



# Father Augustus Tolton

**1854–1897**



Where does one start the story of a man's life? Today, many people are interested in genealogy, and these people trace their personal life stories back many generations.

In some cases, it is difficult to trace the ancestry of American slaves of the 19th century. They were often bought and sold at auctions, oftentimes resold, and their families were broken up with no one keeping accurate records.

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## Slave Origins

We might start with clarifying the name of the priest whom the Church is interested in canonizing. Father Tolton is known by several different names around the country: *Augustus* and *Augustine* and *August*. From what we can determine from the archival material documenting his life: the letters written by Father Tolton in his own hand, he always and consistently signed his name "A. Tolton." He never wrote out his first name. This may well be his personal acknowledgement that he was known by a couple variations of his first name. His baptismal record lists his name as "Augustine." The handwritten testimonial of his baptism, sent to Rome, lists his name as "Augustine." His Confirmation record at St. Peter Church in Quincy, Illinois, lists his name as "August." He was known in Quincy as "Augustine" and later, "Father Gus." Records in Rome list him as "Augustus." Fellow clergy in Chicago called him "Father Gus." Various church enterprises bearing his name around the country today will call him "Augustine," others "Augustus." The vast majority of archival material lists his name as "Augustine". A great, great grandniece of Father Tolton, daughter of his sister, Anne Tolton, in her book "A Place For My Children," by Sabrina Penn, Penn Ink, Chicago, Ill, 2007, chapter 5, pp. 41-44, mentions Father Tolton was named after his maternal grandfather, Augustus Chisley. It could well be that the priest who baptized him determined that "Augustus" was a non-Christian name and, therefore, as so frequently happened at baptisms, the priest at the baptismal font Christianized the name by changing it to the great fourth century saint and doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo.

So, whether you call him Augustine, Augustus, August, or Gus, these names are valid for so noble

a soul and priest. For purposes of our biography displayed here, however, we shall use the name "Augustus."

We might start the story of Augustus Tolton 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, Augustus Chisley and Matilda Hurd, were baptized and married shortly after they were purchased by the Mannings; Martha Jane was baptized shortly after her birth. Their parish church was in Flint Island, Kentucky.

When the wealthy John Manning died, his widow married Stephen Burch. Manning's youngest daughter, Susan, married Stephen Elliot in 1849. Mr. Burch, of course, was expected to give a fine wedding present to his stepdaughter. He decided to give her some slaves. He went to the slave quarters and selected a half-dozen slaves of varying ages and abilities.

We can imagine the excitement as the bride opened wedding gifts. Those gifts must have included household utensils, linens and furniture. We can imagine too, the groom, Stephen Elliot, announcing that he and his new bride would soon be moving from Kentucky. He had acquired a farm in Ralls County, Missouri. It was near Brush Creek and only a short distance from Hannibal.

At some point in the festivities, Susan must have announced what her dowry was from her stepfather. The gift was a group of slaves. One was sixteen-year old Martha Jane Chisley. Not included, however, were Martha's parents and brother.

A short time later, the newlyweds had their possessions, including their slaves, loaded in carts, and they headed westward. The teenage slave girl, Martha Jane, would never see her parents again. When the party arrived at the mighty Mississippi for the trip upstream to the Salt River, there was no way Martha Jane could have realized what a fateful role the great river would play in her life just over a dozen years later.

Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Elliot, along with their slaves, arrived in Ralls County, Missouri in 1849. The farm adjoined the property of another Catholic family by the name of Hager. One of the Hager slaves, Peter Paul, had been purchased at a slave auction in Hannibal. He was baptized by Father Peter Paul Lefebre, a missionary whose headquarters from 1834 to 1837 was in St. Paul, Missouri. Father Lefebre tended to the spiritual needs of Catholics in northern Missouri, western Illinois and southern Iowa.

From the time he was just a boy, Peter Paul worked in the Hager 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 field, the distillery buildings and the row of slave cabins. It was an endless cycle of plowing, planting, hoeing, cutting the ripe grain with scythes, binding it into bundles, threshing the grain by means of flaying, then scooping it into the air to let the wind blow the chaff away and the valuable grain fall back to the threshing floor.

Peter Paul received basic religious instructions from his master. Even though he was illiterate, he had an active mind and must have listened, like everyone else, to the gossip about the political unrest in the country over the slavery issue. He heard talk of secession by the slave holding states, insurrection by the slaves, and possibly war. The main source of

news was often brought by newly purchased slaves who came from other parts of the country. Everyone heard of the final 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.*

Many slaves thought of trying to escape. There was the Underground Railway system pledged to assist slaves to reach freedom in places north, even to Canada, one route of which had its first station in nearby Quincy, Illinois. Slaves were routinely chastened by the sting of the master's whip; with slavery came the horrible sight of the backs of many lash-scarred fellow slaves.

The day Peter Paul met his future spouse, Martha Jane, she was calling for help in the neighbor's field. She was trying to help a slave boy who collapsed. The boy died, unfortunately, but Peter Paul could not forget Martha Jane and her sense of compassion.

When he made his interest in her known, an agreement was reached between the slave owners, the Elliots and the Hagers. They allowed Martha Jane and Peter Paul to enter a Christian marriage. In addition, it was agreed between the two masters that Peter and Martha would live in a slave cabin on the Elliot farm, Peter would remain the slave and worker of the Hagers; while all children of the union would be the property of the Elliot family.

Slaves could not enter upon a marriage without the permission of their master(s). Martha Jane and Peter Paul were married at St. Peter log cabin Church, Brush Creek, MO in 1859 – not 1851 according to testimony Martha Jane gave military authorities upon the time she filed for her pension upon hearing of the death of Peter Paul. She received therefrom \$11 per month until her death.

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## The Family and Pre-Civil War Times

Martha Jane and Peter Paul did not receive permission to marry by their respective owners until 1859, and life as a slave did not change for either of them after coming together. Within a few years, besides the endless work as slaves, they had the care of their children to concern them. Their first child was a sickly boy named Charles, born in 1853. Augustus was born in 1854, and a daughter, Anne, was born in 1859.

Augustus' baptismal certificate of which we have a copy thereof from the archives of the Vatican does

not mention Augustus' name nor his parents' names. The record is inscribed merely as *a child, property of Stephen Elliot; and Savilla Elliot as sponsor, and the child's birthdate of April 1, 1854.*

As the years progressed, tensions in the country grew. 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 1850s. The case of Dr. Eells of Quincy 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 was shot dead 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 in the Mississippi River.

Quincyans were known to go into Missouri 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!* Palmyrans boycotted Quincy businesses because of the abolitionist activity in Quincy. The chapel at the Mission Institute at 25th and Prentiss was burned by Palmyrans in retaliation for the assistance the staff and students gave to runaway slaves.

In the Eells case from Quincy, the Supreme Court decided slave catchers could enter free States and apprehend runaway slaves. Since slaves were considered property, harboring a runaway would be the same as being in possession of stolen property.

