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Father Gus*

The life and times of
Augustine Tolton,
First Black Priest
in the U.S.A.

Father Roy Bauer



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Part One: The Wedding Present

Where does one start the story of a man's life? People interested in genealogy trace their personal life-stories back many generations, even many centuries, but this is not possible in the story of Augustine Tolton.

We might start his story with his mother, Martha Jane Chisley. She steps into our history in Mead County, Kentucky, on the John Manning plantation. The Mannings were Catholic and had their slaves instructed and baptized when they were purchased. The babies of their slaves were baptized in infancy. Martha Jane's parents, Augustine Chisley and Matilda Hurd, were baptized and entered a Christian marriage shortly after they had been purchased by the Mannings. Their daughter, Martha Jane, was baptized shortly after her birth. Their parish church was at Flint Island, Kentucky.

When the wealthy John Manning died, his widow married Stephen Burch. Manning's youngest daughter, Susan, married Stephen Elliott in 1849. Susan's step-father, of course, wanted to give a fine wedding present to Susan. He decided to give her some slaves. From his Negroes, he selected a half a dozen of varying ages and abilities.

Susan and her new husband must have received the usual array of wedding gifts, personal items and things for the house. Stephen Elliott and his new bride would be moving from Kentucky. He had acquired a farm in Ralls County, Missouri. It was near Brush Creek, close to the Salt River, and only a short distance from Hannibal.

Among the slaves in Susan's dowry was the sixteen-year-old Martha Jane Chisley. Not included, however, were Martha Jane's parents and brother whom she loved dearly. A short time later, the newlyweds loaded their possessions in carts took their slaves and headed westward. The teenage slave girl, Martha Jane, would never see her parents again. When the party arrived at the mighty Mississippi River for the trip upstream, there was no way that the teenaged Martha Jane would know what a fateful role this great river would play in her life a dozen years later.

Part Two: A Wedding of Catholic Slaves

The farm of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Elliott adjoined the property of another Catholic family. That family name was Hagar. One of the Hagar slaves had been given the name Peter Paul when he was baptized by the missionary priest, Father Peter Paul Lefevere. Father Lefevere tended to the sacramental needs of the Catholics in northeastern Missouri, western Illinois and southern Iowa. The black man Peter Paul Tolton was always proud to have the same Christian names as the priest who baptized him. Father Lefevere later became a bishop in Detroit.

From the time Peter Paul Tolton was just a lad, he worked in the Hagar grain fields and in his master's brewery. For him and his fellow slaves, old and young, male and female, life was a constant drudgery. His world consisted of the fields, the distillery buildings and the row of slave cabins. It was an endless cycle of plowing, planting, hoeing, cutting ripe grain with scythes, threshing the grain by means of flaying it, then scooping it up and throwing it into the wind where the chaff would blow away and the precious grain would fall back onto the threshing floor.



The gravemarker on Fr. Tolton's grave in St. Peter Cemetery, Quincy Illinois, is a large cross with the intertwined letters IHS (Greek for JESUS) and the priestly logo of a stole and chalice engraved on it.

Peter Paul Tolton received basic religious instructions from his master. Even though he was illiterate, he must have had an active mind as he listened to the gossip about the unrest in the country brought about by the slavery question. He must have heard talk of secession by the slave states, insurrection by slaves, and possibly war. The main source of news would be from new slaves in the area who came from other parts of the country. Perhaps he heard of the scaffold-words of John Brown: "I am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but by blood."

Perhaps, too, Peter Paul thought of trying to escape. He surely knew of the Underground Railway system, one route of which had its first station in nearby Quincy. There, at Twenty-fifth and Maine Street, runaway slaves were hidden from bounty-hunters until they could be moved to the next station, and then the next, and so on, until they reached the safety of Canada.

The day Peter Paul Tolton met his future spouse, Martha Jane Chisley, she was calling for help. She was trying to help a slave boy who collapsed. The boy died, but Peter Paul could not forget Martha Jane and her tender compassion.

When he made his interests in her known, an agreement was reached between the slave owners, the Elliots and the Hagars. They would allow Martha Jane and Peter Paul to enter into a Catholic marriage, with the agreement that Peter and Martha would live in a slave cabin on the Elliott farm, with Peter remaining a slave and worker of the Hagars, but Martha and all children born of the union would be the property of the Elliott family.

In the Spring of 1851, Peter Paul Tolton and Martha Jane Chisley, now eighteen years of age, were married in St. Peter Catholic Church, Brush Creek, Missouri. Father John O'Sullivan officiated at the ceremony.

Part Three: The Birth of Augustine

There is no reason to believe that life was easier for Martha Jane and Peter Paul after the marriage. Within a few years, besides the endless work imposed on them, they had to care for their children. Their first child was a sickly boy named Charles. He was born in 1853. Augustine was born in 1854, and a daughter, Anne, was born in 1859.

The baptismal record of St. Peter Church at Brush Creek does not even mention Augustine's name. It simply states: "A colored child born April 1, 1854, son of Peter Tolton and Martha Chisley, property of Stephen Elliott; Mrs. Stephen Elliott, sponsor; May 29, 1854, (signed) Father John O'Sullivan."

In later life, Augustine Tolton said that he was given the name of Augustine, the great African theologian, because that was his grandfather's name, and he was given the name of John because that was the patron saint of the priest who baptized him.

As the years progressed, tensions over the slavery question grew in the country. There were political upheavals and rumblings of a possible war to free the slaves.

Several crucial cases concerning slavery were heard by the United States Supreme Court in the 1850's. The case of Dr. Richard Eells of Quincy, Illinois, was decided by the court in 1853; The Dred Scott Decision from Missouri was decided in 1857. Violence against abolitionists and those assisting runaway slaves had been part of the country for years.

Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy of Alton, Illinois, was shot to death in 1837 as he tried to prevent a pro-slavery mob from stealing his printing press; not long before, an earlier press of his had been thrown into the Mississippi River.

People from Quincy, Illinois, were known to go into Missouri near where the Toltons lived and encourage slaves to run away. A notice was posted at the Canton, Missouri, ferry landing warning: "Anyone caught stealing slaves will be hung by the neck till he is Dead! Dead! Dead!!!" Many citizens of Palmyra, Missouri, boycotted businesses in Quincy because of the abolitionist activity in the Illinois city. The chapel at the Mission Institute at Twenty-fifth and Prentiss in Quincy was burned in retaliation for the institution's assistance given to runaway slaves.

Dr. Richard Eells in Quincy assisted many runaways, but one day he met his match. A runaway by the name of Charley, from the Chauncey Durkee plantation at Monticello, Missouri, showed up at his door, his clothes still wet from swimming the Mississippi. Slave catchers were close behind. Eells took Charley by a circuitous route towards the Mission Institute. When he was about to be overtaken by the pursuers, Charley jumped out of the carriage and ran into a cemetery, but was caught. Later Dr. Eells was charged with "harboring, secreting and assisting a fleeing slave." He was fined half the price of the slave he was assisting, but the abolitionists raised the funds to appeal the case, thinking maybe the courts would rule that since it was in a free state, the court would rule in favor of Dr. Eells. The case reached the Supreme Court which decided that harboring a runaway would be the same as being in possession of stolen property. Dr. Eells had died before the unfortunate decision was handed down.

Four years later, in 1857, the United States Supreme Court reached a decision in the case from Missouri called The Dred Scott Decision. Dred Scott was a slave in Missouri. His owner went to Illinois, which was a free state, and to the Wisconsin Territory, which was free, and Scott went along as an employee. Then his owner moved back to Missouri. The question was, since Scott had lived in a non-slave state, was he a free man? The Supreme Court decided that Negroes, whether free or slave, could not be citizens and so had no civil rights. Therefore, they could not bring a case into court.

This was the milieu in which the Toltons lived in eastern Missouri. The ominous events of the time must have made the field slaves in Ralls County wonder if they would ever be free persons.

Part Four: Runaways

It was obvious that the nation was headed toward civil war over the slavery question. We can only imagine the feelings in the hearts of the slaves when news of Fort Sumter was heard. More slaves than ever were escaping, many of them joining or assisting the Union Army.

Surely Peter Paul Tolton informed his wife and children about his plans. Surely he bid them good-bye before he ran away. Surely he was thinking about the future of his children, about freedom and education for them. As he left, little did Martha Jane and the children realize that they would never see him again. Peter Paul got to St. Louis, a highly divided city, in an effort to help the Union Army. During the Civil

War, 180,000 Blacks became part of the Union's effort to free the country's four million slaves. Martha Jane had no way of knowing that her husband died of dysentery in a St. Louis hospital shortly after his arrival there.

The work of the slaves in the fields must have been intensified as more escaped, their work being taken up by the ones left behind. Martha Jane had to contend with the sight of sickly Charles, age eight, and Augustine, age seven, doing field work. When she heard that there were slave traders in the area, she worried that her children might be purchased and taken away. She had been separated from her parents and brother as a teenager; her husband was now gone; all she had were her children.

