

THE LIFE OF MATHILDA BEASLEY

Prepared for Dr. Warlick

HIS 300/500

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Mathilda Beasley made many contributions, monetary and physical, to ease the burden of poor blacks in Savannah, especially black children. History attributes her with many titles. She was a spiritual and educational pioneer of her race. After these weeks of research her life remains largely a mystery to me. I know through reading and talking to others that the same has been true for my predecessors. Following is an account of her life as I know it thus far. In this paper her first name is spelled as she signed it.

Mathilda Taylor¹ was born in New Orleans in 1834². Orphaned at a young age, she may have gained her compassion for the poor through personal experiences. She came to Savannah as a young woman and, except for her travels, remained here the rest of her life. Concerned with the future of black children, she taught them secretly in her home before the Civil War³. Her maiden name is found along with two restaurant ads dated March and May, 1865. The restaurant, located on Bryan Street, also took in gentlemen boarders⁴. Abraham Beasley, Mathilda's future husband, owned a restaurant in Savannah.⁵ She may have been employed by him in 1865.

Mathilda Taylor married Abraham Beasley, a prominent widower, on February 9, 1869.⁶ Mr. Beasley was originally from Richmond, Virginia. He had a son, also named Abraham, who was born in Macon, Georgia.⁷ Abraham Beasley was a financially secure, free black man at a time when the majority of his race in the South were held by the bonds of slavery and it's aftermath. He earned money in a number of ways, including grocer, saloon owner,⁸ restaurant

owner, and seller of slaves.⁹ He and Mathilda lived at 48 Harris Street. His produce market, known as The Green Grocer, was at the same location.¹⁰ Abraham owned land in Savannah as well as Skidaway Island and the Isle of Hope.¹¹ The family was Catholic. Abraham died September 3, 1877, and is buried at the Catholic Cemetary on Wheaton Street.¹² He left all of his holdings to Mathilda.¹³ In the years 1879 and 1880, Mathilda was taking in sewing at home.¹⁴ She turned over the money and land she inherited to the Catholic Church, asking that part of it be used for a black orphanage.¹⁵ Whether or not she did this to atone for part of the money being made through slave trading has been inferred, but not proven.¹⁶

Mathilda wanted herself to become a nun, and she journeyed to York, England, for her novitiate. The date of her departure from Savannah for England is not certain. It is known that she was there in the Spring and Summer of 1885. In a letter dated August 21, 1891 from Father Oswald Moosmuller, she is given a financial account. He states, "May 15, 1885 I sent you in 2 Post Money orders \$50 to York, England

and the same amount again July 22, 1885." The letter also mentions her being at Skidaway and of Father Oswald paying a carpenter in May and June of 1886 for an addition to the house of the younger Abraham Beasley.¹⁷ Whether he was handling her financial affairs in her absence is unclear.

Mathilda Beasley's journey to York, England and her stay at Skidaway Island raise some unanswered questions. Around November, 1884, a group of Franciscan nuns arrived in Savannah to work with negroes on Skidaway Island. This group, known as the "Poor Clares," had a member who had previously been one of a community of Poor Clares in York, England.¹⁸ The Savannah Morning News on January 28, 1885 gives an account of a group of Franciscan nuns coming to Savannah at the invitation of Bishop Gross. Their purpose was to establish a convent and school and to teach ¹⁹ Negro women. This group may have been the Poor Clares. Whether Mathilda Beasley contacted any of the Poor Clares while in York or worked with them on Skidaway has not been proven. However, the timing and the locations suggest a possible connection. This suggestion has also been made by others who have studied

the life of Mathilda Beasley. The Poor Clares stayed in the Savannah area for only a short time.

Bishop Becker, arriving in Savannah in 1886, replaced Bishop Gross who was transferred to Oregon.²⁰ Describing the situation of homeless black children, Bishop Becker wrote, "We have the nucleus of an Orphan Asylum for the colored orphans, and have been struggling along as best we might, having some twenty children under the charge of a mother, one of the colored women, who has spared no pains to teach these little folks."²¹ The colored woman he wrote of was Mathilda Beasley.

