

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK NUNS IN THE UNITED STATES**  
FEATURING MOTHER MARY ELIZABETH LANGE AND HENRIETTE DELILLE

The oldest communities of Black nuns in the United States were two: the Oblate Sisters of Providence, founded in Baltimore, Maryland in 1828 by Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, and the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded in New Orleans, Louisiana by Henriette Delille.

Black Catholic nuns were teaching in Savanna, Georgia in the 1950s and 1960s, and were pushed out by diocesan, virulent racism. Two of the eight original sisterhoods taught in this school system. White nuns there never taught about the pioneering Black nuns that were there first. The nuns did leave records documenting their history in this country. The older Black orders maintained an archive. These women desegregated Catholic colleges and universities in an era before the Brown v. Board of Education decision. They also led schools and many other Catholic institutions, opening them to African Americans.

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Mother Elizabeth Lange was born in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba in 1789, approximately. She was the first African American mother superior, ever. Mother had received an excellent education. She left Cuba in the early 1800s and immigrated to the United States, arriving first in Charleston, South Carolina. From there, she moved to Norfolk, Virginia before finally settling in Baltimore, Maryland by 1813. The free African American population had outnumbered the city's enslaved population. A large amount of the French-speaking African Caribbean population had fled the revolution earlier.



Various Protestant groups had opened a school in their homes to help. There were no free public schools for children of color until 1866. Elizabeth had met with Father James Nicholas Joubert, S.S., a Sulpician priest and former soldier. He helped by establishing a school for girls and asked the archbishop for two women of color to teach them. Elizabeth was referred to him as well as Marie Balas, since they had a school already. They informed him of their calling to be consecrated to God and that they were waiting on God to show them the way. Father supported them and helped them start their order by asking the archbishop to approve the new community, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Their primary purpose was Catholic education of girls. Their vocation came to include vocational and career training, and establishing homes for widows and orphans.

Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange died February 3, 1882. She was named Venerable in 1991.



Henriette Diaz Delille was a mixed-race free woman of color born in New Orleans, Louisiana on March 11, 1813. She was raised Catholic by her mother, a free woman of color, and her father, a Frenchman. She was brought up in the plaçage system, where she was groomed to find a wealthy, white man to take care of her; it was a type of common law marriage.

She refused this lifestyle and decided to teach. Henriette was very outspoken against this system and was drawn instead to the religious belief of the Catholic church. Her influence was from Sister Marthe Fontier who had opened a school for colored girls. At the age of 14, Henriette had started teaching at the local Catholic school. She grew into a devotion for educating and for the poor.

She founded an order, The Sisters of the Holy Family, in 1835 – the same year her mother had a nervous breakdown after which the courts deemed her incompetent. Henriette was appointed by the court to be her legal guardian and controlled the remaining assets. She sold them off and used the money to establish her order of religious women. There was opposition from her family members and the Catholic church due to racism.

Henriette lived a holy life and died in 1862. She has been deemed Venerable by the church.