Fully aware of the dangers involved with escape, Martha Jane decided to try to escape with her children. Runaways were often caught because slave owners had organized groups, with orders to hunt, shoot and even kill, any Negro not in chains after nightfall. Sometimes, however, mothers with small children were not chained up at night; Anne was only twenty months old.

Whatever the circumstances, Martha Jane was able to get her three children out of the slave quarters and to head for Quincy, Illinois. Quincy was a place she had only heard about, but it beckoned the runaways from eastern Missouri, as Mecca summons devout Moslems!

It was twenty miles from the Elliott farm to Hannibal, and then there was the big river, followed by twenty-one more miles to Quincy. It would take a number of nights for a woman, with three small children, one in arms, to make the trip to Hannibal. They had to have some supplies with them and probably could not walk during the daylight hours.

When they reached Hannibal, they were accosted as runaways by some Confederate officials. They were on the verge of being cuffed when some Union soldiers defended them with the claim that they were in a section of town under Union control.

Part Five: The Cigar Factory

In later life, Augustine often told of the experience in Hannibal and the harrowing row across the river. The Union men helped Martha Jane find a row boat. Even though it was dilapidated, she loaded her children; even though she had no experience rowing a boat, she struggled with the oars, veering the boat this way and that.

After they were off-shore, the angry Confederates spotted them and began shouting threats at them. One fired repeatedly at the boat, but it was dark and he missed. Martha Jane with Charles, Augustine and Anne reached the Illinois side.

They came upon some workers on their way to early morning work on the wharf. The workers could tell that they were runaways, so they gave them some food and pointed the way to Quincy, still some twenty miles away. One assured Mrs. Tolton that there was a colony of Negroes living in the eastern section of Quincy and that many of these folks "had broken away from slavery." Mrs. Tolton still feared being captured by those seeking runaways, but with the war going on, most pro-slavery people were giving their all to the war effort.

In the late afternoon, the day following their night experience on the river, the family arrived in Quincy. Quincy's population was 25,000. It had factories, schools, businesses galore and many churches. They found the Negro district; it had about three hundred inhabitants. Almost immediately they were given help by a kindly lady, Mrs. Davis. She was a widow with a nine-year-old daughter named Mary Ann. Mrs. Davis took in the Toltons, an arrangement which lasted several years. The two mothers, one employed in daytime factory work, the other as a night-time charwoman in a downtown office building, looked after each other's children.

Harris was a huge tobacco factory at Fifth and Ohio Streets. About three hundred persons were employed there turning tobacco leaves into fine cigars. Employees worked ten hours a day, six days a week. Mrs. Tolton got work there right away and soon her sons Charles, age ten, and Augustine, age nine, began work in the same factory.

Augustine told in later life that his supervisor was a Negro man named Mr. Pleasant; he said that the man's name fit him well. The tobacco factory had winter layoffs. During the winter of 1863, Charles caught a cold and developed pneumonia. Mother Tolton sat by his bed day and night. Medicines were not effective. Ten-year-old Charles died.

Prayer and hymn singing were part of the family life. Augustine's lifelong boast was that he learned how to pray and sing at his mother's knee.

Part Six: The First Experience in School

In 1865, the Civil War was over. Mrs. Tolton hoped that her husband would be able to find her. Her hopes were dashed, however, when she was told that his name appeared on the official casualty list of the Union Army; 63,178 Negroes' names were on the list. Peter Paul Tolton's body rests in an unknown grave. His life was a sad life, except that he and his wife passed a love of God and religion on to the next generation!

From the time of their arrival in Quincy, the Toltons attended St. Boniface Church. It had two thousand members, mostly German. Sermons were given in German, but out of consideration for a little cluster of Blacks who gathered in a corner of the church, Father Schaeffermeyer would summarize his sermon in English.

Mrs. Tolton decided that Augustine ought to get an education. St. Boniface had a parish school taught by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the priest and laymen. Augustine was enrolled and assigned to Sister Chrysologus' room where he would be taught to read along with the small children.

Augustine's presence in a previously all-white school caused a parish uprising! Parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school and discontinue their support of the parish; they threatened to withdraw their membership from the Catholic Church; they wrote vicious, anonymous letters; a rock was thrown through the rectory window. The gossip in town was that a petition was going to be presented to the bishop, insisting that Father Schaeffermeyer be removed.

Augustine's school life became intolerable. The others tormented him because he could not read, mimicked his accent and called him insulting names until he broke out in uncontrollable sobs. Sister Chrysologus would keep him after school, both to give him extra help and to protect him from the children waiting outside to tease him.

In less than a month, it was mutually agreed upon to have Augustine withdraw from the school. Father Schaeffermeyer, in later years, always spoke with sorrow when telling of the incident. He recalled: "I can still see them — mother and son — Mrs. Tolton's arms flung around the boy's shoulders, walking down the sidewalk after we drove them out."

After the St. Boniface School experience, it would be several years before another effort was made toward his education. Because Augustine had attended St. Boniface Church for several years, he learned some German. This would be a "plus" for him in his later education.

Part Seven: The Pastor from the Emerald Isle

Each year during the three winter months, the Harris Tobacco Factory was closed. In 1868, during the layoff time, Mrs. Tolton decided to put her fourteen-year-old son in the all-Negro public school at Tenth and Oak Streets. The Colored School Number One, in a small log cabin, was founded in 1862.

But again, this school experience was bitter for Augustine. He was a tall, extremely black, fourteen-year-old who could not read or write. He was placed in the class with the primary children. The mulattoes, who were numerous in the school, looked down on him; there was no father in his family, so the other boys called him a bastard and called his mother a whore. He remained in this school for a couple of months.

In Quincy at the time, there were four Catholic parishes: St. Boniface, founded as The Church of the Ascension, in 1837, St. Lawrence O'Toole founded in 1839, which would eventually be known as St. Peter Church, St. Francis Church established "on the prairie", and St. Mary Church in the south end of town. After the unfortunate experience at St. Boniface, Mrs. Tolton started attending St. Lawrence Church with Augustine and Anne.

The pastor of St. Lawrence Church was a strong-willed Irishman, Rev. Peter McGirr. He came to America during the potato famine at the age of 15; he studied for the priesthood and was ordained April 22, 1862, for the Diocese of Alton, Illinois. After a few months in Pittsfield, Illinois, Father McGirr was assigned to St. Lawrence in Quincy, a parish he pastored until his death in 1893.

It is thought that the first time Father McGirr talked with his teenage parishioner, Augustine Tolton, was on the occasion of the death of Mary Ann Davis. Mrs. Davis and her daughter, Mary Ann, were the ones who took in Mrs. Tolton and family when they arrived in Quincy. Mary Ann was dying of tuberculosis in 1868 at the age of sixteen. When Father McGirr gave her the Last Rites of the Church Augustine was there. Father McGirr, who knew about the trouble in St. Boniface School, learned that Augustine was now in the public school. Father insisted that he come to St. Lawrence School, also taught by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Father would see to it that there would be no trouble.

Around this time, Mrs. Tolton, with Anne and Gus, as Augustine was generally known, moved to a dwelling in the alley between Maine and Jersey, Eighth and Ninth Streets. It was just a few steps from St. Lawrence Church and School.

Part Eight: Confirmed in His Religion

The Sisters of St. Lawrence School prepared the pupils to accept the first black youngster in the school. There was no trouble in the school, although Father McGirr received threats of withdrawal of church support. Father McGirr's Sunday sermons were eloquent explanations of Christian doctrine which applied to the situation. "If you did it to the least of my brothers, you did it to Me," and "Depart from Me into everlasting fire!" and "Let the little children come unto Me." He applied the Good Samaritan story to the situation at hand. The opposition died down. Sister Herlinde arranged to give Gus additional instructions after school.

In 1869, the church and school were renamed in honor of St. Peter. Years later, Augustine spoke fondly of his time in St. Peter School saying, "As long as I was in that school, I was safe. Everyone was kind to me. I learned the alphabet, spelling, reading and arithmetic."

During his first months there, he memorized the Latin Mass prayers and began to serve Mass. He attended St. Peter School for three or four years for the winter months, but as soon as the tobacco factory opened again, Gus would go back to work.

It is not known when Augustine made his First Communion. He was confirmed in St. Peter Church on June 12, 1870. At the time, it was a common practice for a young person to make First Communion on the day of Confirmation.

Gus was such a devout Catholic, serving daily Mass before going to work, that at some point Father McGirr and Gus discussed the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood. They found out that there were no Negro priests in the United States. (The three Healy brothers of Georgia who became priests had a white, Irish Catholic father and a light-skinned slave woman was their mother; they were not readily identified as Blacks, but went north to avoid any possibility of being identified as slaves.)

Because of Augustine's limited education, it was thought that if he wanted to become a priest, he should join the Franciscans since they could accommodate his educational needs more readily. Father Schaeffermeyer, the pastor of St. Boniface, joined the Franciscans himself, but left some of his money to provide for the seminary training of Augustine.

Augustine applied to be a postulant in the Franciscans, but his request was turned down. Then Father McGirr wrote the diocesan bishop about the devout, talented, and aspiring young man. The bishop advised father to "find a seminary which will accept a Negro candidate ... the diocese will assume the expenses." The directive of Bishop Baltes was of no value, since Father McGirr had already written every seminary in the country and the responses all started with words like "we are not ready for a Negro student."