This first location of the Colored Orphan Asylum was in the vicinity of the intersection of 31st and 32nd Streets with Habersham Street, the site of the first building of the Sacred Heart Church.²² The first orphans were received in the Spring of 1887.²³ Father Oswald, along with Mathilda Beasley, established this first home.²⁴ In 1889 Mathilda Beasley founded the first group of black nuns in Georgia, which were of the 3rd Order of St. Francis.²⁵ She was then known as "Mother Mathilda." Under

her direction, this small community ran the orphanage for several years.²⁶

In 1892, the name of the orphanage was changed to St. Francis Home.²⁷ On August 24, 1893, Mother Mathilda wrote to the Cardinal in Baltimore requesting help for her orphanage. This indicates that she has just returned home, and she implies that she may have been visiting in Baltimore. She asks the Cardinal to send a few subjects to help staff the orphanage and school. She explains that with help "we could work and help ourselves. But now, during the school term we principally depend on our good Bishop and Dr. Read." Her letter implies that she is short staffed and low on funds. In her closing she describes her humility, signing "I am in the S. H. the lowest of God's creatures, Mother Mathilda Beasley O.S.F."²⁸

There were problems other than financial ones in the mid-1890's. In the early months of 1895, several attempts were made to burn the orphanage down. These fires were started by mischievous teenage girls living at the home. At the time of the

fires, St. Francis Home was still operating at it's original location and was under the supervision of the Sacred Heart Church.²⁹

The orphanage was moved in the late 1890's to East Broad Street, the site of the newly erected St. Benedict's Parish.³⁰ A long awaited goal was finally realized: a church and orphanage exclusively for black Catholics was completed at the same location. Around the same time of the move, Mother Mathilda again asked for help. She was in her 60's and concerned about the future of the orphanage. In 1898 three Franciscan Sisters came to Savannah to help. They began work on January 6, 1899. Not long after their arrival, the black community of nuns dispersed. One Sister died and another left Savannah to join an all black community in the North. Mother Mathilda took the habit of this new group of Franciscans, and worked alongside them in the orphanage.³¹

In 1901, she was given a cottage near the Sacred Heart Church. Located at 1511 Price Street, the property may have been part of her late husband's estate.³² Though she was aging, Mother Mathilda did

not retire, she continued to work at the orphanage and again began to take in sewing, giving the money she earned to poor blacks. She was cared for in her last years by the people of the diocese.³³

In the early morning hours of December 20, 1903, Mother Beasley was found dead in her small cottage. Kneeling in the cottage's private chapel, she had apparently been engaged in devotions when she died. Near her were found her burial clothes, the instructions for her funeral, and her will. Coroner Keller, after examining her, stated the cause of death as acute indigestion. The funeral was held on December 21, at the Sacred Heart Church. She had left instructions for a simple ceremony and had chosen her own pallbearers.

The Savannah Morning News dedicated an entire column to news of her death. She was hailed as "a notable figure and foundress of St. Francis Home for Colored Orphans. Mother Beasley was well known in Savannah and her almost unequalled charities had made her the idol of the poor, especially among the negroes." The paper stated she was of French-Indian

descent, born of a French Creole mother and Indian father. Mention is also made of the land she gave to the church, saying her holdings included properties on the Isle of Hope, Skidaway Island and in Savannah City limits. Reactions of the community brought together black and white, Catholic and Protestant, to grieve her passing. "By the Sacred Heart Clergy, Mother Beasley was held in the highest esteem and only words of warmest praise and eulogy were heard concerning her. Protestants speak in the highest terms of her life and character, and among the negroes the feeling prevails that they have lost one of their best and truest friends and benefactors."³⁴ Mother Mathilda Beasley was buried at Catholic Cemetary on Wheaton Street.

Following her death the orphanage continued under the direction of the Franciscan Sisters. A day school was opened in 1907, operating in the basement for awhile and later replaced by a brick school. St. Benedict's school operated in Savannah until 1969. As for the orphanage, in the late 1930's or the early 1940's it was closed and the orphans were transferred to Augusta.³⁵

On February 8, 1981, Marhilda Beasley was honored during a Gerogia Week Program at St. Benedict's Church. The program, under the direction of Sister Charlene Walsh, R.S.M., featured Mother Beasley as one of the "Role Models From our Roots, in our Church, in our neighborhood." Church members performed a skit written by Sister Walsh that portrayed events from Mother Beasley's life.

In March of 1982 a groundbreaking ceremony was held for a park funded by the City of Savannah dedicated and named after Mother Beasley. Sister Charlene had been involved in this project as well as Mr. W. W. Law of Savannah, who was instrumental in having the park named for Mother Beasley.

NOTES

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- 2
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- 3
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- 4
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torical Society, Savannah, Georgia Folder (Negro
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- 5
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- 6
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- 7
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- 8
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- 9
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- 10
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- 11
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- 13
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18

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29

Hartridge Collection (Folder, Negro Catholics), Copy of Savannah Morning News article 13 February 1895.

30

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31

Brief History of St. Benedict's Parish (Program From Centennial Celebration of St. Benedict's Church, Savannah, Georgia).

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Matilda Beasley Folder (Copies of information compiled by Sister Charlene Walsh R.S.M.)

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