



James, Alexander, and Patrick Healy

Did you know that the very first African-American priests in the United States were three brothers who passed for white? They, along with their siblings, were born of a slave mother and fathered by a Georgia plantation owner.

The Healy Brothers: James, Alexander, and Patrick were sent north for their education and freedom. Because of the adverse racial climate in 19th century America, the Healy brothers had to be ordained in Europe, beginning with James in 1854; Alexander, in 1858; and Patrick, in 1864.

James Augustine Healy later became our nation's first African-American bishop (although he and his brothers passed for white) in Portland, Maine, in 1875.

Alexander Sherwood Healy was ordained as a priest and earned his doctorate degree at the Sulpician Academy in Paris. He became an expert in canon law and Gregorian chant. After working with his brother, James, in Boston for a time, Sherwood was appointed director of the Catholic seminary in Troy, New York, and later as rector of the Cathedral in Boston. His career was cut short by his death at age 39.

Patrick Francis Healy became a Jesuit and earned his PhD in Paris. In 1866, he became the highly regarded president of the largest Catholic institution in the United States, Georgetown University, in Washington DC. Ironically, Georgetown did not admit students of color until the mid-1900s.

Their accomplishments were not readily recognized as those of African-Americans because they overtly denied their heritage. While the Church was aware of the situation, it was mostly overlooked because of their appearance.

www.ncronline.org *National Catholic Reporter-Black Saints/Healy Brothers*
en.wikipedia.org *James Healy/Alexander Healy/Patrick Healy*