



- *Educator*
- *Businesswoman*

Mathilda Taylor Beasley

1832–1903

Inducted 2004

When Mathilde (later spelled Mathilda) Taylor was born on November 14, 1832 in New Orleans, to Caroline, a slave owned by James C. Taylor, few would have believed that she would later successfully defy the very laws that kept her and her mother from their freedom. It was speculated that her father was Native American and Mathilda inherited her “extreme height and her commanding figure” from him.

Little is known of Mathilda’s early years in Louisiana and there is no record of how she achieved her freedom to move to Savannah as a young woman. But by 1859, records indicate that she had been operating a secret school for African-American children at a time in history when “punishment for teaching slaves or free person of color to read” was a “fine and whipping.” Facing great personal risks, she was committed to educating children who otherwise would have no opportunity for schooling and because there is little information about her school, she seems to have achieved her goal of keeping her efforts from the authorities.

During the 1860s, Mathilda worked at a Bryan Street restaurant in Savannah, The Railroad House, which was owned by a free black named Abraham Beasley. Abraham was a prosperous widower who owned land, a produce market, a saloon and boarding house as well as the restaurant. Ironically, he also had earned part of his money in the slave trade. He and Mathilda married in 1869 and when he died in Sept. 1877, he left Mathilda a childless widow with five acres of land worth \$300 and property holdings on the Isle of Hope, Skidaway Island and inside the Savannah city limits.

In the 1880s, Mathilda became a pioneer within the Catholic Church when she went to England to train as a Catholic nun. Upon her return to Savannah she became known as Mother Mathilda, and later Mother Beasley, and Georgia’s first African-American nun. Mother Mathilda donated her husband’s estate to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Savannah in order to establish an orphanage, the St. Francis Home for Colored Orphans, the first facility of its kind for African-American girls. Originally located near the Sacred Heart

church, the orphanage started taking girls in 1887 and was moved in the late 1890s to East Broad Street, the site of the newly erected St. Benedict's Parish. Though it has been speculated that Mother Mathilda donated her estate to atone for her late husband's financial gain from slavery, the very institution that she was born into and later escaped from, it has not been proven that was her motivation. However, with her pure heart and willingness to sacrifice for others, it would not be surprising if this was true.

"Protestants speak in the highest terms of her life and character, and among the negroes the feeling prevails that they have lost the best and truest friends and benefactors."

– Mathilda Taylor Beasley's obituary in The Savannah Morning News, Dec. 21, 1903

Mother Mathilda founded the Third Order of St. Francis in 1889, Georgia's first group of black nuns. During this time, the orphanage faced financial troubles and arson attacks and Mother

Mathilda did not hesitate to do whatever she could to keep the orphanage going, including fundraising and taking in sewing to support her cause. She operated the orphanage until her death at age 71 on Dec. 20, 1903, when she was found in her private chapel with hands clasped and stretched towards a statue of the Blessed Virgin and her shroud and burial garments folded neatly with her last will and testament placed on top.

Mother Beasley devoted herself to bettering the lives of others in spite of great difficulties and her sacrifices improved conditions for the African-American population in Savannah. Her work continues through the Mother Mathilda Beasley Society, which was established to promote programs and awareness of African-American contributions within the church, and Savannah has commemorated her life with a park bearing her name and a roadside marker listing her accomplishments. Her obituary in the Savannah Morning News (Dec. 21, 1903) said, "Protestants speak in the highest terms of her life and character, and among the negroes the feeling prevails that they have lost the best and truest friends and benefactors." Mother Mathilda Taylor Beasley gave freely of her wealth and devoted her life to the youth and people of Savannah, making her a true Georgia woman of achievement.

Additional Resources

The Mother Beasley Society

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Sacred Heart Parish
1707 Bull Street
Savannah, GA 31401
(912) 232-0792

Savannah Morning News Online
Polly Powers Stramm
Polly's People: Gail Karwoski Nominates Beasley
October 8, 2002