Summary:

The Society of Jesus participated in slaveholding from the 16th to the 19th centuries. At the time of the order’s mid-eighteenth-century suppression, Jesuits claimed ownership over about 2,000 enslaved people in the British and French colonies of northern America. After the order’s restoration in the United States in 1805, the Jesuits turned to slaveholding again in their new and reestablished missions in the Mid-Atlantic region and along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Over the course of the 19th century, the Jesuits in northern America owned, rented and received as payment in kind on term over 700 people. Between the order’s restoration and the end of the Civil War, all Jesuit missions, provinces, and institutions in northern America benefited in some form from enslaved labor. When Jesuits refrained from or abandoned the use of enslaved labor, they nearly always did so for financial reasons or because of legal prohibitions, rather than out of principled opposition. The order in the United States did not participate in the 19th-century abolition movement, and some Jesuits openly justified slavery as socially and morally beneficial for Black people.

Research into Jesuit complicity in American slaveholding is ongoing, as is research on the peoples and communities whom Jesuits brutalized through slavery. New details are constantly being discovered, and greater precision and understanding are steadily being achieved. The pages that follow offer a succinct, candid and up-to-date description of Jesuits’ participation in slaveholding in northern America in the 17th to 19th centuries. It is hoped that this overview will encourage readers to pursue further study and deepen their own engagement in the process of acknowledgment and atonement. A select set of resources appears at the end of this document.

1. Jesuits and Slavery in Northern America up to the Suppression

English and French Jesuit missions claimed ownership over more than 2,000 people in mid-18th-century northern America, an area roughly encompassing for the purposes of this document what are today the United States, Canada and the Caribbean. Most of these enslaved people were used as field laborers, some as household servants and artisans. The revenues generated by this enslaved labor supported Jesuit ministries and communities.

Among the early Catholic missionaries in the West Indies, French Jesuits became involved in the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-17th century through sugar production. They turned to this highly profitable and labor-intensive crop to fund their Caribbean missions. French colonial plantations made extensive use of enslaved labor from Africa. By the mid-18th century, Jesuits ran multiple cash crop plantations with enslaved labor across the Caribbean. As the French Jesuits moved along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and around the Great Lakes, they also acquired enslaved Native Americans through trade with,
or as gifts from, native peoples. In the 18th century, mission posts at Quebec, Detroit and Michilimackinac were all supported by enslaved Indigenous people. In 1719, French Jesuits introduced the first enslaved Africans to the Kaskaskia mission, which had been founded out of Quebec in 1703 for the conversion of the Illinois peoples. At the time of the order’s suppression in the French colonial territories of North America (1763), the Jesuits claimed ownership over 68 people at Kaskaskia, making the order the largest slaveholder in Illinois Country. Further south, over a hundred enslaved people of African origin or descent labored on Jesuit plantations founded outside of New Orleans in 1727. The royal confiscations of Jesuit property that followed the Suppression included the enslaved people. Colonial agents auctioned off the enslaved people from the New Orleans plantation, as well as 48 enslaved people from Kaskaskia who had been forcibly transported to New Orleans. These revenues went into the French royal treasury.

In the English colony of Maryland, Jesuits, like other elite colonists, were granted land when they arrived, beginning in 1634. Farming revenues were to support the Jesuit mission in an era when English law penalized adherence to Catholicism and no direct governmental support of a Catholic mission would have been tolerated. The Jesuits — like all major landowners, Protestant and Catholic — initially used indentured servants to work on their “manors.” Indentured servants, mainly Europeans, were contracted for a set period of years. At the end of their indenture, they received a parcel of land to support themselves. Larger landowners in the Chesapeake region gradually judged this labor model inadequate: Indentured servants were not available in sufficient quantity for the large-scale tobacco farming these landowners had in mind. The elite colonists decided that enslaved labor from Africa was a viable replacement and began the importation of enslaved Africans to the Maryland colony in 1642. The English Jesuits first acquired enslaved people in the late 17th century through bequests and were buying, selling and trading them by the early 18th century. The Jesuits concentrated most of their enslaved labor at six plantations across Maryland. Although in early correspondence to the Maryland Jesuits the English provincial superior advised against using female house servants on the grounds of decorum, no concern over the morality of using enslaved labor or engaging in the slave trade has been found in the mission’s colonial-era archives.

