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## EARLY CONVERSIONS TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA (1521-1830)<sup>1</sup>

The history of conversions to the Church in America may be divided into three periods. The first period from 1521,—the date of Ponce de Leon's landing on the southwest point of the coast of Florida, when priests who accompanied the expedition established the first mission to the Indians in the United States, to 1607, the year of the Jamestown settlement. The second period from 1607,—when Jamestown formed the first beginning of white colonies in the new world, to the year 1830. This era embraced the Colonial and Revolutionary periods, and the first fifty years of American independence. The third period from 1830,—a date just prior to the commencement of the great tide of Catholic immigration, to the present day. This period is chiefly noteworthy as embracing the Oxford Movement of 1833-45, with its influence on America. Conversions during the third and last decade became so numerous that only the earlier ones (before 1850-60) can very well, as a whole, be treated biographically. In the last sixty years converts have come into the Church in such great numbers that they can only be properly recorded under the general head of statistics.

So far as our present knowledge of the records informs us, there

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<sup>1</sup> A complete bibliography for the use of those interested in this important subject would fill many pages. The general histories of the Church in America, such as the standard work of John Gilmary Shea, and the many diocesan histories which have been published during the nineteenth century, contain valuable references to the converts to the Catholic faith. Special biographical publications on the conversions prior to 1830—the period covered by this article, are not very numerous. In the pages of the *Records and Researches of the American Catholic Historical Society* of Philadelphia, in the *Catholic Chronologist*, edited by James A. Rooney, LL.D., (1945 83rd Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.), in the *Catholic World*, *St. Peter's Net*, the *Missionary*, *Truth*, and in the *Rosary*, articles have been written from time to time on these early conversions. The last named magazine featured a series of such articles on converts in the army and navy and in the different universities and non-Catholic institutions of learning. They were: *Convert Sons of Kenyon*, (vol. xxxii, Jan., 1908); *Convert Sons of West Point* (vol. xxxii, Feb., 1908); *Convert Sons of Nashotah Seminary* (vol. xxxii, April, 1908); *Converts from the Church of the Advent, Boston* (vol. xxxii, May, 1908); *Convert Sons of the Navy* (vol. xxxiii, July 1908); *Converts of Note* (vol. xxxiii, August, 1908); *Convert Sons of Harvard* (vol. xxxiii, October, 1908),—all written by SCANNELL O'NEILL, Esq.

were no conversions among the white settlers before 1634, when the Catholic colony of Maryland was founded; but the Indian convert history runs all through the three divisions named above and is still being carried on at the present day in Alaska and the Northwest country. In this present article, the purpose of which is to call attention to the necessity of gathering up into one volume the history of these conversions, we shall confine ourselves to the first and second periods,—1521-1830. The most logical way of ascertaining the number of these conversions is to follow the geographical growth of the early colonies themselves. This geographical division covers every corner of the United States. European colonization in America up to the year 1607 was the work of Catholic countries and of men professing the Catholic faith. During this first period (1521-1607), the work of conversion was almost entirely among the native Indians. Beginning with "Florida," which at that time included Virginia, Kentucky, the Carolinas, and Georgia, with other parts of the South, the missions to the Indians, which were directed by the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits, attained a development that held the promise of a brilliant success. Then came in chronological order the establishment of the Church in Maryland (1634), where the first Jesuit missions were established by Father Andrew White and his companions. They founded a number of stations among the different tribes and were very successful in converting the Indians until 1645, when the Puritans and other European *emigrés*, who had been given a safe shelter in the Maryland colony, repaid the kindness they had received by plundering the churches, the missions, and the houses of the Catholics, and ended by sending Fathers White and Copley to England, as prisoners on trial for their lives. Father White's *Relatio itineris ad Marylandiam*, small as it is, gives a very fair account of these Maryland Indian missions together with the methods employed by the priests to convert the natives in this colony. He also wrote an Indian catechism, and a grammar of the Piscataway language, the first Indian grammar written by an Englishman. In New England, the Rev. Nicholas Aubry landed on the island of Ste. Croix (now known as De Monts Island) and celebrated Mass for the first time on New England soil (1604). Later, in 1613, a foundation was made at St. Sauveur, near Mt. Desert, by Father Pierre Biard and three companions. From here as a centre, missions to the Indians, in charge of the Jesuits, Sulpicians and Capuchins, spread

