Charles. *A Biography of Msgr. Benedict Joseph Flaget*, translated by Mary Wedding and Rachel Willett of *Le Patriarche de L'Ouest* [The Bishop of the Woods], 3 vols

cornbread and salt pork. He told a fellow bishop, “an American missionary had to be able to live on nothing and cook it himself.¹⁷”

When he left France, Flaget’s religious superior gave him a precious French cookbook, “as I greatly mistrust their [Americans’] manner of cooking.¹⁸” Given her literacy in French, Frederick may have used this very book decades later to prepare the bishop fine meals. A 1989 archaeological excavation of the cathedral uncovered evidence of French foodstuff and cooking including a bottle of French olive oil as well as several French wines. Additionally, there were oyster and scallop shells and evidence of legs of lamb and fine cuts of beef (Mansberger 349). We might picture Frederick preparing these meals for the bishop and other clergy that resided at the cathedral.

It is unclear if Frederick lived in the cathedral rectory or walked from the nearby Rudd residence. Equally unclear is how long she was in Flaget’s service. According to an obituary, she came to know him, the future bishop Martin John Spalding, and several other prominent clergymen very well. It is plausible to picture her serving him for the entirety of his nine years in Louisville. The archaeological excavations also revealed a clear socioeconomic dichotomy of some of the residents of the cathedral grounds. These persons ate much less desirable cuts of meat and fish, often in soups, using mismatched bowls.

Her nursing and housekeeping skills would have become more valuable as Flaget, in his 80s, ailed. During this period, he continually sighed a prayer to God, *que sa volonté soit faite* (Thy will be done). We can imagine Frederick ministering to him during this time of suffering, and able to speak to him in his native tongue. His command of English had never been perfect.

He would eventually become unable to preside at mass or even to attend. Martin John Spalding writes,

“Six months before his death, he was deprived of this happiness [attending mass]. Unable to leave his room without assistance, his chief concern was for the loss of this blessed privilege. He had himself conducted to a balcony, looking towards the sanctuary of the church ; and here, in pleasant weather, he spent whole hours together in prayer to Jesus, on that altar to which he was unable to make a nearer approach. When the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was given, he caused himself to be warned of the solemn moment by the sacristan, and he bowed down reverently to participate in the blessing.” (Spalding 355)

On this same balcony, Bishop Flaget made his final public appearance. A new church building, the Cathedral of the Assumption, was being constructed on the grounds of St Louis Cathedral. Flaget appeared at the blessing of the cornerstone to bless the

¹⁷ To Simon Bruté. Quoted without attribution by Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein, “Seeking the Face of the Lord.” August 19, 2005 <https://www.archindy.org/archbishop/column/2005/08-19/archbishop.htm>

¹⁸ *Sketches* by Martin Spalding, pg. 65.p. 65. Superior was Jacques-André Emery, S.S. Gave him a second gift, a box of needles saying, “These needles, my Lord, may be of great service to you in the midst of your savages;”

construction and the people assembled. We might picture Frederick at his side, caring for him and assisting him onto the balcony at these moments. She may have been there, too, in the room of his rectory when he died in 1850.

Marriage in chains

Two news stories from 1886 about Narcissa Frederick give conflicting accounts of her Catholic identity. The Louisville *Courier Journal* refers to her as “the first colored convert to Catholicism in this city,” A second from Cincinnati says that she and her husband Thornton “have always been members of the Catholic Church.” Perhaps she was in a French Huguenot settlement in Virginia and entered the Catholic Church after being acquired by James Rudd. It seems equally possible that writers at the end of the 19th century did not know how to conceptualize enslaved persons belonging to a church during the antebellum period.

For the first forty years of her life, despite her enslavement, Frederick was a faithful Catholic with some liberty to worship, receive the sacraments, and lead others—enslaved and free Black and perhaps even white Catholics—in worship (see Levi Smith - Badin story in Webb pg. 46 Gollar *KY Slaves*). She continued, after emancipation, to play a prominent role in the Catholic community. On the occasion of her 50th wedding anniversary, the *Courier Journal* wrote, “Both she and her husband are ardent supporters of this church.”

Both news stories noted how remarkable it was for an enslaved couple to have been married for so long, to not have been separated by their enslaver, killed during the Civil War, or died an early death from the vicissitudes of slavery. The *Enquirer* noted, “This is the first instance on record here of a golden wedding being celebrated between former slaves.”

