



# **Best Practices Guide**

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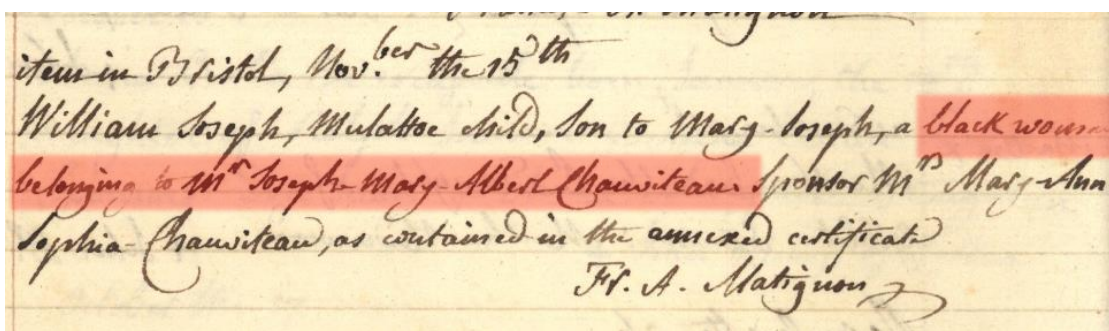


Man Praying in front of Our Lady of Peace, Vacherie, LA.

(Archive, Diocese of Baton Rouge)



[Eliza Nesbit](#), “given” as a gift to [Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne](#) ca. 1820s by Bishop Louis DuBourg of St. Louis. (Archive, Society of the Sacred Heart, United States-Canada Province)



Baptismal record of William Joseph, 15 November 1811, Bristol, RI.  
Recorded in the sacramental register of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Boston, MA, 1810-1823.  
(Archive, Archdiocese of Boston)

**“...we, the Catholic bishops in the United States, acknowledge the many times when the Church has failed to live as Christ taught—to love our brothers and sisters. Acts of racism have been committed by leaders and members of the Catholic Church—by bishops, clergy, religious, and laity—and her institutions. We express deep sorrow and regret for them. We also acknowledge those instances when we have not done enough or stood by silently when grave acts of injustice were committed. We ask for forgiveness from all who have been harmed by these sins committed in the past or in the present.”**

*Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love, A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*  
USCCB Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church  
November 2018

# Introduction

## What is CROSS?

Catholic Religious Organizations Studying Slavery (CROSS) was established in March 2021 by representatives of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the Jesuit Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation project. It would grow to encompass 15 men and women representing eight dioceses and six religious organizations convened to study the records of enslaved peoples in Catholic archives.

It is the embodiment of a discussion that has been ongoing for over a decade in the Catholic archives and history communities, where questions have been raised about access to records of the enslaved.

## Our Mission

Recognizing that slavery is a sin, it is our mission to promote open and honest access to the historical record in order to achieve a more comprehensive and truthful telling of enslavement within the Catholic Church in the United States.

## Our Purpose

Members of CROSS will work collectively to improve access to the records of the enslaved and those who enslaved them. Additionally, in consultation with descendants of the enslaved, we will promote active engagement with this subject, encouraging discourse on the many legacies of slavery in the United States, and advocating for institutional responses, to a greater effect than would normally be beyond the limited means of each individual member.

Many descendant communities have ancestors who were enslaved to more than one religious order, individual, or institution. Within the past decade, several Catholic dioceses and religious orders have begun examining their histories of slaveholding to acknowledge more fully their participation in the evil of slavery and to work toward repairing the damage wrought by its enduring legacies.

For both historical and contemporary purposes, we find it prudent to assemble these and other entities who share a similar past, to engage with descendant communities, learn from one another, share models and precedents, and suggest best practices resulting in a more comprehensive and accurate account of slavery within the Catholic Church in the United States.

We envision that, in partnership, diocesan organizations, religious orders, schools, and congregations can work to effect greater institutional responses that address the legacies of slavery, benefit descendant communities, and eradicate racism within our respective institutions.

### The Purpose of this Guide

Understanding the Catholic Church's role in benefitting from and perpetuating slavery in the United States is paramount to recognizing that records of the enslaved are held in Catholic institutions around the country.

