

Servant of God Mary Lange: Founded first U.S. order for black sisters

February's celebration of Black History Month in the United States traces its roots back to the 1920s, although it gained more formal recognition in the '70s. All during February, we'll be sharing stories of holy and often unknown black Catholics.

Meet Servant of God Mary Lange, who founded the first U.S. order for black sisters.

Not much is known about the first half of Mother Mary Lange's life.

Likely of Haitian background, Elizabeth Lange came to the United States from Cuba shortly after the War of 1812, making her way to Baltimore, where she settled in a colony of Haitian refugees. There, she ran a school for refugee children in her home. Sulpician Father James Joubert's parish, in the same section of Baltimore, served the same Haitian community. In catechizing the children, he noticed that many of them were unable to read or write – particularly girls. Recognizing this, he saw a need for a girls' school and asked Lange and collaborators to run it. Moreover, he encouraged her to establish the Oblate Sisters of Providence – the first successful establishment of black sisters in the United States. She had to tackle a variety of hurdles to achieve this work, as Baltimore's Archbishop William E. Lori recognized: "She had many, many obstacles – among them racial prejudice and hatred – and her love overcame that in her life."

The Oblate Sisters of Providence broadened their mission from

its origins in schools under the leadership of Mother Mary Lange, eventually serving in a variety of educational and social capacities, including helping young women develop careers and operating homes for widows and orphans. Lange died in Baltimore on Feb. 3, 1882. The formal investigation into her holy life was opened in 1991 by then-Archbishop (later Cardinal) William H. Keeler of Baltimore.

- [Visit the Mother Mary Lange Guild web site.](#)
- [Read more about black Catholics who helped shape the U.S. Church.](#)