Thornton Frederick (1819-1897) was another enslaved member of the Rudd household. His family had been the property of James Rudd’s parents in Springfield, Kentucky. The Rudd family were English Catholics who had migrated from Maryland in the early 19th century, settling in a heavily Catholic part of central Kentucky nicknamed the “Kentucky Holy Land.”

Susannah Brooke Rudd willed nine enslaved persons to her son James in 1822. Among them were Thornton’s mother Polly and his older brothers John and Worden¹⁹. Upon the death of Rudd’s mother, Thornton and the other enslaved persons moved sixty miles north to the town of Louisville.

Thornton was in James Rudd’s service for eleven years before Rudd acquired Narcissa in 1833. Narcissa moved into the Rudd house, and within three years, the two were married. Narcissa and Thornton received the sacrament of marriage on February 11, 1836 in St.

¹⁹ “I give and bequeath to my son James Rudd the following negroes (viz) the negro man called Osborne, Arthur, Polly and her three children John, Worden, Thornton and a negro woman called Rose and her two children Harrison and Harry...”

Louis Catholic Church, which was the only parish in the town of Louisville at that time. The white priest who married them was likely the pastor, Robert Abell²⁰.

Slave marriages were not legally recognized by the state of Kentucky. To marry, the enslaved needed the permission of their enslavers. In Kentucky, verbal consent seemed to be sufficient. In Washington D.C., written statements of consent are entered into the sacramental records next to other details.

Being married did not provide legal protection against separation from one's spouse or children. It could provide informal leverage in attempting to keep an enslaver from breaking a family apart. For example, James Rudd's son, who was also named James, intervened to keep together an enslaved couple named Isham and Mary Howard who had been sacramentally married. Mary had been hired out to the Rudds. Her husband was on the estate of another enslaver. Mary's owner decided to sell her to Memphis, but James was "moved by the expressions of grief on the part of the husband and wife" according to his wife Colgate and moved to buy Mary "to keep her and her husband together."²¹ Economic considerations were far stronger than sacramental bonds in the eyes of most slave owners.

In the case of enslaved persons who were owned by different enslavers, sacramental marriage could enable the couple to spend weekends together. Typically, the husband would stay in the quarters of the wife on her enslaver's property. In 1860, one of James Rudd's bondsmen, Henry Powell, ran away with his wife, Mary Ann Ball, who was owned by a different enslaver. The desire to live together was likely a motivator in fleeing to the free state of Indiana. Rudd and Jesse K Ball (Mary Ann's owner) advertised their escape with a reward, and slave catchers apprehended them both²².

At the same time, enslavers had an incentive for their enslaved to get married: children. Children became the property of the mother's enslaver, and were a valuable financial asset. Some enslavers *told* enslaved persons that they were married and were to have children. Others encouraged them to hold "broom jumping" ceremonies to signify a wedding bond. Another frequent occurrence was sexual violence by enslavers. Mixed race children could and did become the property of their enslaver fathers. James Rudd owned multiple mulatto slaves.

Remarkably, at least four married enslaved couples and their children, including Narcissa and Thornton, lived in the Rudd household. This is a sign of Rudd's wealth—most enslavers in Louisville owned four or fewer enslaved persons, with married couples typically living separately. For example, Thornton's brother Worten was married to an enslaved woman who lived in another house. —and perhaps also a moral commitment or obligation to keeping favorite slave families intact.

²⁰ The sacramental record book for St. Louis church was destroyed by fire. This date is given in the *Cincinnati Enquirer's* story. The pastor's name is not given.

²¹ Deposition of James C. Rudd, August 27, 1885, and Deposition of Colegate M. Rudd, August 27, 1885.

²² "Police Court – Assisting Slaves to Escape," *Louisville Daily Courier*, Feb 3, 1860. pg. 1

James Rudd knew Bishop Flaget very well. Flaget insisted that Catholic enslavers give their enslaved persons access to the sacraments, including marriage. He threatened one Catholic community in Missouri who was not following this instruction with excommunication.