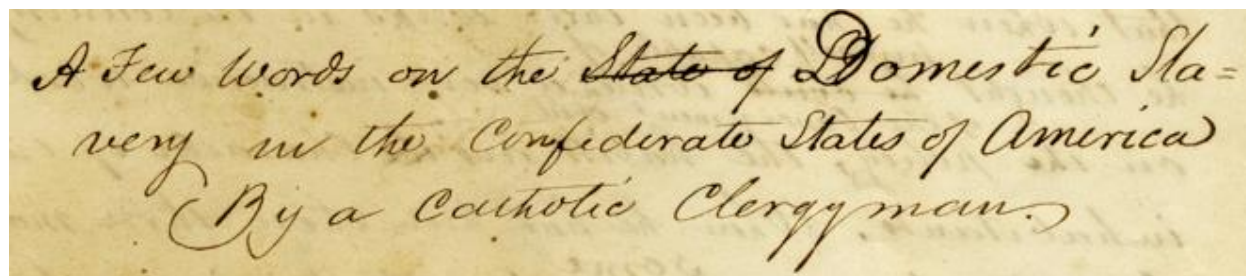
Catholic bishops, priests, and religious orders of men and women, along with the faithful, enslaved other human beings. Enslaved men and women worked in Catholic hospitals, Catholic schools, church parishes and bishops' residences. Enslaved people built Catholic churches, cathedrals, hospitals, and schools. Their stories are documented in sources such as diaries, financial ledgers, correspondence, and property records.

Additionally, hundreds of thousands of enslaved men, women and children were baptized and given a Christian name. Sacramental records provide a wealth of information for their descendants such as parents, godparents, and other relations. The reality is that there are millions of enslaved people documented in Catholic records across the United States.

This best practices guide is intended to serve as a resource for Catholic archivists to help them identify records of the enslaved in their collections, conduct or facilitate further research into these records, and gain the support of their colleagues in these endeavors.

### What you will find in this Guide

- I. Getting Started – Will help identify where records of the enslaved might be found in a Catholic archive, and where additional resources might be found at local, state and federal repositories.
- II. Research and Access – Will help gain a better understanding of the use and access of records held by Catholic archives and the importance of sacramental records.
- III. Leadership and Allies – Suggests where to seek support within your organization and examples of successful projects from which you can draw ideas.
- IV. Frequently Asked Questions – A list of common questions regarding slavery in the United States and how it relates to Catholic archives.
- V. External Resources – While there are countless local and state resources, this section provides a brief list of resources that will be useful to all Catholic and religious archives in the United States.



*Manuscript title for a defense of slavery published by Bishop Patrick N. Lynch  
of the Diocese of Charleston while visiting Rome in 1864.  
(Archive, Diocese of Charleston)*

# Getting Started

The first step is to identify where records exist within your own repository, and then any related public records in local, state, and federal repositories. Catholic and public records may verify one another, together make a more complete record, or may each contain unique information.

Neither geography nor date of establishment exempt an organization from these trends. At various times slavery was legal under Dutch, English, French and Spanish colonial rule, as well as in the independent United States. This includes several Northern states that are typically thought of as “anti-slavery.” Even if an organization was established after 1865, its archive may hold records from prior to that time.

For instance, parish records may predate the existence of a diocese or state in which they exist, and in some instances even predate the United States. A diocese established after 1865 was most likely formed from territory belonging to an existing diocese and may possess early records from parishes and institutions that now fall within its boundary.

Keep in mind, slavery is not exclusively related to Africans and African Americans, but to Native Americans as well. In these circumstances especially, the issue may extend outside the United States into Central, North and South America.

It is also important to consider the language one might encounter in Catholic records. Enslaved persons may be recorded as “slave,” “servant,” “belonging to,” “serv<sup>t</sup>,” “serv,” or “of.” Some of these words are ambiguous, and, while they do not always imply that an individual was enslaved, it would not be ruled out exclusively because the word “slave” is not used.

