

175 years remembered

St. Frances Academy to mark anniversary with cakewalk, other events

By Kimberly A.C. Wilson

Sun Staff

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The nation's oldest black school begins celebrating today its 175th anniversary with the most American of festivities: a cakewalk.

St. Frances Academy on East Chase Street in Baltimore plans an 18-month program of events, to include concerts, prayer breakfasts, parades and ceremonies at the school founded by Mother Elizabeth Lange in 1828.

"We wanted to engage the city in helping us celebrate our first 175 years," said Ralph E. Moore Jr., director of the St. Frances Community Center. "The whole thing is a birthday party, so a cakewalk with 175 cakes seemed like a very good idea."

In a cakewalk, participants walk to music on numbered spots inside a circle of cakes. When the music stops, the person standing closest to the number picked out of a hat wins one of the homemade confections.

The 2 p.m. event in the school's new gymnasium harks back to the antebellum South. The cakewalk is rooted in plantation gatherings at which the slave who best mocked the master's bourgeois mannerisms - his high-kicking, low-bowing, hat-doffing strut - stepped away with a free cake. In the 1890s, a dance of the same name evolved into the first dance of African-American origin to become a popular ballroom staple.

The school is steeped in its own rich history.

Lange, born to a wealthy Creole family that fled Haiti, lived among Baltimore's free black population in Fells Point in the early 1800s. She established the school in her house on Bank Street because there was no place for her neighbors' children to be schooled. A year later, with the encouragement of a French Sulpician priest, she organized the Oblate Sisters of Providence, an order of Roman Catholic nuns whose mission remains the education of black students.

To fund the school, which was eventually relocated to its present home at 501 E. Chase St., the sisters toiled as housekeepers and cooks for white clergy at a downtown seminary, squirreling away pennies to board and educate Baltimore's black daughters.

In January, the school opened a \$6 million addition, a 33,500-square-foot community center and gymnasium, complete with computer labs, meeting spaces and space for an evening health clinic.

A hallway in the original red brick school catalogs Lange's continuing legacy: On one wall, whole classes of graduates smile from fading photographs. On another wall, the institution's rules of attire remind the high school's students that baggy pants, loose shirt hems and excessive jewelry are unacceptable.

Efforts are under way to canonize Lange, who died in her room at the school in 1882.