

PROFILE

ANGELA AND BENVEN SANSBURY

A giant oak tree, over two hundred and fifty years old, stands some twenty miles east of Washington, D.C., in the woodlands of Prince George's County, Maryland. The tree grew in the churchyard of Boone's chapel, the religious center of Maryland Catholics since colonial times. It is not difficult to imagine two small children, close enough in age to be taken as twins, playing ring games around this old oak tree. As Catholic colonists finally found religious freedom in the new republic, Elizabeth and Mariah Sansbury would find themselves at home in both Church and state.

Although records differ, it appears that Elizabeth and Mariah Sansbury were born in 1794 and 1795 respectively. Their parents, Alexis and Elizabeth Hamilton Sansbury, married on February 16, 1782,^[1] and reared three daughters and four sons. The family probably lived on the land Thomas Sansbury, the grandfather of Elizabeth and Mariah, willed to their father Alexis in 1781. This land, east of the Patuxent River and southwest of Upper Marlborough, was near Boone's chapel.^[2] There they worshipped either in a church or in private homes which Jesuit missionaries routinely visited.

The strength of character displayed by the amiable Mariah and the benevolent Elizabeth undoubtedly can be traced back through the centuries when persecutions and penalties affected their English Catholic ancestors. Both the Sansbury and Hamilton progenitors left England in the 1600s, probably for economic as well as for religious reasons. The Hamiltons could trace their Catholicism back to England. The Sansburys were early contributors to the building of Boone's chapel in 1710. Thus, both heredity and environment blessed Elizabeth and Mariah Sansbury.

The amount and quality of their education is unrecorded, although its effects seem almost as impressive as their religious inheritance. An aunt by marriage, Jane Coomes, was an educated woman; she migrated to Kentucky in 1775 and became the first teacher in that state.^[3]

Records indicate that Elizabeth and Mariah's mother signed numerous financial statements after the death of her husband. Books were listed as part of the contents of Alexis Sansbury's estate.^[4] That the Sansbury children were educated while in Maryland seems a reasonable assumption. With their economic resources, the Sansburys could have their children attend either a small



private school established by wealthy planters, a county free school, or classes in the home of family or relatives.

Relatives and friends of the Sansburys began to move to Kentucky as early as 1775. Some came with a colony in 1785. Economic hardship in Maryland and the prospect of more fertile land in Kentucky were the primary reasons for going west. Probably because of the father's poor health – Alexis died in 1816 – his family remained in Maryland until late 1819 or early 1820.^[5] The years after his death must have been extremely difficult for the family. In 1816-1817, crops failed and food became scarce. In that "year without a summer," Elizabeth and Mariah's brother Alexis, Jr., became a member of an organization to provide relief for the poor.^[6] Yet the 1818 family records indicate that the widow Elizabeth Sansbury was still paying the debts of her husband's estate, which was valued at over five thousand dollars. Most of that amount represented the current "value" of sixteen slaves.

Cartwright Creek became the destination of this branch of the Sansbury family. Its waters begin in the knobs of central Kentucky in what is currently Marion County, then cut through Washington and Nelson Counties where it joins the Salt River. As the horse-drawn coach or wagon carrying the Sansburys lumbered down Bardstown Road near what is now Springfield, the most imposing sight that met their eyes was the cluster of buildings belonging to the Dominican Friars of St. Joseph Province. These included St. Rose Church and priory, St. Thomas College and Seminary, a mill, and a farm. As told in Chapter 4, the Province had been established at St. Rose in 1806 by the American Edward Fenwick and the Englishmen Samuel Thomas Wilson, William Raymond Tuite, and Robert Antoninus Angier. This Dominican presence on the banks of Cartwright Creek changed the lives of Mariah and Elizabeth Sansbury dramatically.

There is some evidence that the Sansbury family did not live with relatives during their first days in Kentucky. Instead they may have spent time in a house on the McAfee property adjacent to the Dominican establishment. This 106-acre farm was purchased by the widow, Elizabeth and her daughter, Mariah, in March, 1820. When their mother died in 1822, the two daughters, Mariah and Elizabeth, received it as their inheritance and it became their dowry in 1823.^[7] For several years Mariah and Elizabeth lived at the new property.