When the papal decree of suppression was imposed on the Maryland mission in 1773, the order ceased to exist in the colony. Jesuit priests became secular clergy and fell under the jurisdiction of English church authorities, and unordained Jesuits were released from their vows. The mission properties, including the enslaved people, remained largely intact, however, through many of the same means that had been used to circumvent the English penal laws for a century and a half. One such mechanism was that the multiple deeds comprising the total property of the mission were diffused across a number of individual Jesuits (as of 1773, ex-Jesuits) and non-Jesuits, including even some sympathetic non-Catholics. Following Maryland’s independence from Britain and the state’s enactment of new corporation laws, the diverse titleholders organized the properties into the Corporation of Roman Catholic Clergymen in 1792 and placed the Corporation at the disposal of John Carroll, a former Jesuit and the first bishop of Baltimore. Under these auspices, the plantations continued to operate with enslaved labor and to generate revenues for church activities. While the plantations sometimes operated at a deficit, what profits they produced funded, for example, mission churches and priestly circuit-riding in the mid-Atlantic region. When Bishop Carroll and other church leaders decided in 1786 to found the first Catholic college in the United States — Georgetown College, they directed some revenues from the farming and from the sale of “supernumerary slaves” to the school. The Corporation also assigned one plantation, the Bohemia manor on the upper Chesapeake Bay, to the Sulpician Fathers for the support of the first Catholic diocesan seminary in the United States, St. Mary’s in Baltimore, which had been founded in 1791.

Before the Suppression, slaveholding was not unique to the missions in northern America. In the mid-18th century, Jesuits worldwide claimed ownership over about 21,000 people. At the order’s Restoration in the early 19th century, many nations implemented severe restrictions on Jesuit activity and made their global return to slaveholding impossible. New ideas about liberty also made slaveholding objectionable in ways it had not been earlier. The exception, however, was
in United States, where Jesuits could and did take up slaveholding once again. After the order’s restoration in the United States in 1805, Jesuits gradually acquired control of the Corporation, including its human property. The Corporation eventually became the civil entity corresponding to the Jesuits’ Maryland province. The Maryland mission was thus unusual, compared to the rest of the order, in gaining after its restoration so much of the property that it had lost because of the Suppression, and in becoming slave owners once again.

2. Jesuits and Slavery in the 19th Century

Following the order’s universal restoration in 1814, the Jesuits expanded their slaveholding across North America. European Jesuits were attracted in significant numbers to the United States by the missionary possibilities and as a refuge from new, secular, anti-Jesuit laws at home. A group of Belgians, including the novice Pierre De Smet, immigrated for these reasons to the United States and settled at the Jesuit plantation at White Marsh in Maryland in 1822. At the time in some financial distress, the Maryland mission was unable to support the Belgians; but Louis Dubourg, the bishop of Louisiana and the Two Floridas (and earlier, as a Sulpician priest, the third president of Georgetown College) was petitioning the Jesuits to establish western missions for white settlers and American Indians. The Belgian Jesuits therefore relocated to the St. Louis region. Six enslaved people from the White Marsh plantation — Thomas and Molly Brown, Moses and Nancy Queen, and Isaac and Susanna Hawkins — were forced to separate from their families and journey to the Mississippi Valley in bondage to the Belgian Jesuits. These enslaved people helped establish the St. Stanislaus seminary and plantation in Florissant, Missouri. Soon enslaved people were also forced to work at new missions and churches in St. Ferdinand, Portages des Sioux and St. Charles in Missouri. In 1829 the Maryland Jesuits forced 16 more people — the families of Proteus and Anny Hawkins and Jack and Sally Queen — from White Marsh to St. Stanislaus. In the same year, the Missouri Jesuits accepted St. Louis College (now University) from the bishop and brought several of their enslaved with them to work on campus and eventually on the college’s farm north of the city. Between 1823 and the abolition of slavery in 1865, Jesuits in the Missouri mission relied on the forced labor of upward of 70 people. To the extent that this mission served as the launching pad for Jesuit activities across the Midwest and the territories west of the Mississippi, Jesuit slaveholding and the contribution of enslaved people must be accounted for in any comprehensive evaluation of these activities in the antebellum period, including the trips of Father De Smet and the early Italian Jesuits in the Indian territories of the Northwest.

