



SAINT AUGUSTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

SINCE 1841



Tomb of the Unknown Slave

MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

Dear Friends and Supporters of St. Augustine Church,

The history of St. Augustine church is printed on the reverse side of this letter. Along with our history is also printed an explanation of "The Tomb of the Unknown Slave" which is situated on the side of our church. The meaning of this shrine is similar to the meaning of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington VA. In war as in slavery deaths happen in a very messy way. Dignified burial rites very often cannot happen. Thus, to have one grave site that commemorates the lives of the unknown and forgotten is a source for ritual remembrance.

We the members of present-day St. Augustine church would like to begin a devotion dedicated to the memory of all the slaves represented by this shrine of "The Tomb of the Unknown Slave". Since it is a tomb, our purpose is to remember all of our ancestors, slave or free, on whose shoulders we stand. Since our devotion is at "The Tomb of the Unknown Slave" our devotion will include intercessory prayer for healing, both personal and civic.

Our devotion will put an emphasis on ritual. The ritual for our remembrance of our ancestors will be placing incense on charcoal and calling out the names of those we want to remember in prayer. As the smoke rises from the incense so our prayers will rise to God. The ritual for healing will include the anointing of our hands and again the calling out of names of persons or groups who need the power of Jesus' healing. At the end of our devotion, we will be given a small votive candle, and we will proceed to the Shrine of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, place the votive candle there and say a quiet personal prayer.

Since many cannot attend our devotion, we will include the opportunity to participate by mail. Along with this letter there is an Intercessory Prayer Naming sheet. Anyone can send in names of ancestors to be prayed for and names of persons or groups who are in need of healing. This sheet can be sent to St. Augustine Church, 1210 Gov. Nicholls St., New Orleans, LA 70116. We also ask that you send in a donation for the continuation of this devotion and for the upkeep of our church.

We hope to have this devotion three times a year. We will inaugurate this devotion on Saturday, November 16, 2024, at 7 a.m. and 12 noon. We plan the second time for this devotion on the first Saturday of Lent (after Mardi Gras) and the third for some time in the Easter season. Each time we hope to send you a letter requesting your participation. In anticipation of your support, we thank you from the depths of our common faith in God.

Rev. William Mason, OMI

HISTORY OF SAINT AUGUSTINE CHURCH

In Historic Faubourg Treme

The property on which Saint Augustine Church stands was part of the original Claude Treme plantation estate. Treme, a Frenchman, subdivided his estate and sold off large tracts to free blacks and others on a first-come, first-serve basis. In 1834, Jeanne Marie Aliquot purchased the immediate property of the Treme home from the City of New Orleans and became a major catalyst in the development of Saint Augustine.

Jeanne Marie sold the house, which was built by the Company of the Indies in 1720, as the office for a tilery and brickyard, to the Ursuline Sisters in 1836. They, in turn, sold the property to the Nuns of Mount Carmel in 1840, who then took over the little school for colored girls and used the Treme home for their motherhouse until 1926 when they moved to Robert E. Lee Boulevard.

In 1841, when the free people of color got permission from Bishop Antoine Blanc to build a church, the Ursuline Sisters donated the property at the corner of Bayou Road and Saint Claude, on the condition the church is named Saint Augustine, after one of their patron saints. Bishop Antoine Blanc named Pere Etienne Rousselon the founding pastor of the newly built French speaking church. And so it came to pass.

In the midst of all these things, Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, and Juliette Gaudin, a Cuban, began aiding slaves, orphan girls, the uneducated, and the sick and elderly among people of color in 1823. Their particular concern for the education and care of black children, aided greatly in the founding of the city's early private school for the colored. At the urging of Jeanne Marie Aliquot and the wise counseling of Pere Etienne Rousselon, the two women knelt in Saint Augustine Church on November 21, 1842, and pledged to live in community to work for orphan girls, the uneducated, poor, sick and the elderly among the free people of color, thus founding the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, the second-oldest African American congregation of women.

A few months before the dedication of Saint Augustine Church, the people of color began to purchase pews for their families. Upon hearing of this, white people in the area started their campaign to buy pews. Thus, the *War of the Pews* began and the free people of color bought as many pews as the whites. In an unprecedented political and religious move, the colored members also bought all the side aisle pews. They then gave those pews to the slaves as their exclusive place of worship.

This mix of pews resulted in the most integrated congregation in the country: one large row of free people of color, one large row of whites with a smattering of ethnic folk, and two outer aisles of slaves. Except for a brief six-month period when its sanctuary was being enlarged and blessed in time for Christmas, Saint Augustine Church has been in continuous use as a place of worship. Saint Augustine Church was chosen to be included in the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture opening in the fall of 2016. In 2008, the church was designated as one of the original 26 sites included on the African American Heritage Trail. We celebrate the 183rd Anniversary in October of 2024.

THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE

On this October 30, 2004, we, the Faith Community of Saint Augustine Catholic Church, dedicate this shrine consisting of grave crosses, chains and shackles to the memory of the nameless, faceless, turfless Africans who met an untimely death in Faubourg Treme. *The Tomb of the Unknown Slave* is commemorated here in the garden plot of Saint Augustine Church, the only parish in the United States whose free people of color bought two outer rows of pews exclusively for slaves to use for worship. The Saint Augustine/Treme shrine honors all slaves buried throughout the United States and those slaves in particular who lie beneath the ground of Treme in unmarked, unknown graves. There is no doubt that the campus of Saint Augustine Church sits astride the blood, sweat, tears and some of the mortal remains of unknown slaves from Africa and local American Indian slaves who either met with fatal treachery, and were therefore buried quickly and secretly, or were buried hastily and at random because of yellow fever and other plagues. Even now, some Treme locals have childhood memories of salvage/restoration workers unearthing various human bones, sometimes in concentrated areas such as wells. In other words, *The Tomb of the Unknown Slave* is a constant reminder that we are walking on holy ground. Thus, we cannot consecrate this tomb, because it is already consecrated by many slaves' inglorious deaths, bereft of any acknowledgement, dignity or respect, but ultimately glorious by their blood, sweat, tears, faith, prayers and deep worship of our Creator. *The bronze plaque was donated by Sylvia Barker of the Danny Barker Estate.*