Life at Cartwright Creek took on special meaning for the two young women in 1822 when the parishioners of St. Rose Church witnessed a series of historical events occurring each month from January through April. No doubt, Elizabeth and Mariah Sansbury were present and took more than ordinary interest in these parish activities. In January, Edward Fenwick was consecrated Bishop of Cincinnati in St. Rose Church by Benedict Joseph Flaget, Bishop of Bardstown. Unless the Sansbury sisters had met Fenwick during his short time in Maryland, this was their first meeting with him.

In February, Samuel Wilson challenged the young women of the parish to establish a Third Order of Dominicans who would live as a religious community. He explained the advantages of religious life and reminded them of the great necessity of a Catholic school for young women. He shared with Fenwick a long-time dream of men and women of the Order working together to

carry out the mission of the Church. Now as provincial, he made the first general appeal to St. Rose parishioners. Friars and parishioners awaited some response to the call of their pastor.

February 28, nine young women of the pioneer families, including Mariah and Elizabeth Sansbury, told Wilson of their intention to become Dominicans. By March all nine were planning to form a Dominican community. Five of the nine were related to Mariah and Elizabeth. "Four were ready for reception but had not yet come together in community since they had no house, no means and no provisions, so St. Rose [the friars] fixed up a log cabin for their dwelling."^[8] They named this small building Bethany. The candidates' slight knowledge of religious life would soon be broadened. "They had not as yet the habit to put on or even an idea how to make it, therefore, the Very Rev. Father Provincial instructed them and provided for them the habits."^[9]

Six weeks after Father Wilson's pulpit invitation, on Easter Sunday morning, April 7, 1822, Mariah Sansbury entered the parish church of St. Rose and in the presence of the parishioners accepted the habit of the Order of Preachers from Wilson. She received the name of Sister Angela. In the afternoon young friar Richard Pius Miles gave the habit to three more women and Wilson examined the other five respondents. They received the Rule of St. Augustine and the constitution which Wilson had translated from the Latin. It was taken from the Second Order and Third Order constitutions with such adaptations as circumstances of the country would require. The introduction compared the sisters to the deaconesses of the early Church.^[10]

Elizabeth Sansbury and Theresa Edelen sought admission into the Order in March. Elizabeth became known as Sister Benvenuta, shortened informally to Benven. Theresa received the name Magdalene. The two Sansburys, now known as Angela and Benven spent less than four months living in their newly organized religious community when they began to suffer personal losses. Their mother died in the summer of 1822. Shortly thereafter, their sister Sophie joined another congregation, the Sisters of Loretto, which had been established in Kentucky by Charles Nerinckx in 1812. The losses may explain why the Sansbury home was made available for the Dominican sisters. In view of the growing community, it seemed prudent to move from tiny Bethany to the larger house on the Sansbury property. By 1823, Angela and Benven found themselves back "home," but now the home was known as the St. Mary Magdalene Convent of Dominican Sisters. Eleven months after the first call, there were seven new novices living the Dominican life at St. Magdalene Convent. As yet, none had pronounced vows.

On January 6, 1823, Angela Sansbury made her profession into the hands of Samuel Thomas Wilson. He apparently had received or presumed a dispensation for Angela to make vows before she completed her year of novitiate. On June 6, the provincial confirmed Angela as the prioress of the new community. With joy, the sisters of St. Mary Magdalene Convent heard his historic words: ". . . being well acquainted with your exemplary conduct and zeal for regular discipline . . . influenced by that affection which your virtuous sisters testified toward you on a former occasion when they petitioned to have you placed at the head of their community I . . . Brother Wilson . . . do hereby declare, establish and confirm you . . . first Prioress of our said College of Saint Magdalene. . . ." ^[11] On August 30, 1823, Benven and four companions made profession before Angela in the presence of Wilson. Thus they became the first women of the United States to pronounce vows as Dominican Sisters.

Six months after the move to the Cartwright Creek valley, the St. Mary Magdalene community made another historic move. On July 15, 1823, they opened the first school conducted by American Dominican women. Fifteen students studied in a building that once housed a still on the Sansbury property. They gave it the prestigious name of St. Mary Magdalene Academy. The community and the school continued to grow. By February 1824, there were seven professed sisters, seven novices, and twenty-nine boarders.

Along with growth, however, there came new losses. Angela and Benven suffered the death of their sister Sophie who had joined the Sisters of Loretto. She had been received on April 3, 1824, and professed two days later on her deathbed.[\[12\]](#) The following year, the Mary Magdalene community suffered its first death; in fact they experienced the death of one sister every year for four consecutive years. Among them were two young cousins of Angela and Benven and a young Boone relative who took her vows on her death-bed.

