

Order of black nuns founded in 1829

■ **History:** Starting tomorrow, a stone monument will mark the spot where Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange established the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN**
SUN STAFF **RF**

Tomorrow afternoon, Mayor Martin O'Malley, Cardinal William H. Keeler, invited guests and interested citizens will gather at 610 George St. (near Paca Street) for the unveiling of a stone monument commemorating the site where in a rented house, no longer extant, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the oldest order of black nuns in the nation, in 1829.

The monument, a joint effort of the city and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, was spearheaded by Tom Saunders of the city's Community Relations Commission, who also leads tours to historic sites in Baltimore associated with black history. **Sun**

The 3,080-pound granite monument, 4 feet high and 28 inches wide, was created by Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens in Timonium. **FEB 12 2000**

The monument bears a bronze plaque explaining the significance of the site and the coat of arms of the Oblate Sisters: a blue shield divided by a white cross, with quadrants containing an anchor, two lilies and a heart.

According to Saunders, interest in the monument came about last summer when O'Malley, a Roman Catholic, was campaigning for mayor. **Sun**

"He met Sister Virginie Fish, vice postulator of the Oblate Sisters, at St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore, and heard the story of Mary Elizabeth Lange and thought there should be a marker at the site where the order began," Saunders said. **FEB 12 2000**

Elizabeth Lange was born in 1784 in Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), to a Jewish merchant father and a mulatto mother. After an uprising in Haiti,



Beatific: The Oblate Sisters and the Archdiocese of Baltimore have begun the process to make Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange a saint.

the family fled to Cuba, and eventually to Baltimore, where they settled in a home near Fells Point in 1813. **FEB 12 2000**

Thousands of refugees from political turmoil in Santo Domingo and other islands in the Caribbean had emigrated to Baltimore and found themselves in a highly segregated city where their children could not attend school. **Sun**

Lange also encountered difficulty as a free black woman in a slaveholding state and as a

French-speaking Catholic in a mostly Protestant city.

She risked being jailed for illegally teaching free and slave black children when she opened a school in her father's home. **Sun**

And when funds to operate the school became scarce, Rev. James Joubert, a Sulpician priest who worked in the city's Haitian community, helped out. It was he who urged Lange to become a nun and establish her own order because blacks were excluded from exist-

ing orders.

"Make an offering of yourself to God who in his providence will provide all your needs," it is reported that Joubert told Lange.

In 1828, she established the first school in the nation for "colored" children in Baltimore, and the next year, Lange and three others founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order for women of African descent. **FEB 12 2000**

Lange added Mary to her name when she became a nun. **Sun**

The first paragraph of the newly established order's rule stated: "The Oblate Sisters of Providence are a religious society of virgins and widows of color. Their end is to consecrate themselves to God in a special manner not only to sanctify themselves and thereby secure the greater glory of God, but also to work for the Christian education of colored children."

The order was confirmed by the Vatican in 1832, the same year a cholera epidemic paralyzed Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. Trustees of the Baltimore Bureau of the Poor sought the help of the four sisters to nurse the sick.

Ironically, one of the nuns, Sister Anthony Duchemin, nursed the cholera-stricken archbishop of Baltimore back to health but later died of the disease herself.

Today, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange's work continues. **Sun**

Besides their motherhouse on Gun Road in Catonsville, the Oblate Sisters still operate St. Frances Academy, a coeducational high school that is the oldest continuing educational institution for black students in the nation, in the 500 block of East Chase Street.

They serve in schools and orphanages in 10 states, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

"The sisters have worshiped in basement chapels. They have weathered the animosity of white Catholics who objected to seeing black women in habits. They have survived periods in which church officials, pessimistic about their survival, advised them to 'return to the world,'" *The Sun* said in an account of the order's history in 1994. **FEB 12 2000**

Lange was 98 when she died in 1882. In 1991, the Oblate Sisters and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, with the approval of the Vatican, began the process that could make Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange a saint.