There are contradictory accounts of whether Narcissa and Thornton had children. The *Courier Journal* story about their golden anniversary in 1886 stated, “they have no children.” Just six years previously, the 1880 census shows that the couple had two children Belle and Julia born in 1867 and 1872. These could have been grandchildren, as the Fredericks were past childbearing age at that point. Perhaps they were foster children or adoptees. The 1870 census gives a different last name for Belle.²³

A “slave child” named Joseph Frederick was baptized at St. Louis church in 1842, and a Mary Frederick is listed in Rudd’s list of slaves from 1853. Following emancipation, a Charles Frederick acted alongside Narcissa as a Confirmation sponsor. Were these three children of Narcissa and Thornton or did they have some other kinship relationship by biology or association? The record is not clear. The enslaved Catholic community in Louisville created a kinship network that tried to protect members from the horrible realities of slavery: family separation, violence, and early death.

The Enslaved Black Catholic kinship community

Narcissa and Thornton were pillars of the kinship community (or surrogate family) of Black Catholics in Louisville. The sacraments, sacramental sponsorship, and naming conventions played an important part in this. Narcissa was godmother for 12 baptisms at St. Louis church between the years of 1843 and 1860, typically playing this role every other year during this period. Half of these baptisms were enslaved children in the Rudd household. Three children in the household were named after Narcissa or Thornton. Narcissa sponsored two marriages of enslaved couples in 1856 and 1860 and one of an emancipated couple 1869, which was one of the last in the Cathedral of the Assumption before the Black Catholic community founded their own parish.

Sacramental sponsorship strengthened relationships, gave ecclesial and spiritual recognition to family ties and ‘fictive kinship.’ Godmothers, like Narcissa, were expected to step in as a mother should a child’s birth mother be sold, hired out, killed, or separated in some other way. As Mary Beth Corrigan wrote, “The recognition of familial relationships and membership in a spiritual community emphasized the personal choices and identities that enslaved people made. While urban slavery afforded opportunities to make meaningful connections, however, those bonds were disrupted or even destroyed in the interest of slaveholders.²⁴” It is clear that Narcissa was frequently trusted with the role of godmother and sponsor, indicating that she was seen as a stable and spiritual woman who could ably fulfill this responsibility.

²³ She is named “Bette Gorrent.” The ages match up, suggesting that this is Belle.

²⁴ Corrigan, Mary Beth, “Making the Most of an Opportunity: Slaves and the Catholic Church in Early Washington.” *Washington History* 12 (2001): 90-101

Catholic sacraments could also strengthen the bonds between the enslaved and free Black communities. One of the maids of honor for Narcissa and Thornton was a free Black woman named Catherine Smith. She would sponsor the baptisms of several enslaved children in and out of the Rudd household. These sponsorships formed a mutually reinforcing web of relationships.

A founder of St. Augustine

Following the end of the Civil War and emancipation, Narcissa Frederick helped found a predominately Black parish, St. Augustine in Louisville, in 1868. It was the first in the city and one of only four predominately Black parishes in the country at the time. Enslaved Black Catholics first worshipped in the balcony of St Louis church, which was replaced by the Cathedral of the Assumption. They were permitted to receive communion and the other sacraments (except for ordination), with some restrictions. Black Catholics received the Eucharist last, with free Blacks received before the enslaved. Confessionals were segregated, as were cemeteries.

In 1868, Frederick and other free Black Catholics formed their new parish in the basement of the cathedral. It was a cramped coal storage space at the time, but they were able to celebrate the mass without the indignities of segregation. Their pastor was John Lancaster Spalding, called Fr. Lank, who was the nephew of the bishop and a future bishop himself.

Spalding was instrumental in raising funds to build a church building for St. Augustine. Ministering to the Black Catholic community was very important to him. He later called the years as St. Augustine's pastor the best of his life. A new church was built in 1870 at 14th and Broadway. The Black Catholic community celebrated with a triumphant procession from the cathedral to their new worship space.

Three years after its creation, St. Augustine founded a school for Black children (then the only school for Black students in Louisville). Belle and Julia Frederick, the family members of Narcissa and Thornton, very likely benefited from this school and from Narcissa's own literacy and education. On an 1880 census, a clerk initially marked eight-year old Julia as being unable to read and write. He then crossed those check marks out. We can imagine the surprise he may have felt to discover a literate Black child fifteen years after emancipation in a city with few schools for Blacks.