Part Nine: Local Tutoring

When no seminary or religious order in the country would accept him because of his race, the priests in Quincy decided to tutor Gus locally. The city was blessed with well-educated priests, both diocesan and Franciscans.

In 1866, Cardinal Vaughan of England founded the St. Joseph Society for Foreign Missions which was dedicated to the work of the Christianization of Negroes. In

1871, Pope Pius IX commissioned them to work with the Blacks either in Africa or America. The order came to the U.S.A. and accepted the pastorate of a Negro parish in Baltimore.

Father McGirr heard of the order and contacted them, thinking that they might be interested in admitting Gus. The group in Baltimore had only five members and lived in a small house. There was no seminary. They suggested that Augustine come to Baltimore as a catechist or that he go to the Mill Hill Seminary in London and then go to Borneo, or that he continue his studies in Quincy.

Gus studied under Father Theodore Wegmann, assistant at St. Boniface Church for several years until he was transferred. Once again the situation seemed hopeless.

Father McGirr had grown up with a brilliant young man, Patrick Dolan. They were born on the same day, June 29, 1833, and they had lived on adjacent farms near Fintana in rural Ulster, Ireland. At the age of fifteen, Peter McGirr and his two older brothers came to America; Peter eventually attended Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, and then the Sulpician Seminary in Montreal, Canada. His friend, Patrick Dolan, on the other hand, stayed in Ireland and attended the seminary at Maynooth. After his ordination, he had problems getting along with his fellow priests and he clashed with his bishop repeatedly. His alcohol problem became intolerable and so it was decided to permit him a complete change. He came to America and Bishop Kenrick of St. Louis assigned him to a parish in northeastern Missouri.

Before long, Father McGirr heard from his boyhood friend, Father Dolan described the rundown condition of his parish church and rectory. Father McGirr apparently knew nothing of his alcohol problem, and thought this would be a solution for the Toltons. Mrs. Tolton could be his housekeeper and Augustine his custodian and in return, the learned priest could tutor the young black man.

Part Ten: The Lay Apostle

It was with much apprehension that the Toltons moved back to Missouri, but it meant a chance for more education. Gus took an extra job cleaning a tavern after closing hours. He was trying to save money for his trip to the Mill Hill Seminary in London. Much to his dismay, Gus was not permitted to serve Mass, and within a few months, it was obvious that Father Dolan was “hitting the bottle.” Mrs. Tolton wrote Father McGirr about the problem and he advised them to return to Quincy without hesitation. Eleven months had passed.

Back in Quincy, Augustine went to work in the J. L. Kreitz Saddle Factory and was employed after hours as custodian at St. Peter Church. Mrs. Tolton went back to the tobacco factory. Eventually Gus found a good paying job working for John Flynn at the Durholt Bottling Company.

In 1878, the Franciscans at St. Francis College (now known as Quincy University) took Augustine as a student. The Franciscans, Father Richart, Father Engelbert Gey, and Father Francis Albers, were his teachers. Everyone knew that Gus was working towards going to London for his theological studies and then would work as a priest in Borneo.

Gus was zealous to do something about religious instructions for the Negro children in Quincy. St. Boniface Church owned an old Protestant church on the southwest corner of Seventh and Jersey Streets. It had been used temporarily for a parish school but was no longer in use. There were three thousand Negroes in Quincy and although some of them were Catholic, most had quit going to church. Father Richart and Augustine started a Sunday School first. Then with the help of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, under the direction of Sister Herlinde, a regular day school for Blacks was started.

The progress of the new St. Joseph School was noted by non-Catholic leaders who organized protest meetings among the Blacks at which parents were asked to publicly pledge that they would not send their children to the Catholic school. Nevertheless, new pupils seemed to show up whenever others were lured away.

Augustine, knowing the problems brought about by alcohol abuse, urged those of his race to join St. Peter Church's temperance society. Gus attended daily Mass, sometimes serving Masses in two churches each day, worked with great dependability at the bottling company, talked with families urging them to see to the religious instructions of their children, and attended classes at the college. The lay apostolate, however, was not what Augustine wanted; he was determined to become a priest.

Part Eleven: Acceptance at the Propaganda

It became more and more obvious that the St. Joseph Society for Foreign Missions did not want Augustine to come to London. Their order would someday open a seminary in the United States, but no one knew when that might be.

Father Richart, O.F.M., and Father McGirr decided to ask Bishop Baltes of Alton to try and get Augustine in the Propaganda Seminary in Rome. Bishop Baltes was about to make his “ad limina” visit to Rome and he promised to see what could be done.

The Urban College in Rome is a seminary for training priests for work in mission countries. It is more popularly known as The Propaganda, because it is under the direction of the Office for the Propagation of Faith. In Rome, Bishop Baltes was advised to have Augustine train for the priesthood in the United States. The Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda turned down the request for having Augustine Tolton admitted to the Urban College.

In desperation, Father Richart made one more dramatic effort. He knew that the superior general of the Franciscans in Rome was a personal acquaintance of the Cardinal Prefect, so Father Richart wrote his superior and described the frustrating situation with the seminaries in the United States. He described Augustine, who was twenty-six years old, as a reverent acolyte, a devoted son, a faithful worker, a diligent student, and a zealous lay apostle.

Months passed. Then came the response. Augustine Tolton had been accepted as a seminarian at the Propaganda in Rome. As with all students of that seminary, he would be trained for a mission country and he would have no choice about where he would be sent. Of course, everyone presumed that he would eventually be sent to an African country, but that was fine with Gus; his calling was to the priesthood and it mattered not where in the world he would serve God.

Part Twelve: The Eternal City

On Sunday afternoon, February 15, 1880, Augustine left Quincy on the train for Chicago. Surely his mother, Martha Jane, his sister, Anne, Father McGirr, Father Richart and other friends must have seen him off. From the time of his arrival in Quincy at the age of nine, he had never been outside of the town. He must have watched with interest the fields and the towns along the route to Chicago.

To help him pay for his trip to Rome, Bishop Baltes had sent fifty dollars, the students at St. Francis Solano College had taken up a collection, and the Franciscans gave him ten dollars, a considerable sum of money for that time and for men vowed to poverty. In his bag, he guarded the letter he was to present to the Cardinal of the Propaganda College when he arrived in Rome.

The train arrived in Chicago at night. There was a two hour layover before he caught the train to the east. On Tuesday morning he arrived in Jersey City, New Jersey and the port of Hoboken.

The Sisters of the Poor of St. Francis, who operated St. Mary Hospital in Quincy, had a hospital in Hoboken. Sister Perpetua, whom he knew from Quincy, was there and she invited him to stay until Saturday, February 21, when the ship "Der Westlicher" would sail from Hoboken, New Jersey, to LeHavre, France.

Once on board ship he found a familiar face, Father Ewald Fahle, O.F.M., whom he had met at the college in Quincy. Father and several other friars were going to Germany to visit relatives.

The twelve day journey ended at LeHavre on March 4, 1880. From there he took a train to Paris where he made the connection to Rome. His long journey ended on March 10. The first thing he did was to find a church where he made a prayer of thanksgiving for the safe journey. He had to report to the seminary on March 12.

The dome of Saint Peter's in the Vatican dominates Rome. It must have been an incredible thrill for the devout Catholic, ex-slave, former cigar-maker and soda-bottler from Quincy, Illinois, to see the great monuments and churches of Rome.

On Friday, March 12, 1880, he arrived in the Piazza di Spagna where he looked up at a modest building with the inscription: COLLEGIUM URBANUM DE PROPAGANDA FIDE.

His education there would last six years. The first two years would be a completion of college work with most classes in philosophy. Then there would be four years of theological studies, including doctrinal theology, moral (ethical) theology, ascetical (holiness) theology, sacramental theology, church law, and church history. All lectures, textbooks and examinations were in Latin, but Augustine was well prepared for this higher education.

Part Thirteen: Augustine the Seminarian

On Palm Sunday, March 21, 1880, nine days after his arrival at the Propaganda, Augustine was invested with the seminarian's garb, a black cassock and black biretta, but this seminary's special connection with the pope was symbolized by a red sash worn around the waist and a red tassel on the biretta. This would be Augustine Tolton's garb for the rest of his life.

Seminarians from all parts of the world shared life together, in the classroom and library, the chapel and the recreation room. Racial prejudice was totally absent from this environment. At the time, there were 142 students there and three were from Central Africa which gave Augustine a grand opportunity to learn more about the continent in which he would surely spend much of his life.

The Propaganda was founded by Pope Urban VIII in 1627 as an international seminary in Rome, under the Congregation of the Propaganda which was the congregation for overseeing the Catholic Church in mission territories. The church in the United States in the Nineteenth Century was considered a mission country and under this branch of the church government.

"Gus from the U.S.," as he was affectionately known, became acquainted with the Eternal City and attended papal ceremonies of Pope Leo XIII.

When he was in his third year at the Urban College, he made the Propaganda oath. The students made three promises: (1) to work in whatever country or diocese to which they were assigned, (2) not to join a religious order without the permission of the Holy See, and (3) to inform the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda every three years of their general condition and work.

