In May of 2006, my wife, Louise, and I drove to Maryland to locate the grave of Father William F.X. O’Brien, the first priest assigned by a bishop to serve in Pittsburgh in the early 1800s. Recently rediscovered photos from the trip inspired the present essay about the places in Maryland to which Father O’Brien returned prior to his death. Along with the memories of that trip, I discovered other historical anecdotes that may be of interest to readers of Gathered Fragments.

As noted above, Father William F. X. O’Brien (1779-1832) was the first resident priest assigned by a bishop to a Roman Catholic parish in Pittsburgh. He served the then-frontier town and surrounding areas from 1808 to 1820. He arrived in Pittsburgh on November 5, 1808 and became the pastor of the first St. Patrick Church at the corner of Liberty and Washington Streets, which today is the area between Penn Station (The Pennsylvanian) and the Federal Building on Grant Street.

Father O’Brien ministered to Catholics well beyond the city of Pittsburgh. Traveling by horseback, he visited Sugar Creek in Armstrong County; Butler in Butler County; Blairsville, Latrobe and Greensburg in Westmoreland County; Brownsville in Fayette County; and Waynesburg in Greene County — all in Western Pennsylvania — and additionally, he journeyed to Wheeling in West Virginia.

This circuit is nearly three hundred miles in modern day travel.

Father O’Brien lived in Pittsburgh until March 6, 1820, when he left Pittsburgh to join Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget in Bardstown, Kentucky. From 1820 to 1824, he served as assistant at St. Joseph Cathedral in Bardstown and also taught at St. Joseph’s Seminary. While at Holy Cross Parish in Marion County, Kentucky, he became “so violently ill that it affected his mind temporarily,” and he had to leave because of his poor health. In 1824, he moved to Conewago, Pennsylvania, where he remained until 1827, at which time he was stationed at Newtown, Maryland for a year. The Catholic churches in both Conewago and Newtown were staffed by Jesuits during this period.

After leaving Newtown, Father O’Brien served as the chaplain at the Carmelite convent at Port Tobacco, Maryland. He continued to serve the Carmelites after they moved to Baltimore in September 1831. Father William F.X. O’Brien died at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore on November 1, 1832, at the age of 54 and was buried in Calvary Cemetery, which was attached to the seminary. Church historian Monsignor Andrew Lambing maintained that Father O’Brien died of dropsy.

According to the Registration Book of St. Mary’s Seminary, then located in Baltimore, Father O’Brien was listed as being from Charles County, Maryland. His mother’s name was Mary Ann O’Brien and he may have had other siblings. His mother also owned some small property. However, little is known about his father, his actual place of birth, or his social and economic background.

The oldest Catholic church in that county is St. Ignatius, established by Jesuits in 1641. St. Ignatius became part of St. Thomas Manor, which the Jesuits established in 1741. Jesuit manors were farms or plantations initially worked by indentured servants, and later by slaves. St. Thomas Manor was likely Father O’Brien’s home parish, a likely assumption because of his close association with the Jesuits and Bishop John Carroll, the bishop who assigned O’Brien to Pittsburgh. Further, O’Brien considered St. Thomas Manor as a place to hold his mail while he was traveling. In a letter
addressed to Archbishop James Whitfield (1770-1834), fourth archbishop of Baltimore, O’Brien requested priestly faculties to serve as the chaplain for the Carmelite Nuns at Port Tobacco on his return to Maryland. He asked the archbishop to send his response to the Jesuit Francis Neale, at St. Thomas Manor.

St. Thomas Manor is an important site in the history of Catholicism in the United States. The Manor is the longest continuous residence for Jesuits in the world. After the Jesuits had been suppressed by the Vatican in 1773, St. Thomas Manor served as the center of the 1805 revival of the Jesuits in the United States. In 1794, before John Carroll was consecrated in London as the first bishop in the United States, he reportedly chose St. Thomas Manor as the site for the investment of his robes. Even though the assertion of St. Thomas Manor as the place of Carroll’s investiture is incorrect, it does point to the perceived importance of the Manor in the history of the Catholic Church in America.

