



## December 2011 Newsletter

### **Introduction to an Extract from *War of the Pews: A Personal Account of the St. Augustine Church in New Orleans*, by Rev. Jerome G. LeDoux, S.V.D.**

By Christopher N. Matthews\*

In 1998, as director of the University of New Orleans' Greater New Orleans Archaeology Program, I had the opportunity to meet Rev. Jerome LeDoux, pastor of the historic St. Augustine church located in the Tremé section of New Orleans. I went with Bettie Pendley, a preservationist and archaeological advocate, to appeal to Father LeDoux to allow us to test the churchyard for archaeological remains of an early colonial house that stood there until the early 1900s. I was also hoping to convince Father LeDoux to work with us to develop a public archaeology program that would allow the project to reach out and connect with the surrounding Tremé community. This was a time when public archaeology was becoming increasingly common, and the St. Augustine site seemed a very good place to do it.

Tremé is a neighborhood with deep roots in the city, and many connections to the city's diverse and important African American community. The colonial house that stood at the site was first built in the 1710s as the home of the Company of the Indies brick maker, Charles Morand. The workforce at the site consisted of enslaved Africans owned by the company under Morand's supervision. Morand later owned the brick works and its laborers independently. By the 1790s, the property was owned by Claude Tremé, who started subdividing the land, naming the new neighborhood after himself.

Among the new residents were many free Creoles of color. With this population growing, especially promoted by a migration of refugees from the revolution in Haiti, demand grew for a new church and a school. In the 1840s, the former colonial manor and its lot were obtained by

the Archdiocese. St. Augustine Church was built on the southeast corner of the lot and the old manor house taken over by a free Creole of color order known as the Sisters of the Holy Family. Under their authority, the school and church served the diverse community of Tremé, where they paid special attention to serving both free and enslaved people of African descent. The Sisters of the Holy Family only remained at the site for a few years, after which their duties were taken over by the Sisters of Mount Carmel, who maintained the site as their convent and school until the 1920s.

Tremé has always been a home to people of color in New Orleans, and several important families have lived there. For example, Homer Plessy, of the well known *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court case on Jim Crow segregation, came from Tremé. So did Sidney Bechet, a founding father of traditional New Orleans Jazz. The neighborhood is currently predominantly African American and this is mirrored by the makeup of the congregation at St. Augustine church and its African-influenced Catholic spiritualism. My hope for the public program was to share the process and findings of the archaeological research at the site with this community. With great excitement, Father LeDoux agreed, and the Archaeology in Tremé project was born.

His new book, *War of the Pews*, tells the story of St. Augustine Church in history and as well as in the recent years, especially after the devastation of the city after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which profoundly impacted the congregation in many ways. It is a story of conflict, struggle, and survival told from Father LeDoux's perspective. I could not have been more excited as when he shared with me a draft of his chapter on the archaeology project we did there. As you will see Father LeDoux has a knack for writing about archaeology and gives us a clear view of the meaning of doing archaeology in and with minority communities. With permission, I have also copied another chapter from the book in which he discusses the church's initiative to create a powerful monument known as the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. This gives just a sampling of this great book. Copies of the book are available from Margaret Media:

[http://margaretmedia.com/index.php?\\_a=viewProd&productId=37](http://margaretmedia.com/index.php?_a=viewProd&productId=37)

I have also included here a few images to illustrate the church and the archaeological site as well as some references that provide for more detailed discussions of the archaeological fieldwork and findings and the public programming.

## Note

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## For more information:

Dawdy, Shannon Lee and Christopher N. Matthews

2010 Colonial and Antebellum New Orleans. In *The Archaeology of Louisiana*, Mark Rees, ed. Louisiana University Press.

Matthews, Christopher N.

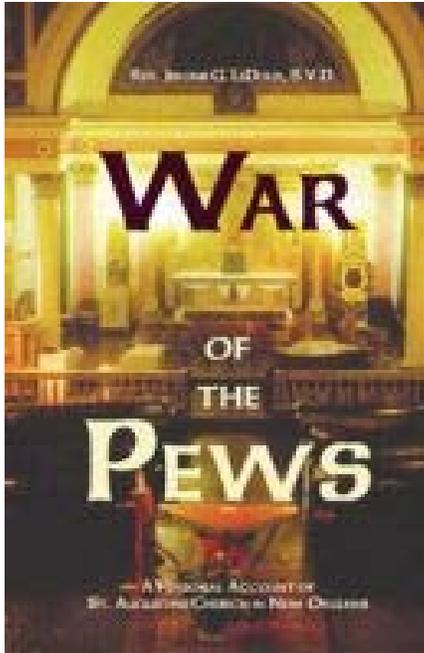
2001 Political Economy and Race: Comparative Archaeologies of Annapolis and New Orleans in the 18th Century. A contribution to *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, C. Orser, ed., pp. 71-87. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

2007 History to Prehistory: An Archaeology of Being Indian in New Orleans. *Archaeologies: The Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 3(3): 271-295.