all over Maine, and penetrated into Canada on the north. In New York, as far as is known, the Recollect Father Joseph de la Roche de Daillon was the first to begin similar work (1626). He was followed in 1642 by Father Isaac Jogues. The subsequent history of the missions among the Iroquois, Hurons, and Mohawks of New York State, with their splendid though ephemeral prosperity, is the best known page of early conversions in America. Pennsylvania saw the beginning of the Catholic native-conversion movement in 1755, through Father Claude François Virot, S. J. The Ohio River and Lake Region, which at that time embraced Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota was part of the French Jurisdiction of Canada up to 1789. The first mission west of the Huron country was established in 1660 in upper Michigan by Father René Menard. Other missions, including that of Father Marquette (Illinois, 1674), followed in rapid succession. The Louisiana Mission (1763), embracing Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, with a part of Illinois, was first visited by Father Marquette. Other missions, founded by different religious orders, followed in 1682-1698-1702, and during succeeding periods. The Central Western States included the labors of Father Juan de Padilla, who accompanied Coronado's expedition in 1540. He founded a mission in southern Kansas. The Jesuit Father Allouez, in 1666, and the Recollect Father Louis Hennepin, in 1680, who labored among the Indians from the Wisconsin border to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, were followed by numerous other missionaries, ending with the noted Father De Smet in 1848. Texas was first evangelized by Father Andres de Olmos, a Franciscan (1544). The wonderful labors of the Franciscans in Texas cover the period up to 1812. In the territory now occupied by New Mexico and Arizona, the cross was first planted by Friar Marcus de Niza, a Franciscan (1539). He was followed by Father Juan de Padilla, Father Juan de la Cruz, and a lay brother, Luis de Escalona, all of whom were afterwards murdered by the Indians. These were the first Christian missionaries within the present area of the United States to be martyred for the Catholic faith. The California Missions began in 1769. This was the year when the first of the great Catholic Missions, which will always remain one of the most picturesque monuments of American history, were established by the Franciscans on the Pacific Coast. Previous to this date, Lower California had been

visited by the Jesuits, who established eighteen missions there between 1697 and 1769. In earlier times Lower California had been visited by Cortés in 1533, and Upper California by Cabrillo in 1542. Since Cortés was always friendly to the clergy, it is supposed that he was accompanied by priests on this expedition. In numbers and scope California ranks next to Florida in missionary endeavor and the harvesting of converts. How far the Mission Archives still extant in California and Mexico would enable us to give the exact number of conversions is a problem which has not yet been seriously studied by Catholic historians. To the north of California, in the Columbia region, the first knowledge of Christianity in the Northwest (including Montana, Oregon and Washington) came through Catholic Iroquois Indians and French Canadians about 1820. This field was to become the scene of Father Peter De Smet's great activity in 1841. After him came a long line of other missionaries, chiefly Jesuits and Oblates, who carried the faith to the remotest parts of the Northwest.

The reader has already noticed that this geographical summary of the development of missionary activity in the United States is like the growth of a mighty tree. Planted in Florida, and spreading northward, it branched to the east and west and then northeast and northwest, until the whole vast continent had seen the Black Robes, who numbered everywhere their harvest of souls by thousands. Some of these Indian converts became famous. Among them are Catharine Tegakouita, the saintly maiden of the Mohawk tribe; the Tayac Emperor of the Piscataways in Maryland, who was baptized by the Jesuit Father White; Mary Kittamaquund, his daughter, from whom several distinguished Maryland families are said to be descended; and Daniel Garakoutie, chief of the Iroquois (1669). It is recorded in the history of Maine that Baron de Castine, who helped build the church of St. Ann at Panawaniske (Oldtown) in 1688, a parish which exists to this day and is the oldest in New England, married the daughter of the Sagamore chief, Modockewando. There are many other records of prominent Indian converts in different parts of the United States. If I have dwelt on these primitive conversions, it is for two reasons. First it shows, what is so seldom thought of in these days, that—following the discovery by Columbus—the first religion established everywhere in America was Catholic and no other. Secondly, the vast harvest of white converts to the Church,