Considering location, time and language may make this seem like a daunting task, but in practice identifying these records can be straightforward, and below is a list of places to consider searching.

## *Within Catholic archives:*

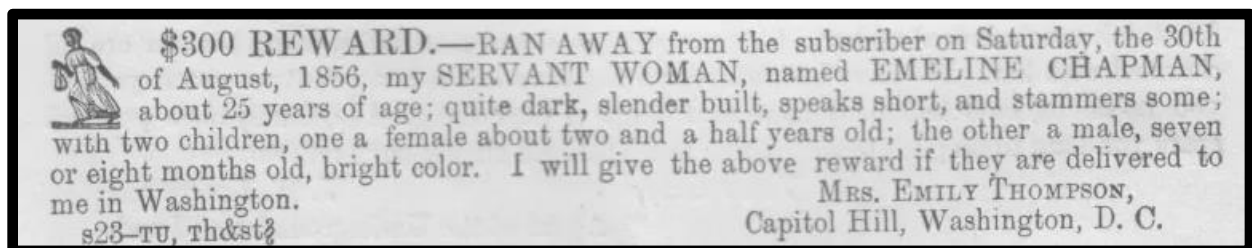
- Sacramental records –
  - May contain the records of baptisms (including birth information), first communions, confirmations, marriages, sick calls, and/or deaths.
  - May document an enslaved person’s name, status, age, relations, and enslaver.
  - Entries may appear under the name of the individual receiving the sacrament, or under the name of their enslaver.
  - Records of the enslaved may appear in the same sacramental registers as all other parishioners, or registers may be segregated by race.
- Financial records –
  - The purchase, sale, or hiring out of enslaved persons are often documented as individual transactions within financial ledgers.
  - These may include the name and/or age of the enslaved, and information about the enslavers.



- Property records –
  - Records of enslaved people are often found alongside real property, deed, and indenture records.
  - These extend to estate inventories, succession records, and wills.
  - May be recorded under name of clergyman or religious superior who enslaved them.
- Personal papers –
  - Records and correspondence of clergy, religious superiors, or lay people.
  - Records may be formal, such as a personal financial ledger, or informal, such as references in diaries or letters.

*Within local and state archives:\**

- Wills and deeds –
  - Often maintained by a city or county government.
  - Enslavers bequeathing an enslaved individual to an institution/organization may use either the name of the institution/organization, or the name of a clergyman or religious superior.
- Court cases/freedom suits –
  - Often stored in state archives.
  - Include manumission records.
- Assessment records –
  - Classified as property records for tax purposes.
  - May include list by name or enumerations of enslaved persons.
- Newspapers –
  - May contain advertisements for buying and selling of enslaved persons.
  - May also contain advertisements for fugitives from slavery including names of the fugitive, enslaver, place of departure, and physical description.



*Advertisement for Runaway Slave, Emeline Chapman, submitted  
by Mrs. Emily Thompson, Washington, DC.  
(Baltimore Sun, 23 September 1856)*

Within federal archives:\*

- Decennial census records (1790-1840) –
  - Enslaved individuals may be found under the name of the organization/institution, clergyman, or religious superior who enslaved them.
  - Do not include names of enslaved but can be used to verify if institution/organization or individual was enslaving individuals and how many.
- Decennial census records (1850-1860) –
  - Contain “Slave Schedules” which are separate from the main entries.
  - As with above, may be found under the name of the organization/institution, clergyman, or religious superior that enslaved them.
- Civil War Pension Records –
  - Contain soldier and widower pension applications.
  - May include physical description and family information such as relationship of applicant to soldier and children.

\*Some local, state and federal records may be available online, for free. The Federal Census, for instance, is public record and available for free on several websites.