2008 The Location of Archaeology. In *Ethnographic Archaeologies: Reflections on Stakeholders and Archaeological Practices*. Quetzil E. Castañeda and Christopher N. Matthews, eds. AltaMira Press.

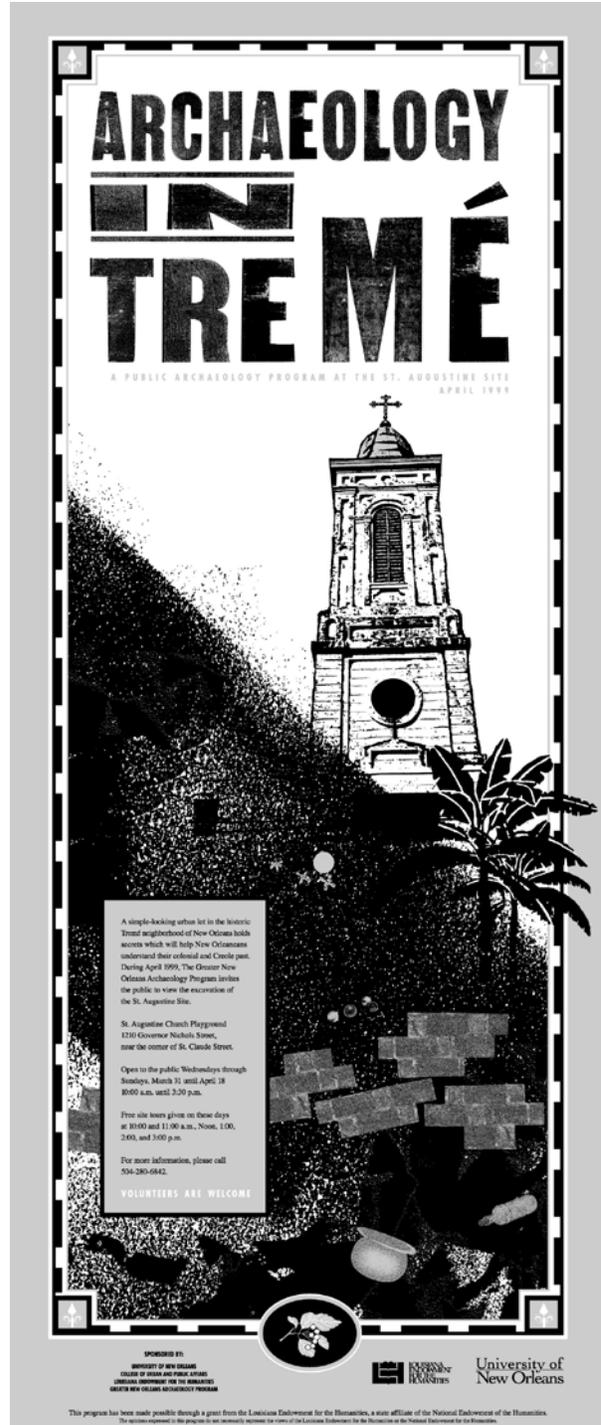
St. Augustine Church website:

<http://www.staugustinecatholicchurch-neworleans.org/hist-sum.htm>



Cover the *War of the Pews* by Rev. Jerome G LeDoux, S.V.D. (above)

Poster for the “Archaeology in Tremé” public program at St. Augustine Church (right)





**St. Augustine Church during the “Archaeology in Tremé” public program**



**Overview of the Tremé Plantation house foundation and brick floor unearthed during the “Archaeology in Tremé” excavation**

**Return to December 2011 Newsletter:**  
<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news1211/news1211.html>

WAR OF THE  
PEWS

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF ST. AUGUSTINE  
CHURCH IN NEW ORLEANS

by

Rev. Jerome G. LeDoux, S. V. D.

Margaret Media, Inc.  
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*War of the Pews*

A Personal Account of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans

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DEDICATED TO THE FAITH-FILLED MEMBERS,  
ASSOCIATE MEMBERS AND FRIENDS  
OF ST. AUGUSTINE CHURCH  
OF FAUBOURG TREME  
IN NEW ORLEANS



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN  
ARCHAEOLOGISTS FROM  
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS DIG IN

St. Augustine Church and its campus are steeped in history of many kinds. The church archives and architectural renderings show that the original church structure ended with a wooden wall some 12 feet beyond the Communion rail – which did not exist then – where the arch spans the sanctuary. When a fire of unspecified origin destroyed that wall in 1920, the church members were mostly Italian, especially Sicilian, due to heavy immigration from Italy on the one hand and on the other a steady emigration of people of color from Tremé after the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling.

That majority Italian membership did not rebuild the burned wall, but built the present sanctuary, pulpit and all, importing the beautiful marble from Italy. The completed sanctuary was dedicated on Christmas Day in 1925.