Augustine used every opportunity to learn the geography and history, the languages and cultures of the various areas of Africa. For recreation, he learned to play the accordion, and he entertained by singing the Negro spirituals which he learned as a child in the fields of Ralls County, Missouri. On days of no classes, he walked the streets of Rome, visiting many of its six hundred churches, making sketches in his notebook on the art and architecture of the buildings, and recording their histories.

On May 14, 1883, he received the Tonsure. This ceremony fell into disuse in the latter part of the Twentieth Century. The religious ceremony consisted of a bishop cutting the hair of the seminarian in the form of a cross, or in monasteries of having the head shaved except for a small band of hair in the manner of the ancient Roman slaves. This symbolized the candidate's willingness to become a slave of the people of God. Augustine received the tonsure at the hands of Cardinal Lenti as he prayed that the candidate would "free his heart from the bonds of the world and from earthly desires."

Part Fourteen: "Meanwhile, Back in Quincy..."

From six thousand miles away, seminarian Tolton kept a keen interest in St. Joseph's School in Quincy. During his first year in Rome, he received the sad news that the Catholic school for Negroes, so dear to him, was closed. Father Michael Richart was transferred and so was Sister Herlinde. But several years after that Father McGirr wrote with excellent news. Not only was the school reopened, the church building was restored by donated labor and was opened as a parish church for the Blacks of Quincy. St. Boniface parish still owned the building, but this was their contribution towards the Negro apostolate. The priests of St. Boniface and St. John parishes would serve the sacramental needs of the parishioners.

It was on January 15, 1882, that St. Joseph Church was opened with a Solemn High Mass. Each Sunday there were two Masses, Vespers with Benediction and a

period of religious instructions. Sister Herlinde was permitted to return and the school was soon so crowded that a candidate of the order was sent to teach the smaller children.

Again, unfortunately, three years later, services were discontinued for lack of man power. Even though the need was evident, service to the parish became very irregular.

Part Fifteen: Minor and Major Orders

Before the revision of the ritual of ordination in the latter part of the Twentieth Century, the candidate for the priesthood went through the steps of four minor orders and two major orders. The first two ritualistic steps took place on March 8, 1884, the orders of porter and lector.

In the ceremony of porter, the candidate was handed the keys to the church and instructed to “ring the bells, open and close the church and sacristy, and open the books for the preacher and endeavor by word and example to close to the devil and open to God the hearts of the faithful.” In the order of lector, the candidate is told “to read the word of God intelligibly, so that the faithful may be edified.”

Progress to the priesthood is slow. The next two minor orders were conferred on December 20, 1884 — the orders of exorcist and acolyte. The exorcist, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is to drive out the power of Satan; the acolyte is to minister at the altar. Augustine was probably thinking of the service he would give to the church in Africa — but it did not matter where — he would be doing the work of God and the Church.

On Sunday, August 2, 1885, Augustine Tolton received the first major order, that of subdeacon. In those days, this was the irrevocable step. At this time, the candidate accepted the responsibility of perpetual chastity in the celibate state, and the responsibility of praying the Divine Office daily for life. “If you desire to persevere in your holy resolve, come forward in the name of the Lord,” the celebrant calls to the candidates. At that point, the candidates take a ceremonial step forward. Then, with the vestment called the tunic hanging over the arms, not yet put on, the candidates prostrate themselves on the sanctuary floor while the Litany of Saints is chanted. This is the point of no return; this is the point where a man gives himself completely to God and the work of the Church.

On November 8, 1885, Augustine was ordained a deacon. The earlier orders were ceremonies of the Church. The orders of deacon, priest and bishop form the sacrament of Holy Orders. “Consider well to what exalted rank you rise in the Church. The office of deacon is to assist at the altar, to baptize and to preach.”

Augustine wrote in later years, “The day I was ordained deacon, I felt so strong that I thought no hardship would ever be too great for me to accept. I was ready for anything; in fact, I was very sure I could move mountains in Africa.”

Part Sixteen: Plans for Africa

Early in 1886, Augustine learned that he would be ordained a priest on Holy Saturday, April 24, in St. John Lateran Church in Rome. St. John Lateran has the title of “The Mother and Head Church of the City of Rome and the World.” St. John Lateran is the pope’s cathedral. It is not St. Peter’s in the Vatican as is so often supposed.

St. Peter Church in Brush Creek, Missouri. This church completed in 1860 replaced the log church built in 1834 where Augustine Tolton was baptized in 1854.



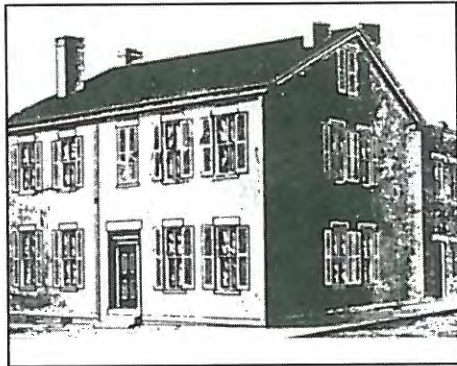
Graves of the Elliotts of Brush Creek, owners of the slave, Augustine Tolton.

St. Lawrence O'Toole Church, now known as St. Peter, where Augustine Tolton made his First Holy Communion and was Confirmed.



Father Peter McGirr, pastor of St. Peter Church in Quincy, who promised an education to Augustine Tolton.

St. Peter Church where Augustine Tolton was employed as a custodian, where he served Mass and where his funeral was held.



St. Boniface Rectory where Augustine Tolton was tutored by diocesan priests.

St. Francis Solano College (now Quincy University) where Augustine Tolton was enrolled as a special student.



Augustine Tolton, a seminarian in Rome.

Centennial Celebration

On July 12 and 13, 1997, a memorial celebration was held in Quincy on the occasion of the centennial of the death and burial of Fr. Tolton.



Among the thirty priests concelebrating the Mass were five bishops, guests of Bishop Daniel Ryan of Springfield in Illinois. Pictured here are Archbishop Rigali of St. Louis, Missouri, Bishop McAuliffe of Jefferson City, Missouri, Bishops Murry and Goedert of Chicago, Illinois and Bishop Gregory of Belleville, Illinois.

Knights of
St. Peter Claver
and the
Knights of Columbus
in procession.



The choir from
St. Augustine Church
Memphis, Tennessee
sang at the Mass.

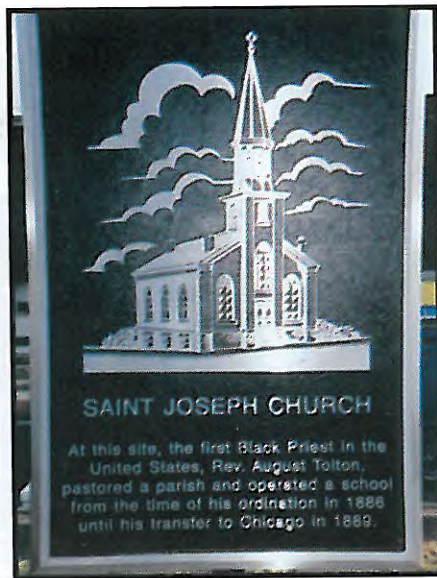
St. Peter Church
was filled beyond
capacity for the Mass.



The Bishops and Deacon Tom Meyer at the Altar.



Banner of Fr. Tolton being carried high in procession at Mass.



Historical marker dedicated at the location of Fr. Tolton's church in Quincy.

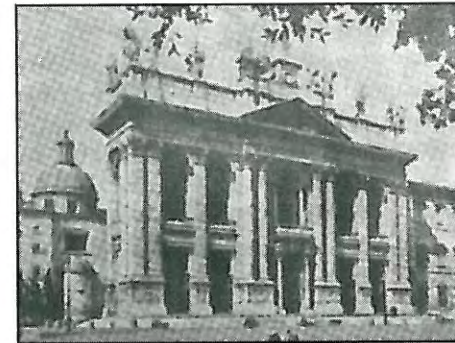
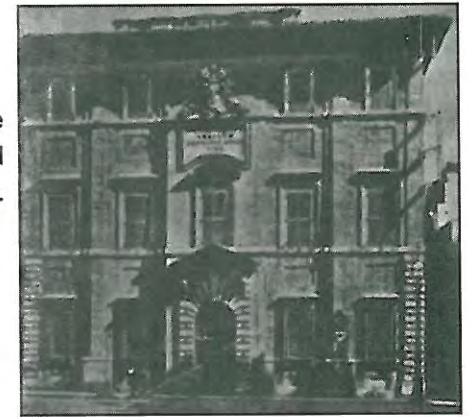


Banner of St. Katharine Drexel.



Banner of Bl. Frances Schervier whose sisters were friends of Fr. Tolton.

The Urban College in Rome where Augustine Tolton attended the seminary.



Church of St. John Lateran in Rome where Father Tolton was ordained a priest.



St. Boniface Church where Father Tolton had his first Solemn High Mass in Quincy.



Father Tolton wearing the Biretta with the indication that he was educated at a Pontifical Seminary.