Francis Neale, S. J. (1756-1837), the person to whom Father O’Brien entrusted his mail, was a member of a prominent Catholic family in Colonial Maryland. Francis Neale served two terms as president of Georgetown College and as the leader of the Jesuit mission in America. His brother, Leonard Neale, S. J. (1746-1817), also served a term as president of Georgetown and as Bishop Carroll’s successor as archbishop of Baltimore. Leonard Neale, S. J. reportedly spent some time by George Washington’s side when he was dying and supposedly converted Washington to Catholicism. However, documentation for Washington’s embrace of Catholicism is inconclusive.

Father William F.X. O’Brien served as chaplain to the Discalced Carmelites at Port Tobacco, Maryland from 1828-1831. This community of nuns has the distinction of being the first contemplative monastic community in the United States. The first superior, Mother Bernardine Matthews and her two nieces were members of the convent. They were also nieces to the above-mentioned Neale brothers.

Two incidents are noteworthy during O’Brien’s tenure as chaplain for the Carmelites. His duties extended beyond the usual spiritual and liturgical affairs of a chaplain. Father O’Brien conducted most of the business for the Carmelite nuns at Port Tobacco. The nuns’ property was contested in a legal suit and a Catholic lawyer defended and won their case. The lawyer was Roger Brooke Taney (1877-1864).

Taney was a descendant of one of the earliest Catholic families of Maryland. He became Andrew Jackson’s Attorney General and subsequently, the fifth chief justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1837. Taney wrote the majority opinion for the infamous 1857 Dred Scott case in which the Court held that the Constitution was not meant to include American citizenship for black people, regardless of whether they were slave or free. This Supreme Court decision heightened tensions between the North and the South leading up to the Civil War.
Taney’s involvement with the Carmelites occurred long before his appointment by President Jackson. After the nuns’ property case concerning the property was settled Taney wrote the following to Father O’Brien from Baltimore, on January 2, 1830.

Dear Sir,

I received yesterday your kind letter with the fee of one hundred dollars enclosed — which I assure you I neither desired nor expected. I felt myself abundantly rewarded in the fortunate issue of this long and anxious controversy. I pray you to return to the Revd. Mother and the good Sisters my sincere acknowledgements for their kindness and liberality — and I beg to be remembered in their prayers and in yours.¹⁰

One other noteworthy incident occurred in the Port Tobacco Carmel in 1829. Father O’Brien wrote to Archbishop James Whitfield (1770-1834) about what he and others thought to be a miracle at the Carmelite convent.¹¹ Sister Magdalen, one of the nuns, had been sick for seven or eight years with a “liver complaint.” The doctors thought her condition was incurable. Then, she acquired a great burning in her stomach and was unable to eat anything without pain. On March 10, 1829, her condition deteriorated, and she began to have breathing difficulties. The nuns started a novena and Father O’Brien gave her Communion. The evening of that same day, he entered her cell and found that she had completely recovered — appearing better than he ever remembered. The doctor was astonished and thought the recovery was due to the medicine that he prescribed but also stated that the nun’s cure was similar to the cure of a Mrs. Mattingly. Ann Carbery Mattingly was also cured after suffering seven years from a breast tumor, chills, coughing and vomiting blood. On March 10, 1824 she was close to death, but after a novena, Mass and
reception of Communion, she had an immediate recovery. Mrs. Mattingly was a forty-year-old widow who belonged to an old Maryland Catholic family. One brother was a Jesuit, the other was mayor of Washington, the nation's capital.

In the same letter cited above, Father O'Brien wrote to the archbishop, and mentioned that there were some Catholics who did not believe that Mrs. Mattingly’s cure was miraculous. O'Brien was cautious about proclaiming the Carmelite nun’s recovery miraculous: “I leave it to you to judge whether it would be well to give the case publicity in print.” At least seventeen similar miracles occurred in the 1820’s and 1830’s. The miracles were controversial and highlighted the tension that existed between the Maryland and English Jesuits and their continental brethren. The former enthusiastically promoted the authenticity of the miracles, while the other Jesuits were skeptical.

Many Americans had a negative opinion of the Catholic Church in the early years of the republic. Those who promoted the veracity of the miracles wanted to prove the spiritual power of the Church. Catholics who opposed promoting the miracles thought doing so would only confirm opponents who saw the Church as steeped in superstition. O'Brien viewpoint on the miracles suggested that he was aware of the tension between the two factions and points of view.