Despite having their own church building and parish, Black Catholics experienced other forms of discrimination within the church. They were not welcome in religious orders, seminaries, or white Catholic institutions like schools, hospitals, and the Knights of Columbus until the civil rights era a century after the Civil War. Black priests would not be ordained in the United States until 1891. Black Catholics responded by creating their own support networks, religious orders and fraternal organization. The community developed vibrant lay leadership, and participatory liturgy.

Mary Beth Corrigan wrote, "Catholicism had become the family religion for many slaves, an identification that continued in freedom. Black Catholics did not establish a separate Catholic church before the Civil War despite the discrimination they encountered.²⁵" The family identification and history within Catholicism was important for many Black Catholics than the second class status they were according by the institutional white church.

Many formerly Black Catholics did leave the church after emancipation. Joining a Protestant church with Black preachers was compelling. Several Black churches in Louisville were founded before the Civil War. The work of C. Walker Gollar shows that there was a migration of Blacks out of the Catholic church immediately after the war, but a faithful remnant always stayed²⁶.

A historian of Black Louisville, George C. Wright wrote that, "At no time from [St. Augustine's] inception in the 1860s to 1920 did more than 120 people claim affiliation with the church.²⁷" Other sources gives vastly different numbers. In 1900, for example, the *Courier Journal* reported that there were 7,000 Black Catholics in the city and Jefferson County, "about 1,400 attend church regularly in the various churches of the city, a majority attending the church of St. Augustine...²⁸"

Last Days

Thornton and Narcissa lived with the Rudd family following emancipation from 1865 until 1880. James Rudd died in in 1867. The two continued to work for the family, Narcissa as a nanny, Thornton as a carriage driver. In 1880, the Rudds sold the mansion. Thornton and Narcissa moved to a "comfortable little house" on East Green Street (now Liberty) near Floyd Street in Louisville. This house was purchased by John Rudd, James' son. The Fredericks likely had no savings of their own after laboring without compensation for decades for the family. At the time of the their 50th wedding anniversary, the were described. as "rather needy at present, both being too old for manual labor. Their friends are not forgetful, however, in their time of need and helplessness."

Thornton died in 1897. Narcissa would outlive him by eleven years. When she became enfeebled by age, she asked to live at a house run by the Little Sisters of the Poor at 10th and Magazine Streets. She wanted to be in a place where the mass was celebrated daily. Like Bishop Flaget, she wished to be close to the Eucharist at the end of her life. She died there in 1908 and her funeral was in the chapel.

²⁵ Corrigan, Mary Beth, "Making the Most of an Opportunity: Slaves and the Catholic Church in Early Washington." *Washington History* 12 (2001): 90-101

²⁶ C. Walker Gollar, "Kentucky Slaves and Slavemasters:" "Each year from 1830 to 1865 at least twenty-five percent of the people laid to rest were slaves. But from 1866 to 1875 barely five percent of the burials were of blacks.... Many other church records prove this mass exodus from Catholicism."

²⁷ *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930*

²⁸ Fitzpatrick, Edward. "Louisville's Negro Catholic Church." *Louisville Courier Journal*. 7 Oct 1900. Section 3 pg. 2.

An obituary claims she was 99 years old, though this may have inflated her age by a decade. She was laid to rest next to her husband in the Rudd family plot, the white Catholic family that she had served for most of her life. This obituary, written in a Louisville publication called the *Kentucky Irish American*, describes her being given a “royal treatment” at her funeral and burial, carried by white pallbearers who had once been the children that she had raised and cared for. It is unknown if it was her choice to be interred “at the feet of her ‘old Master and Missus’” as the obit relates. How did she feel about her service to white Catholics over the course of her life, both as an enslaved and free woman? What was her experience being enslaved to the “patriarch of the West?” How did she feel about belonging to a Church that condoned enslaving her? We do not have any record from her.

I visited the Rudd family plot over Martin Luther King weekend this year. There is a large obelisk with “Rudd” carved on the side. Several large stones mark the resting place of individual family members. I located the place where Narcissa and Frederick should be buried near a tree. There is no marker or stone to show that their remains lie in here. I took a picture of a weathered woman on one Rudd tombstone, thinking of Mary Narcissa Frederick as I looked at the obscured features. Like so many of the enslaved and formerly enslaved, there are only vanishing traces of her life. The Kentucky International Convention Center in downtown Louisville occupies the space where the Rudd mansion once stood. The choir loft and undercroft of the Cathedral of the Assumption bear no mention or sign of the enslaved and free Black Catholic communities that worshipped there. This leader of the Louisville Catholic Church who lived such a remarkable life, has no stone, marker or remembrance to commemorate her.