The post-suppression French Jesuits also returned to slaveholding as they adapted to the new missionary situation from Louisiana to Quebec. In the 1830s and 1840s the French Jesuits accepted operation of St. Mary’s College in Kentucky and Spring Hill College in Alabama from local bishops. These institutions included enslaved people among their assets. When the Jesuits founded St. Charles College in Grand Coteau, they borrowed and rented enslaved labor from the nearby Sisters of the Sacred Heart and neighboring lay people. Their purchases of enslaved people began with Ignatius Gough, Philadie and her daughter Rachel, and increased from there. In 1846 French Jesuits left St. Mary’s College in Kentucky and relocated to St. John’s College in the Bronx (now Fordham University). New York had completed its process of abolition in 1841, so these French Jesuits left their enslaved people in Kentucky. At this time, the Missouri mission was expanding into the Ohio River valley region as well, and in 1848 the Missouri Jesuits accepted St. Joseph’s College in Bardstown, Kentucky, from the bishop. They assumed ownership of the college’s enslaved people, hired additional labor out from local slave owners and obtained a few more enslaved people from the novitiate farm at Florissant.

A word must be said regarding religion and the treatment of enslaved people by the Jesuits. In the colonial period, slave-owning society was divided over whether to allow enslaved people to adopt Christianity. From early on, however, the Jesuits encouraged those they held in bondage to receive baptism and catechesis. Canonical records about the people the Jesuits owned — logs of baptisms, marriages and burials, for example — comprise a significant portion of extant mission archives. Christian conversion provided added justification for slaveholding since, by the Jesuits’ reasoning, the sacraments, a moral code and
catechesis offered the enslaved people the means to salvation. Of course, Jesuits could not fully control how the enslaved people adopted, adapted or rejected what the Jesuits taught. Whether Christianity tempered the Jesuit treatment of enslaved people is another matter. The expression a “priest’s slave,” found in Jesuit correspondence, has sometimes wrongly been interpreted to suggest that the Jesuits were especially lenient, even generous masters. But when Jesuits used the term, it was with dissatisfaction that any lax treatment on their part was to the moral detriment of the enslaved people. A province consultor complained in a letter to Father General in 1829, for example, that the enslaved people were “for the most part corrupt and are corrupted without punishment,” and they would “perhaps abandon their sins under harsh masters and be saved.”

