

# BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH



On July 24, 1990, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus of the United States designated November as Black Catholic History Month to celebrate the long history and proud heritage of Black Catholics. It also marks a time to share in remembrance the saints and souls of Africa and the African Diaspora.

Over the past year, a group of parishioners have been researching and publishing articles on the role of slavery, segregation, and race in Holy Trinity's history. This special bulletin issue highlights excerpts of this important work and profiles on U.S. Black Catholic candidates for sainthood, as well as further invitations to pray and learn. The full history series may be found at [trinity.org/holy-trinity-history](http://trinity.org/holy-trinity-history).



**THIRTY DOLLARS  
REWARD.**

Runaway from Georgetown College, on Saturday night the 29th inst a Negro Man named ISAAC, about 23 years old, quite black complexion, about 5 feet 8 inches high; had on when he went away a short coat of drab cloth, pantaloons of the same kind, fur hat & great coat made of thick drab coating and bound with ferretting—he carried with him a pair of blue cloth trousers, two Russis linen shirts, an old hat and other articles of clothing not recollected, it is probable he may change his clothing—he has learned to read tolerably well, and it is likely he may have procured a written pass. It is supposed that he is gone to Pennsylvania, he was raised at Mrs. Johnson's near Bryantown, Charles County. The above reward will be paid if secured in any Jail more than 50 miles from this District, and reasonable expenses paid if brought home, or twenty dollars if a shorter distance, by the subscriber Clerk of Georgetown College, District of Columbia.

JOHN McELROY.  
February 1—d1m



## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

*Excerpt from April 28 and June 9 articles written by Peter J. Albert that were published on the Cura Virtualis Blog.*

When Black Holy Trinity parishioners proposed opening their own church in 1923, Bishop Michael Curley, the prelate with jurisdiction over Washington, D.C., wanted a survey done to list the families and where they lived. Who were the African Americans who left Holy Trinity?

On March 4, 1923, James A. Smackum, Richard N. Carter and Aloysius Marshall met with Bishop Michael Curley, the prelate with jurisdiction over Washington, D.C., to propose creating a new parish in Georgetown for the African American members of the Holy Trinity community.

“We stated the object of our call briefly,” they wrote in their report of the meeting, “telling of the crowded condition at Holy Trinity, of our poor accommodations, of the small space assigned to us, 30 pews with a seating capacity of 120 out of 400 members, of the number of our people staying away from church on account of segregation and poor accommodations.” Bishop Curley, they said, “was very much in sympathy with our cause, he not only promised us a church but he wants us to have a school also, saying we can not expect our children to put up with what we have put up with.”

At Bishop Curley’s request, the three men and Holy Trinity pastor Fr. Benedict Smith, S.J., compiled a list of the African American parishioners at Holy Trinity. It enumerated 352 adults; no children were listed. By the time Epiphany was founded a year or two later, some of those listed had died, but with the children added in, and adults who’d been overlooked or who had joined the new church, the congregation at Epiphany numbered some 600 in 1924, and 630 in 1925.

Many of the them lived near Holy Trinity Church — for example, 12 families lived in the two blocks between the church and Visitation Convent, that is, up 36th Street and along P Street across from Visitation, and fifteen lived on two blocks just west of the church, that is, along N Street and down 37th Street.

**Martha (Ridgely) Belt** rented a home at 1414 36th Street where she lived with her son William, a road laborer, and her grandson Sylvester, a horse team driver. Mrs. Belt was a widow; she had married Ignatius Belt, a laborer, at Holy Trinity on August 15, 1856, and he had died in 1907; his funeral was held at Holy Trinity and he was buried at Holy Rood. Mrs. Belt died the spring of 1920 and was also buried at Holy Rood.

**James Bruce** and his wife **Lizzie Bruce** lived at 1415 36th Street with Lizzie’s mother, Maria (Green) Sprigg; Mr. Bruce was employed as a laborer at the Navy Yard. Mrs. Sprigg, a widow, had married Lee Sprigg at Holy Trinity on June 2, 1889; before his death, he had worked as a stableman. Mrs. Sprigg died in February 1920 and was buried at Holy Rood.

