

For my experience assignment I went to a Keynote Address by Rachel Swarns titled *Meeting the Moment: Reckoning with Catholic Slaveholding*. This keynote address was part of a larger conference, *Catholic Archives of Slavery*. This conference was hosted by the Georgetown center for the study of slavery and its legacy and it is working to build a greater understanding of catholic slavery, and its legacy in the United States.

This keynote address was given on the exact day Katherine Jackson sailed from Port of Alexandria after the sale of the GU 272, this fact was brought up several times during this discussion and it serves as a salient example of how important it is to remember the stories of those in the GU 272. We can take time to think about the experiences that the GU 272 have been through, especially in engagement and partnership beyond the classroom to reckon with institutions involvement in slavery. This work to understand the history of slavery and its ties to the Catholic Church continues today, especially with organizations like Descendents United, Descendents Truth, and Reconciliation Initiative.

Adam Rotham is in conversation with Swarns and Georgetown Slavery archive in the relation between Slavery and history. These archives have proved vital for people needing to understand their history. Geneology research done by Patricia Bayonne-Johnson reveals connections between GU 272 and people living today. The work of the GU 272 Genelological project is to explore honor and share history to pursue a path of reconciliation.

Rachel Swarn had done work documenting organizations' ties to enslavement and roles in our community. She is grateful for work that has already been done, and here with humility for

work that is yet to be done. She understands that it is hard history, but recommends that we don't shy away from it and instead reckon with the hard history. Reckoning with hard history can bring people together and give everyone a better understanding of what has happened. She emphasises that we need to wrestle with this history across the country as well.

She tells the story of how on November 13, back 187 years if you were in Alexandria you would see scores of people loaded onto a ship, a crush of crowd, people begged for mercy, sold and about to be shipped to Louisiana. These people had been enslaved by some of the nation's most prominent Catholic priests, and sold as human property in a time of economic disparity in order to save Georgetown University. This endeavor was successful, and Georgetown continued to grow, but scores of families were torn apart by this sale of the GU 272.

All Swarm's work had been rooted in the present, and she never imagined she would study 18th and 19th American slavery. She considered this career change to be her "mid life crisis" that "consumed her so much she left her career at NYT to become an academic" (2025). The thing that pulled Swarm into this work was Michelle Obama. Swarm was assigned to report on her first year in the White House. She had a sense that this first African American family in the White House would be talked about for years to come. At the time, people did not know much about Michelle Obama's genealogy, but Swarm did not give enough time to find out about Michelle Obama's genealogy for this report on Michelle Obama.

As she continued researching after this first report, she found out that Michelle Obama was the great great great granddaughter of an enslaved girl, and Swarm got an offer to write a book about this. In the research for this book, Swarm found an old African American Cemetery that was not

apkept, which made her search much more difficult. Swarm was unsuccessful in finding the plot of the great great grandfather of Michelle Obama, and was called to do more research and archival work.

She detailed the Journey from slavery to the white house in 5 generations. There was an idea that the work she had done in writing this book was irrelevant, but it allowed her to see what was right in front of her when she found out about the sale of the Gu 272 in 1838. These research projects and prospects were before more widespread conversations about reparations. Swarm knew that the Jesuits selling 272 enslaved people was a viable news story and was flabbergasted at the idea that Catholic Priests had bought and sold people.

Swarm understood that ordinary Catholics did not know anything about this history, and she wanted to make this knowledge more accessible and widely known. There were protests, building name changes, but there were still questions about what happened to the GU 272. A link to Patricia Johnson, and gave a link to the people who had been sold in this sale. Richard believed that Georgetown owed something to the descendants of the GU 272, and identified who these people were and who the descendants of these people were. Swarm was one of the only people who believed that this would be important. The record of the sale of the GU 272 had first and last names, this helped readers to understand how they could be connected to this story.

This story was one of the most widely read stories in 2016, descendants understood their ties to Georgetown history. Swarm wrote a book about this and wanted to grapple with some of the questions from the beginning, like how enslaved people left out of origin story told about

catholic church and how priests relied on early slaves and slave sales to build Cathedrals, schools, cemeteries, and archdioceses.

Currently Swarm's work focuses on asking: "How do you tell this story and get people to read and listen?" Especially when people think it was so long ago that it does not matter. She is emphasizing the present in this endeavor and is focusing on the families to make this project feel more relevant.

Swarm R., Contributor (2025, November 13). *Meeting the Moment: Reckoning with Catholic Slaveholding* [Keynote Address]. Catholic Archives of Slavery, Gaston Hall, Georgetown.