

## The History of

# St. Augustine Church

St. Augustine Church was built on the site that was part of a plantation estate. Originally, it was the brickyard and tilery headquarters built in 1720 of the Province of New Orleans' Supervisor of the Company of the Indies and was an economic stimulus for the province. In 1731 the Company of the Indies left and the plantation was sold to the Moreau family and eventually came into the possession of Julie Moreau in 1775, a manumitted slave.

Claude Tremé, a Frenchman, married Julie Moreau and took title to the property. The couple subdivided the estate and sold off many lots to Free People of Color, people from the Old Quarter and Haitian immigrants fleeing the 1791 revolution. After selling 35 lots the Tremé family left their plantation home in 1810.

In the 1830s, the Catholic Free People of Color, in cooperation with Martha Fortier, a postulate of the hospital nuns, created a school to educate free colored girls in the French Quarter, the first of its kind in the United States. Marie Jeanne Aliquot, a French émigré, began overseeing Fortier's school. In 1834

she purchased the immediate property of the Tremé home for \$9,000 and was the major catalyst in the origins of Saint Augustine Church.

Marie Aliquot moved the school from the French Quarter to the Tremé

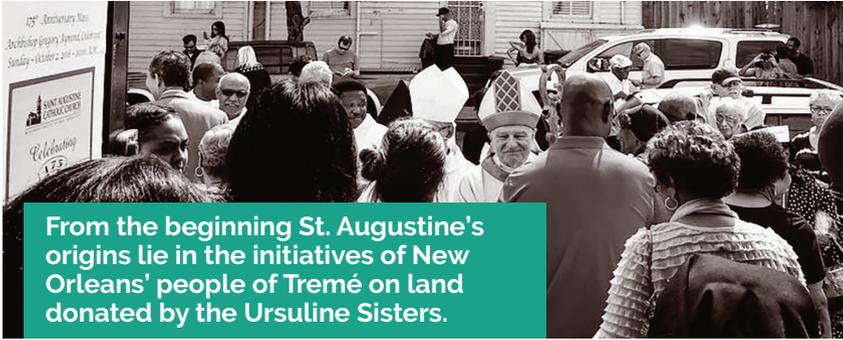
in 1834, which at that time was briefly the site of the College d'Orleans. There, a group of free colored women, including Fortier Protégéé Henriette Delille, organized themselves as Sisters of the Presentation.

In 1842 the Sisters of the Presentation were formally recognized as the order of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Henriette Delille, a Creole, along with two others, founded the group and devoted her life to caring for the sick, helping the poor and instructing free and enslaved, children and adults. She died in 1862 and her funeral was at St. Augustine Church; she is awaiting sainthood (venerable).

Marie Aliquot sold the house to the Ursuline nuns in 1836. The Ursuline nuns purchased the school under the condition that it continue the education of colored children. They, in turn, gifted the property to the Carmelites in 1840,

**Henriette Delille devoted her life to caring for the underprivileged. Her funeral was at St. Augustine Church; she is awaiting sainthood.**

*Continued on back*



**From the beginning St. Augustine's origins lie in the initiatives of New Orleans' people of Tremé on land donated by the Ursuline Sisters.**

who took over the school and merged it with their school for white girls and used the Tremé home for their mother house until 1926.

From the beginning St. Augustine's origins lie in the initiatives of New Orleans' people of Tremé. In the 1830's Tremé's Free People of Color petitioned Bishop Antoine Blanc for permission to build a church. The Ursuline Sisters, who owned the property adjacent to the school, donated a lot at the corner of Bayou Road (Gov. Nicholls St.) and Saint Claude, (Henriette Delille St.) on the condition the church would be named Saint Augustine, after one of their patron saints. St. Augustine Church began construction in 1839, where fourteen Free People of Color placed the church's capstone. The church was dedicated in 1841.

A few months before the October 9, 1841 dedication of Saint Augustine Church, the Free 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. The white and Free People of Color each purchased the center pews. In an unprecedented political and religious move, the Free People of Color members 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. It is the oldest church in the

United States that has had a continuous mixed congregation of Free People of Color, slaves and whites throughout its entire history; many ethnicities found spiritual comfort at Saint Augustine Church. White children and black and every shade in between knelt side by side. Black and whites sang side by side in the choir of Saint Augustine as early as the 1860s, and knelt together at the altar rail for communion.

On Saturday, October 30, 2004, in the midst of a Gospel Extravaganza unfolding in the St. Augustine parking lot, Archbishop Alfred Schulte, standing near the church garden area and accompanied by a large crowd from around the city and parts of the nation, blessed and dedicated "The Tomb of the Unknown Slave", a shrine consisting of outsize marine chains welded together with shackles and iron balls to form a huge, fallen cross. The grim, rusting monument standing outside the church honors those countless slaves who perished uncounted and unnamed. As the bronze plaque affixed to the wall behind the shrine explains, the monument was primarily inspired by the number of unmarked graves that have been unearthed in the city over the years, but is also dedicated to all of those who died ignominious fates during the American slave trade. The plaque even points out that it is likely that there are such graves even in the earth beneath it since much of the parish was created by slave labor. ■