

Mother Austin Carroll a pioneer Mercy sister

Years before dear St. Katharine Drexel founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for African and Native Americans; a Sister of Mercy began a series of schools in the South for people of color. It is ironic that many of the schools started by this Mercy Sister would be in the area where St. Katharine Drexel later founded similar schools. The name of the pioneer Sister of Mercy was Mother Austin Carroll.

Mother Austin Carroll entered the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Cork, Ireland, in 1853. Three years later, in 1856, the newly professed Mother Austin was sent to the United States. In 1860, she was assigned to New Orleans. While journeying down the Mississippi on the river boat to the delta, Mother Austin took it upon herself to instruct several African-Americans in Catholicism. She prepared the daughter of one of the laundresses for both first holy Communion and the sacrament of confirmation. She also taught the truths of the faith to several cabin boys and deckhands.

Mother Austin Carroll established her first school for African-American Catholics, outside of New Orleans, in Biloxi, Miss. The year was 1875. The school lasted until 1890, when a public school for black children was established in Biloxi.

Two years later, Mother Carroll opened three schools in Pensacola, Fla.: one for African-Americans, one for mulattoes and the third, for white children. All three schools lasted until 1918. Eventually the schools for blacks and mulattoes combined and became one school.

Mother Carol's fifth school for African-Americans was in Evangeline Territory: St. Martinsville, La., on Bayou Teche. Strangely, that school became her largest African-American school and lasted until 1960.

In the area known as the Irish Channel in New Orleans, the Redemptorist Fathers began a school for black children in the French parish located in that area of New Orleans. How the area became known as the Irish Channel, I do not know. The inhabitants of that part of the city were African-Americans, French, German and

Irish. The French, German and Irish each had their own ethnic church. The French and German church was across the street from each other and the Irish church was at the corner. The school the fathers built for blacks was burned down. They built another school, one block away from the original school and the second school was also burned down. Finally, the good priests made another attempt to build a third school. Again that school was burned down. One school was built near the river and another on Jackson Avenue.

At St. Michael's parish in the same area, Mother Austin had a small building for an African American school. She had the building moved into the yard of the Mercy convent. Although the Irish and Germans had burned the three other schools in the "Irish Channel", Mother Austin believed that they would not burn this black school for fear that the convent might burn also. She was right. The school survived and eventually, its graduates became teachers in the public schools.

A year later, Mother Austin Carroll built a much larger school for black children in St. Michael's parish. Again, she built the school next to the convent. That way, Mother Carroll assumed once more that the Irish and German people would not burn the school for fear of burning the convent. She was right, this school was not burned. The convent faced the square. The entrance to the school was on Race Street. Ironically, Mother Austin had to beg the parents of the black children to send them to school since many parents were fearful of the harm that might come to the children. But in the end Mother Austin won out and the children did come. In fact, the black and white boys played together in the school yard.

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