NAMES OF SLAVE OWNERS.	Number of Slaves.	DESCRIPTION.			Fugitives from the State.	Number manumitted.	Deaf & dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.
		Age.	Sex.	Colour.			
	2	3		5	6	7	8
1 Peter R. Kenrick	1	13	46	13			
2	2	79	46	13			
3	3	47	3	13			

*Slave Schedule from the 1850 US Census indicating Bishop Peter R. Kenrick, Archbishop of St. Louis, enslaved three people. (United States Census [Slave Schedule], 1850, accessed via FamilySearch.org)*



# Research and Access

In 1997, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church wrote a circular letter entitled, “The Pastoral Function of Church Archives.” Section 4, entitled “The Appreciation of the Patrimony of Documents in the Historical Culture and the Mission of the Church,” addresses the issues of access:

“Archives, as part of the cultural heritage, should be offered primarily at the service of the community which has produced them. But in time they assume a universal destination because they become the heritage of all of humanity. The material stored cannot be, in fact, precluded to those who can take advantage of it in order to know more about the history of the Christian people, their religious, civil, cultural and social deeds.

“Those responsible must make sure that the use of church archives be facilitated further, that is not only to those interested who have the right to access but also to a large range of researchers, without prejudice towards their religious or ideological backgrounds, following the best of Church tradition yet while respecting the appropriate norms of protection offered by universal law as well as the regulations of the diocesan Bishop.

“Such an attitude of disinterested openness, kind welcome, and competent service must be taken into careful consideration so that the historical memory of the Church may be offered to the entire society.”<sup>1</sup>

Public access to Catholic historical records is not standardized in the United States. While we respect that each Catholic institution has its own policies governing access, reference, and use, we encourage all to strive for a **disinterested openness, kind welcome, and competent service**.

## Reference and Use

Although the primary responsibility of a Catholic archive is to facilitate internal use, it should also seek to promote a wider understanding of the Church by making its resources available to the public.

External researchers may use archives for a variety of purposes including family history, researching the foundations of the Catholic community in a locale, or exploring the role of Catholicism within the context of American history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marchisano, Francesco. “The Pastoral Function of Church Archives” Circular letter, February 2, 1997 (Vatican City: The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church) 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> Leumas, Newcomer and Treanor. *Managing Diocesan Archives and Records: A Guide for Bishops, Chancellors, and Archivists* (Chicago: Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists, 2012) 6-7.

## Access

While reference and use may be closely associated with access, there are distinct differences. Reference and use describe *how* the documents and records are used. Access tells *who* may use the records.

As a guide, we refer to the 1991 Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists “guidelines for Access to Diocesan Archives.” It states that there is a “concept of equal use” and that “archival repositories have a duty to be as open as possible to all of their constituencies, regardless of conditions such as race, creed, or professional status.”<sup>3</sup>

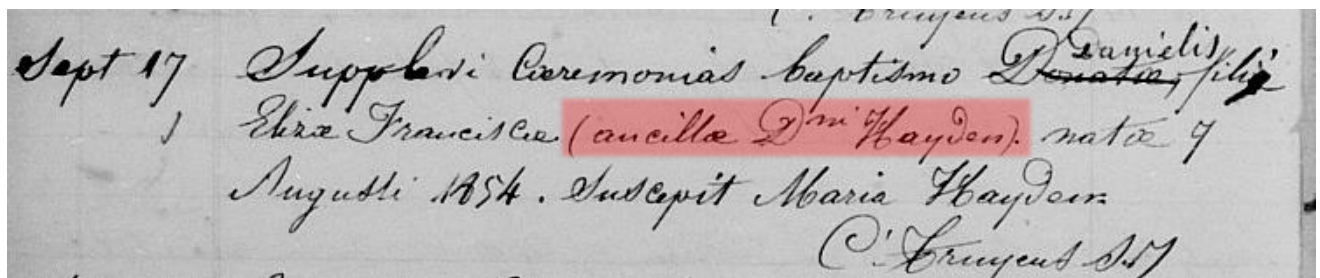
## Importance of Sacramental Records

Sacramental records - which document baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and oftentimes deaths and burials - are among the most important resources available to scholars researching the lives of enslaved and free persons of color.

Because these records detail the life history of a local community over time, church officials recognize them as having unique and enduring value. More importantly they illustrate the Catholic heritage of families that are passed from one generation to another. Therefore, in many diocesan archives, these records are extensive, well-maintained, and searchable.