The Dred Scott case was about a slave who moved to a free state with his owner, worked freely for him, and then moved back to a slave state. The question was: Could a person be free for a while and then be enslaved again? The Supreme Court decided not to answer this question and responded instead that blacks could not be citizens and therefore had no civil rights and therefore, as non-citizens (like Dred Scott) could not bring a case into court.

The ominous events of the time must have had the common field slaves in Ralls County wondering if they would ever be free persons.

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## The Family's Escape

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.

Peter Paul surely informed his wife and children about what he intended to do. Surely, he bid them goodbye before he ran away. In his mind, he must have been thinking about freedom and education for his children. As he left, little did Martha Jane and the children realize they would never see him again. Peter Paul got to St. Louis, a divided city, to join the Union Army. During the war, 180,000 Blacks became part of the Federal effort to free the country's four million slaves. Martha Jane had no way of knowing her husband died of dysentery in an Arkansas military dispensary shortly after his escape.

The work of many slaves was intensified as more escaped, leaving their labor to the ones left behind. Besides the excessive work, Martha had to contend with the sight of Charley, age 8, and Augustus, age 7, already doing field work and feeling the lash of the overseer's whip. To add to the confusion, Martha Jane had observed slave traders in the vicinity showing a special interest in buying children. She had been separated from her parents and brother; her husband was gone; all she had was her children.

Fully aware of the dangers involved with escape (a punishment for a captured runaway was, among other such tortures, tied and bull-whipped or having

a foot cut off), Martha Jane decided 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 mothers with small children were not chained up at night; Anne was only 20 months old at the time Martha Jane plotted her escape.

Whatever the circumstances, Martha Jane was able to get her three children out of the slave quarters and head for Quincy. Quincy was a place she had never seen, but it beckoned the runaways as Mecca summons Moslems.

It was twenty miles from the Elliot farm to Hannibal, and then there was the big river, and then 21 more miles to Quincy. This was not a distance a person could easily walk with three children, one definitely carried in her arms. They must have carried some food with them, and some effort must have had to be exerted to keep the children quiet. But, they made it safely through Ralls and Marion counties, stumbling across plowed fields at night, drinking from streams and brooks and hiding during the day.

When they reached Hannibal, they were accosted as runaways by some Confederate officials. They were on the verge of being handcuffed when some Union soldiers defended them with the claim that that section of town was outside Southern jurisdiction. It was not uncommon during the war to have a section of a city under Southern control and another section under Union control.

In later life, Augustus often told of the experience in Hannibal and the harrowing event of crossing the river. The Union men who came to their assistance when the Confederates wanted to arrest them, helped Martha Jane find a dilapidated rowboat. She loaded her children and started across the river. She had no experience with a boat and as she struggled with the oars, it veered this way and that.

After they had gotten off shore, the angry Confederates spotted them and began shouting threats at them. One fired repeatedly at the small boat out on the river but it was too dark to get a good shot. Martha Jane with Charley, Augustus and baby Anne reached the Illinois side safely.

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## The Struggle for Acceptance

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, and churches. They found the Negro district, which had about 300 Blacks in it, and they were given immediate help by a Mrs. Davis. She was a widow with a nine-year old daughter, Mary Ann. Mrs. Davis took in the Martha Jane and her children, an arrangement that lasted several years. The two mothers, one employed in daytime factory work and the other as a nighttime charwoman in a downtown office building, looked after each other's children.

Harris was a huge tobacco factory at Fifth and Ohio streets. When the whistle blew at 8 a.m. each morning, three hundred employees had to be at their stations turning tobacco leaves into fine cigars. Employees worked 10-hour days, six days a week. Mrs. Tolton got work right away, and soon Charley, age 10, and Augustus, age nine, began work in the same factory. They worked as stemmers, cutting the coarse stems from leaves so just the finest part of the leaf got rolled into cigars. They worked under the supervision of a Negro named Mr. Pleasant. Augustus told later in life that his name fit his personality.

Prayer and hymn singing were part of family life. Augustus' lifelong boast was that he learned praying and singing at his mother's knee.

During the winter of 1863, Charley, who was always sickly, caught a cold and developed pneumonia. It was at the time the tobacco factory had its winter layoffs. Mrs. Tolton sat beside the bed of her sick son day and night. Medicines did not help. Ten-year old Charley died.

They came upon some workers, black and white, on their way to early morning work on the wharf across from Hannibal. They could tell the woman and children were runaways. They gave them some food from their lunch buckets and pointed the way to Quincy, still some twenty-miles away. One assured Mrs. Tolton there was a colony of Negroes living in the eastern section of Quincy, and many of these folks had broken away from slavery. Mrs. Tolton still feared being captured by those seeking runaways as they made their way north. It proved an enormously tense and fearful journey fleeing slavery.

In 1865, the Civil War was over. Martha Jane hoped her husband would be able to find her. Her hopes were dashed, however, when she was told his name appeared on the official casualty list of the Union Army. Sixty-three thousand, one hundred, seventy-eight Negro names were on the list. Peter Paul's body rests in an unknown grave. His life was sad, except he and his wife passed a love of God and religion on to the next generation.

From the time of their arrival in Quincy, Martha and her children attended St. Boniface Church. It had two thousand members, mostly German. The sermons were given in German, but out of consideration for a little cluster of blacks that gathered in a corner of the church, Father Schaeffermeyer would read the Gospel and summarize the sermon in English.

Martha decided Augustus ought to get an education. St. Boniface had a parish school with the Notre Dame Sisters teaching the smaller children, and priests and laymen teaching the older boys. Augustus was enrolled and assigned to Sister Chrysologus' room.

Augustus' presence in an all-white school caused a parish uprising. Parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school; they threatened to discontinue their support of the parish; they threatened to withdraw their membership; the pastor and the sisters received vicious anonymous letters; a rock was hurled through the rectory window; the gossip was that a petition was being circulated to be presented to the bishop, insisting Father Schaeffermeyer be removed.

Adults can sometimes understand ignorance, but a 10-year old child cannot. Augustus' school life proved intolerable. The children tormented him, taunted him because he could not read, mimicked his accent, called him insulting names until he broke out in uncontrollable sobs. Sister Chrysologus would keep him in the room after school to give him special lessons and to protect him from the children waiting outside to torment him.

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

Because Augustus had attended St. Boniface church for several years, he learned to speak German. This eventually was a plus for him in his education. After the St. Boniface School experience, it was several years before another effort was made toward his education.

Each year during three winter months, the Harris Tobacco Factory was closed. In 1868, during layoff time, Mrs. Tolton decided to put her 14-year old son in the all-Negro public school at 10th and Oak Streets. The Colored School No. 1 in a small log cabin was founded in 1862.

But again, this school experience was bitter for Augustus. He was a tall, extremely black, 14-year old who could not read and had to learn with the primary children. The mulattoes, who were numerous in the school, looked down on him; there was no father in his family and so the other boys called him a bastard and said that his mother was a whore. Yet in his couple of months there he made progress in learning and in being accepted socially.

