
Lange, Mary Elizabeth

(?-1883),

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educator and founder of both the oldest Catholic school for African Americans and the first order of African American nuns in the United States, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. The place and date of Lange's birth are unknown. Oral tradition says that she was born on the western part of the island of St. Domingue (now Haiti). Born Elizabeth Lange, she was the offspring of mixed parentage and was a free mulatto. Her mother was Annette Lange; her father's name is unknown. The revolution on the isle of St. Domingue coupled with the Napoleonic revolution forced the emigration of many natives; both black and white refugees fled to other parts of the Western Hemisphere. Lange arrived in the United States educated, refined, and fluent in French. When she arrived on the shores of Maryland, she encountered major problems. She was a free person of color in a slaveholding state, and she spoke French in a country whose native tongue was English. She was a black Catholic and a single woman in a foreign, male-dominated society. In spite of such difficulties, by 1828 Lange had established a school for children of color in Baltimore, St. Frances Academy, still in existence.

The French revolution also caused an influx of European Catholics into the United States. Among the immigrants was a group of priests known as the Sulpician Fathers. In Baltimore the fathers started a seminary for priests, a college for the laity, and a catechism class for black children. The priest in charge, James Marie Hector Nicholas Joubert de La Muraille, himself a refugee from St. Domingue, needed someone to help him with the catechism classes. The problem was not doctrine but reading. In volunteering to teach the children to read, Lange also told Father Joubert of her desire to serve God as a nun. Because no such option was open to black women in 1828, the two decided to start a religious sisterhood for women of African descent. In a rented house at 5 St. Mary's Court, Lange began her new Catholic school. Her pupils consisted of eleven day scholars, nine boarders, and three nonpaying poor students who were called "children of the house." From the outset the curriculum was comparable to ones at private schools for white children. Music and the arts played a major role in the program of studies. Several students who graduated from the school eventually started private schools of their own. These endeavors took place where the average black person was still in slavery. In 1829 Lange and her three companions pronounced vows as Catholic nuns. Lange's name then became Soeur Marie, or Sister Mary. As superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Lange also became known as Mother Mary Lange.

Soon Lange began taking in homeless children, then widows. Expansion became necessary. Changes in the personnel of the church brought changes into the school and convent of the Oblate Sisters. The reigning archbishop, Samuel Eccleston, suggested that the black women give up the religious life and become good servants in the homes of Baltimore's elite. Lange refused to follow the archbishop's wishes. Poverty and hardship surrounded the infant community. The sisters took in washing, ironing, and sewing to support themselves and their orphans. Then a Bavarian priest, Thaddeus Anwander,

asked to help Lange. At first the archbishop asked the priest, "What is the use?" Finally, after much insistence, the bishop gave Father Anwander permission to assist the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Students enrolled at St. Frances, more young black women entered the religious life, and in 1852 a school for African American males was built. News of the sisters' work soon spread to other cities. The Oblate Sisters opened schools in other sections of Baltimore, including Blessed Peter Claver in Fells Point, St. Joseph's in south Baltimore, and St. Michael's on Lombard Street as well as Blessed Peter Claver School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, St. Joseph and St. Frances in New Orleans, Guardian Angel in Kansas, St. Elizabeth's in St. Louis, St. Ann's Academy and St. Augustine's in Washington, D.C., and a mission in Cuba, all in the nineteenth century.

Lange died in Baltimore, the city where she had defied the rules, where she succeeded in establishing an educational system for African American youths, and where she brought into existence the first permanent African American Catholic sisterhood. Mother Mary Lange, an immigrant, enriched American culture by enhancing the educational, spiritual, and social structures of nineteenth-century black America.

Further Reading

Joubert's original diary, started by the priest and continued by the sisters after his death and covering 1828 to 1874, is in the Oblate Sisters of Providence Archives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Sherwood, Grace. *The Oblates Hundred and One Years* (1931)

See also

Bowman, Thea [_<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-38381>](https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-38381)