To truly appreciate what is in the records, one must be familiar with the laws, traditions and practices that dictated entries into the registers prior to 1865. Manumissions, surnames, recognized paternity, and evidence of literacy, are examples of important social evidence that may be found in these records.

For those whose ancestors were enslaved, these records are essential as they may be the only place where an ancestor’s name is recorded. Being transparent about their existence, use, and providing access to these records should be embraced as an opportunity to evangelize and to connect with those searching for their heritage.



*Baptismal Record of Daniel A. Rudd (1854-1933), Basilica of St. Joseph  
Proto-Cathedral, Bardstown, KY, 17 September 1854.  
(Archive, Archdiocese of Louisville)*

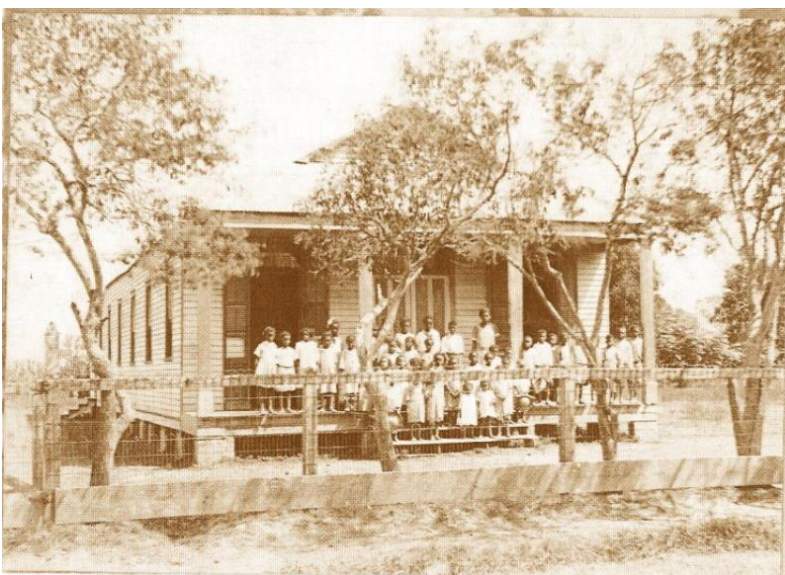
<sup>3</sup> O'Toole, James M. *Basic Standards for Diocesan Archives: A Guide for Bishops, Chancellors, and Archivists*. (Chicago: Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists, 1991) 69.

# Leadership and Allies

The Pastoral Letter *Open Wide Our Hearts: the enduring call to Love - A Pastoral Letter against Racism* states:

“The evil of racism festers in part because, as a nation, there has been very limited formal acknowledgement of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation and, all too often a neglect of our history. Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us. We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just.

“As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice.”



*St. Augustine School, Klotzville, LA.  
(Archive, Diocese of Baton Rouge)*

The stories we must hear exist in both past and present, and evidence of them may exist in a Catholic archive. It is important we understand the role played by our local church in these issues, especially in relation to slavery.

Just as no one historical actor was complicit in perpetuating, or benefiting from, slavery, no one person should be responsible for the burden of identifying and providing access to these records, publicizing them, and conversing about their meaning. We recommend seeking allies in your organization that can help with this process, such as an Office for Black Catholics, Office of Racial Harmony, or multicultural ministries. Colleagues in communications or public relations

can help craft a clear, consistent, and unified message to communities who may be interested in the records of the enslaved held by your archive. And, finally, suggest presenting these issues with your allies to your Chancellor, Vicar General, Bishop, or Religious Superior.

Others have already taken steps to identify records of the enslaved, make potential users aware of their existence, facilitate access and, in some cases, hosted events and programming to further discuss the legacies of slavery in relation to their respective communities. These can be used as a model by which you can do the same, below are a few examples:

Archdiocese of St. Louis:

- [Forgive Us Our Trespasses \(Event Page\)](#)
- [St. Louis Review on Researching Records of Enslaved \(Article\)](#)

Diocese of St. Augustine:

- [“Lost Voices from America’s Oldest Parish” \(Article\)](#)
- [La Florida Lost Voices Project \(Online Archive\)](#)

Georgetown Visitation Sisters:

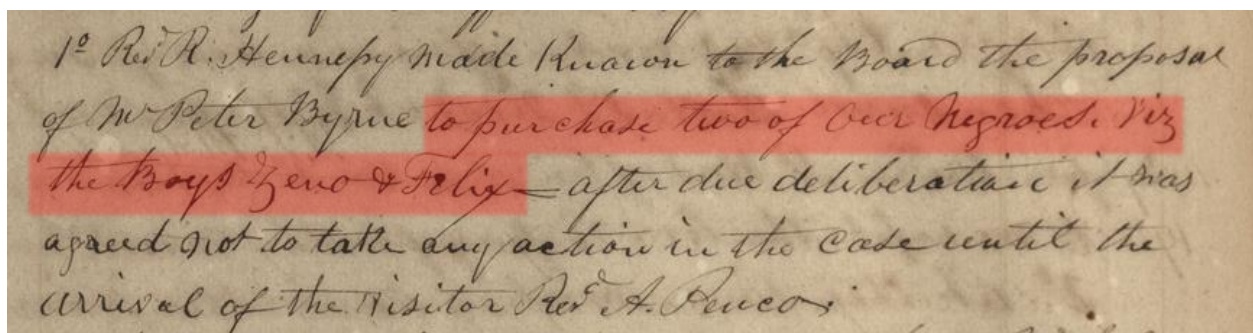
- [The History of Enslaved People at Visitation \(Webpage and Digital Collection\)](#)

Society of Jesus (Jesuits):

- [Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project \(Website\)](#)

Society of the Sacred Heart:

- [Society of the Sacred Heart – History of Enslavement](#)



Board of Trustee Minutes, St. Vincent's College, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, 5 February 1853.  
(Vincentian Archives, DePaul University Library Special Collections and Archives, Chicago, IL)

# Frequently Asked Questions

*What comprises “the Catholic Church in the United States” referenced in the CROSS Mission Statement?*

Depending on the time and place, we expect that Catholic dioceses, colleges, clergy, religious, and lay people will have enslaved people or benefited from the work of the enslaved.

*My diocese was established after 1865, so this does not affect me/us, right?*

Even if your diocese was established after the abolishment of slavery in the United States, it is possible that there were enslaved people in the territory that it encompasses, or that your diocese may have encompassed a larger area in which there were enslaved people.

Also, consider that a member of the clergy, a religious, or lay person may have been active in your diocese after 1865, but their personal papers (financial ledgers, correspondence, journals, etc.) begin at an earlier date and contain records of the enslaved.

*Is the intention of this project to find descendants of the enslaved and offer reparations?*

No, CROSS was not formed with the intention of identifying descendants for the purpose of providing reparations.

Our purpose is to use our combined knowledge and resources to advocate for improved access to the records of the enslaved in Catholic archives and, in consultation with descendants, promote active engagement with the subject and encourage discourse on the many legacies of slavery.

*If we do find records of the enslaved in our collections and make them known, will it damage the reputation of our organization?*

Being honest, transparent, and making accessible records of the enslaved is an essential part of healing the wounds caused by slavery, acknowledging the sins of our institutions, and promoting a healthy discourse with descendant communities, scholars, and other interested parties.

*Why are Catholic records of the enslaved so important?*

From a research perspective, records of the enslaved in Catholic archives may be the only written record of their existence and will be invaluable to researchers, especially descendants who may not have another resource by which to learn their family history.

For the Catholic Church at present, the first step to healing is acknowledging its role in the enslavement of people, which we hope will lead to meaningful discussions of this legacy and help combat racism today.



### *Is CROSS affiliated with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)?*

Yes, CROSS has been officially acknowledged by the USCCB Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism. Archbishop Shelton J. Fabre, Archbishop of Louisville, serves as an advisor of CROSS.

### *What is the appropriate language to use when discussing the history of slavery?*

While terms such as “master,” “slave,” and other derogatory terms are used to refer to enslaved people in the records, we encourage the use of “enslaved people/persons” and “enslaver” while discussing the history of slavery.