**George Williams and his wife Genevieve (Jackson) Williams** rented a home at 1426 36th Street where they lived with their daughters Helen, Eloise, and Alice, their son Charles, and Mrs. Williams’s father, George Jackson; Mr. Williams worked as a laborer for a contractor, Helen as an elevator operator and Mr. Jackson as a carpenter.



*House at 1420 36th Street, NW, Washington, DC. (Historic American Buildings Survey photograph, Library of Congress). Martha Belt and her family lived on one side of this house at 1414, George Williams and his family lived on the other side at 1426.*

**Joseph Dodson and his wife Fannie (Matthews) Dodson** lived at 1430 36th Street with their sons Joseph Jr. and George; Mr. Dodson worked as a street railway laborer. He and Fannie were married at Holy Trinity on July 14, 1902.

**Nathaniel Wise** and his wife **Rosa (McKay) Wise** rented a home at 1436 36th Street where they lived with their son William; Mr. Wise worked as a road laborer and William as an elevator operator. Mr. Wise had previously worked as a waiter at Georgetown College. He and Rosa were married at Holy Trinity on February 20, 1893.

**Cecilia (Dodson) Creek** rented a home at 1440 36th Street where she lived with her daughters Louise and Sadie and her niece Ada Dorsey; Mrs. Creek, Louise, and Ada Dorsey worked as domestics and Sadie was a clerk in an insurance office. The 1910 U.S. Census indicated that Mrs. Creek was working as a “servant” at Visitation Convent. She was a widow; she and her husband John Creek were married at Holy Trinity October 15, 1893.



**Peter Colbert Sr.** and his large family rented a home at 3524 P Street. They included Mr. Colbert's daughters Eleanor, Louise (and her husband William North and their son Leo), and Beatrice, and his sons Peter Jr. (and his wife Cora and their daughters Beatrice and Ursuline), Marshall, Lawrence, Dorie, and Walter. Mr. Colbert and William North worked as waiters at the college; Eleanor, Peter Jr., and Louise worked in the home – Eleanor and Louise as laundresses and Peter Jr. as a presser. The elder Beatrice Colbert worked as a domestic. Mr. Colbert had married Mary Julia Smackum at Holy Trinity on November 28, 1889; she died in August 1913 and was buried at Holy Rood.

**Letty (Leticia) Smackum** and her mother-in-law **Mary Agnes (Marshall) Smackum** rented a home next door at 3526 P Street. Both women were widows. Letty Smackum worked at home as a laundress. She had married her husband William Smackum, who worked as a plasterer, around 1892. He died in January 1918 and was buried at Holy Rood.

**Mary Agnes Marshall**, the mother of both William Smackum (Letty Smackum's husband) and Mary Julia Smackum Colbert (Peter Colbert Sr.'s wife), had married Charles Adam Smackum at Holy Trinity on June 11, 1868. A day laborer, he had died in November 1909 and was buried at Holy Rood. She died in July 1924; her funeral was held at Holy Trinity and she was also buried at Holy Rood, leaving behind her five children, 15 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

**Mabel Curtis Beason** lived at 3606 N Street and worked as a waitress at Georgetown. A widow, she lived with three children – Percy, a laborer, Vincent, a milk wagon driver, and Gladys – as well as her widowed mother, Martha Virginia Jackson Curtis, and a nephew, Joseph. Mrs. Beason had married William H. Beason at Holy Trinity on September 18, 1901. Her mother, Martha Curtis, died in 1922 and was buried at Holy Rood. Camille (or Carmelia) Hall lived at 3607 N Street. She was a nurse.

**Walter Bowman**, a laborer, rented a home at 3608 N Street together with his wife, Sylvesta Warton Bowman, his sister-in-law Elsie Washington, and Mrs. Washington's two children Wilbur and Effie.

**Joseph M. Coffey**, a laborer, and his wife **Charlotte (Lottie) Boyd Coffey** lived at 3613 N Street. They were married at Holy Trinity on September 22, 1897; when she died in 1930, Charlotte Coffey was buried at Holy Rood.

**William Edward Morris** and his wife **Cora Coffey Morris** rented a home at 3622 N Street together with their five children: Bernice, Hattie, Elizabeth, Cora, and Edward. Mr. Morris worked as a building porter; Hattie was a dress maker's apprentice. Cora Coffey Morris was the sister of Joseph M. Coffey, who lived at 3613 N Street.

