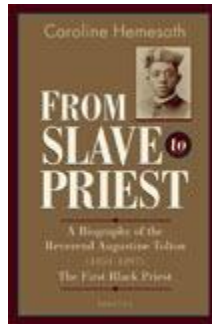


given the name of Augustine, the great African theologian, because that was his maternal grandfather's name, and he was given the name of John because that was the patron saint of the priest who baptized him. For five years Father Tolton led St. Boniface Mission in Quincy before Archbishop Feehan requested the only African-American priest to come to Chicago.

Read more about the remarkable priest in:

**From Slave to Priest: The Inspirational Story**  
of Fr. Augustine Tolton  
*By Sr. Caroline Hemesath*  
Ignatius Press



Fr. Augustine Tolton (1854-1897) was the first black priest in the United States. Born into a black Catholic slave family, Father Tolton conquered almost insurmountable odds to become a Catholic priest, and at his early death at 43, this pioneer black American priest left behind a shining legacy of holy service to God, the Church and his people.

With the thorough scholarly research and inspirational writing by Sister Caroline Hemesath, the great legacy of this first black priest, and his courage in the face of incredible prejudice within the Church and society, will be a source of strength and hope for modern Christians who face persecution for their faith, especially black Catholics who still experience

similar prejudices. In American history, many black people have achieved, against great odds, success and made distinct contributions to our society and their fellowman. But Father Tolton faced a different source of prejudice—an opposition from within the Church, the one institution he should have been able to rely on for compassion and support.

He endured many rebuffs, as a janitor spent long hours in the church chapel in prayer, and attended clandestine classes taught by friendly priests and nuns who saw in his eyes the bright spark of the love of God, devotion to the Church and a determination to serve his people. Denied theological training in America, these friends helped him to receive his priestly education, and ordination, in Rome. He later became the pastor of St. Monica's Church in Chicago and established a center at St. Monica's which was the focal point for the life of black Catholics in Chicago for 30 years.

The author interviewed many people who knew Father Tolton personally, including St. Katharine Drexel, and presents a deeply inspiring portrait of a great American Catholic.

On March 17, 2010, Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Archbishop of Chicago, announced, that Fr. Augustus Tolton's cause for sainthood was introduced in the Archdiocese of Chicago. The Cardinal appointed Most Rev. Joseph N. Perry, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, as the Postulator for the cause of Fr. Tolton. Bishop Perry will be responsible for making Fr. Tolton better known and encouraging prayer to him.

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Pamphlet 012

## From Slave to Priest

### Father John Augustine Tolton



Fr. Augustus Tolton

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

During the Civil War, 180,000 Blacks became part of the Union's effort to free the country's four million slaves. People from Quincy, Illinois, were known to go into Missouri near where the Toltons lived, and encourage slaves to run away.

In 1862 Peter Tolton escaped slavery with the intention of joining the Union Army. He died of dysentery in a St. Louis hospital shortly after his arrival there.

Augustine's mother, a slave also, told John and his two siblings, "We must escape too." One night they fled to the Mississippi River.

Three days later they reached the river finding a leaky old row boat. After they were off-shore, the angry Confederates spotted them and began shouting threats at them. One fired repeatedly at the boat, but it was dark and he missed. Martha Jane with Charles, Augustine and Anne reached the Illinois side. Upon landing on the Illinois side she looked at her son with streaming eyes, "John, boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord."

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

In the late afternoon, the day following their night experience on the river, the family arrived in Quincy. Quincy's population was 15,000. It had factories, schools, businesses galore and many churches. They found the Negro district; it had about three hundred inhabitants. Almost immediately they were given help by a kindly lady, Mrs. Davis. She was a widow with a nine-year-old daughter named Mary Ann. Mrs. Davis took in the Toltons, an arrangement which lasted several years. The two mothers, one employed in daytime factory work, the other as a night-time charwoman in a downtown office building, looked after each other's children.

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

and Augustine, age nine, began work in the same factory.

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

Father Peter McGirr, pastor of St Peter's Catholic Church of Quincy, IL noticed a poorly dressed African-American boy standing across from his church for the third day. He spoke to the boy. John Augustine told him he was hungry and willing to work. Father McGirr fed him and asked if he was interested in attending school.

John Augustine entered St. Peter's Catholic School. After the first month Father McGirr asked John who had already progressed to second reader, if he wanted to become Catholic. Father McGirr instructed him for his first Holy Communion. John served as Alter Boy for the 5 a.m. Mass during the following summer. After which Father McGirr asked him if he would like to become a priest. John Augustine was incredulous. Father McGirr explained, "You would be the first Negro Catholic Priest of the United States. It will take you about twelve years of hard study." Excited and delighted all at once he turned to Father McGirr and said, "Let us go to church and pray for my success."

John progressed quickly in school. He finished high school, then attended and graduated from Quincy College. As an African-American in the United States during the nineteenth century Father McGirr and the Franciscan Fathers had to arrange for him to complete his ecclesiastical studies in Rome. He was an exemplary student. For the rest of his

life John loved to speak of his wonderful experiences in the Eternal City.

At the age of 32, John Augustine Tolton, who was born a slave in Missouri, was ordained a Catholic Priest in Rome by Cardinal Parochi on April 24, 1886. Newspapers throughout the United States carried the story and announced the date and arrival time of Father Tolton to Quincy, Illinois.

Upon arriving back to Quincy on July 17, 1886, Father Tolton was greeted at the train station like a conquering hero. Thousands were there to greet him led by Father McGirr. A brass band played church songs and Negro Spirituals. Thousands of blacks and whites lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the new priest wearing a black Prince Albert and a silk hat. People marched and cheered his flower draped four horse carriage. Children, priests and sisters left the school joining the procession heading towards the church.

Father Tolton arrived at the church where hundreds were waiting inside. People of all races were kneeling at the communion rail awaiting his sacerdotal blessings. The first blessing went to Father McGirr, his friend and benefactor. For this momentous occasion racial prejudices were momentarily replaced with religious fervor as all races kissed the new Father's hand.

The next day at 9 a.m. Father Tolton gave his first solemn High Mass. The church was packed as thousands stood outside unable to attend. There were many priests within the sanctuary. The Church was beautifully decorated for this special occasion. Father John Augustine Tolton sang his first Mass. Father McGirr preached the sermon sketching Father Tolton's story and gave purpose of the Holy Mass. Afterwards all knelt and asked the sacerdotal blessing of the priest. Later in life Father Tolton would explain that he was