The most devastating loss was the death of Samuel Wilson on May 23, 1824. Although the provincial had appointed Richard Miles to take responsibility for the sisters, still the loss of Wilson's wisdom and experience proved deeply traumatic. The few years that this highly respected churchman had provided them meant much to Angela and Benven and their small community, even if the horarium he crafted for them seemed strict. In view of the rigorism of some clerics in the area, however, the liberal, non-Jansenist teachings of Fenwick, Wilson and Miles were a beneficial influence on the life and spirituality of the Sansbury sisters and their companions.

The death of Wilson initiated another series of significant activities in the province. St. Mary Magdalene Academy had attracted so many students that an addition to the buildings was needed. This the workmen completed in the summer of 1825. The sisters had solicited money for the work, but lacked enough to cover all costs. Father Miles approved the addition, gave his personal pledge for the payment and signed a \$2000 note. The note signed by Miles just before he was called to Ohio, as well as the appointment in 1826 of the Spaniard Raphael Munos as prior of St. Rose, caused the St. Magdalene community much sorrow. Munos objected to the unpaid debt, and in 1828 proposed that the sisters disband. As commissary general of St. Joseph province, Edward Fenwick sought a resolution to the problem. He wrote to the Master of the Order asking permission to sell the monastery and transfer the sisters to another place, or to establish them in Ohio.[\[13\]](#) This permission was refused. With encouragement from Miles in Ohio, the sisters discussed the proposed move, but decided against it. Little by little the community paid off the debt and remained in their beloved Kentucky.

Edward Fenwick's wish to have Dominican sisters share in the missionary work of his friars in the Cincinnati diocese soon became a reality. In 1830 he asked the Kentucky community for four sisters to serve in Ohio. On January 11, Benven, Emily Elder, Agnes Harbin and Catherine Mudd left for Somerset, Ohio. For Angela and Benven this separation, the first in their lives, was painful but was also a sign of growth for the community. Angela and the remaining twelve waved their good-byes as the chosen four went resolutely to their new adventure.

Piety Hill, the highest point in the village of Somerset, was the location of Dominican life in Perry County, Ohio. Adjacent to Holy Trinity Church on this hill, Fenwick purchased land and buildings that were to become St. Mary Convent and Academy. Here Benven encountered, not fifth generation English Catholics of Maryland or Kentucky, but recent German Catholic immigrants. The four pioneers derived much satisfaction from being the first Dominican women religious in Ohio and the second Dominican foundation in the United States. They recorded the event in these words:

Sister Benven, Sister Agnes, Sister Emily, and Sister Catherine of the Order of St. Dominic, being invited by the Right Reverend Bishop of Cincinnati to make an establishment in Ohio, having obtained leave, left St. Magdalene's Kentucky, on the 11 of January, 1830, and arrived at Somerset Ohio, their place of destination, on the 5th of the following month, where they found a gratified public ready to receive and support them. The said Sisters took possession of the house and lot purchased by the Reverend Bishop of Cincinnati and commenced housekeeping February 25th, 1830, and commenced their school April 5 in the same year with forty scholars the first quarter.[\[14\]](#)

The school building had served previously as a carpenter shop. Of this new St. Mary's Academy Sister Benven reported, "They commenced the building in the fall of 1830 and got it nearly finished before the winter of 1831 came on too cold."[\[15\]](#)

For the next three years, until 1833, Angela and Benven remained apart. Benven and her companions busied themselves organizing their school and getting acquainted with the people of Somerset who had never seen women religious before. During these years of separation, the two sisters were often at the heart of crisis. For one thing, cholera epidemics were rampant. The Kentucky sisters and friars distinguished themselves for their unselfish ministry to the sick and dying. Benedict Flaget, Bishop of Bardstown, had only praise for their dedication.[\[16\]](#) But the death of Bishop Fenwick, victim of the cholera, on September 16, 1832, in Wooster, Ohio, brought great sorrow. Especially affected were those who had recently come to Somerset at the bishop's request.

After a brief respite from her six-year duty as prioress in Kentucky, Angela decided to join Benven in Ohio. On April 15, 1833, she made her will,[\[17\]](#) leaving all real and personal property to the St. Mary Magdalene community. On that same day she and her cousin Ann Hill left for Somerset. With their departure, none of the Sansbury-Hamilton cousins, so integral to the foundation of the Dominican women was left in Kentucky.



