

Agnes K. Callum

By Jacques Kelly
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Agnes Kane Callum, a prominent genealogist who devoted years of research to Maryland's African-American history, died Wednesday at the Green House Residences of complications from Parkinson's disease. The former East Baltimore resident was 90.

Mrs. Callum's paternal grandfather, Henry Kane was born a slave at Sotterley, a tobacco plantation in Hollywood, St. Mary's County, in 1860. She helped many people trace ancestors who had been held in slavery.

Born Agnes Emma Kane in Baltimore, she was the daughter of Phillip Moten Kane and Mary Gough Kane. She attended Dunbar High School until the 11th grade. As a young woman she sold cosmetics for the black-owned Beauty Queen Co. She then was a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Co. agent and became well known in East Baltimore. She worked as a licensed practical nurse at Rosewood Hospital before becoming a night clerk at the Post Office.

She joined the Eastside Democratic Organization and founded a neighborhood club, Clean Up for a Better Neighborhood. A 1973 Baltimore Sun sketch said, "She found time to take busloads of neighborhood children to the Smithsonian, the Walters and ... other places that would serve to open a window to them." The article called her a "vigorous community leader" who slept only 4 1/2 hours a night.

When she was 44 she returned to school and earned a bachelor's and master's degrees in the social sciences from Morgan State University. She was named a Fulbright-Hayes Scholar in 1973 and studied at the University of Ghana at Legon.

"She was a remarkable, careful and industrious researcher who was a treasure as far as our knowledge of African-American history in Baltimore and in St. Mary's County," said Edward Papenfuse, Maryland's archivist emeritus. "She was instrumental in tracing her ancestry back to the times of the Calverts. She found one of her family lines included a marriage between a white servant woman of Lord Baltimore and a black slave."

As a Morgan undergraduate she wrote, "The Acquisition of Land by Free Blacks in St. Mary's County Maryland," a paper for a class. In 1979 she published her first book, "Kane-Butler Genealogy – History of a Black Family." Mrs. Callum went on to edit and publish the "Flower of the Forest," a genealogical journal named after a St. Mary's County tract that the Butler family members owned for nearly 125 years.

"Agnes was a leader in African-American history in the state of Maryland and certainly in Southern Maryland. She was a pioneer in documenting a connection between both the enslaved and the enslavers in our state, She was also a pioneer in the study of the U.S. Colored Troops in Maryland," said Chris Haley, director of the Study of Slavery in Maryland at the state archives in Annapolis.

Mr. Haley recalled that Mrs. Callum once met his uncle, Alex Haley, the author of "Roots, The Saga of an American Family," which was made into a television miniseries.

She was a founding member of the Commission to Coordinate the Study, Commemoration and Impact of Slavery's History and Legacy in Maryland.

The Baltimore chapter of the African American Historical and Genealogical Society was named in her honor in 2007.

"She was an amazing woman. If it could be known, she knew it about black Catholic Baltimore and St. Mary's County. She knew the families, chapter and verse," said the Rev. Michael Roach, pastor of St. Bartholomew's Roman Catholic Church in Manchester. "She was an incomparable resource."

Family members said that much of what is known about the history of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in East Baltimore is the result of her work. Henry Kane, her paternal grandfather, joined the parish in 1896.

Mrs. Callum was a frequent contributor to *The Catholic Review*.

Mrs. Callum also wrote "7th Regiment U.S. Colored Troops," about those who served in the Civil War; "Slave Statistics"; "Black Marriages of St. Mary's County 1800-1890"; and "Black Marriages of Anne Arundel County, Maryland."

She donated 19 volumes of her research to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.

In 2008, she received an honorary doctorate in history from St. Mary's College. She was named to the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame in 2014.

A funeral Mass will be held at 11 a.m. Tuesday at St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church, 1427 N. Caroline St.

Survivors include a son, Martin James Callum of Baltimore; two daughters, Dr. Martina P. Callum of Baltimore and Agnes C. Lightfoot of Palm Coast, Fla.; a sister, Edna Martina Aiden of Baltimore; three grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. Her husband, Solomon Melvin Callum, died in 1975. A son, Paul Ambrose Foster, died in 2005. Another son, Arthur Melvin Callum, died in 2007.

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