**James William Torney** and his wife Isabelle lived at 3626 N Street with their four children: James, Sadie, Joseph, and Evelyn. Mr. Torney worked as a framer, Isabelle

Torney was a clerk, James was a chauffeur, and Joseph was a government clerk. Boarding in the house was Lavinia Davis, who worked as a maid.

**Josephine Beall Taylor** rented a home at 3628 N Street with her two children, Edward and Virginia. Mrs. Taylor, a widow, worked as a laundress; her son Edward worked as a laborer. Mrs. Taylor had married Charles Henry Taylor at Holy Trinity on December 23, 1878; when she died, in 1937, she was buried at Holy Rood.

The listing of the African American members of Holy Trinity mentions **Charles and Mary Onley Smackum** as living at 3618 N Street, although this cannot be corroborated in the census or city directories. The two were married at Holy Trinity on September 30, 1896. Charles, who worked as a laborer, was the brother of Mary Julia Smackum Colbert (Mrs. Peter Colbert, Sr.) who lived at 3524 P Street before her death in 1913; over the course of that decade Charles Smackum had lost four other siblings as well, Agnes in 1910, Arthur in 1914, and William and Henry – the latter in the flu epidemic – in 1918. He was the son of Mary Agnes Marshall Smackum who lived at 3526 P Street. James A. Smackum, probably his cousin, was one of the three African American members of Holy Trinity who met with Bishop Curley in March 1923 to ask him to bless the creation of a new African American parish in Georgetown.

These were just some of our fellow parishioners, and just a few of our neighbors who were not made welcome here.



*Houses at 3606, 3608, and 3610 N Street, NW, Washington, D.C. Mabel Beason and her family lived at 3606, Walter and Sylvesta Bowman and their family lived at 3608.*

## A Prayer from Just Faith: Embracing Truth, Justice and Restoration

Hear these words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I refuse to accept the view that [humankind] is so tragically bound to the midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

As people of faith — we work not only to form a just society that is inclusive, but also to transform unjust structures that are exclusive.

As people of change — we work to hear the voices of those on the margins, joining our voices with theirs, listening to them for guidance and leadership.

As people of hope — Give us the courage not to remain silent in the midst of injustice, apathetic toward great need, nor paralyzed by the immensity of the problem.

As a people of prayer — May unceasing prayer accompany all of our actions, as we work together to bring about God’s Kingdom of justice and peace.

Lord, you have given all people one common origin, and your will is to gather them as one family in yourself. Set our hearts on fire with the desire to ensure justice for all our brothers and sisters. Empower us to share what we have received from you, that we might “rejoice in that day and leap for joy” at the coming of your Kingdom. **Amen.**



First Choir at Epiphany Catholic Church, 1925. (Photograph courtesy of Cynthia Jackson for *Black Georgetown Remembered*, Georgetown University Library.)



Members of Holy Trinity, Epiphany, and St. Aloysius dramatize the Gospel reading during the Reconciliation Prayer Service (Photo copyright Catholic Standard, 1994)

### Setting Captives Free: Racism, I and You and God’s Liberating Grace

#### *An Ignatian Retreat in Daily Life*

**Weeks of February 27, March 6, 13, 20 & 27, April 3**

Registration deadline: **February 13**

Our intention in offering this retreat is to give God a chance to enlighten our minds and change our hearts to liberate us from our personal and shared participation in racist social structures. We ask each person to carve out 30 minutes each day of the six weeks for prayer. A variety of prayer materials, e.g. Sacred Scripture, music, poetry, literature, works of art, etc. will be available electronically. We will meet for 90 minutes in small groups once each of the six weeks for spiritual conversation. All small group meetings will be facilitated on zoom. Watch the bulletin, eLetter and website for registration information. Contact: [moshea@trinity.org](mailto:moshea@trinity.org).