The discussion surrounding language is constantly changing; for instance, some scholars would prefer to use the word “slave” rather than “the enslaved.” While CROSS will attempt to be consistent with “the enslaved” and “enslaver,” we welcome the use of other respectful terms that fellow archivists, scholars, or descendants choose to employ.

Please consult [this list of resources](#) for up-to-date considerations.

### *If the language in our records is derogatory, should we erase, change, or update the entries?*

We do not condone effacing or altering the original entries in any way. When communicating the information in writing, we suggest italicizing the original language to emphasize it is the same as used in the record.

### *Do I have to do all this research myself?*

No, we are not advocating for archivists, records managers, or an internally appointed person to conduct thorough research on every enslaved person in your records; though we would support such an undertaking. We are instead advocating for the identification of these records and making them accessible for research.

### *Slavery ended in the United States so long ago, why does it matter now?*

The legacy of slavery in the United States continues to impact people around the world.

It has remained relevant since the abolition of slavery, notably in the context of legal segregation based on race, the perpetuating of stereotypes, the disenfranchisement of certain communities within our society, and understanding the civil rights movement.

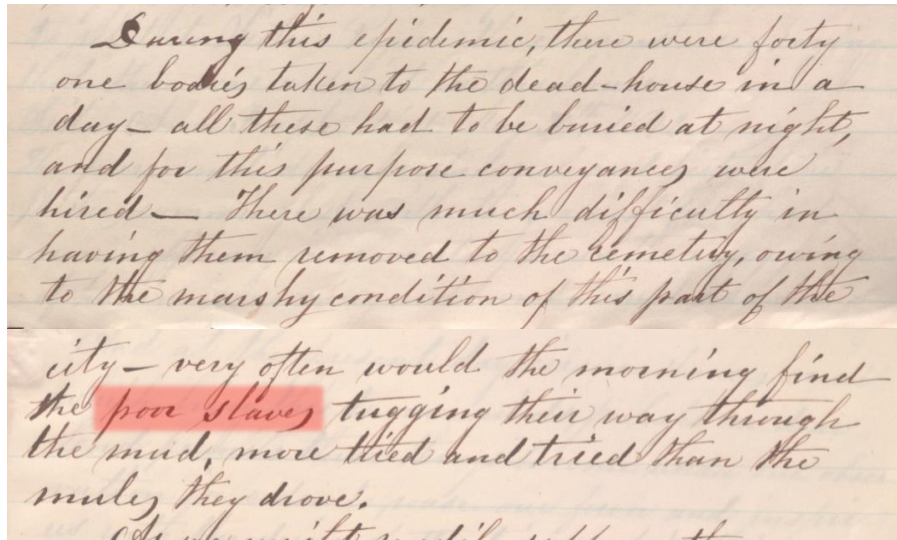
### *Why has nothing been done about this sooner?*

Various dioceses, religious communities, and other Catholic organizations have made records of the enslaved accessible and held special community events and exhibitions to highlight the enslaved and their contributions. Using these experiences, we are advocating for more, if not all, Catholic organizations to start examining their own past and do the same to create a more complete record.



*Will CROSS be comparing the experiences of those enslaved by Catholic individuals and institutions to those enslaved by people and institutions of other faiths? Did the former treat their slaves better, relatively?*

No, there are no factors that made the enslavement of human beings acceptable, nor do we consider one instance relatively better than another while the enslaved remained in bondage. Our focus is on the records and legacy of those enslaved by Catholic individuals and institutions.



Notes on the Commencement and Progress of Charity Hospital, New Orleans, LA.  
(Archive, Daughters of Charity, St. Louise Province [Emmitsburg, MD])

## External Resources

- [African American Gateway – US States](#)
- [African American Genealogy 101](#)
- [Freedom on the Move – Rediscovering the Stories of Self-liberating People](#)
- [Georgetown Memory Project](#)
- [USCCB - Find a Bishop & Diocese](#)
- [USCCB - Ad Hoc Committee against Racism](#)
- [Task Force to Address the Vincentians' Relationship to Slavery](#)
- [Vincentians and Slavery: History](#)
- [Writing about "Slavery"? This Might Help](#)

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