Bibliography

Campbell, SL Joan. *Loretto: An Early American Congregation in the Antebellum South*. St. Louis: Bluebird, 2015.

Clark, Emily. *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*. University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Clark, Emily. *Voices from an Early American Convent: Marie Madeleine Hachard and the New Orleans Ursulines, 1727-1760*. Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

Creason, Carl C. “‘The Whole World Seems to be Getting Out of Joint:’ The Roman Catholic Response to the Election of 1860, the Secession Movement, and the Start of the Civil War in the Border South.” University of Louisville. Unpublished graduate paper. 2016.

Creason, Carl C., "Puritan hypocrisy" and "Conservative Catholicity:" How Roman Catholic Clergy in the Border States Interpreted the U.S. Civil War." (2016). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 2430. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2430>

Corrigan, Mary Beth, "The Ties That Bind: The Pursuit of Community and Freedom Among Slaves and Free Blacks in the District of Columbia, 1800-1860." In *Southern City, National Ambition*, ed. Howard Gillette. Washington DC, 1995, ppg. 75-78.

Corrigan, Mary Beth, "Making the Most of an Opportunity: Slaves and the Catholic Church in Early Washington." *Washington History* 12 (200): 90-101.

Crews, Clyde F. *American and Catholic: A Popular History of Catholicism in the United States*. Franciscan 2004.

Crews, Clyde F. *American Holy Land: A History of the Archdiocese of Louisville*. Revised Edition. Glazier, 1987.

Clyde F. Crews, "Benedict Joseph Flaget," *Patterns of Episcopal Leadership*, ed. Gerald P. Fogarty (New York, 1989)

Crews, Clyde F. *Hallowed Ground Louisville's Historic Cathedral of The Assumption*. Louisville: Archdiocese of Louisville, 2002.

Crews, Clyde F. *Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville, Minn., 1997), s.v. "Flaget, Benedict Joseph (1763-1850)."

Davis, Cyprian. *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. Herder & Herder, 1995.

Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Catherine Spalding, SCN: A Life in Letters*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.

Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Pioneer Spirit: Catherine Spalding, Sister of Charity of Nazareth*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

Farrelly, Maura Jane. "Slavery and American Catholicism." *Common Place*. Issue 15.3 (Spring, 2015). <http://commonplace.online/article/slavery-and-american-catholicism/>

Fox, Columba. *The Life of Right Reverend John Baptist Mary David (1761-1841) – Bishop of Bardstown and Founder of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth*. New York: US Catholic Historical Society, 1925.

Gollar, C. Walker. *American and Catholic: Stories of the People Who Built the Church*. Cincinnati: Franciscan, 2015

Gollar, C. Walker. "Catholic Slaves and Slaveholders in Kentucky." *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), pp. 42-62

Gollar, C. Walker. "Jesuit Education and Slavery in Kentucky, 1832-1868." *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Summer 2010, Vol. 108, No. 3, pp. 213-249.

Gollar, C. Walker. "The Role of Father Badin's Slaves in Frontier Kentucky." *American Catholic Studies*, Spring 2004, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 1-24

Greene, Nathaniel E. *The Silent Believers: the Religious Experience of Black Catholics in the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky*. Louisville, West End Catholic, 1971.

Howlett, Rev. William J. *Historical Tribute to St. Thomas' Seminary at St. Thomas' Seminary at Poplar Neck Near Bardstown, KY*. St. Louis: Herder, 1908.

Howlett, Rev. William J. "Bishop Flaget's Diary." *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, March 1918, Vol. 29, No. 1 pp. 37-59

Johnson, Isaac. *Slavery Days in Old Kentucky. A True Story of a Father Who Sold His Wife and Four Children. By One of the Children*. Ogdensburg, N.Y.: Republican & Journal Print, 1901.