In Quincy at the time, there were four Catholic parishes: St. Boniface, which was established in 1837 and the Church of the Ascension, St. Lawrence O'Toole founded in 1839 which would eventually be known as St. Peter; St. Francis established on the prairie in 1860, and St. Mary founded in 1867. After the unfortunate experience at St. Boniface, Mrs. Tolton joined St. Lawrence Church along with Augustus and Anne.

The pastor of St. Lawrence Church was a strong-willed, determined Irishman, 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. After a few

months in Pittsfield, Father McGirr was assigned to St. Lawrence in Quincy, a parish he pastored until his death in 1893.

The first time that Father McGirr had a private talk with his teenage parishioner Augustus was on the occasion of the death of Mary Ann Davis. Mrs. Davis and her daughter, Mary Ann, were the ones who took in Martha Jane and her children when they arrived in Quincy. Augustus referred to Mary Ann as his stepsister since they were so close. Mary Ann was dying of tuberculosis in 1868 at the age of 16. Father McGirr was called and he gave the last rites. He stayed after the prayers for the dying until she passed away. Father led the little group in prayer for the departed soul. This having been completed, Augustus led him to the door. At that time, Father had a talk with the lad. As everyone in town, Father McGirr knew of the trouble at St. Boniface and now he found out the boy had been going to the public school for the last two months.

Father insisted he wanted Augustus in Catholic school. St. Lawrence had a fine school taught also by the Notre Dame Sisters. Arrangements would be made for him to be admitted to the school. Father would see to it that there would be no trouble for the boy.

Around this time, Martha with Ann and Gus, as Augustus was affectionately known, moved to a brick dwelling in the alley between Main and Jersey, Eighth and Ninth Streets. The address was 818 Main Street (rear). It was just a few steps from St. Lawrence Church and School, and a new phase in his life.

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, but Father McGirr received threats of withdrawal of church support and even of quitting the Catholic Church by angry white parishioners. Father McGirr's Sunday sermons, week after week, were eloquent explanations of Christianity. *If you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to Me, and Let the little children come unto Me, and even Depart from Me into everlasting fire!* He craftily told the story of the Good Samaritan to make the listeners apply the parable to the situation. 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, Augustus spoke fondly of his time in St. Peter School noting: *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 month, he memorized the Latin Mass prayers, which he needed to know to serve Mass. He attended school three months for three or four years. As soon as the tobacco factory opened for the season, Gus would go back to work.

It is not known when Augustus made his first Communion. He was confirmed in St. Peter Church on June 12, 1870. Parishes are required to keep records of baptisms, confirmations and weddings. Some also keep records of first communions and burials. At the time, it was a common practice for a young person to make first Communion on the day of Confirmation. This was probably the case with Augustus.

By the date of his Confirmation, it is clear from Church records that Martha and Augustus were using the surname "Tolton."

Gus was such a devout young man, serving Mass daily before going to work, that at some point, Father McGirr and Gus discussed the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood.

They found out there were no black priests in the United States, although there were the Healy brothers out east, whose father was an Irishman and their mother was a mulatto.

Augustus' formal education up to this point was very limited: a month at St. Boniface School, two months at the Colored School, and three months each winter for three or four years at St. Peter School.

Since he wanted to become a priest, it was thought it would be better for him to join the Franciscans, since they could accommodate his educational needs better. Father Schaeffermeyer of St. Boniface had also befriended him and showed an interest in his seminary training. Before joining the Franciscans himself, Father Schaeffermeyer left some money to assist in the seminary education of Augustus.

Augustus applied to be a postulant in the Franciscans but his request was turned down. Then, Father McGirr wrote Bishop Baltes about the devout and talented young man. The bishop advised Father: *Find a seminary which will accept a Negro candidate.. the diocese will assume the expenses.* But the directive was of no value, since Father McGirr had already written every seminary in the country and the response always started with words like: *We are not ready for a Negro student.*

When no seminary or religious order in the United States would accept Augustus because of his race, the priests in Quincy decided to start his higher education there in town. Quincy was blest with well-educated priests. Father Ostrop, the pastor of St. Boniface, outlined a study plan and reading material, and the tutoring began. The assistant pastor, Father Theodore Wegmann, did most of the tutoring. Two other students, Clement Johannes and Henry Ording joined Augustus in the classes. The year was 1873.

In 1866, Cardinal Vaughan of England founded the St. Joseph Society for Foreign Missions, which was dedicated to the work of 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 US and they were assigned to a Negro parish in Baltimore. Father McGirr heard of the group and not knowing the size or scope of their work, wrote them immediately telling them of Augustus Tolton, thinking he might enter their seminary.

The Josephites had no seminary, in fact, and the group in Baltimore had only five members who lived in a small, rented house. They were organizing catechism classes and convert instructions for the Negroes in Baltimore. They suggested Augustus come to Baltimore and become a catechist, or he might try going to the Mill Hill seminary in London and go to Borneo, or perhaps he could continue being tutored in Quincy until another opportunity opened.

Augustus studied under Father Wegmann from 1873 to 1875; in October of that year Father Wegmann was transferred. Once again, the situation seemed hopeless.

Father McGirr had grown up with a brilliant young man, Patrick Dolan. Both were born on the same day, June 29, 1833 and they lived on adjacent farms near Fintana in rural Ulster, Ireland. At the age of 15, 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, being ordained priest for the Diocese of Alton, Illinois. Patrick Dolan, on the other hand, stayed in Ireland and distinguished himself at the elite seminary at Maynooth. Unfortunately, after his ordination, Father Dolan had problems getting along with his fellow priests and clashed more than once with his bishop. Eventually, an alcohol problem became intolerable and it was thought that a complete change for him would make a difference. So, arrangements were made for him to

transfer to the Diocese of St. Louis. Bishop Kenrick assigned him to a parish in the northeastern part of Missouri.

Before long, Father McGirr received a letter from his boyhood friend in which Father Dolan described the run-down condition of his parish church and rectory, and he mentioned he had no housekeeper. Father McGirr apparently knew nothing of his friend's alcohol problem. He thought this would be a solution for Martha Jane and her children. Mrs. Tolton could be his housekeeper and Augustus his custodian and in return, the learned priest could tutor the young man.

Martha Jane and her family moved back to Missouri with much apprehension, but it meant a chance for Augustus to get more education. Mrs. Tolton soon had Father Dolan's rectory tidied up, Ann obtained a job and Augustus resumed his studies and took an extra job of cleaning a tavern after closing hours. He was trying to save money for his trip to the Mill Hill Seminary in London. The family attended daily Mass, but Augustus was not allowed to serve, much to his dismay.

In a few months, it was obvious Father Dolan was again "hitting the bottle." He was missing Gus' classes. Mrs. Tolton wrote to Father McGirr about the situation and he advised them to return to Quincy without hesitation. Eleven months had passed.

Back in Quincy, Augustus went to work in the J.L. Kreitz Saddle Factory and was employed after hours as custodian at St. Peter's. Mrs. Tolton went back to the tobacco factory. Gus resumed his studies, this time under Father Reinhart who had established St. Mary parish, but with broken health, became chaplain of St. Mary Hospital. Soon, Augustus found better paying work: Mr. John Flynn hired him at Durholt Company, a soda-bottling firm.