was built upon, and followed these conversions of the Indian, taking geographically almost the same trend. Wherever the Indian missions were left undisturbed, they prospered in a marvelous manner. It was when they were attacked by hostile Indian tribes, by white traders, or by European explorers bent on conquest, or later by the English colonists, that they declined and died out. Many writers have already paid glowing tributes to the conversions achieved among the Indians by the early missionaries, great numbers of whom laid down their lives for the cause. With Puritan New England on one side and the violently anti-Catholic colony of Jamestown on the other, and with thousands of hostile savages in every direction, they yet conquered because the motive of their zeal, which knew no bounds in their devotion to the Indians, was a supernatural one. With hearts that were afire with a strong conquering love of souls, they blazed their way through the wilderness over thousands of miles, enduring heat and cold, fire and flood, until these primitive conversions which they effected embraced every tribe and covered the whole area of the western continent. With such a foundation, it is not surprising that the later history of the Church's expansion in America among the white settlers was so fruitful of results.

The complete history of the early conversions among the non-Catholic colonists is at present the work taken up by the writer for publication in book-form later on. Up to the present time only about one-half the sources for this study have been investigated. It is a difficult, though necessary task, and its ultimate success depends upon the facility with which these sources are made known. In most cases the desired data are scattered; they are hard to find, and often in a very fragmentary condition. The principal sources of information are:—church records and archives, which are always the most direct and reliable; the archives of Religious Houses, Colleges and Universities, such, for example as the archives at Georgetown University, at St. Rose's Priory, Springfield, Kentucky, in the old Missions in California, and in the Edwards' collection at the University of Notre Dame; old newspaper files; pamphlets, many of which were, and still are being written for private circulation by the descendants of early converts and which are not to be found in book stores, and can be obtained only as a favor; histories and biographies now in print and others which are out of print, as well as provincial

and community histories; old letters, some of which are still in private archives, and others in the possession of private individuals; and old encyclopedias. These are the silent, printed references; but beside these there are traditional sources, namely, the recollections of learned men, both lay and clerical, living in every part of the United States who have stored away in their memories, as the result of years of study and research a vast fund of information which, if they have the time to place it at the writer's disposal, will help to make this work complete. There are no books dealing professedly with seventeenth and eighteenth century conversions that are known to the writer.

The white conversions to the Church in the Colonies begin rightly with Maryland. Maryland was founded by the convert son of a convert father, Cecilius Calvert, second Lord Baltimore, eldest son and heir of George Calvert, first Lord Baltimore, who became a Catholic in England, probably in the year 1624. In November, 1633, Leonard Calvert, a younger brother of Cecilius, set sail for Maryland in charge of a party of colonists on board the *Ark* and the *Dove*. They numbered in all about three hundred souls, one-third of whom were Catholics. The place of their landing they named St. Mary's; and here on March 25, 1634, Mass was celebrated for the first time. The apostolic labors of the two priests, who accompanied the expedition, were so successful that in a short time almost all the Protestant colonists who were of the party became Catholics. This first Catholic colony in America was ideal. Its laws were wise, its spirit was noble, and its toleration formed a marked contrast to that of the Jamestown and Puritan settlements. Religious freedom was the rule. Bancroft, in his *History of the United States*, gives to Cecilius Calvert the honor of being the first in the annals of mankind to make religious freedom the basis of the state.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vol. I, ch. VII, edition of 1838. In the edition of 1883, Bancroft suppressed this word of praise. A comparison between these two passages will give the reader an idea of the eminent historian's method of "re-editing" his work, in which edition (1883) the praise given to Catholic institutions in the New World was either weakened or deleted altogether.

(Text of 1838)

Calvert deserves to be ranked among the most wise and benevolent lawgivers of all ages. He was the first in the history of the Christian world to seek

(Text of 1883)

Sir George Calvert deserves to be ranked among the wisest and most benevolent lawgivers, for he connected his hopes of the aggran-

Under this beneficent and liberal rule the colony flourished and conversions increased.