St. Joseph Church in Quincy where Father Tolton pastored a Negro Congregation.



Saint Katharine Drexel, wealthy heiress turned nun, financially assisted Father Tolton's work in Chicago.

Father Tolton shortly before his death in 1897.



Probably, the Church of St. John was an enlargement of the great hall of the palace of the Laterini family. It was also called Domus Faustae — the house of Fausta. She was the wife of Emperor Constantine, the emperor who granted religious freedom to Christianity. This emperor gave this property to the pope. Other names that have been applied to St. John Lateran are “The Splendid Basilica” and “The Basilica of the Savior.”

The original basilica was in use in 314 A.D. The building was laid waste by the barbarians in the Fifth Century; the church also received damage in an earth tremor in 896 A.D. and was severely damaged by fire in 1308. The basilica was beautifully restored in the 18th Century.

Some of the great councils of the church took place at the Lateran. Some of the decisions made here have been the decision to have popes elected by the cardinals and the decision that Catholics would be required to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist at least once a year. Also, a crusade was launched here.

The art in the church is overwhelming. The mosaic of Christ dates from the Fourth Century. One of the most startling pieces of art is the collection of statues of the apostles. These are done in white marble, five times life size, and with arms raised and flowing robes, they seem to be alive. In the Fourth Century, all baptisms in the city of Rome took place in the baptistry of this church.

Deacon Tolton knew three months ahead of time that he would be ordained a priest in this basilica the day before Easter. During these months of anticipation he must have envisioned the church. He wrote to Father Richart, “My seminary studies are about over now, and I will go on to Africa right after my ordination in April.”

The day before his ordination, Good Friday, April 23, 1886, Augustine's faith was put to the test. Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni addressed the deacons who would be ordained the next day and he reminded them of the “Propaganda Oath.” It bound them in obedience to go wherever they would be sent. Augustine knew that he would be sent to Africa. He was admitted to the Propaganda with this understanding. The bishop of Alton, Illinois, of his home diocese, was not able to get him into this seminary; he had had no contact with him nor with the seminary during the past six years. Augustine had studied about Africa. He was anxious to find out to which part of the great continent he would be sent. However, Augustine was not prepared for what was about to happen.

Part Seventeen: Ordination

Cardinal Simeoni spoke to Augustine and informed him that at a committee meeting the evening before, it was agreed that he should be sent to Africa, but at the end of the discussion, Simeoni overruled announcing, “America has been called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see it if deserves that honor. If the United States has never before seen a Black priest, it must see one now!”

The Cardinal told Augustine that he was being sent back to the United States, to the Diocese of Alton, Illinois, his home diocese. It was a blow to Augustine and it came swiftly; it was a disappointment, but it was the cost of a vow of obedience!

Augustine must have recalled his time as a slave in America, his escape, his rejection at the first school he attended, the rejection by every seminary in the country,

and the rejection by religious orders which were “not ready” for a Negro member. How, he must have wondered, could he be successful in the ministry in America? Perhaps he was consoled by the thought that God calls people to be faithful, not to be successful.

April 24, 1886, Holy Saturday, the day of Augustine Tolton’s ordination to the priesthood dawned. Pope Leo XIII delegated Cardinal Giovanni Parocchi to officiate at the ceremony. “Let those come forward who are to be ordained to the Order of Priesthood,” announced the Master of Ceremonies. Then the names of the candidates were called one by one. “Augustine Tolton!”

The Black man from St. Peter Church in Quincy, Illinois, U.S.A. responded, “Adsum” meaning “I am present.” He stepped forward. The ordination ceremony lasted several hours. The Litany of Saints was chanted as the great statues overlooked the prostrated forms of the candidates. As the ceremony progressed, Augustine hands were anointed with holy oil; he was offered a chalice and paten; a stole was placed over his shoulders as a “sweet yoke,” and the chasuble as a symbol of charity was placed on him, but it remained folded until after the Communion, at which time the Church gives the candidate the authority to forgive sins.

The ceremony clearly pointed out what the priesthood in the Catholic Church is about: to offer the sacrifice of the Mass, to bless, govern, preach, baptize and forgive sins.

When the ordination Mass was over, those in attendance approached each newly ordained and asked for a blessing; the person then kisses the hands of the newly ordained, symbolizing respect for the priesthood.

Part Eighteen: Easter Sunday Mass

Cardinal Simeoni made arrangements for Father Tolton to celebrate his first Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica, the largest and most popular church in Christendom. It was April 25, 1886, Easter Sunday. Pilgrims must have wondered when they saw a red-robed cardinal taking his place humbly beside a black priest.

Father Tolton began, “Introibo ad altare Dei.” The cardinal gave the server’s response, “Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.” Father Tolton had first heard these Latin words in St. Peter Church, Brush Creek, Missouri; he then learned them by heart as Sister Chrysologus taught him how to serve Mass at St. Peter Church in Quincy. Now he was saying the priest’s prayers in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome!

During the Easter season, Pope Leo XIII received the newly ordained priests from the Propaganda. On Ascension Thursday, each member received a missionary’s cross. Gradually the new priests began departing for various mission countries in the world. Those who had studied, prayed and played together for six years were now going out to make their mark on the world.

Father Francis Ostrop of Carlinville, Illinois, had sent Augustine spending money regularly during his six years in Rome. Father Ostrop knew Gus when he was stationed at St. Boniface Church in Quincy and knew that a student always needed money for books and supplies.

Through the years, Augustine saved some of the money, but it was not enough for his passage back to the United States. Cardinal Simeoni wrote to his superior ask-

ing for money for Father Tolton. In a letter dated June 3, 1886, now found in the archives of the Propaganda, the Cardinal wrote, “Father Augustine Tolton is now about to leave for Alton, Illinois, his diocese in America. Although he is not profoundly learned, he is nevertheless trustworthy and willing, alert and obedient. Please allow 220 liras to pay for the journey to America. The amount he has (485 liras) is not sufficient.”

The money was forthcoming, but in a letter to the bishop of Alton dated June 16, 1886, the bishop was informed, “We have advanced 220 liras which Father Tolton needed to pay for his voyage and we have charged this amount to the Diocese of Alton. Father Tolton is a good priest, reliable, worthy, capable, deeply spiritual and dedicated.” Father Tolton left the Urban College on June 13, 1886.

Part Nineteen: The Trip Back to Quincy

Father Tolton’s route back to the United States took him from Rome to Civitavecchia, then by boat to Livorno and from there to Marseilles, France. He crossed the English Channel to Liverpool where he would embark across the Atlantic.

At Livorno, an Italian immigration officer, thinking that the black man who spoke fluent Italian was an Italian subject from Africa, tried to get him to enlist in the Italian military.

In France, all the passengers were quarantined for twenty-four hours. In England there was a twelve-day delay in departure, so a kindly Irish gentleman who had met Father, took him back across the channel and traveled with him for a week in several countries, arranging for him to offer Holy Mass in some of the great cathedrals and shrines of Europe. Back in Liverpool, Father Tolton boarded the CUNARDER GALLIA. The ship arrived in New York on July 6, 1886.

Father Tolton offered his first Mass on American soil at St. Benedict the Moor parish church in New York City. The congregation consisted primarily of Negroes. Father also had a Mass for the Franciscan Sisters at Hoboken, New Jersey. He said he did this out of love for those dear Sisters who had served so devotedly back in Quincy.

When it became known exactly when Father Gus would arrive in Quincy, Father McGirr made plans for a hearty welcome. He chartered a railroad car to take Father’s friends to Springfield, Illinois. That car was attached to the train back to Quincy for a gala celebration.

As the train pulled into Quincy, a brass band played “Holy God.” The crowd waved and cheered as a decorated carriage drawn by four white horses took him through the streets to St. Peter Church where an enormous crowd waited.

At the church, hundreds of people stood in line to come forward to ask for a blessing. Before laying his hands on the others, Father Augustine Tolton laid his hands on the head of his mother, invoking God’s blessing on this woman whose Catholic faith governed every aspect of her life.

Part Twenty: A Solemn High Mass

The priests in Quincy arranged for Father Tolton to have his first Solemn High Mass in Quincy’s St. Boniface Church. Not only was the church larger in size than St. Peter’s, but St. Boniface Parish had aided in establishing St. Joseph Negro School

before Augustine went to the seminary and then offered the use of the building for the founding of St. Joseph Parish.

The Solemn High Mass was scheduled for July 18, 1886, at 11:00 a.m. Hours before the scheduled time, the church was filled. Children were asked to go to an earlier Mass because there would not be room for them. The gallery was filled; people were standing in the aisles. Others stood outside. The congregation was estimated at one thousand Whites and five hundred Blacks. At the end of the Mass, Father Gus spoke to the people in trembling voice thanking the priests and sisters and the people who had given him encouragement. Then he said, "Above all, I want to thank my mother."

At the end, the people began shouting "Hail to the Propaganda College; long live the college in Rome."

Bishop Baltes of Alton had died a few months before and Rev. John Janssen was the administrator of the diocese until a bishop could be appointed. He received Father Tolton and gave him his assignment in the diocese. He was appointed pastor of the Negro Church of St. Joseph at 7th and Jersey in Quincy.

