

Dan Rodricks: A long thread of Black church history loops back to Baltimore

STAFF COMMENTARY



The needlework sampler stitched nearly 200 years ago by the Rev. William Levington, a Black Episcopal priest, for James Bosley, his church's white benefactor in Baltimore. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



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PUBLISHED: June 6, 2024 at 9:58 a.m. | UPDATED: June 6, 2024 at 5:04 p.m.

The long threads of American history run through sailcloth and battle flag, through breeches and gowns, through slave apron and immigrant scarf, through soldier's coat and nurse's cape, from cotton to silk, denim to linen, from bondage to freedom, rags to riches.

The long threads run through five centuries, through millions of people who arrived, willfully or against their will, from across oceans and borders. All of it, sewn together, forms America, each stitch a story.

Two hundred years ago, William Levington, a Black man of the cloth, sewed his name into a corner of American history when he established the first Episcopal church with an African American congregation below the Mason-Dixon Line. The sewing is not merely metaphorical; you can find the Rev. William Levington's name at the bottom of an ornate needlework sampler he presented as a gift to a white Baltimore lawyer who gave land for Levington's church.

The sampler, now part of the collections of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is headed back to Baltimore this weekend for the [200th anniversary celebration](#) of Levington's church. It's a relic from the church's founding and from the Baltimore of 1824.

Crossing the Mason-Dixon line to establish a church for Blacks was Levington's daring mission. The line, the border of Pennsylvania and Maryland, was considered the border of north and south, freedom and slavery.

By the time Levington, who had grown up in New York and Philadelphia, arrived in Baltimore to establish his church, there were about 10 million people living in the United States, 1.5 million of them in slavery. Maryland had about 107,000 people in slavery but it also had a growing population of free Blacks, many of them living and working in Baltimore.

Levington is thought to be the first Black priest to serve in the American South, says Lawrence Jackson, the Johns Hopkins professor of English and history and a leader in the university's [Inheritance Baltimore](#) project to preserve the city's Black history, culture and arts.

Levington, a 30-year-old deacon at the time, established St. James First African Protestant Episcopal Church on the second floor of a building in what is today downtown Baltimore, a couple of blocks from Lexington Market. Hard as it is to believe, he had white benefactors, and one of them, James Bosley, gave Levington land for a church — a lot near Saratoga Street and Guilford Avenue — and another man is said to have donated 5,000 bricks for the construction.

In gratitude for the gift, Levington stitched a colorful needlepoint sampler and gave it to Bosley on the Fourth of July 1832. The sampler is 21 inches by 22 inches, with eight colors, all silk thread, embroidered into linen. Here's how curators of the Williamsburg collection describe it:

"The design consists of a centered large woven basket filled with large scaled flowers. The basket has ornamental peacock-head handles. The basket sits on a plinth with a beehive which has upside down flower buds at sides. ... A large scale flower bud and vine border is at the sides. Below inscriptions and side borders at bottom are large scaled upside down strawberries. The bottom border is of grass."

After the sampler surfaced in 1996, the museum purchased it. The curators at Williamsburg were struck by a couple of things: "Samplers associated with male adults are so rare that their numbers are not documented. Almost as rare are samplers marked by African-Americans of either sex. The Reverend Levington could have expressed his gratitude in a number of ways. He could have commissioned a piece of silver or furniture in Bosley's honor, written a poem, or presented a plaque. William Levington, however, chose to demonstrate his gratitude through the intimate stitches of a sampler."

Levington was ordained a priest in 1828; he died in 1836. The Rev. George Freeman Bragg, a later rector of St. James, wrote a history of African Americans in the Episcopal church, and summarized the story of the Rev. William Levington with these words: "And thus it came to pass that the little African babe born in New York ... was the first of his kind to penetrate the land where slavery reigned."

The St. James congregation moved a couple of times over the years, eventually landing in 1932 at its present location on Lafayette Square in West Baltimore, taking over a church from a white congregation that had moved to Middle River.

In anticipation of the church's 200th jubilee, Jackson and his colleagues at Inheritance Baltimore asked the museum if the Levington/Bosley sampler could be loaned for this weekend's event. Parishioners joined in the effort with a petition. "Wonderfully," Jackson wrote in an email, "[the museum] not only agreed to pull the embroidered tapestry from the exhibit, 'I made this...': The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans,' but they decided to cover the cost of insurance, transportation and installation."

And so, on Sunday the long thread of history loops back to Baltimore. Two employees of the Williamsburg museum will transport the sampler to St. James for the jubilee mass. The **Most Rev. William Curry**, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church and a former rector of St. James, is the scheduled celebrant. The sampler will then be installed in a special exhibit at the Episcopal Diocesan Center of Maryland on University Parkway. It will be on display through July 7.