Sister Angela Sansbury



Sister Benven Sansbury

A Note on the Sansbury Portraits

The likeness of Angela reveals an oval face, a heart shaped mouth, a somewhat distant look in her eyes and a relaxed pose: features that suggest a contemplative person. Her image reveals Mother Angela to be sensitive, intelligent, perceptive, anxious, artistic, beautiful, and distinguished in bearing. The portrait belies both the stereotypical rough frontier woman and the extraordinary achievements of this active contemplative.

The portrait of Benven shows a face square in shape. The mouth is firm with a small upper and full lower lip. The eyes are clear and resolute. With head erect and an open mantle over her shoulders, she appears to be ready to step forward to meet any need. The photograph presents a woman with a face that is kindly but strong; one can surmise that Benven could be either witty or determined. Those who knew Benven characterized her as stately, dignified and an observer of the Rule.

The portraits of the Sansbury sisters reveal stalwart Dominican women of the first two communities of vowed apostolic women in the United States. Through the choices and responses of Angela and Benven Sansbury, the Sisters of St. Catharine and St. Mary of the Springs congregations inaugurated what would become a procession of women who would join the friars as missionaries in the New World.

The two Sansbury sisters are remembered for the leadership they provided, especially for the St. Mary's community in Ohio. Over the years, Benven served either as prioress or sub-prioress, treasurer or novice mistress, in the three communities where she lived. After Angela's move to St. Mary's, she, too, was elected prioress and held that position until her death.

Under Benven's leadership as prioress, the academy flourished and the number of students increased rapidly. In 1832 Nicholas Dominic Young, O.P., the Dominican Provincial and mentor, arranged for the incorporation of the school as St. Mary's Female Literary Society. "I

have obtained an Act of incorporation for our sisters, this will save them much trouble and make the Institution more generally known."[\[18\]](#) Following the Kentucky procedure, building a chapel took precedence over other structures. Angela and Benven sought financial assistance jointly from their friends abroad and at home. They avoided the dilemma of their earlier Kentucky experience.

Angela's death came in the midst of the flurry of building activities at St. Mary's. She had been ill for only eight days. She was forty-five years of age. One of the students at the Academy gave this account:

I have to tell you that which is most painful. Mother Angela died Saturday night, on the 30th of Nov., between 10 and 11 o'clock. The affection of the sisters, I should judge is very great at being deprived of a member so amiable. We were all present when she died. We attended her funeral on Monday at ten o'clock. There were three Rev. Fathers attended by a concourse of people; the church was crowded. . .[\[19\]](#)

Benven succeeded Angela as prioress at Somerset. She continued to serve St. Mary's and its missions for more than thirty years. She also demonstrated her loyalty and concern for the welfare of the St. Mary Magdalene community. She ensured that the property in Kentucky remain in the hands of the Literary Society of St. Mary Magdalene. On March 11, 1847, for one dollar, she gave the Society her undivided interest in the 106 acres in Kentucky. She framed an agreement in strong legal terms. "The said Literary Society and the said Elizabeth Sansbury [sic] does further covenant and agree that she will warrant and forever defend the above sold land . . . from and against the claim or claims of all. . ."[\[20\]](#)

If Benven's continuous calls to leadership were difficult, her ministry demands were no less taxing. She was called at age sixty to be involved in caring for infants in Tennessee. In 1855 she answered the call of the friars in Memphis to establish St. Peter's Orphanage there, and she remained for almost two years. Less than ten years later in 1864, at the age of seventy and in the midst of the Civil War, she and two companions arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, to staff an orphanage established by St. Mary's Orphanage Association.[\[21\]](#)

Benven endured two years in Nashville, years troubled because of the war. Shortly after they arrived, one of her companions, Gertrude O'Meara, became ill and died. Benven and her only other companion cared for the fourteen orphans until more sisters joined them from Kentucky. However, on December 1, 1864, a real crisis occurred when the sisters and orphans were notified they would have to leave immediately because of shelling by the Union armies. With the help of Father Joseph Kelly and friends, all were evacuated to the basement of the cathedral. The orphanage was leveled by the ensuing barrage, but rebuilt in 1865.