On July 25, 1886, Father Gus was formally installed as pastor. As part of the ceremony, he was presented a key to the church and then escorted to the altar, the pulpit and the confessional. For this ceremony, all the pews in church were reserved for the members of the parish. In the sermon, Father Bruener of St. Boniface traced the history of the Black Catholics in Quincy and the school which Augustine helped establish.

Father Tolton began his pastoral work. He had two Masses, Vespers, and catechetical instructions on Sundays. There was daily Mass and daily religious instructions in the school. Weekday afternoons and evenings were given to convert instructions, counseling, home visits, especially to the sick and aged, sermon preparation and recruitment for students for the school.

Part Twenty-one: A Devoted Pastor

Much of what is known of St. Joseph Parish comes from the writings of Father Bruener of St. Boniface Church who was a leading force in founding St. Joseph Church. He wrote of the accomplishments and adversities of Father Tolton. He described the activities in the parish, such as the girls' choir which consisted of Blacks and Whites and the Altar Society which consisted of eighty women, also of both races. Father Tolton lived with his mother in an apartment on Eighth and Maine. Mrs. Tolton was the sacristan.

Father Bruener continued, "Every Sunday the church is filled to capacity. Father Tolton is highly esteemed by all and everyone likes his sermons." Then the historical account changes abruptly. "For the past ten years much has been done for the conversion of the Negroes in Quincy; the results have been minimal. As a whole, in terms of achievement, the Negro mission has not paid off. The school has always been well attended, and actually many children were baptized."

The poverty of the Negroes is described and it is told how some children were so destitute that they came to school in the winter just to be in a warm place. Shoes, clothing and sometimes food were provided for the poorest of them.

The average attendance in the school was sixty pupils. Even though many were baptized, they did not all persevere in the faith. Secret societies and opposition from clergymen of other religions impeded conversions.

The constant presence of Whites in his church gave Father Gus encouragement because they were able to make contributions to keep the school open. People of both races stood in line to go to confession and get spiritual advice from Father Tolton. Father was active in the community, especially in the struggle against the problem of alcohol abuse.

Part Twenty-two: Devastating Prejudice

Being a graduate of the Urban College in Rome, Father Tolton had to give a regular report on his work to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In his report dated July 25, 1887, Father Tolton seemed discouraged. In his first year, he had only six converts. He said that he had heard that Archbishop Feehan of Chicago had appealed to Rome to have him transferred to the diocese of Chicago where there was great hope of success in the Black apostolate. He told that even over his objections, other parishes in Quincy were selling pictures of him to raise money. He said that the people of Quincy were generous to him and that he had many opportunities to travel and give lectures, but did not want to neglect his parish by frequent absences.

The response from Rome told him to stay in Quincy and continue his good work. This gave him encouragement. The newspaper THE QUINCY JOURNAL described Father Tolton in glowing words, using such phrases as "fine educational training," "wholehearted earnestness," and "a rich voice which falls pleasantly on the ear."

His church was full Sunday after Sunday. Often the children had to sit on the floor around the altar to make room for more adults in the pews. Blacks and Whites attended the church, but the school was attended only by Negro children.

Conversions to the Catholic faith, that Father so desperately hoped for, simply did not come in great numbers. Some clergymen of other faiths in town did what they could to keep people away from St. Joseph's fearing "papal inroads" and "the spread of Romanism."

But the worst hurt came when a new pastor was assigned to St. Boniface Church, who was also appointed as the dean or leader of the Quincy area Catholic clergy. Father Michael Weiss arrived in Quincy in November of 1887. St. Boniface Church was laboring under a staggering debt. He was anxious to put the parish on a sound financial basis. He was unhappy about his parish maintaining the church building for the Negro parish, and he was especially unhappy because many of his parishioners frequently attended services at St. Joseph Church. He even referred to his brother priest as "that nigger priest." As long as the pleasant Father Gus, who gave such wonderful sermons and spoke such kindly and encouraging words was just a block away, he could not hope to keep his parishioners from going to services there, at least occasionally. Father Weiss developed a plan!

Part Twenty-three: “Desist from Luring the Whites!”

Father Weiss complained to his congregation that they had donated the use of the very building used by the Black Catholics and maintained it for ten years. With all the authority of the deanship, he told Father Tolton that he was expected to minister only to the Negroes and that he should tell the white people to stay out of St. Joseph Church. Father Weiss publicly declared that money put into the collection basket by white people at St. Joseph’s in reality belonged to the white parishes.

In telling a Josephite priest about it, Father Tolton wrote, “These facts I have kept hidden through fear of it greatly injuring the success of the mission among the colored race.”

In 1889, reluctantly, Father Tolton began accepting speaking engagements as a means of raising money to maintain his church and school. He spoke at a meeting of colored Catholics held in Washington, D.C. Cardinal Gibbons made arrangements for him to speak in Baltimore. He spoke to large gatherings in New York, Boston and Galveston.

Some of his speeches can still be read. “The Catholic Church deplores a double slavery — that of the mind and that of the body. She endeavors to free us of both. I was a poor slave boy, but the priests of the Church did not disdain me. It was through the influence of one of them that I became what I am tonight. I must now give praise to that son of the Emerald Isle, Father Peter McGirr, pastor of St. Peter’s Church in Quincy, who promised me that I would be educated and who kept his word. It was the priests of the Church who taught me to pray and to forgive my persecutors.

“It was through the direction of a Sister of Notre Dame, Sister Herlinde, that I learned to interpret the Ten Commandments; and then I also beheld for the first time the glimmering light of truth and the majesty of the Church. In this Church we do not have to fight for our rights because we are Black. She had colored saints — Augustine, Benedict the Moor and Monica. The Church is broad and liberal. She is the Church for our people.”

But back in Quincy the situation had not changed. Father Weiss suggested to Father Tolton that he go elsewhere. “I am bound by my Propaganda oath; I have been appointed to this parish and I must remain,” Father Tolton explained.

Father Weiss, who was powerful with the bishop, conferred with him. After a meeting about the situation, Father Tolton was called to the bishop’s office in Alton and sternly admonished to heed the direction of the dean of Quincy. He was told to desist from luring White worshippers and he was told to minister to Negro people only or to go elsewhere. While the other priests in Quincy sympathized with Gus, there was little they could do. Father Weiss publically and repeatedly publicized Bishop Ryan’s mandate that Father Tolton was to minister only to Negroes. Father Tolton quietly continued to work tirelessly for his impoverished parish and parishioners.

Part Twenty-four: The Sad Departure from Quincy

Another incident in 1889 put Father Tolton in an unacceptable light with some in Quincy. A wealthy, Catholic, white, society matron’s daughter planned to marry an “unacceptable” person. The mother put pressure on the priests in town to close their doors to her daughter’s wedding plans. However, she forgot about Father Tolton. When the couple asked Father Gus to officiate at their wedding in St. Joseph Church, he obtained very quietly the permission of her pastor and proceeded with the wedding. In the civil and Church law, everything was in order, but what a shock to Quincy’s high society when they learned that the daughter of one of their own had married in the Negro church.

On July 12, 1889, Father Tolton wrote to the Cardinal of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith giving an account of the situation in Quincy. “There is a certain German priest here who is jealous and contemptuous. He abuses me in many ways and has told the bishop to send me out of this place. I will gladly leave here just to be away from this priest. I appealed to Bishop Ryan and he also advises me to go elsewhere.”

In the cause of justice, the Cardinal found it appropriate to get more information. He wrote Bishop Ryan asking for a full explanation as to why Father Tolton had made his request. Bishop Ryan replied on August 20, 1889, saying, “Father Tolton is a good priest. However, he wants to establish a type of society here which is not feasible in this place.” It seems that he was referring to interracial marriage without daring to put it into written words.

In the meantime, Father Augustine sent letters to find a bishop who would take him into his diocese. Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, said that he was in no position to spend more money on the Negro apostolate. The aggressive archbishop did not like Father Tolton’s mild manner; he wrote to someone that he wanted a black priest, but he didn’t want a Tolton! On the other hand, Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago assured Father Tolton that he would receive a warm welcome in his archdiocese, if it met with the approval of the Propaganda.

Father Tolton wrote the Cardinal in Rome again. On September 4, 1889, he pleaded, “I beg you, give me permission to go to the diocese of Chicago. It is not possible for me to remain here any longer with this German priest.” On October 7, 1889, he made a third appeal, “There are nineteen Negroes here whom I have baptized and they will follow me to Chicago. I will go at once, as soon as I receive your consent.”

On December 7, 1889, Father Tolton received his answer from the Cardinal in Rome, “If the two bishops concur in giving their approval, go at once!”

Augustine informed only his mother, sister, and a few friends. On December 19, 1889, he left Quincy quietly after three and a half years as pastor of St. Joseph Church which then closed its doors permanently.

He must have recalled the joy in his heart when he made his first trip to Chicago in 1880 as he was on his way to the seminary. This time as he left Quincy, various words must have been burning in his mind. Some called him a “total failure.” The dean told him to “get out of Quincy.” The bishop told him to “go elsewhere.” The Cardinal Prefect wrote him to “go at once!”