The fact of the matter is that brutality was a key component in sustaining the system of chattel slavery across the Americas, and Jesuits enforced their control over their human property with typical violence. The Jesuit archives preserve ample evidence of floggings, imprisonments and the punitive selling-off of those who tried to escape. After visiting the plantations on behalf of Father General in 1819 and 1820, the Irish Jesuit Peter Kenney remonstrated the priests for beating enslaved people, especially women, and directed that corporal punishment be administered instead only by Jesuit brothers and lay overseers. While Jesuits sometimes expressed concern for the family life of those they owned, enslaved people judged “supernumerary” were routinely sold off, often without regard to age or familial connections. The archives are also full of concern about runaways. John McElroy — the builder of the largest Catholic parish church in United States at the time [St. John the Evangelist in Frederick, Maryland (1837)] and founder of two colleges [one in Frederick (1829); the other, Boston College (1857/1863)] — signed numerous runaway advertisements, paid out rewards to runaway hunters and oversaw the punishment of runaways. McElroy also frequently advised superiors on acceptable market prices for enslaved people. Kenney likewise took Maryland and Missouri Jesuits to task for the appalling living conditions of the enslaved people. Records indicate the shelter provided to the enslaved people was often in serious disrepair and crammed with multiple families. One enslaved man, Thomas Brown, used his literacy (some of the people enslaved by the Jesuits were able to learn rudimentary reading and writing skills) to complain of the squalid living conditions to which he was subjected. Enslaved at St. Louis University, he and his wife Molly lived in an unheated outbuilding of rotting logs. As the cold winter months approached in 1832, Thomas wrote the Jesuit leadership, requesting that he be allowed to purchase his freedom and that of his wife. His plea was ignored.

The notorious mass sale of enslaved people by the Maryland Province in 1838 has received extensive scholarly attention since the 1980s and significant national attention since 2015. This horrible episode constitutes a low point in this abysmal chapter of Jesuit history. Since the restoration in 1805, Maryland Jesuits had been engaged in an extensive argument about whether to continue managing the plantations and owning enslaved people. Over more than three decades, the Jesuits considered several alternatives to what now ranks among the largest sales of people in Maryland history. In 1814 the Corporation leadership (at that point a group not identical to the mission governance and sometimes at odds with it) had even resolved to emancipate the enslaved people in phases. The decision was never implemented and was formally rescinded in 1820. A few Jesuits favored manumitting all the enslaved people but keeping them on the plantations as tenant farmers. Despite small profitable experiments along these lines on one Jesuit plantation, the proposal did not garner broad support, especially after 1820. Most Jesuits wanted to retain ownership of the enslaved people. They understood the plantations as part of their patrimony and saw it as their Christian duty to care for the enslaved people (a common, 19th-century, white-supremacist defense of slavery). As the likelihood of a mass sale increased in the 1830s, some in this group began denouncing slave trading, as distinct from slaveholding, as immoral. In contrast, the faction advocating for the sale argued that the plantations and the slaveholding were unprofitable, risky and burdensome. This group also deplored the rural manors for diverting the Jesuits from the urban commitments they should be developing. Behind all these arguments was a keen awareness of the financial strain under which many province enterprises, including not only Georgetown College but also the plantations themselves, operated. The Jesuits also looked at the burgeoning Catholic immigrant population and were excited by the prospects of serving it.
Wide-ranging, ambitious and earnest apostolic aspirations and general financial concerns, more than financial worries about any single institution, drove the discernment which resulted in the mass sale of people in 1838.

After extensive lobbying by the province leadership, the superior general in Rome permitted the sale on certain conditions. The conditions included that the revenues from the sale not be used for operating expenses but be put in endowments, that families not be divided, that the elderly and infirm be provided for and that the Catholic religious needs of the enslaved people be accommodated by the new owners. These conditions had a significant effect on the sale: That families be kept together added pressure on the province leadership to find a single purchaser and thus a larger plantation owner, such as could not be found in the Chesapeake region, but only in the Deep South. The dictate to care for the elderly and infirm led the province to exclude some of the enslaved people from the final sale, but this then separated families. The search for a religiously sympathetic purchaser may have led the province leadership to select a less financially secure one. Further complicating the transaction, concern over possible uprisings by the enslaved people as well as localized Jesuit resistance to the sale led the province leadership to rush handing over the enslaved people to the purchasers.