Lemarié, Charles. *A Biography of Msgr. Benedict Joseph Flaget*, translated by Mary Wedding and Rachel Willett of *Le Patriarche de L'Ouest* [The Bishop of the Woods], 3 vols

Lucas, Marion B. *A History of Black in Kentucky from Slavery to Segmentation, 1760-1891*. 2nd ed. Kentucky Historical Society, 2003

McGreal, Mary Nona OP, ed. *Dominicans at Home in a Young Nation: 1786–1865, Volume 1 of the Order of Preachers in the United States: A Family History*. Strasbourg, 2001.
<https://www.dom.edu/mission-and-ministry/mcgreal/publications/dominicans-young-nation>

Mendoza, Elsa Barraza. "Catholic Slaveowners and the Development of Georgetown University's Slave Hiring System, 1792–1862." Washington: Brill, 2021.

Noonan, John T. *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching*. South Bend: Notre Dame, 2004.

Paschala Noonan, *Signadou—History of the Kentucky Dominican Sisters* (New York, 1997), 81-87.

Pasquier, Michael. *Les Confrères Et Les Pères: French Missionaries and Transnational Catholicism in the United States, 1789-1865*. Dissertation for Florida State University, 2007.

Pasquier, Michael. "Though Their Skin Remains Brown, I Hope Their Souls Will Soon Be White": Slavery, French Missionaries, and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the American South, 1789–1865." *Church History*, 77(2), 337-370. 2008.
doi:10.1017/S0009640708000577

Pasquier, Michael. *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789-1870*. Oxford, 2010.

Schauinger, J. Herman. *Stephen Badin: Priest in the Wilderness*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1956. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005922251>

Schauinger, J. Herman. *Cathedrals in the Wilderness*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1952.

Schmidt, Kelly L. *A National Legacy of Enslavement: An Overview of the Work of the Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project*.

Schmidt, Kelly L, "Enslavement at St. Joseph College, Bardstown, Kentucky," *Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project*, 2020.

Schmidt, Kelly L, "The Pervasive Institution: Slavery and its Legacies in U.S. Catholicism." *American Catholic Studies*. April 05, 2022

Simpson, Gilly. *Heritage of Faith: History of Saint Thomas Parish 1812-2012*. Louisville: Chicago Spectrum, 2012.

Spalding, Martin John. *Sketches of the Life, Times, and Character of Benedict Joseph Flaget* (Louisville, 1852)

Spalding, Martin John. *Sketches of the Early Catholic Missions of Kentucky: From Their Commencement in 1787, to the Jubilee of 1826-7*. Louisville: B.J. Webb & Brother, 1844.

Spalding, Thomas W. "The Maryland Catholic Diaspora." *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Summer, 1989, Vol. 8, No. 3, Catholic Rural Life. (Summer, 1989), pp. 162-172

Spalding, Thomas W. "Martin John Spalding's 'Dissertation on the American Civil War.'" *The Catholic Historical Review*, Apr., 1966, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Apr., 1966), pp. 66-85

Webb, Benedict Joseph. *The Centenary of Catholicity in Kentucky*. Louisville: C. A. Rogers, 1884. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008437792>

Mary Narcissa Frederick (Rudd)

"Married Fifty Years: An Aged Colored Couple Celebrated their Golden Wedding in a Catholic Church."

Louisville Courier-Journal Louisville, Kentucky. 12 Feb 1886, Fri • Page 8

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/977734/the-courier-journal/>

"A Negro Wedding" *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. Cincinnati, Ohio. 12 Feb 1886, Page 1

https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=977691&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlXZpZXctaWQiOjM0NjI1MzUxLCJpYXQiOjE2NDI3MzUzMDEsImV4cCI6MTY0MjgyMTcwMX0.ZtNB6Yq1N2B7LXcqFxmWwUp3xlWZI-PJ1SQIelp_qQ

Obituary of Mary Narcissa Frederick. "White Heart was Almost a Centenarian" *Kentucky Irish American*. Louisville, Kentucky. 14 Mar 1908.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86069180/1908-03-14/ed-1/seq-8/>

"Men She Helped Rear Will Be Pallbearers: Mammy Narcissa Frederick." *Louisville Courier-Journal*. 8 Mar, 1908; Louisville, Kentucky pg. 4

"Jottings." *The Catholic Telegraph*, Cincinnati, Ohio. Volume 65, Number 7, 18 February 1886

<https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=TCT18860218-01.2.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->