

# RELIGION IN AMERICAN HISTORY

A Group Blog on American Religious History and Culture

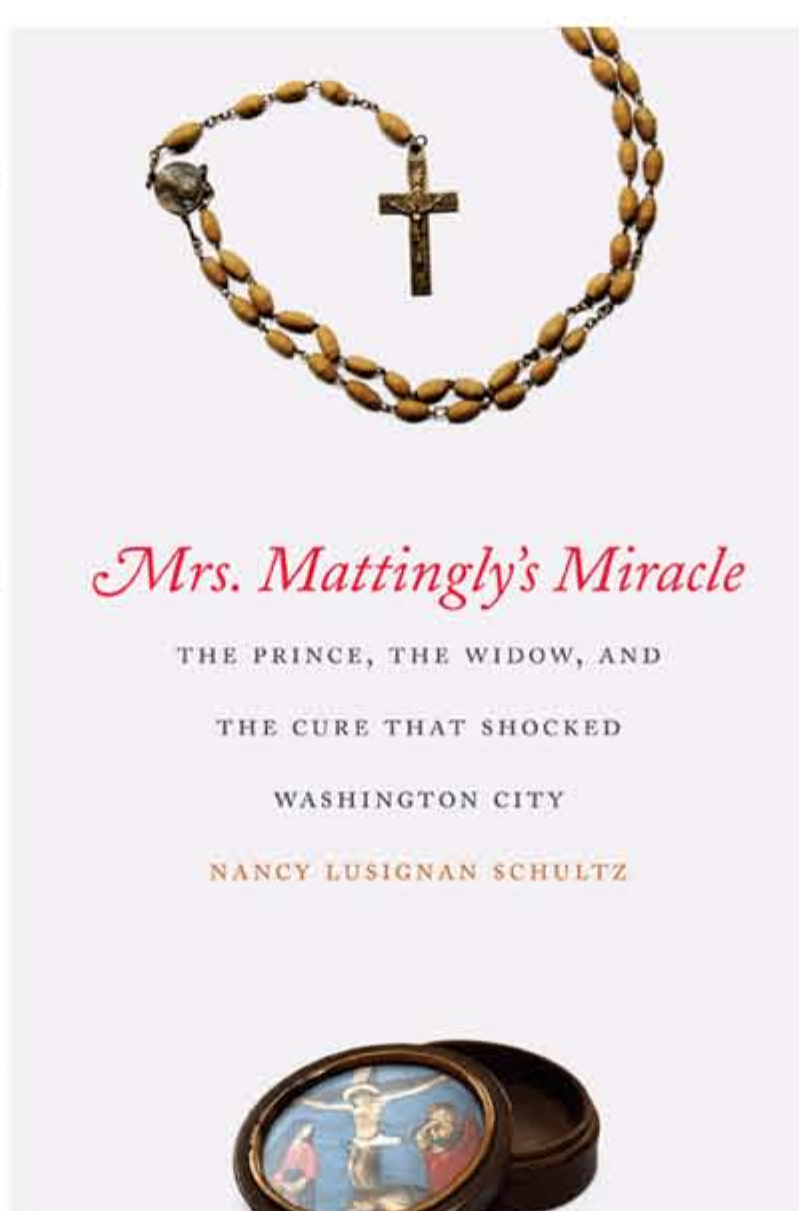
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## Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle, and the Miraculous Serendipity of Archives

Paul Harvey

Here's a new and intriguing work that's already making quite a splash: Nancy Schultz, *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle: and the Cure that Shocked Washington City*, recently published by Yale University Press. A brief description, from the book's website:

*In the spring of 1824 in the young capital city of Washington, D.C., Ann Carbery Mattingly, widowed sister of the city's mayor, was miraculously cured of a ravaging cancer. Just days, or perhaps even hours, from her predicted demise, she arose from her sickbed freed from agonizing pain and able to enjoy an additional thirty-one years of life. The Mattingly miracle purportedly came through the intervention of a charismatic German cleric, Prince Alexander Hohenlohe, who was credited already with hundreds of cures across Europe and Great Britain. Though nearly forgotten today, Mattingly's astonishing healing became a polarizing event. It heralded a rising tide of anti-Catholicism in the United States that would culminate in violence over the next two decades.*