The persecutions carried on against the Catholics by the Puritan element in Maryland after 1649, drove many colonists in different directions. The first large settlement of Catholics outside Maryland seems to have been made in 1785 near Bardstown, Kentucky. This state, the first great nursery of the Faith west of the Alleghenies, has a glorious Catholic history, and, as might be expected, conversions there were numerous. History records that in a series of missions given during the time of Bishop Flaget (1826), six thousand people went to Confession and Holy Communion, while over twelve hundred were confirmed and many converts were received. One of the earliest cradles of the faith in Kentucky, whence the apostolic labor of conversions was carried on, was St. Rose's Dominican Priory at Springfield, founded in 1806. Many of the conversions were effected by the saintly Father Nerinckx. From Kentucky the light of faith spread to St. Louis. The territory known as the Louisiana Purchase had a varied history. Between 1658 and 1826, the country east and west of the Mississippi had its jurisdiction changed five times; nor were the different divisions on each side of the river always under the same jurisdiction at the same time. Whether or not this retarded its development, the fact remains that in 1810 the present great Catholic diocese of St. Louis was a struggling village in the midst of a wilderness. When Bishop Dubourg took possession of the See in 1818, the pro-Cathedral was a poor wooden building in a more or less dilapidated condition. Under the great Bishop Rosati, of the Congregation of the Mission, St. Louis entered upon its

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for religious security and peace by the practice of justice, and not by the exercise of power; to plan the establishment of popular institutions with the enjoyment of liberty of conscience; to advance the career of civilization by recognizing the rightful equality of all Christian sects. The asylum of Papists was the spot, where, in a remote corner of the world, on the banks of rivers which, as yet, had hardly been explored, the mild forbearance of a proprietary adopted religious freedom as the basis of the State.

dizement of his family with the establishment of popular institutions; and, being a "Papist, wanted not charity toward Protestants."

present wonderful development. We read of him that when he preached "his audience included men of every rank and station, and so convincing were his words, and so impressive his personality, that his converts in St. Louis for one year alone (1839) numbered two hundred and ninety-nine." Evangelization of the white colonists had been made at an earlier date by the Jesuits who labored in every part of the great territory then included in the diocese.

The second great section of development in the matter of conversions was that now occupied by New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The average non-Catholic will tell you that the history of New York began with Hendrick Hudson; but nearly a century earlier two Catholic navigators, Verrazano and Gomez, sailed some distance up the Hudson and placed New York under the patronage of St. Anthony. It is presumed, though not certain, that these explorers were accompanied by priests, and that Mass was said on the Island (Manhattan). The fact that Catholic colonizers seldom sailed from the Old World without one or more priests on their ships lends color to this supposition. Subsequent occupation by the Dutch resulted in the prohibition of public worship on the part of Catholics. When Father Jogues reached the island of Manhattan in 1644, he found only two Catholics, an Irishman and a Portuguese woman. It was not until 1684, under the Catholic Governor, Thomas Dongan, that religious liberty for the Catholics was established, making it possible for conversions to occur more frequently. It was in the first Catholic church erected in New York, old St. Peter's on Barclay Street (1785), that the saintly Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder and first superioress of the Sisters of Charity in the United States, was received into the Church on March 14, 1805. Other converts of that period were Henry James Anderson, born in 1799, who became a Catholic in 1849, and who held the chair of mathematics and astronomy in Columbia University (New York) from 1825 to 1850; and Mrs. Thomas Floyd, whose husband was known as "The Father of American Shorthand," and who, in 1789, reprinted in America his work, *The Unerring Authority of the Catholic Church in Matters of Faith*. Mrs. Floyd, originally a Presbyterian, became a Catholic at Lancaster, Pa., in 1780.

It has been said of Pennsylvania that no other American colony had such a mixture of languages, nationalities and religions as the first settlements in Cambria and Westmoreland Counties, in the

western part of the State, and in Philadelphia. Yet the Catholic history of Pennsylvania stands out saliently in the records of the early church. The labors of the convert priest, Prince Gallitzin, were rich in results, and especially in converts. We read, among others, of a Mrs. John Burgoon living at McGuire's Settlement about 150 miles from Conewago, who was instructed and received into the Church by the prince-priest in 1796. In modern times nowhere can so much data about converts be found as in the archives of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia. William Penn was blessed with the great gift of religious tolerance and under his benign influence Catholics enjoyed immunity from persecution. Many distinguished converts came into the Church, some of whose descendants live in Philadelphia and other parts of Pennsylvania to this day. The fifth Bishop (and first Archbishop of Philadelphia), the distinguished James Frederic Wood, was a convert; as was also the second Bishop of Erie, the Right Rev. Josue Moody Young. The Baltimore Cathedral Archives give also the names of Major Noble of Western Pennsylvania, and Major McHenry, both converts, who fought under Wayne.