Part Twenty-five: Saint Monica's in Chicago

Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago was destroyed in the great fire of 1871. Bishop Foley then bought an old Congregational Church, built in 1835, for his cathedral. This eventually became St. Mary's Parish. It was at Ninth and Wabash. In the 1870's and 1880's, Father Joseph Rowles, pastor of St. Mary's, had a Negro apostolate. In 1881, an association known as St. Augustine's Society was formed to give encouragement to Black Catholics and to recruit converts.

In 1882, the lower level of St. Mary Church became Chicago's first Negro parish. Mass was held there for the next seven years. This "subparish" was dependent on St. Mary's for financial support. Of course, the Blacks were anxious to have their own pastor. A year after Father Tolton's ordination they had approached Archbishop Feehan, asking that he try to get Father Tolton transferred to Chicago.

In 1889, when Father Tolton knew that he was going to Chicago, he asked a friend formerly from Quincy to quietly obtain lodging for him in the Negro district. Father Gus arrived in the Windy City a week before Christmas; he went quietly to his room at 2251 South Indiana Avenue. When he reported to the archbishop, he was appointed pastor of St. Augustine Parish with "full pastoral jurisdiction over all Negro Catholics in Chicago." It was suggested that the time had come to move out of the basement of St. Mary Church.

No members of St. Augustine Society, except the friend who obtained the room, knew that Father Tolton had arrived. On the first Sunday, when it was time for Mass for the Blacks, Father Rowles walked down the steps with Father Tolton who was dressed in his black cassock with the red sash.

Father Gus must have wondered that Sunday what his former parishioners were doing for Mass. In Quincy, he had a nice church, a school, and an apartment with his mother and sister. In Chicago, he had an altar in the basement of another congregation's church and a one-room apartment where he lived by himself.

Eventually his mother and sister moved to Chicago. He got a rectory at 448 Thirty-sixth Street and opened a store-front church which he called St. Monica's Chapel. Nineteen of his converts from Quincy moved to Chicago in order to have their faith strengthened by belonging to St. Monica's.

All of this good news was written in his next report to Rome. He had a vision of a great church building for use by the Blacks of Chicago.

Part Twenty-six: Help From Mother Katharine Drexel

Even before Father Tolton arrived in Chicago, a lady by the name of Anne O'Neill gave the archbishop \$10,000 to be used for a Negro church. At the time there were 27,000 Negroes in Chicago, most of them living in a ghetto at the edge of the business district. Those who were employed held low paying jobs. A site was selected for the Negro church.

Mr. Lincoln C. Valle, a trustee of St. Monica's, received permission from the archbishop to solicit funds from Catholics in other parts of the city. The parish also

received some funds from the Negro and Indian Fund which had been set up by the American bishops at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore.

In 1889, while attending the Catholic Colored Congress in Washington, D.C., Father Tolton learned about Katharine Drexel. Upon the death of her father, she and her two sisters inherited the annual income from \$14 million. The three Drexel sisters became generous benefactors of various charities, especially those which promoted Catholic causes. Katharine became interested in the cause of native Americans. When she asked Pope Leo XIII to send priests to the Indian reservations, he suggested that she become a missionary. In 1889, she entered a novitiate. On February 12, 1891, she made her profession in a newly established religious order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People.

Father Tolton appealed to Katharine Drexel for financial help on a number of occasions. It is not known exactly how much help she gave, but it was certainly in excess of \$36,000.00. A number of letters that Father wrote to her are in the archives of this religious order.

In 1891, construction was started on a grand church for St. Monica's Parish. Two years later, due to limited funds, construction was halted and a temporary roof was placed on the building and the lower level was put into use as a church. At this time, Father Gus was ministering to six hundred parishioners.

The rectory was behind the church and Mrs. Tolton, affectionately known as Mother Tolton, served as housekeeper, sacristan, and a faithful choir member. Father organized adult religious classes; he engaged some church members to help teach catechism to the children. He taught religion after both Sunday Masses and before Sunday afternoon Vespers. Most parishioners lived in poverty which was so bad that Father Gus described their situation as "being in a bag, with both ends open!"

Part Twenty-seven: Poverty and Holiness

Poverty afflicted so many of Father Tolton's neighbors that he spent a great deal of time trying to find help for them. Several charitable groups were called upon repeatedly for help. Miss Mary Elmore, a Franciscan tertiary and board member of the Visitation and Aid Society visited Father Gus offering help. She wrote, "I attended 10:00 o'clock Mass with Father Tolton's congregation and I had the opportunity of speaking with the Negro priest. I thought he was going to attend the Congress (the Catholic Colored Congress) but he said he was feeling so ill that he was afraid he would not be able to undertake the journey. Poor Father! He is left to struggle alone in poverty! We are witnesses of his ardent charity and self-denying zeal."

The parishioners were aware that Father was wearing himself out by hard work. At times he had to ask the Mass server to bring him a chair because he could not stand to deliver his sermon. He made his rounds, visiting his people in their poverty. He wore a simple black cassock and put aside the red sash worn by those who had attended a Pontifical seminary. He fraternized with his brother priests only on special occasions.

A priest from Dubuque, Iowa, spoke once about living with Father Tolton and his mother in 1896 while he attended a summer session at the University of Chicago. Father Theodore Warning stopped at St. Monica's seeking a place to stay for two months because it was convenient to the university campus. A quarter of a century after that summer, he recounted, "They lived in a poorly furnished but very clean house. The meals were simple affairs. Father Tolton, his mother and I sat at a table having an oil cloth cover. A kerosene lamp stood in the middle. On the wall directly behind Father's place hung a large black rosary. As soon as the evening meal was over, Father Tolton would rise and take the beads from the wall. He kissed the large crucifix reverently. We all knelt on the bare floor while the Negro priest, in a low voice, led the prayers with deliberate slowness and with unmistakable fervor."

Eventually some of the members of St. Monica's who had lived a distance away, realized that they could attend churches in their neighborhoods without any problems, so they stopped coming to St. Monica's Church.

Part Twenty-eight: An Untimely Death

"Father Tolton is dead! Father Tolton is dead!" The wildfire news plunged Chicago's Negro community into a state of shock.

"What happened? Was there an accident? Does Mother Tolton know?"

His parishioners recalled his words from the previous Sunday when he announced that he would be away that week because he was going on retreat with his brother priests from the Archdiocese of Chicago. The retreat was going to be held at St. Victor's College in Bourbonnais, Illinois. He said that he would be back on Friday.

The people had noticed how weak Father was, how his hand shook as he gave Holy Communion, and how often he had to sit down. He was only forty-three years old but he seemed to be a worn out old man.

Bourbonnais is about a hundred miles south of Chicago. Father Gus arrived back in the city on Friday, July 9, 1897. He got off the train at the 35th Street Station and began to walk to the rectory at 448 Thirty-sixth Street. It was shortly before noon. The temperature was already 105 degrees. He swayed and then fell heavily to the sidewalk. A police patrol rushed him to Mercy Hospital at 2536 Prairie Avenue.

He was given medical attention all that afternoon. The chaplain administered the Sacrament of Extreme Unction and recited the Prayers of the Dying, prayers which Father Gus had so often prayed over others. His fever mounted and his breathing became more labored. That evening, while his mother, his sister, the chaplain and several Sisters of Mercy knelt in prayer, he breathed his last. According to the hospital records, Father Augustine Tolton died of heat stroke and uremia on July 9, 1897.

On Sunday, his body lay in state in the unfinished St. Monica's Church; a chalice and stole, symbols of his priesthood, were placed on the casket, and the body was dressed in Mass vestments. In the evening, the priests of the city filled the church to recite the Office of the Dead.

On Monday, July 12, Father John Gilliam, vicar general of the archdiocese delegate of Archbishop Feehan, offered the solemn Requiem Mass. More than one hundred priests were in attendance. The church was filled and the overflow crowd stood outside.

The Chicago Police Department assigned ten of the "finest" to assist with the crowd. Father T. Mooney, chancellor of the archdiocese, gave the sermon encouraging the people to fulfill Father Tolton's dream of completing the construction of St. Monica Church.

During his lifetime, Father Tolton had expressed the desire to be interred in the priests' lot of St. Peter Cemetery in Quincy. He wanted a Requiem Mass in St. Peter Church, the church of his teenage years, the church of his First Communion, the church of his Confirmation, the church where he served Mass, where he was employed, and where his vocation was nourished. A horse-drawn hearse carried his body from St. Monica's to the train station in Chicago where it was loaded on the train for Quincy.

Part Twenty-nine: Body Laid to Rest

Father Tolton's body was accompanied to Quincy by Father J. Brecks, his spiritual director while in Chicago, by his mother and sister, by delegates from St. Monica's, James Bowles, Samuel Neals, and several others.

The remains arrived in Quincy on the morning of July 13, 1897. Twelve Quincy priests were at the depot to meet the funeral party and to accompany the body to St. Peter Church. At the church, pallbearers J. J. Flynn, Jerry Shea, Fred Schulties, Patrick McGuire, J. B. Menke and John Hellhake carried the casket through the outside crowd and into the church. Father McGirr, who had befriended the Toltons shortly after their arrival in Quincy thirty-six years before, had died in 1893. Father John Kerr succeeded him as pastor of St. Peter Church.