*Working from sources in Europe and America, Nancy Lusignan Schultz deftly weaves analysis of this significant episode in American social and religious history together with the astonishing personal stories of both Ann Mattingly and the healer Prince Hohenlohe, around whom a cult was arising in Europe. Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle has the dramatic intensity of a novel and brings to light an early episode in the battle between faith and reason in the United States—a battle that continues to inspire debate in American culture to this day.*

The author previously published a really fine study *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834*, and has made her name as someone who brings to life the social history of antebellum Catholicism, and anti-Catholicism. The new book is akin to Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz's classic *The Kingdom of Matthias*, in that it takes an unusual, idiosyncratic story and uses it as a lens to explore broad themes of American religious and cultural life in a particular time period. The book has received a really wonderful review by the *Washington Post*; here's a little snippet:

*Nancy Lusignan Schultz, a professor of English at Salem State University, brings an impressive depth of scholarship to this odd, forgotten chapter of America's early social history. She presents a gripping account of the controversy that erupted over Mattingly's sudden and inexplicable return to health and explores the lasting debate it provoked "between reason and emotion, between science and religion, and between sectarianism and ecumenism."*

*All of these tensions, she explains, were distilled in the person of Prince Hohenlohe, the mysterious "thaumaturgus," or miracle worker, whose apparent ability to cure blindness and other infirmities had already made him a sensation in Europe. The 18th son of an Austrian crown prince, Hohenlohe drew crowds wherever he went, combining the "benign accessibility of a parish priest with the awe-striking cachet of a thousand-year-old name." He also attracted powerful enemies. One official denounced him as a "deeply dissipated man, who seduces girls," and even his staunchest defenders were forced to admit that he made "an unlikely candidate for Catholic sainthood." As Hohenlohe's fame spread, Pope Pius VII himself urged moderation, "so that the holiness will not become a subject of curiosity and mockery."*

*The Vatican's fears were amply borne out in America, where the news of Mattingly's "distance healing" created an immediate stir. The young nation was moved, wrote one cleric, "as Jerusalem formerly was at the arrival of the three wise men." Perhaps wisely, Schultz does not attempt to answer the divisive question of whether Mattingly's return to health was a genuine miracle or not. "I believe that something extraordinary did happen in Washington City nearly two centuries ago," she explains. "How this happened, though, and whether the explanation is natural or supernatural, pushes deep into the realm of faith. This book does not try to guide you there.*

*Instead, Schultz focuses on the cultural impact of the drama. As the initial enthusiasm gave way to skepticism and concern, she demonstrates, the Mattingly episode exposed tensions within the American church and raised fears that foreign religious figures wished to tamper with the new republic's hard-won freedoms. The result was a climate of "spectral paranoia" that fueled a wave of anti-Catholic violence, including the burning of an Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Mass., in 1834 — which, perhaps not surprisingly, forms the subject of one of Schultz's previous books.*

*The result is a gripping slice of history with fresh, often unsettling resonances for the modern reader. "This miracle has caused a great deal of trouble," as one beleaguered priest remarked at the time, "happy thing they do not occur often."*

You can also access lot of other reviews and reflections on the book [here](#).

One of the links in the page just mentioned is to a piece by the author in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, something that should warm the heart of every historian although written by an English professor! The author reflects on the "serendipity" of the archive, and how that can never be replaced fully by digitized material. In the course of researching *Fire and Roses*, she stumbled on the inspiration and story for this book. Reflecting on leading her students through the archive at the college where she teaches, she concludes, "My students now understand that most rare archival material . . . will never be scanned and digitized. And even if much of this material is digitized, its virtual presence is no substitute for the tactile and sensory experience of being in an archive." The serendipitous discoveries she made in researching this book on antebellum miracles, she concludes, were themselves small miracles.



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