## MARYLAND JESUITS AND SLAVERY, PT. I

*Excerpt from an article series written by Bernard A. Cook that was published September 8 in the Holy Trinity Bulletin.*

Fr. Francis Neale, S.J., the founding pastor of Holy Trinity parish, had been the administrator of St. Thomas manor at Port Tobacco in Charles County, Maryland. In 1809, when he became president of Georgetown College, Neale had Priscilla Queen brought to Georgetown, probably from Port Tobacco. She took advantage of her transfer to the District of Columbia to lodge a freedom suit asserting that she was a descendant of Mary Queen, a free woman of color. Although she lost that suit, the Jesuits were concerned about the possibility that their property in slaves was being threatened by freedom suits. The account book of St. Thomas Manor in August 1794, recorded £4 17s 6p paid to Philip Barton Key, the uncle of Francis Key, "To... retain or stop the mouth of lawyer Key from speaking in favor of the Negroes who have sued for their freedom."

Georgetown College was founded in 1789 by the Maryland Jesuits reorganized as the Corporation of Roman Catholic Clergymen. The College did not own many enslaved persons, never "more than five people in any given year from 1792 to 1862," when slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia. However, the college was dependent upon enslaved laborers, whose services it rented. Enslaved people cooked for the Jesuits and students. They cleaned the school and did the laundry of the faculty and students. The college also utilized enslaved laborers to construct buildings including Old North. It hired enslaved masons from a builder, Daniel Bussard, to construct an infirmary and smokehouse, and it hired enslaved bricklayers and carpenters from George B. Magruder, James Harvey, George Athee and others for a variety of construction projects at the expanding campus. As many as 20 enslaved people worked at the college in 1815 and 1816. It is probable that the original church at Holy Trinity, now the Chapel of St. Ignatius, as well as the present church, dedicated in 1851, were constructed utilizing the labor of enslaved workers.

In addition to hiring enslaved workers, the college administrators bought and sold enslaved people. In 1810, the college sold Liddy to Phillip Bussard for \$220, of which \$70 was in cash and the rest in whiskey and sugar. In 1808, Fr. Francis Neale purchased from the Jesuit plantation, St. Inigoe, a woman and a man named Len "for the use of the college." Bishop John Carroll, himself, had proposed the sale of enslaved persons when the Jesuits needed money in 1805. He wrote, "the sale of a few unnecessary Negroes, three or four, and stock would replace the money."

In 1813, Jesuit trustees met at Georgetown College. They discussed whether they should free the enslaved people held by the order. It was proposed to sell "the whole or greatest part" of the enslaved on their plantations in Maryland for a specific term of years "after which they should be entitled to their freedom." In June 1814, they agreed to sell all of the enslaved people they held with the provision that they would be granted their freedom after a specific number of

years.

In 1814, Fr. Francis Neale personally sold an enslaved man, Isaac, who had run away from Georgetown College and attempted to reach Pennsylvania and freedom. When Bishop John Carroll discovered that Neale continued to sell for life people enslaved by the Jesuits, he wrote to Neale of his surprise and mortification. He declared that the sales "for life" were "in direct contradiction to the humane decision of the Corporation." Carroll expressed his belief that the sales were invalid. Despite Carroll's indignation, the Jesuits did not initiate their decision for gradual emancipation. Carroll died on December 3, 1815, two months after his denunciation of the continued sale of slaves for life. In 1820, the Jesuits reversed their decision. They argued that they "on mature reflection considered the measure prejudicial."



*A Map of Maryland Jesuit Stations of the 17th-19th Centuries.*

### Future of the Neale Room

Students, choral members, and parishioners often congregate in the Neale Room on the first floor of the parish center. Acknowledging our complicated history with selling slaves has led many parishioners to discern if the name of the Neale Room continues to reflect our values? Some have suggested that it be renamed to the Isaac-Neale Room with a history of their relationship included to educate visitors. What do you think?

## ON THE ROAD TO SAINTHOOD

*How well do you know these Black Catholic candidates for Sainthood?*

### **Mother Mary Lange**

Mother Mary Lange is, unofficially, the patron saint of education for the Black poor children in the city of Baltimore. She was one of the founders of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the order of African-American religious women, and established St. Frances Academy in 1828. Mother Lange and three other sisters showed holiness in their courageous commitment to teach reading to children of slaves when it was illegal. The sisters could have been killed for educating slaves. Mother Lange died in 1882.