In the New England States the same successful beginnings of conversions to the faith are to be seen. In 1668, Bishop Laval of Quebec visited Vermont, and after that the Jesuits visited the State and made many converts among the white settlers. In the Archives of the Cathedral, Baltimore, we read that "converts formed a considerable proportion of the congregation ruled by Bishops Matignon and Cheverus in Boston"; and again, from the same source, that "the little congregation that gathered around the Kavanaugh family at New Castle, Maine, in the time of Bishop Cheverus (1797), was made up mostly of converts." New England was, however, handicapped by its strong Puritanism. In 1722, Massachusetts ordered the Catholic Indians to deliver up every priest among them, and yet, despite this religious bias, the State has a wonderful convert history. One of the first converts in Connecticut, (where as late as 1843 there were but three resident priests in the whole State), was Bishop Tyler of Hartford. The Rev. John Thayer, missionary and convert, was born in Boston, 1755, and was received into the Church in 1783. His family were among the early Puritan settlers, and he himself had been a minister of the Congregational church and chaplain to Governor Hancock. His conversion took place in Rome and was

the result of a dispute into which he had been drawn regarding the authenticity of miracles worked through Blessed Benedict Joseph Labre, then lately deceased. Among the numerous nineteenth century conversions in New England are those of the Barber family in New Hampshire, in 1817.

Ohio and the Great Lakes region had many old and interesting missions, Kaskaskia and Cahokia in Illinois, the one near Rockford, the other, near St. Louis, which is said to have been the sole centre of civilization in the Mississippi Valley for some time. From archives in the possession of the writer, mention may be made of a Mr. William Morrison, who is said to be a prominent convert of Kaskaskia in the early part of the nineteenth century. Another early mission was Vincennes, which later became the See of the saintly Bishop Bruté who, like all the early bishops, numbered many converts among his flock. There was also the parish of Saint Anne, in what is now Detroit, the Mother Church of the Northwest, which then included all of Michigan and most of Wisconsin. Its parish records have been preserved in unbroken sequence to the present day, and contain many interesting records of early conversions. The church now standing is the sixth of the name. Its first pastor, Father de l'Halle, who took charge July 26, 1701, was martyred in 1706 by the Indians. The history of the church in Ohio begins at a later period than that of others in the Central West; but this state is noteworthy for its long line of distinguished converts who began to come into the Church during the Oxford Movement.

The twenty-one Missions established by the Franciscans in California, beginning with San Diego in 1769, and stretching northward to Sonoma, numbered their converts by thousands. The Church records and archives show that these converts were not all Indian. The daughters of Spanish settlers, when asked in marriage by non-Catholic *émigrés* or traders, invariably refused their consent unless their prospective *fiancés* would become Catholics. The archives of the different parishes contain the records of these conversions among the white population, though naturally the Indian converts predominated. Statistics of the California missions tell us that the Padres baptized 99,000 souls, of whom about 9,000 were not Indians. It would be interesting to know just how many of these nine thousand whites were converts. The first white settlement in the Columbia region of the Northwest seems to have been begun in 1811, and

the first priest sent to minister to them was Father Blanchet. It is a noteworthy fact that it was Catholic Iroquois Indians, evangelized by Father Jogues, who first carried the news of the Gospel to the heathen Indians farther west. It was these latter Indians who asked for missionaries, so that they, in their turn, were the cause of the reception into the Church of later white converts. The Pacific Coast has many distinguished converts. Two, of the early part of the nineteenth century, were Judge Peter Burnett, first Governor of California, and Dr. John McLaughlin, Governor of the Hudson Bay Company and founder of Oregon City.

It has not been my purpose in this brief summary to give any detailed account of the early converts in America but rather to point out the chronological and geographical growth of conversions in general, and the sources where their history may be found. Present-day Catholic scholars owe it to the future to preserve the names and the lives of all these early converts for the future history of the Church in this country. America is pre-eminently a convert country, and the rapid growth in the work of conversions, carried on during the last generation by the Paulist Fathers and the other Orders in the Church throws a value heretofore unappreciated around the missionary activity of this early period up to 1830.

GEORGINA PELL CURTIS.