The sale itself, the division of families and the provincial’s misuse of the down payment — to satisfy building debt at Georgetown College and to settle a conflict with the archbishop of Baltimore, who claimed the land and the enslaved people for the archdiocese — caused such an uproar that the provincial was compelled to resign. After several years in penitential exile on orders of the superior general that former provincial, Thomas Mulledy, returned to the United States and became the first president of the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. The principal purchaser, the Louisiana politician Henry Johnson, went on to lose ownership of some of those he had bought because he had used them as collateral in other business dealings. As these ventures failed, families were split yet again. New owners showed indifference to the religious expectations of the enslaved, who complained to the Jesuits, but without effect. The Jesuits received the final payment from the sale in 1862 by deploying lawyers against Johnson and his creditors in Louisiana. As well as can be now reconstructed, the revenues from the sale (beyond the down payment) were deposited in a general account that supported Jesuit ministries (e.g., churches and schools) and the training of young Jesuits. In this respect, any work staffed in the 19th century with Jesuits trained through the Maryland Province benefited from the sale.

The sale of 1838 ended most, but not all, slave owning by Jesuits on the East Coast. The sale had no direct impact on the Missouri mission’s continuing ownership of enslaved people, and the sale did not end the common practices of renting enslaved labor and accepting enslaved labor on term as payment in kind at Jesuit institutions, especially schools, across the slaveholding South.

### 3. Civil War and Emancipation

Although Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 declared enslaved people free in the rebelling states and some people were consequently able to leave their owners, the Confederate States did not recognize the laws of the Union as applicable to them. Thus the Proclamation did not result in widespread manumissions of enslaved people. Furthermore, slavery remained legal in the Union’s border states, such as Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri, as well as in Union-controlled Louisiana, where Jesuits held people in bondage through the war. Records in Missouri indicate new purchases of enslaved people by Jesuits as late as 1862. The states of Maryland and Missouri legally abolished slavery through legislation in November 1864 and January 1865, respectively. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing slavery, was ratified in December 1865. Legal confusion over and resistance to emancipation encouraged some whites, Jesuits among them, to take advantage of newly freed Blacks, whose rights were poorly protected. In Missouri, for example, Peter Hawkins had purchased his own freedom from the Jesuits before emancipation and then contracted himself to the Jesuits for several additional years of servitude to purchase the freedom of his wife Margaret. Although emancipation legislation freed her in 1865, the Jesuits held Hawkins to his original contract in a sort of peonage until April 1867. Hawkins continued to work for the Jesuits until around

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the time of his death in 1907. In a very different situation, but one also indicative of resistance to emancipation, a local superior in southern Maryland registered with the state for financial compensation for the loss of human property through legislative emancipation. The state considered making such compensation statewide after the war but ultimately never authorized it.

Conclusion:

Just as the Jesuits participated in the antebellum system of chattel slavery, so too have they continued to live and operate in systems of racial injustice that are part of American society. Their legacy in this regard has been complicated: Sometimes they have confronted issues of racial injustice, sometimes they have perpetuated them. The more recent history is beyond the scope of this overview. Here we conclude by pausing to recall, with unsatisfying brevity, the thousands of men, women and children held in slavery by Jesuits in northern America over the course of two and a half centuries. A few, despite the order’s best efforts, won their freedom by running away, legal suit and self-purchase: people like Abraham who escaped from a Jesuit plantation in 1767; Priscilla Queen, whom Francis Scott Key represented in court and who won her freedom only briefly in the 1810s; and Matilda Tyler, who purchased her freedom from St. Louis University and afterward attended Mass with her family in the “Negro chapel” built with those very funds at St. Francis Xavier College Church. Most, however, were born, lived, labored and died, all the while regarded by the Jesuits simply as property. It is their history and the legacy of that history which Jesuits today commit themselves to understanding more deeply. Such understanding, the Jesuits hope, will inspire in them a more vital commitment in all they do to the human dignity and common good that racism and racial injustice so contradict.

Readers are encouraged to continue learning by turning to these resources:

- The Georgetown Slavery Archive [slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu], a collaboration of Georgetown University and Jesuits USA East.
- The Jesuit Archives and Research Center [jesuitarchives.org], a work of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.
- The Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation Project [shmr.jesuits.org; shmr@jesuits.org; 1-314-758-7159], a project sponsored by the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

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