### **Pierre Toussaint**

Born in modern-day Haiti and brought to New York City as a slave, Pierre died a free man, a renowned hairdresser, and one of New York City's most well-known Catholics. Pierre lived in an era when not only was he looked down upon as a freed slave, but anti-Catholicism was strong in New York at the time. It did not stop Pierre from professing his Catholic faith. He attended Mass every day for more than 60 years and was devoted to the Rosary. He was also a teacher of the faith and could explain the church's teachings well and simply. He is recognized for his care of the sick and the poor and for founding the first New York Catholic school. He died in 1853.

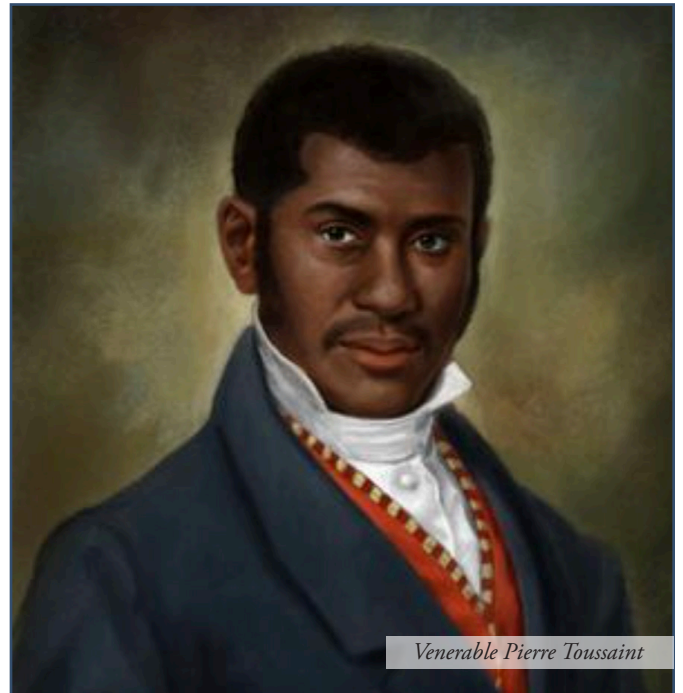
### **Henriette Delille**

Henriette Delille was born a free woman of color in New Orleans in 1813. She was a feminist, social worker, and an educator. She and a friend, Cuban born Juliette Gaudin, worked to teach religion to the slaves, encouraged free quadroon women to select men of their own class and encouraged slave couples to have their unions blessed by the church. In 1835, Delille sold all of her property hoping

to start a community of Black nuns to teach in a school for free girls of color. After a few failed attempts, the two nuns, along with Josephine Charles, founded the Sisters of the Holy Family religious order at St. Augustine's Church in 1842. She died in 1862.

### **Augustus Tolton**

Father Augustus Tolton was born into slavery in Missouri, where he escaped with his mother and siblings by crossing the Mississippi River into free Illinois. Impressed by Augustus' intelligence and piety, several priests tried to enroll him in a seminary in the US. This proved impossible, and Augustus studied in Rome and was ordained a priest in 1886. He returned to Illinois and served at parishes throughout the state and endured countless hardships and discrimination.





He worked tirelessly to help the Black community suffering the effects of poverty. He is recognized as the first Black American priest. He died in 1987.

### **Thea Bowman**

Sister Thea Bowman was the granddaughter of a slave, an advocate for racial justice, and the first African American woman to address the U.S. bishops' conference. Bertha was raised in a vibrantly spiritual Methodist home, and she became attracted to the life of love and service that the religious sisters in her town led. With her parents' permission, young Bertha converted to Catholicism when she was just nine. When she entered the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, she was the first and only African-American member of her order. In 1989, she became the first Black female to address a meeting of all the bishops of the United States.

She not only urged the bishops evangelize the African-American community and to welcome African Americans' participation in the Church, she was equally devoted to encouraging African-American Catholics to share their culture and their gifts with the Church. She worked to create a hymnal that showcased Black spirituality and culture. She traveled across the American continent and even abroad to the Caribbean Islands and Africa to spread a ministry of joy—a ministry of proclaiming the joy of each culture's unique differences yet their unity in Christ.