Benven was back in Ohio just three weeks when fire destroyed St. Mary's at Somerset on June 6, 1866. After the fire, Benven helped establish a temporary academy at St. Joseph Priory in Somerset. There she was prefect of the boarders and teacher. Although she often expressed her great love for Somerset and its people, yet as sub-prioress she voted on July 7, 1866, to move the sisters' convent and academy to Columbus, Ohio, a city with much more promise for growth.

During her long life, Benven had lived about twenty-five years in Maryland, ten in Kentucky, and, with the exception of a few years in Memphis and Nashville, over thirty-five years in Ohio. The mutual love between Benven and the citizens of Somerset in Perry County is expressed in her letter to the editor of the local paper when she was on her way to Nashville. She wrote,

My feelings urge me to tender . . . a most grateful farewell . . . I say from my heart: I thank you for your many kindnesses . . . Yes, most valued . . . yet much more so for the feelings of mutual esteem which they bespeak to exist between us. . . When I shall be in a far-off land, my prayers, in unison with those of the little orphans, shall ascend in behalf of my esteemed friends in Perry.[\[22\]](#)

Now in her declining years, Benven "devoted her time principally to prayer, meditation, and a daily preparation for death."[\[23\]](#) She died just before she was to celebrate her golden anniversary as a Dominican sister. Death came quickly after only a week of illness, on May 31, 1873, at the age of seventy-nine. In her life she served her Order and Church generously. In four different communities, and in three states, she had made many friends who grieved for her.

The announcement will be received with feelings of intense grief at all the convents of the order. The telegraph, before this, will have conveyed the sad intelligence to her sorrowing sisters, not only throughout this State, but in Kentucky, Tennessee, Washington, D.C., Delaware, Florida and California. In all these convents, her name is a household word, and her sisters had hoped to have her live to see the 50th anniversary of her religious profession, the golden jubilee of which was to be celebrated on the 30th of August next, the Feast of St. Rose of Lima.[\[24\]](#)

Benven was the last to die of the original, founding members of St. Catharine's, Kentucky, and St. Mary of the Springs, Ohio. Her accomplishments and those of Angela were immeasurable. Angela, the angelic, and Benven the good, were rarely separated in life. Together they are finally at rest, buried near each other at St. Mary of the Springs, Columbus, Ohio.

NOTES

1. C.M.Brumbaugh, *Maryland Records: Colonial, Revolution, County and Church (Prince George County)* 150.
2. Flaherty-Knox to Cameron, Branson, MD, Feb. 3, 1992, Kentucky Dominican Sisters Archives (KDS).
3. Clyde Crews, **An American Holy Land** (Louisville, Ky: Ikonographics, Inc., 1987) 36.
4. Prince George County Records, July 10, 1818.
5. Alexis, Sr., is listed in Prince George County census of 1810, but not 1820. Elizabeth his wife is listed in Washington County, Kentucky, census of 1820.
6. Lee R. Van Horn, **Out of the Past-Prince Georgians and Their Land** (np, 1976) 268.
7. Washington County, Ky, Deed Book F, 356, I, 280-281 and Will Book, C, 472.
8. SCA, First Profession Book, p.4.
9. SCA, First Profession Book, p.4.
10. SCA, First Profession Book, pp 17-18.
11. Copy of letter of appointment – Original in Archives of St. Mary of the Springs, Columbus, Ohio.
12. Notes from Loretto Archives, KDS,
13. Fenwick to Thomas Ancarani, Baltimore, Oct. 10, 1829, Archives General of the Order of Preachers (AGOP) XIII, 03150, 136.
14. Council Book, ms., Archives of Columbus Dominican Sisters (CDS).
15. Benven Sansbury, "Brown Paper Annals," ms. Somerset, 1830, CDS.

16. Flaget to Louis DeLoul, Bardstown, July 5, 1833, The Filson Club, Louisville, Ky. (FCA).
17. Apostolic women religious with a simple vow of poverty retain possession of personal property, but not its use without permission. So making a will was appropriate.
18. N.D. Young to Fredric Rese, Somerset, Dec. 19, 1832, University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA), II 4e.
19. Jane Lawe to R.L. Lawe, Somerset, Dec. 12, 1839, copy at CDS.
20. Washington County Records, Kentucky, Deed Book Q, 323.
21. Thomas Stritch, **The Catholic Church in Tennessee** (Nashville: The Catholic Center, 1987) 114.
22. **Democratic Union**, Somerset, Ohio, May 11, 1864.
23. Council Book, ms., CDS.
24. **Freeman's Journal**, New York, June 14, 1873, 3.