

Elizabeth Lange was a native of Saint-Domingue—present-day Haiti—whose family fled to Cuba after the 1800 slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. Being wealthy Creoles—people of mixed race—she and her family were no longer welcome in their homeland. Perhaps they felt uncomfortable in Cuba too. For whatever reason, many Creoles, including Lange, decided to move to Baltimore in about 1812.

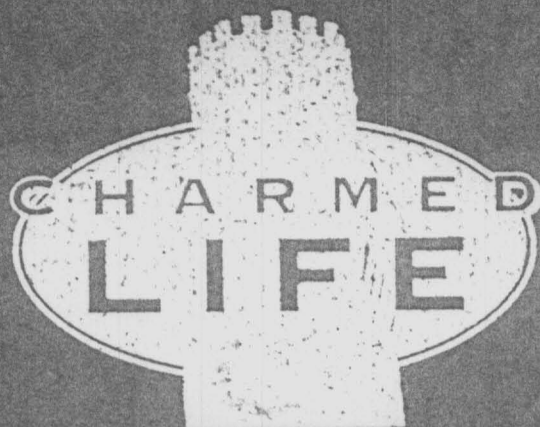
"Why Baltimore? Why would a black woman come to a slave state?" Sister Virginie Fish lets the question sink in for a moment.

"All things happen by God's intent," she explains. A retired teacher, Sister Virginie is a member of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the small, mainly African-American order of nuns that Elizabeth Lange—better known as Mother Lange—founded in Baltimore in 1829.

Today, Mother Lange's followers want her to be recognized as a Roman Catholic saint. If their canonization campaign succeeds, she will be the first African-American saint from outside Latin America. Sister Virginie serves as the effort's vice postulator—that is, as assistant to the priest who oversees research and promotional efforts on Mother Lange's behalf.

Most of Lange's saintly work was carried out at St. Frances Academy, now located at 501 E. Chase Street and still run by the Oblate Sisters. Officially, the school traces its beginnings to 1828—one year before the Oblate Sisters were organized—but its origins go back still farther.

Baltimore in the early 1800s had a large free-black population, but white schools and teachers generally refused to teach children of color, including Creole refugees. Recognizing a desperate need, Lange, then a lay person, established a school in her house on Bank Street in Fells Point. She ran the school for a decade, drawing on her own inheritance for funding. Meanwhile, on the west side of town, a French-born priest, the Rev. James Hector Joubert, was trying—and failing—to persuade white nuns to take black students. Frustrated, Joubert appealed to Archbishop James Whitfield to create an order of African-American nuns to do the job, and invited Lange and two other Haitian-born teach-



BY TOM CHALKLEY



# Soul Sister

ers to be its first adherents. On July 2, 1829, the three made vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and took on the title of "Oblate" which means (in Sister Virginie's words) "to make an offering of your life to

God." Lange was renamed Sister Mary. In recognition of her leadership skills, she was chosen to be the "superior" of the group.

Much of Mother Lange's legend stems from her life-long struggle to carry out her mission despite the pervasive racism of her time. In their first months, the Oblates and their school were shunted from one set of cramped quarters to another in the Seton Hill area before finding a house on Richmond Street, not far from the modern intersection of Park Avenue and Read Street. After the death of Joubert and Whitfield, the Oblates fell on hard times; the new arch-

bishop, Samuel Eccleston, saw no purpose in teaching black children and suggested that the nuns disband and find menial jobs. To survive, Mother Lange and her followers became housekeepers and cooks for white clergy at St. Mary's Seminary (then located downtown) and elsewhere. They scrupulously managed their meager pay to keep their school intact. In 1870, the school moved to its present location, where it continues to this day to struggle against the social legacy of institutional racism.

The only known photograph of Mother Lange is a fuzzy image from her old age, showing a dark-skinned woman with high cheekbones and penetrating eyes. Posthumous portraits of the prospective saint are essentially "age regressions" based on this one picture. She died in 1882 in a room at St. Frances.

Ten years ago, Mother Lange's admirers took the first steps toward her canonization. The process

involves a series of rigorous investigations and tests of the nominee's life and works, including a study of putative miracles attributable to her intercession with the Almighty. Sister Virginie distributes petitions, lectures to all who will listen, and sells books, pamphlets, plaques, and coloring books about Mother Lange to support the cause.

"People ask, 'Why? What difference does it make [if Mother Lange is canonized]?' Again, Sister Virginie lets the question sink in. "Why do we have the Nobel Prize? Why do we have the Olympics?

Why do we have public monuments? Because it serves as a stimulus, an impetus, an example." And, I might note, it can't hurt Baltimore to have a friend in heaven. ■