In 1878, the Franciscans at St. Francis College (now known as Quincy University) took Augustus as a student. The Franciscans, Father Richardt, Father Engelbert Gey, and Father Francis Albers were his teachers and everyone seemed to know that Augustus would one day go to London for his theological studies and be ordained to work in Borneo, Africa.

Gus burnt with zeal to do something for the religious instructions of black children in Quincy. St. Boniface parish owned an old Protestant Church on the southwest corner of Seventh and Jersey. They used it for a school temporarily, but it was no longer in use. Quincy had 3,000 Negroes, and some of them were Catholic, but most had quit going to Church. Father Richardt and Augustus started a Sunday school, first at St. Francis, then in this old church. The Sunday school worked so well that a day school was started for blacks with Sister Herlinde as the teacher.

The progress of this new Catholic school was noted by non-Catholic leaders who organized a protest meeting at which people attending publicly resolved not to send their children to St. Joseph's. Nevertheless, St. Joseph School of Black Children found new pupils whenever others were lured away.

Another area where Augustus had influence dealt with the temperance movement. He joined St. Peter's Temperance Society and, knowing the evil brought about by alcohol abuse, urged other blacks to join.

But Augustus' main influence was his model day-to-day living: attendance at daily Mass, dependability at work, diligence in his attendance at college classes, and talking with families urging them to see to the religious instruction of their children. The lay apostolate, however, was not what Augustus wanted; he was determined to become a priest.

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## The Search for a Seminary

It became more and more obvious that the Josephite Fathers at Mill Hill in London did not think it wise that Augustus come to their seminary. Their order would someday open a seminary in the United States.

The Franciscans at Teutopolis simply could not risk more prejudice against them than they were already bearing. Even as late as the time of the First World War, the Department of Justice (the FBI) sent an agent to Teutopolis to investigate the loyalty of the German friars. Having a black man in the order, it was

thought, would bring additional prejudice against the order.

Fathers Richardt and McGirr decided to ask Bishop Baltes of Alton to see if he could be admitted to the Propaganda Seminary in Rome. Bishop Baltes already agreed to pay for his seminary training if Father McGirr could find a seminary for him. Bishop Baltes was about to make his *ad limina* visit to Rome and he promised that while he was there he would look into the possibility of this seminary.



The Propaganda or Urban College is a seminary in Rome for training priests for work in mission countries. The United States was on the Church's role as a "mission country" until into the 20th century.

A few months later, Father Richardt heard from the bishop. He spoke to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda, and he thought it best for Augustus to train for the priesthood in the United States, and that he work in the United States. The mission office in Rome was well aware of the many ex-slaves in the United States who were in need of evangelizing.

At this point, Father Richardt decided to make one more dramatic effort. He was aware the superior general of the Franciscan Order was a personal acquaintance of the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda. Father Richardt decided to write directly to the superior of his order. He wrote a complete biography of Augustus Tolton; he told of

his efforts to get in the seminary in the United States; he told the real reason why he was rejected from seminaries in this country. Father Richardt described the 26-year-old Augustus as a reverent acolyte, a devoted son, a faithful worker, a diligent student and a zealous lay apostle.

Months passed and then, on a never-to-be forgotten day, a reply came. Augustus Tolton had been accepted as a seminarian at the Propaganda in Rome. As with all students of that seminary, the understanding was that he would be trained for a mission country; he would have no choice of where he would be sent.

Knowing the racial prejudice against blacks in the United States, Augustus thought he would be sent to Africa, but that was fine with him. His calling was to the priesthood and it didn't matter to him where in the world he would work.

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## On, to Rome

On Sunday afternoon, February 15, 1880, Augustus left Quincy on the train for Chicago. His mother, Martha Jane, his sister, Anne, Fathers McGirr and Richardt and other friends, black and white, saw him off. From the time of his arrival in Quincy at the age of 10 he had never been outside of Quincy. It must have been exciting for him to watch the fields and the towns along the route to Chicago.

To help pay for his trip to Rome, Bishop Baltes had sent 50 dollars, the students of Quincy College had taken up a collection, and the Franciscans gave him 10 dollars, a considerable sum of money for that time. In his bag, he had 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 he had a two-hour layover before he caught his next train. On Tuesday morning he arrived in Jersey City and the port of Hoboken. The same order of nuns who operate 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.

The first-time traveler must have been overwhelmed by the excitement, but on-board the ship he found a familiar face, the Franciscan Father Ewald Fahle, whom he had met at Quincy College, was on board

going back to Germany with several other friars to visit relatives.

The 12-day journey ended at LeHavre on March 4, 1880. From there he took a train to Paris in order to make a connection to Rome. His journey ended in Rome on March 10. The first thing he did in the Eternal City was to find a church in which to thank God for the safe journey. He was to report to the seminary on March 12, so he spent two nights in a hotel.

The dome of St. 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, he arrived in the Piazza di Spagna, where he looked up at the front of a three-story 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 theology, ascetical theology, sacramental theology, church law, and the like. All lectures, textbooks and examinations were in Latin, but Augustus was well prepared for this higher education.

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## Seminarian Augustus Tolton

On Palm Sunday, March 21, 1880, nine days after his arrival at the Propaganda, Augustus 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 Augustus Tolton's garb for the rest of his life.

There were about 70 seminarians at the Propaganda at the time. Seminarians from all parts of the world shared the chapel, library, classroom, and recreation hall. Racial prejudice was totally absent from this environment. This seminary 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 was still a missionary country. But Augustus did not know if he would eventually be sent back to America or to Africa. He was nicknamed "Gus" from the US. Augustus got to know the city of Rome and attended papal ceremonies of Pope Leo XIII.

When he was in his third year at the Urban College, he was permitted to take the oath of the Propaganda. As members of the Pope's special household, 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.

Augustus used every opportunity to learn the geography and history of Africa, as well as learn the languages and cultures of the various areas of the Dark Continent. For recreation, he learned to play the accordion, and he entertained by singing the Negro Spirituals 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 600 churches, making sketches in his notebook of the art and architecture of the buildings and recording their histories.

On May 14, 1883, he received the Tonsure. This ceremony consisted of a bishop cutting the hair of the seminarian in the form of a cross. This symbolized the seminarian-candidate's willingness to become a slave of the people of God. Augustus received the tonsure at the hands of Cardinal Lenti. The Cardinal

prayed the candidates would free their hearts from the bonds of the world and from earthly desires.

Seminarian Tolton, 6,000 miles from Quincy, kept a keen interest in St. Joseph School in Quincy. During his first year in Rome, Augustus received the news that the Catholic school for Negroes that was so dear to him was closed. The Franciscan Provincial instructed the friars to discontinue their association with the school. Father Michael Richardt, OFM, was transferred to Teutopolis, Illinois and Sister Herlinde, SSND, was transferred also. The news was disheartening.