When the Carmelites moved their monastery to Baltimore on September 12, 1831, Father O'Brien continued to serve as their chaplain. On July 31, 1832, O'Brien wrote to Archbishop Whitfield:

I am, as far as I can judge, becoming more sick, & weak & declining every day, so that on my return I shall scarcely if at all, be able to render much service to the monastery. I have even sometimes apprehended I should never reach Baltimore alive. It would, perhaps, be better if you & the Rev. Mother could find some other priest to serve the monastery, & let me retire somewhere to prepare myself for death, or if it should be the will of God that I may by any means recover, to render service somewhere else. The Monastery does not suit me & has not for some
time in my weak state. It is a place that requires a healthy priest, on account of the variety of duties to perform there & the punctuality with which they ought to be performed. In consequence of my low state, I have declined riding back to Baltimore & I intend to take passage on the steamboat tomorrow morning.\(^{15}\)

O’Brien’s condition continued to deteriorate, and the following account of his death is from the diary of Father Louis Regis Deluol, S.S., November 1, 1832:

M. O’Brien died at 8.15 P.M. M. Tessier said the prayers: all the Gentlemen and seminarists were there, responding. I was near the bed, helping him in his last moments. M. Fredet and M. Rolle spent the night at the body.

Nov. 2. We began at 7.30 with the removal of the body, followed by the Mass: after the Gospel, I spoke for 10 minutes on the text: “Ego dixi Dii estis et filii, etc.” Ps. 81, 6&7 (I have said you are gods and sons). Then the burial. The body was already decaying.\(^{16}\)

While he may not have been a major player in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States, Father William F. X. O’Brien, the first Roman Catholic priest assigned to the Catholics in Pittsburgh, faithfully served the fledgling Catholic Church in Pittsburgh and surrounding areas in the early years of the nineteenth century. There is some evidence that his personal health was fragile and his desire to return home is understandable. The narrative of his return to his native Maryland is a story that describes his acquaintances, some who played major roles in the history of the church and the United States in nineteenth century America. His witnessing of a potential miracle at the Carmelite convent sheds light on the spirituality of the Catholic Church in the United States in the years prior to the Civil War.

**Endnotes:**


3. Registration book of St. Mary’s Seminary. Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore (hereinafter cited as AAB). Lambing, *Brief Biographical Sketches*, 84. Dropsy was the name for edema, or a swelling caused by accumulation of abnormally large amounts of fluid. This was typically caused by kidney disease or congestive heart failure. “Glossary of Medical Terms Used in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” Craig Thornbber, accessed August 1, 2020, http://www.thornber.net/medicine/html/medgloss.html.

4. St. Ignatius Church at St. Thomas Manor suffered a fire in 1862 and lost all baptismal records. Fire also destroyed marriage records for Charles County Maryland for all marriages prior to July 21, 1865. Further complicating research into the origins of Father O’Brien is the fact that Father O’Brien himself was not consistent in spelling his surname. In the first four letters from Pittsburgh, he spelled his last name ‘O’Bryan’; in the letters after November 14, 1811, he spelled his name ‘O’Brien.’ Both the registration book at St. Mary’s Seminary and his tombstone has the O’Brien spelling.

5. Rev. William F. X. O’Brien to Archbishop James Whitfield, August 26, 1828. 23 P7, AAB.


9. Marilyn J. Griffin, “Did Washington Die a Catholic?,” *American Catholic Historical Researches* 17, no. 3 (July 1900), 123-129.


11. Rev. William F. X. O’Brien to Archbishop James Whittfield, April 1, 1829. 23P81, AAB.

12. Ibid.


14. Father Louise Regis Deluol, S.S. describes the Carmelite move to Baltimore in his diary and makes several references to Father O’Brien. Father Deluol came from France in 1817 and served as the superior of the seminary in Baltimore from 1829-1849. The *Diary of Father Louis Regis Deluol, S.S.*, AAB.

15. Rev. William F. X. O’Brien to Archbishop James Whittfield, July 31, 1832. 23P10, AAB.

16. Ibid. Deluol Diary, AAB.