### **Julia Greeley**

Julia Greeley, Denver's Angel of Charity, was born into slavery, at Hannibal, Missouri, sometime between 1833 and 1848. While she was still a young child, a cruel slavemaster, in the course of beating her mother, caught Julia's right eye with his whip and destroyed it. Once she was freed from slavery in 1865, Greeley worked as a housekeeper, cook, and nanny for white families in Missouri, Wyoming, and New Mexico. However, she primarily lived and worked in Denver, Colorado, where she was known to help anyone in need as she wore her signature black floppy hat and had her little red wagon in tow. In 1880, Greeley was baptized into the Catholic Church at Sacred Heart Parish in Denver, where she was enthusiastically devoted to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Blessed Sacrament, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. She died in 1918.

Learn more at [nbccongress.org/black-catholic-sainthood.html](http://nbccongress.org/black-catholic-sainthood.html)

*Portraits are courtesy of the National Black Catholic Congress.*

### **Join the Conversation!**

Parishioners have been gathering over Zoom over the past 18 months in circles, prayer groups, book discussion groups, and retreats to discuss becoming an anti-racist Church. If you would like to receive updates on individual and collective opportunities, retreats and events, please email [aklick@trinity.org](mailto:aklick@trinity.org)



*Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton*



*Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman*

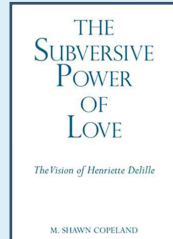
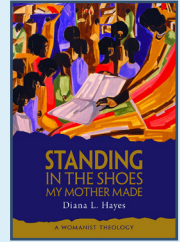


*Servant of God Julia Greeley*

## LEARN MORE

### ***Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made* by Diana L. Hayes**

Black women in America have carved out a distinctive and instructive faith stance that is influential well beyond the historic black church. Diana L. Hayes, a leading commentator and forger of womanist thought, especially in the black Catholic setting, here offers strong brew for what ails the church, the Christian tradition, and the world.

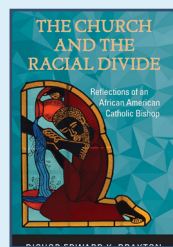
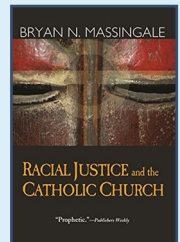


### ***The Subversive Power of Love* by M. Shawn Copeland**

Henriette Delille, founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, lived out a vision that defied social convention, cultural custom, and tepid religiosity. Her vision embraced the enslaved, the poor, the sick, the elderly; and, in the midst of nineteenth century New Orleans, thoroughly reconceptualized black women's bodies. Delille gave herself unreservedly to a bold venture that embodied belief and hope, enduring commitment, and the subversive power of love.

### ***Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* by Bryan N. Massingale**

Leading black Catholic moral theologian, Bryan Massingale addresses the thorny issue of racial justice past and present. Massingale writes from an abiding conviction that the Catholic faith and the black experience make essential contributions in the continuing struggle against racial injustice that is the work of all people.



### ***The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African American Catholic Bishop* by Edward K. Braxton**

The only Catholic bishop who has consistently written on race matters, Bishop Braxton begins this timely book with a probing personal introduction in which he describes his family's history and his experience as an African American that he brought to his ministry as a Catholic priest and bishop. In speeches, homilies, and pastoral letters—in some cases prompted by police shootings and the Black Lives Matter movement—he lays out a vision of healing for the church and the nation, informed by a quest for conversion, justice, and reconciliation.

### ***Mary Lou Williams* by Deanna Witkowski**

In *Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul*, Deanna Witkowski brings a fresh perspective to the life and music of the legendary jazz pianist-composer Mary Lou Williams (1910-81). As a fellow jazz pianist-composer, adult convert to Catholicism, and liturgical composer, Witkowski offers unique insight gleaned from a twenty-year journey with Williams as her chosen musical and spiritual mentor. Viewing Williams's musical and corporal acts of mercy as part of a singular effort to create community no matter the context, Witkowski examines how Williams created networks of support and friendship through her decades long letter correspondence with various women religious, her charitable work, and her tireless efforts to perform jazz in churches, community centers, concert halls, and schools. Throughout this fascinating story told with equal amounts of deep love and scholarly research, Witkowski illumines Williams's passionate mantra that "jazz is healing to the soul." *Note: Williams performed at Holy Trinity in the late 1970s. She died in 1981.*