After several years, however, Father McGirr wrote to Augustus to tell him good news. Some generous people in Quincy along with some craftsmen who donated labor, arranged to restore St. Joseph Church. The building, a former Protestant Church at 7th and Jersey Streets, was completely remodeled and it was opened as both a parish church and a parochial school for Negroes. Father Theodore Bruener, pastor of St. Boniface, was credited with offering the leadership for this Negro apostolate.

St. Boniface Church agreed to support this parish and Father Bruener, along with his assistant, Father Cornelius Hoffman, and Father Joseph Still, pastor of St. John's parish, would service it. The plan met with the approval of Bishop Peter Baltes of the Alton Diocese.

The building, with the school in the basement, received new floors, and a new roof was put on the church and a cross on the tower. Mrs. Herman Tenk spearheaded the raising of funds for the project. On January 15, 1882, St. Joseph Church was opened with a solemn high Mass and sermon. Each Sunday thereafter, there were two Masses, afternoon Vespers with Benediction, and a period of religious instruction. Father Hoffman devoted himself wholeheartedly to the Negro school, and Sister Herlinde was permitted by her superiors to return. Shortly, the school was so crowded and the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) sent a candidate from their order to teach the smaller children.

Within a year, the priests found the extra work a burden. Father Hoffman went on sick leave; Father Still could not find a substitute for the times when he was out of town. Father Bruener appealed to Bishop Baltes for a priest to be named pastor of St. Joseph's, but the bishops did not have the

manpower. Then, the Franciscans agreed to permit Father Samuel Macke to assist at St. Joseph's on the third Sunday of each month, and eventually he taught religion in the school.

All of this prosperity lasted only a year and a half. In April of 1885 there was a setback. Father Macke was

transferred. Sunday Masses were discontinued for a time.

In September 1885 Father George Pesch was appointed assistant at St. Boniface, and he restored some services. However, service to the parish was an irregular thing even though the need was evident.

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## Final Approaches to the Altar

Before the revisions of the ritual of ordination in the latter part of the 20th century, the candidate for the priesthood went through the steps of four minor orders and two major orders. These were ritualistic steps. Augustus Tolton received the first two minor orders on March 8, 1884. In the chapel at the Urban College, he received the order of porter and lector with Cardinal Lucido Parocchi officiating.

In the ceremonies conferring the order of porter, the candidate is handed the keys to the church and instructed to *ring the bells, open and close the doors of the church and sacristy, and open the books for the preacher*. But, the candidate is further admonished to *endeavor by word and example to stay far from 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*.

The progress to the priesthood is slow and deliberate. 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. Augustus was probably thinking of the service he would give in some place in Africa. He did not know where he would be assigned at this point in time, but that did not matter. He would be doing the work of God and the Church.

On Sunday, August 2, 1885, Augustus 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 lie prostrate on the sanctuary floor while the Litany of Saints is chanted. The thoughts that must run through a candidate's mind during the lengthy litany are overwhelming. This is the point of no return; this is the point where one gives completely.

On November 8, 1885, Augustus 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. At the diaconate ordination, Cardinal Parocchi said: *Consider well to what exalted rank you rise in the Church. The office of deacon is to assist at the altar, to baptize and preach*.

Augustus 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*.

Early in 1886, Augustus 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 for the Diocese of Rome; it is not St. Peter's in the Vatican as so often supposed.

Probably, the church of St. John was an enlargement of the great hall of the palace of the Laterani family. It was also called Domus Faustae – the house of Fausta. She was the wife of Emperor Constantine, who granted religious freedom to Christians by the Edict of Milan issued in 313 AD. This emperor gave this property to the Pope. Other names for this church are "The Splendid Basilica" and "The Basilica of the Savior."

The original basilica was in use in 314 AD. The building was laid waste by the barbarians in the 5th century; the church also received damage in an earth tremor of 896 AD and was severely damaged

by fire in 1308. The basilica was restored in the 18th century.

Some of the great councils of the church took place at the Lateran. It would take books to list all of the things that happened here, including the decision to have Popes elected by the cardinals, the launching of a Crusade, the declaration that Catholics must go to confession and receive Holy Communion at least once a year.

It would take another book to describe the art in the building. The mosaic of Christ dates from the fourth century. For many people, the most startling and overwhelming art in the building is the collection of statues of the 12 Apostles. These are done in white marble, five times life size, and they seem to be alive with action, with upraised arms and flowing robes. In the fourth century, all baptisms in the city of Rome took place in the baptistery of this church.

Deacon Augustus Tolton knew three months ahead of time he would be ordained in this basilica on the day before Easter. He wrote to Father Richardt: *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, Augustus' 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 in the world they would be sent. It was understood that Augustus was going to Africa. He was admitted to this seminary with that understanding. The bishop of Alton, Illinois, was not able to get him in the Propaganda, and he had no contact with Augustus or the seminary during the six

years that Tolton was there. Augustus had studied African culture and languages, but he did not know to which diocese or part of Africa he would be sent. However, Augustus was not prepared for what was about to happen.

Cardinal Simeoni on Good Friday 1886, the day before the priestly ordination ceremony, reminded Augustus of his oath of the Propaganda, that he would go anywhere in the world he would be sent. The Cardinal told Augustus 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 the committee announcing: *America has been called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see whether it deserves that honor. If the United States has never before seen a black priest, it must see one now.*

The Cardinal told Augustus that he was being sent back to the United States, to the Diocese of Alton, Illinois, his home diocese. This was a blow to Augustus; it came with frightening swiftness; it was a disappointment, but it was the cost of a vow of obedience.

Augustus must have recalled his time as a slave in America, his escape from slavery with his mother and brother and sister, his rejection at the first school he attended in Quincy, the rejection by every seminary in the country, and the rejection by the religious orders which were not "ready" for a Negro member. Now, he must go back to America. He must have wondered whether he could be successful in the ministry in the United States. But, God calls people to be faithful, not to be successful.

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## Augustus Tolton, Ordained Priest

April 24, 1886, Holy Saturday, the day of Augustus Tolton's ordination to the priesthood dawned. Pope Leo XIII delegated Cardinal Giovanni Parocchi to officiate at the ceremony. St. John Lateran Basilica had seen many centuries of ordinations.

*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. *Augustus Tolton!*

The black man from St. Peter Church in Quincy, Illinois, responded, "Adsum" meaning "Present." Augustus stepped forward. The ceremony of

ordination at the time lasted several hours. The candidates, in a visible sign of unworthiness, laid face down on the floor of this great basilica with the famed statues of the apostles looking over them, as the Litany of Saints was chanted. As the ceremony progressed, Augustus' hands were anointed with blest oil; he was offered a chalice and paten to touch; a stole was placed over his shoulders as a "sweet yoke" and the chasuble as a symbol of charity.

The chasuble would not be completely unfolded until after the reception of Holy Communion, at which time the newly ordained were given the authority to forgive sins in the sacrament of penance. The

ceremony clearly pointed out what the priesthood in the Catholic Church is about, to offer sacrifice, bless, govern, preach and baptize.