The casket was placed at the head of the center aisle. In the crowd were those who remembered Augustine as a Mass server, as a factory worker, as a church custodian, as a student, as a lay apostle, and as a friend. Some recalled the years of St. Joseph Church, but there were only a few black faces in the crowd. Rev. Michael Weiss was still the pastor of St. Boniface Church.

The QUINCY JOURNAL reported, "There was seldom such a large funeral. The cortege was four blocks long, plus street cars which took the people as far as Dulden Field. From there they walked to the cemetery."

Father Kerr said the final prayers at the graveside. A simple marker was put on his grave. Later it was replaced with a concrete cross which bears the inscription:

Rev. Augustine Tolton

The First Colored Priest in the United States

Born in Brush Creek, Ralls County, Missouri

April 1, 1854

Ordained in Rome, Italy, April 24, 1886

Died July 9, 1897

Requiescat in Pace

The entourage from Chicago returned to the train station for their sad journey home. The local priests went back to St. Peter's to visit and discuss the events of the recent days. No eulogy had been preached in Quincy, but then, to those who understood, his life was the eulogy. It could easily be judged that his life was not a success, but God calls His servants to be faithful, not necessarily successful. The scars willingly endured in the service of God are of greater value than what people judge as successes.

Part Thirty: An Epilogue

The death of Father Tolton caused Archbishop Feehan to reduce St. Monica's to the standing of a mission served by the priests of St. Elizabeth Church. One Mass each Sunday was celebrated at St. Monica's. Adult religious instructions were discontinued and the parish societies were disbanded for lack of leadership. Parish trustee, Lincoln C. Valle, tried to hold things together, eventually prevailing upon the archbishop to appoint a full time pastor in the person of Father John Morris.

During Father Morris' fifteen-year pastorate, a parish school was opened for Negro children. In 1912, Saint Katharine Drexel sent five of her Sisters to take charge of the school. The school eventually merged with St. Elizabeth's and more Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were sent to teach.

In 1917, Cardinal Mundelein requested the Fathers of the Society of the Divine Word from Techney, Illinois, to take charge of St. Monica's and to direct the Negro apostolate in the archdiocese.

Martha Jane Tolton, Augustine's mother, served as sacristan at St. Monica's until her death in 1911. She was spared the sight of the closing of St. Monica's in 1924. The unfinished church was razed in 1945. Blacks were migrating into the city sometimes at the rate of five thousand a week, so by necessity, Chicago's parishes became integrated. Augustine's sister, Anne, eventually married.

In 1939, one more concentrated effort was made in Quincy in the area of the Negro apostolate. Father Reginald Doyle, O.F.M., was appointed pastor of a new mission church for Blacks, St. Benedict the Moor at 11th and Broadway. In 1940, there were forty-five attending Mass there and twenty persons were taking convert instructions. Students from Quincy University helped in a census to locate Black families that were once Catholic and assisted in catechetical instructions. Father Dunstan Velez, O.F.M., was pastor in 1950 when Bishop O'Connor closed St. Benedict's and asked the Negroes to attend Mass in the neighborhood parishes. It was a different era and questions were asked about the need for a separate church for Negroes. At the same time in Quincy, the idea of "national parishes" was eliminated and the parishes were all given geographic boundaries.

St. Peter church still flourishes, although it has been relocated just over a mile east of its original location. In front of the parish school, a statue of Father Tolton looks down on the children as they enter and leave the building. Our story ends here, but Augustine Tolton left a legacy of determination, of dedication to the Church and of holiness.

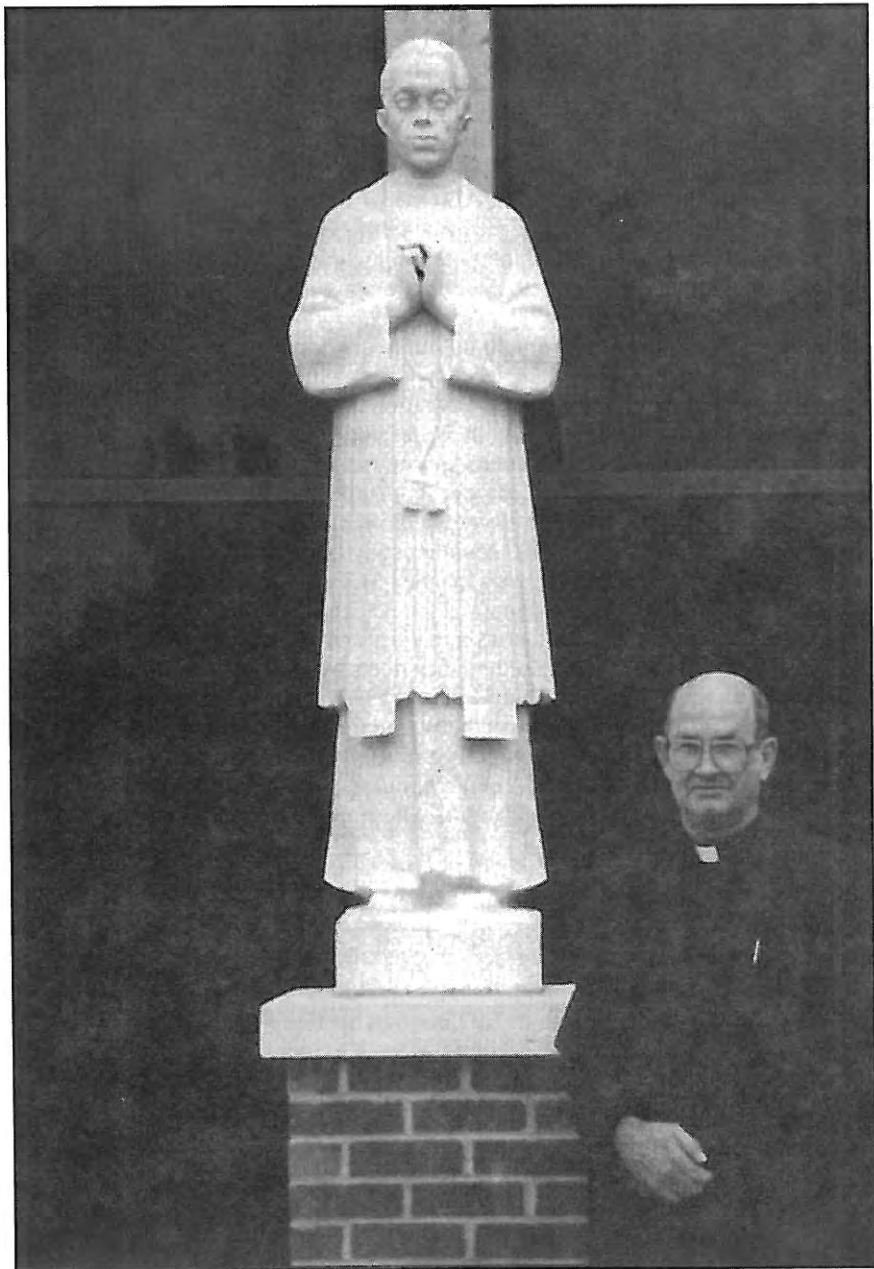
Addendum: The Healy Brothers

In referring to Father Tolton as the first Negro priest in the United States, we mean the first full-blooded Negro who was readily identifiable as of the Black race. The Healy brothers whose ordinations pre-date that of Fr. Tolton were mulattoes. The Healy story is quite interesting. Their Father was an Irishman who owned a farm north of Macon, Georgia. One of his slaves, Mary Eliza, was his mistress and she mothered ten children by Michael. By the state law at that time, he could not marry her; also by law, all her offspring would be slaves. In addition to that, Michael would not be allowed to free these sons and daughters from slavery without the approval of the State legislature.

Although they were very light-skinned, to avoid any possibility of the children being identified as Blacks, he sent some of his children north, even at the tender age of ten, where they received education at a Quaker school. Then, several of them attended Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, a Jesuit school. From there three of the brothers went to the seminary. James was ordained in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1854; he eventually became the Bishop of Portland, Maine. Alexander was ordained in Rome in 1858; he eventually became the pastor of Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston. (An interesting twist is that Rev. Hilary Tucker, a priest from Perryville, Missouri, who founded St. Peter Church in Quincy, Illinois, in 1839, in later years was an assistant priest to Father Alexander Healy at the Boston Cathedral. Father Tucker had Southern sympathies and even wrote to his bishop when he was in Quincy, that he "was hissed on the streets by Quincy's abolitionists!")

A third son of Michael Healy, Patrick, became a Jesuit. He was ordained in 1864 in Liege, Belgium; he became the president of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in 1874 even though the university did not accept Negro students until some seventy-five years later. A major building at the university bears his name.

Three of Michael Healy's daughters became nuns in Canada.



**Father Roy Bauer, Pastor of St. Peter Church
1985 -2004 in Quincy, Illinois, stands by a
statue of Father Tolton in front of St. Peter School.**



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