



**Saint Augustine Catholic Church
Africa & Diaspora Ministry - Black History Committee**

Gabriel Coakley (c.1826 – 1898) and Mary Calloway Coakley (c.1827 - 1902)

During Black History Month, we need look no further than the founders of this parish to find examples of the pursuit of self-determination, despite great obstacles, within America and the American Roman Catholic Church. **Gabriel Coakley** and **Mary Calloway Coolidge Coakley** were two of the 91+ founding members of St. Augustine's parish. Gabriel was born enslaved in Washington, D.C. and, after obtaining his freedom, became an entrepreneur, owning Oyster Restaurants. His wife, Mary, was a seamstress and did work for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Mary also sang in the choir of St. Augustine's Church.



Gabriel, who was born about 1826, purchased many members of his family from slavery over a period of several years, including his wife Mary, starting on March 1, 1850. Gabriel concluded freeing his family members from slavery by Petition to the District of Columbia Emancipation Commission in 1863.

Starting in 1858, Free Blacks in D.C. were worshipping and had established the first school for people of color in the basement of St. Matthew's Church under the patronage of Blessed, now St. Martin de Porres. As told in an article in *America* magazine dated February 11, 1928, D.I. Murphy, the retired American Consul-General to Bulgaria, recounted a conversation he had with Gabriel Coakley in December 1885 at a parish fair. It was said that with the blessing of Fr. Charles White, the pastor of St. Mathew's, a delegation of freedmen, led by Gabriel Coakley, sought the permission of President Abraham Lincoln to have a fundraiser on the White House lawn, to help with construction of a new church.

On June 30, 1864, Gabriel was able to get the personal written assent from President Lincoln to have a Strawberry Festival on the White House lawn. This event raised money for the first church for Black Catholics in the District of Columbia -- which later became St. Augustine's R.C. Church. This event which took place on July 4, 1864 has also been documented in Morris J. MacGregor's book, The Emergence of a Black Catholic Community: St. Augustine's in Washington. President Lincoln attended the fundraiser with his wife Mary, along with several members of his cabinet. The event raised more than \$1,200 (equivalent now to about \$38,455) and had more than 2,000 attendees -- while the Civil War was still raging!

Gabriel and Mary Coakley had 14 children, all of whom were born in Washington, D.C. They were active members of St. Augustine's for many years. Gabriel passed from labor to reward on November 17, 1898 while his wife Mary departed this earth on March 12, 1902. In 2008, more than 80 Coakley descendants traveled from the United States and Canada to attend the 150th Anniversary of St. Augustine's Church.

The direct descendants of Gabriel and Mary Coakley are working with several parties to ascertain additional information about them, including sacramental records. The enclosed photos are from the family archives of the Coakley's granddaughter, **Dr. Lena Edwards** (deceased). She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 for building a clinic for Texas migrants, using her own funds. Assisting with the ongoing Coakley research are: **Dena Grant**, Church Historian, St. Augustine's R. C Church; **Fr. Raymond Kemp**, former Pastor, St. Augustine's R.C. Church, and administrator at Georgetown University; **Lina Mann**, White House Historical Association; and **Stephanie Jacobs**, Head Archivist for the R.C. Diocese of Washington, D.C. The enormous difficulties overcome by the Coakleys and founding members of this parish, and the inspiration of their faith, should inspire us today to continue in the struggle for equality.

Respectfully submitted February 2022,

Andrea Flateau, Richard Flateau and siblings Anne, Alice, John, Adele
Great, Great Grandchildren of Gabriel and Mary Coakley
Brooklyn, New York