When the ordination Mass was over, those in attendance went to the newly ordained to ask them for a blessing. The newly ordained laid hands on each person, whether lay or church dignitary, and then the person kissed the hands of the newly ordained symbolizing respect for the priesthood.

Cardinal Simeoni made arrangements for Father Augustus to celebrate his first Mass in the great St. Peter's Basilica, the church so much identified with Catholicism in recent centuries. It was April 25, 1886, Easter Sunday. Pilgrims and tourists must have wondered when they saw a red-robed cardinal taking his place beside a black priest.

Father Tolton began: *Introibo ad altare Dei*. The cardinal gave the server's response: *Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam*. Father Tolton had first heard these words in St. Peter Church, Brush Creek, Missouri, and 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 for the first time 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 of the class received a missionary's cross in a simple ceremony.

Gradually, the new priests began departing Rome for various mission countries in the world.

Father Francis Ostrop of Carlinville, Illinois had sent Augustus spending money regularly during his six years in Rome. When Father Ostrop was stationed at St. Boniface Church in Quincy years before, he knew Augustus.

Father Tolton had saved some of his money through the years, but it was not enough to pay for his passage back to the United States. Cardinal Simeoni wrote to his superior asking for money. In a letter dated June 3, 1886, now found in the archives of the Propaganda, there is a letter in which he 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 lire to pay for the journey to America. The amount he has (485 lira) 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 lira 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. He would not arrive back in Illinois for over a month. Some interesting things happened on the way.

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## The Journey Back Home

Father Tolton's route back to the US took him from Rome to Civitavecchia, then by boat to Livorno and from there to Marseilles, France. He crossed the English Channel to Liverpool, for his trip across the Atlantic.

At Livorno, Italy, an Italian immigration officer, thinking the black man who spoke such fluent Italian, was an Italian subject from Africa, tried to get Tolton to enlist in the Italian military. In France, all the passengers were quarantined for twenty-four hours, and in England there was a twelve-day delay in departure. A kindly Irish gentleman made the acquaintance of the newly ordained priest and decided to do the priest a favor. Knowing of the delay, he took Father Tolton at his own expense back across the Channel and traveled with him for over a week in several European countries, arranging

for him to offer holy Mass in some of the great cathedrals and shrines of Europe. The tour ended back in Liverpool where Father Tolton boarded the Cunard liner, Gallia. The ship arrived in New York on July 6, 1886.

Father Tolton wanted to offer his first Mass on American soil at St. Benedict the Moor parish church located at Bleeker and Downing Streets in New York City. The congregation there was mainly composed of Negroes. On July 11, in the presence of a full church, the congregation saw the first black priest in the United States offer Mass in their church. The New York World, July 12 edition described the event: *Long before the hour fixed every seat in the church of St. Benedict the Moor was filled; black people, old and young, came from all parts of the city and many from out of town.*

While the Mass at St. Benedict was a solemn high Mass, Father Tolton also said a Mass for the Franciscan Sisters in the chapel of St. Mary Hospital in Hoboken, New Jersey. He had made a promise to the Sisters to do this out of his love of their Sisters working in Quincy.

When it became known exactly when Father Gus would arrive in Quincy, Father McGirr began to make plans for a hearty welcome. He chartered a railroad car to take friends, black and white, to Springfield, Illinois, and have this car attached to the train to Quincy that Augustus would be riding.

As the train pulled into Quincy, a brass band was playing *Holy God We Praise thy Name*. The crowd at

the station waved and cheered. A decorated carriage drawn by four white horses took Father Tolton through the streets crowded with well-wishers, to St. Peter's Church. At the church, school children, more priests, and more people cheered.

There is a long-standing pious custom in the Catholic Church of asking a newly ordained priest for a blessing. Hundreds and hundreds of people were waiting to come to the communion railing to ask for a blessing, but before laying his hands in benediction on them, Father 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 and saw her through many a trial over the years.

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## The Negro Apostolate in Quincy

Father Bruener of St. Boniface Parish was a leading force in founding St. Joseph Parish. He gave a detailed account of the accomplishments and adversities of Father Tolton.

He wrote: *Special recognition must be given to Mrs. Joseph Duker, the former Cecilia Schwab, for her efforts. As a girl she had the privilege of studying music at the Sisters' convent. Expecting no payment, she accepted the position of organist and choir director at St. Joseph's Church. She trained a choir of Negro and White girls together. Mr. Duker constructed a choir balcony for the organ and choir. Weekly rehearsals were held either in the school or in the home of Mrs. Duker.*

*The church measures 36 feet by 70 feet, continued Father Bruener, and was decorated by Henry Gantert. The stations of the cross were done in oil, a shrine of Mary was to the left and a shrine of St. Joseph to the right of the altar.*

The Altar Society consisted of eighty women, both black and white. With his mother as housekeeper and sacristan, Father Tolton lived on the southeast corner of 8th and Maine streets, once part of St. Francis College.

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 history account changes abruptly:

*For the past ten years much has been done for the conversion of the Negroes in Quincy; the results have been almost nil. Several converts were made,*

*but as a whole, in terms of achievement, the Negro mission has not paid off. The school was always well attended – actually many children were baptized.*

Father Bruener then goes on to describe the poverty of the blacks. Sister Herlinde found that some of the 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 60 pupils. Even though many were baptized, they did not persevere in the faith. Secret societies and opposition from clergymen of other religions seemed to impede conversions. A story spread around town about how Mrs. Tolton silenced a Baptist minister who told her that in the end, all Catholics go to hell. Mother Tolton told him: *If they do, hell will soon be filled up, but being charitable people we will move out to make room for the likes of you when you arrive there.*

The constant presence of whites in his church gave Father Tolton encouragement because they were able to make contributions to keep the church and school open. Clearly, there were whites who came to see the new sensation of the first black man wearing a Roman Collar and confecting the holy Eucharist. Other whites were drawn to Father Tolton's goodness and genuinely saw him no different than any other priest. Still, other whites genuinely wished to assist the fledgling Negro Catholic community and its needs. Whites as well as blacks stood in line to go to confession and get spiritual advice from Father

Tolton. And, Father Tolton was active in the community in struggling against the ever-present scourge of alcohol abuse.

In his report to the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide, dated July 25, 1887, Father Tolton seemed discouraged. He reported in his first year he had only six converts.

He also said that he heard that Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago 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 generous to him and wanted him to stay. Further, he explained that he had the opportunity to travel and give lectures, but he did not because he felt that if he were away from Quincy he would be neglecting his parish. In a response from the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda, he was told to stay in Quincy and continue his good work.

The reply gave Father Tolton encouragement.

Shortly after Bishop James Ryan was installed as the bishop of the Alton Diocese, Father Tolton made a trip to Alton to pay his respects. In preparation for the meeting, the bishop had read the dossier on him. Bishop Ryan warmly welcomed him and spoke kindly to him about his work in Quincy.

The newspaper, *The Quincy Journal*, in its July 26, 1886 edition described Father Tolton in glowing words, using phrases such as: *his fine educational training, his oratorical ability, his rich and full voice which falls pleasantly on the ear, and his wholehearted earnestness.*

St. Joseph's Church was often filled with standing room only. On those occasions, with a simple gesture that the children understood, he summoned them to the altar. The children would rush into the sanctuary and sit on the floor around the altar, making room for more adults to have seats. Father welcomed the white people because he knew it was due to their generosity that the church and school of St. Joseph existed. The school, however, was attended only by Negro children.

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## Father Tolton's Suffering

The 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 "Romanism."

But the worst came when a new pastor of St. Boniface, who was also assigned to be the Dean of the Catholic clergy of the Quincy area, began referring to Father Tolton as *that nigger priest*. It was the first time Augustus experienced racial prejudice from a priest. Father Michael Weiss came to Quincy in November of 1887. St. Boniface, the German parish, was laboring under a staggering debt and he was anxious to put the parish on a firm financial basis. Eventually he became known as "the financier of St. Boniface." He was unhappy about the generous donations his parishioners were making to the Negro parish. As long as the pleasant Father Gus who gave such wonderful sermons and spoke such kindly words was just a block away, he could not hope to keep his parishioners from sometimes going to Mass, Vespers, Benediction and Confession there. However, Father Weiss developed a plan. He complained to his congregation that they had donated the very building used by the black Catholics and maintained it for 10 years. With all the

authority of the Dean, he told Father Tolton that he was expected to minister only to blacks and he should tell white people to stay out of his 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 Father Weiss' campaign, Father Tolton wrote: *The facts I have kept hidden through fear of it greatly injuring the success of the mission among the colored race.*

Reluctantly, Father Tolton began accepting speaking engagements in 1889 as a means of raising money to maintain his church and school. He was the main speaker at a meeting of colored Catholics held in Washington DC. Cardinal James Gibbons made arrangements for Father Tolton to speak in Baltimore. He also spoke to large gatherings in New York and 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, 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. Fr. Tolton explained: *I am bound by my Propaganda oath; I have been appointed to this parish and I must remain.*

Father Weiss who was powerful with the bishop, conferred with him. After that meeting, 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 worshipers and he was told to minister to Negro people only or to go elsewhere. While the other priests in Quincy sympathized with Augustus, there was little they could do. Father Weiss publicly and repeatedly publicized Bishop Ryan's mandate – that Father Tolton was to minister only to the Negroes. In the meantime, Father Tolton continued to work tirelessly for the welfare of the disintegrating and impoverished parish.

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, apparently successfully, put pressure on the priests in town to close their doors to her daughter's wedding plans. However, she did not figure in Father Tolton. When the couple asked Father Tolton to officiate at their wedding in St. Joseph Church, he obtained the permission of her pastor and proceeded with the wedding. In the civil law and the canon law, everything was in order. The wedding of the daughter of one of Quincy's most prominent families took place in a Negro Church! Quincy's high society was horrified.

Only July 12, 1889, Father Tolton wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide giving an account of his situation in Quincy. In the letter he wrote:

*There is a certain German priest here who is jealous and contemptuous. He abuses me in many ways and he 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 an explanation as to why Father Tolton made his request. Bishop Ryan replied August 20, 1889, saying: *Father Augustine Tolton is a good priest. However, he wants to establish a type of society here which is not feasible in this place.*

In the meantime, Father Tolton sent letters to find a bishop who would take him now. Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul said that he was in no position to spend more money on the Negro apostolate, but Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago assured Father Tolton that he would receive a warm welcome in his archdiocese.

Father Tolton wrote the Cardinal Prefect in Rome, again. On September 4, 1889, he pleaded:

*I beg you to 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 Prefect: *If the two bishops concur in giving their approval, go at once!*

Father Tolton 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.

Father Tolton must have recalled the joy in his heart when he made his first trip to Chicago nearly 20 years before, but this time as he left Quincy, various words must have been burning in his memory. 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*.



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## Father Tolton's Ministry in Chicago

Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago was destroyed in the great city 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 streets. In the late 1870s and into the next decade, Father Joseph Rowles, pastor of St. Mary's, had a Negro apostolate. In 1881, an association known as the St. Augustine Society was formed to encourage black Catholics and to recruit Negro converts. In 1882, the lower level of St. Mary's Church became Chicago's first Negro parish. Mass was held there for the next seven years. This 'sub-parish' was unstable and dependent on St. Mary's for financial support. The blacks were anxious to have their own pastor.

In 1887, a year after Father Tolton's ordination, these Catholics requested Archbishop Patrick Feehan to try to get Father Tolton to transfer from the diocese of Alton 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 of the city. Father Tolton arrived in Chicago a week before Christmas of 1889; he went quietly to his room at 2251 S. Indiana Avenue. When he reported to the archbishop, he was immediately appointed as pastor of St. Augustine's Church with full pastoral jurisdiction over all Negro Catholics in Chicago. It was suggested that it was time to move out of the basement of St. Mary's.

No members of St Augustine's, 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 red sash. There must have been tears of joy seeing that their efforts to get their own pastor had come to fruition.

Father Tolton started a new phase in his life. In Quincy, he had a nice church, a school and an apartment with his mother and sister. Here, he had an altar in the corner of a church that belonged to another community, no school, and a one-room apartment where he lived by himself. He must have wondered that Sunday about his friends, converts, mother, and sister in Quincy. What were they doing for Mass? How was his departure being accepted?

1891 proved a banner year for him. He was able to

move from the church basement to a storefront church called St. Monica's Chapel. He got a rectory at 448 36th Street and was able to bring his mother and sister to Chicago to live with him. That same year, 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 report to the Propaganda in Rome. At this time, he and his congregation were dreaming of the day when they could build a handsome church building for use by the black Catholics.

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. It was understood the storefront chapel was merely a temporary arrangement. 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 a Negro church in a very bad neighborhood. Father described the plight of most of his people by saying: *These poor people have been left in a bag with both ends open.*

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 was set up by the American bishops at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore.

In 1889, while attending the Catholic Colored Congress in Washington DC, Father Tolton learned about Mother Katherine Drexel (now St. Katherine Drexel), the foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) in Philadelphia. Upon the death of her father, the head of the famous banking house of Drexel & Co., Katherine and her two sisters became heiresses of an immense fortune. Katherine Drexel had a private meeting with Pope Leo XIII in January of 1887, and she spoke of her interest in helping the Negro and Indian missions in the United States. The Pope urged her to become a missionary herself and use her fortune to help these apostolates.

Katherine then founded a religious order of Sisters. Father Tolton, learning about Mother Katherine, made repeated appeals to her for assistance. It is not known exactly how much help was given, but it was at least \$36,000. A number of letters that Father wrote to her are in the archives and have been collected for purposes of examination for his Cause.

In 1891, construction was started on a grand church. Two years later, due to limited funds, construction was halted, a temporary roof was put in place, and the lower level was put to use. Father Tolton kept Mother Katherine informed of the Negro apostolate in Chicago. He wrote he was ministering to 600 Negroes.

Father Gus lived in a house behind the church, and his mother, affectionately known as Mother Tolton served as housekeeper and sacristan and a faithful member of the choir. Father dreamt of the day when the church would be completed. He organized adult religious classes; he engaged some of the members to help teach catechism. He taught after both Sunday masses and before afternoon Vespers.

Poverty afflicted so many of the Negroes of the neighborhood that much of Father Tolton's time was spent trying to acquire help for them. Several groups were called upon repeatedly. Miss Mary Elmore, a Franciscan Tertiary and board member of the Visitation and Aid Society, visited Father Gus. She wrote: *I attended 10 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 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 with hard work and privation. On several occasions he had to ask the Mass server to bring a chair because he could not stand to deliver his sermon.

Father Tolton made his rounds day after day in the foul-smelling streets and alleys; he visited his

people in their poverty, in rat-infested hovels and tenements. He put aside his red sash, the emblem of the pontifical seminary he attended, and wore only his tattered black cassock.

Father did not have much time to fraternize with his brother priests in Chicago, although he did join them on special occasions. A priest of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Theodore Warning, spoke of living with Father Tolton and his mother in 1896 while he attended a summer session at the University of Chicago. He stopped at St. Monica's to seek a place to stay because it was close to the campus of the university. 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 Tolton'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 nail. 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 lived a distance away realized they could attend white churches in their neighborhood without problems and so they stopped coming to St. Monica's. Sometimes, whites came to St. Monica, but he was painfully aware from his experience in Quincy, to make every effort to avoid clashes with his brother priests. Fatigue and exhaustion became his constant companions. Playing the accordion offered him some late evening relaxation.

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## The Death of Father Tolton

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

The people had noticed how weak Father had been, how his hand shook as he gave Holy Communion, and how often he had to sit down even during Mass. He was only 43-years old, but he seemed to be a worn out old man.

Bourbonnais is about a hundred miles south of Chicago. Father Tolton arrived back in the city on Friday, July 9. He got off the train at 35th Street Station and began to walk to the rectory at 448 36th Street. It was shortly before noon. The temperature was already 105 degrees. Father Tolton swayed and then fell heavily to the sidewalk. A police patrol rushed him to Mercy Hospital at 2536 Prairie Avenue. Doctors and nurses were in constant attendance all afternoon. The chaplain administered the Sacrament of Extreme Unction and recited the prayers of the Church for the dying, the same prayers Father Tolton

had so often prayed over others. His fever mounted, and his breathing became more and more difficult.

That evening, while his mother, sister, the chaplain, and several Sisters of Mercy knelt in prayer, Father Tolton breathed his last. According to hospital records, Father Tolton died of heat stroke and uremia on July 9, 1897.

Sunday, July 11, his body lay in state in St. Monica's basement church, a chalice and stole, symbols of his priesthood, stood on the casket. 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.

Monday, July 12, Father John Gilliam, vicar general of the archdiocese, delegate of Archbishop Feehan, offered the solemn Requiem Mass. More than 100 priests were in attendance. The church was filled and the overflow crowd surrounded the church. The Chicago police department assigned 10 officers to assist with the crowd. Father T. Mooney, chancellor of the archdiocese, in his sermon, encouraged the people to fulfill Father Tolton's dream of completing the construction of St. Monica's Church.

During his lifetime, Father Tolton had expressed his 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 and Confirmation, the church where he had been employed for years as a custodian, where he served Mass, the church where his vocation to the priesthood was nourished. A horse-drawn hearse transferred his body from St. Monica's to the train station where it was loaded on the train for Quincy.

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

The cortege arrived in Quincy on the morning of July 13. 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 which was completely filled for the funeral Mass. Father Peter McGirr, who befriended Martha Jane and her family shortly after their arrival in Quincy 36 years

before, had died in 1893 and was buried just outside of Quincy at Bloomfield, a village which no longer exists. The church at Bloomfield was a mission church served by the priests of St. Peter's. Father Joseph Kerr was now pastor of St. Peter Church.

Father Tolton's body was placed at the head of the center aisle with the chalice and stole on the casket. In the crowd were those who remembered Augustus as a Mass server, as a factory worker, as a church custodian, as a student, as a lay apostle, as a friend. Some recalled the years of St. Joseph Church, but only a few faces in the crowd were black.

The Quincy Journal newspaper reported: *There was seldom such a large funeral. The cortege was four blocks long, plus streetcars, 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 that bears to this day, the following 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 rectory to visit and discuss the events of the recent days.

No eulogy had been preached in Quincy, but then to those who understood, Father Tolton's life was a eulogy. Some people could easily judge that his life was not a success, but God calls His servants to be faithful, not successful.

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## Epilogue

Father Tolton's death 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; the parish societies were disbanded for lack of leadership. Trustee Lincoln C. Valle tried to hold things together, eventually prevailing upon the Archbishop in 1901 to appoint a full-time pastor in the person of Father John Morris.

Father Morris was pastor for fifteen years, and during his time a parish school was opened for Negro children. Mother Katherine Drexel continued to help the parish financially. In 1912 she sent five of her sisters to take charge of the school. This school eventually merged with St. Elizabeth's and Mother Katherine assigned additional sisters of her order. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) for Indian and Colored People still teach at St. Elizabeth School.

In 1917, Cardinal George Mundelein requested the Fathers of the Divine Word (SVD) from Techy, Illinois, to take charge of St. Monica's and to direct the Negro apostolate in the Archdiocese.

Martha Jane Tolton, Father Augustus' mother, served as sacristan at St. Monica's until her death in 1911. She was spared the painful experience of seeing the closing of St. Monica's in 1945. Blacks were migrating into the city, sometimes at the rate of a thousand a day, so by necessity Chicago's parishes were pressured to become integrated. This happened successfully in parishes submerged in Negro neighborhoods or where whites were fleeing or were long gone and not so successfully in neighborhoods where whites were the majority.

Meanwhile, in Quincy, one more concentrated effort was made in the area of the Negro apostolate. In 1939, Father Reginald Doyle, OFM was appointed pastor of a new parish for blacks named, St. Benedict the Moor. In 1940, 45 persons were attending Sunday Mass and twenty more were taking convert instructions. So promising were the prospects that two lots were purchased near Berrian Park for a church. But, the church never materialized. A place of worship was established at 11th and Broadway, above the Bickhaus File Factory.

Students from Quincy College helped with catechetical instructions. Father Dunstan Velesz, OFM was pastor from 1943 to 1950. After attending a clergy conference in Chicago dealing with Negro welfare, on April 25, 1946, Father Dunstan was injured in a train accident at Naperville. The Advanced Exposition Flyer stopped and the Exposition Flyer, a few minutes behind it, rear-ended the advanced train. There were many fatalities and injuries. Father Dunstan was indemnified by the C.B. & Q Railroad for injuries and he gave part of this money for support of St. Benedict's.

Questions eventually were asked about the need for a separate church for Negroes in Quincy. In 1950, Bishop O'Connor closed St. Benedict's and asked the blacks to go to the neighborhood parishes.

Here ends our story of Father Augustus Tolton and his legacy.

Bishop Joseph N. Perry  
Postulator