Renovations continued apace into the next year, so that the Communion rail was added, as were the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph beautiful marble side altars. Apparently, the brick/stucco finish on the walls of the nave was depositing sand in the hair of parishioners. So the church went modern by using a new technology for covering the bricks.

Bagasse, the strong biomass residue remaining after sugar cane has been crushed for juice, was being used to make a beaverboard-type of siding. That new bagasse fiberboard technology was applied to cover the plaster and bricks and is still to be seen there on the walls of the church.

During that same period, cypress closets for Mass vestments, altar cloths and other supplies were built in the sacristy and stor-

age room. However, preceding all this in -time by 200 years was the brick-between-posts two-story house built in 1720 about 30 feet southeast of where the church nave was to built. This singular structure is described at the beginning of Chapter 8.

Unfortunately, as has happened to so many historic structures in the United States, this precious one, simply because it was old and deemed useless, was razed in 1926 at the myopic command of then pastor Father J.B. Delepine. It was this quaint house that became the basis for a special phone call from an archaeologist in 1999.

"Hello, Father. I am Dr. Christopher Matthews of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans. Recently, we got acquainted somewhat on the phone during a previous call. And with me here is Ms. Bettie Pendley of the Louisiana Archaeological Conservancy. We have met to discuss the possibility of doing a public archaeology program in New Orleans. Ms. Pendley learned of the site through previous research work done in the Tremé neighborhood. We are requesting of you and the St. Augustine Catholic Church membership that we of the Greater New Orleans Archaeology Program (GNOAP) of the College of Urban and Public Affairs, University of New Orleans, be allowed to test the church yard for archaeological remains."

In pleasant shock over the offer, Pastor Jerome LeDoux took all of a handful of seconds to respond to Dr. Matthews.

"It is a real pleasure to know you, Dr. Matthews, and you, Ms. Pendley. By all means, all of us at St. Augustine Church welcome you and want you to do the dig. Most of us have long grieved over the senseless razing of the Claude Tremé home in 1926. Built by the Company of the Indies in 1720, it would now be the oldest building anywhere in the region, since fires in 1788 and 1794 had consumed the oldest buildings in the Old Quarter. This dig will go far to assuage our grief and to give us and all of Tremé further enlightenment on the unique history of this place."

"It certainly will," Dr. Matthews promised. "The St. Augustine site on the grounds of St. Augustine Church is the location of the former Tremé Plantation house and the Mount Carmel School for free children of color. This program provides a way for the public

to become involved in the production and presentation of their history by touring the excavation and learning about the fascinating history of the site."

"How does archaeology put historical facts together?" the pastor wanted to know.

"Everyone knows that archaeologists dig, but the objects that are found are only the beginning of the story. Archaeologists also record where objects are found and then use various tools of analysis and understanding to build up an interpretation of the cultures that existed in the past. Archaeological sites are found in layers called strata. Each stratum contains one period of history. This Tremé site contains three primary strata, each holding secrets of a different era: the Colonial Era, the Educational Era, and Tremé today."

The testing by the GNOAP took place during the week of September 21, 1998. After testing the site and defining its potential significance, the archaeologists did further research and began fund-raising for the special project. Through their know-how and experience, they soon had generous grants from the Edward Wisner Trust Fund and the Booth-Bricker Foundation. These grants were complemented with funding from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, enabling the GNOAP to undertake an excavation and public program at the site from March 15 to April 25, and from September 20 to October 10, 1999.

That initial testing was done in the church yard grassy portion of the parking lot, using an offset 10 x 10 m shovel testing regimen. The crew consisted of project director Christopher Matthews along with the volunteer help of Zoe Burkholder, Bettie Pendley, Jan Branyon, Martha Irwin, Kelli Ostrom, Mike Godzinski and Suzanne Dathe. With unerring accuracy, they dug straight down at a prearranged point determined by what they understood from the plat of the Claude Tremé home.

And voila! They unearthed the north-northeast corner of the foundation of the ancient house. Very matter-of-fact and stoic, the crew showed no surprise, but the pastor certainly did. Pointing to the 5-foot differential of present ground level and that foundation,

Dr. Matthews called up dryly from the low point of excavation, "This is the level at which they were walking back in those days! All the rest of this has somehow filled in since then!" A bared sidewalk punctuated the remark of Dr. Matthews.

Not long after that, Dr. Matthews aimed at getting the community involved, "Could we have some church and community volunteers once in a while?" Dr. Matthews wanted to know. "We do not need extra help, but it will be very educational for your church members and people from the community to have a hands-on experience together with us, digging carefully and sifting through the sand, clay and shards."

"We will gladly get the word around," the pastor promised. "I am sure there are many who want to get a close-up view and touch the kind of activity that we have seen heretofore only on TV involving digs in faraway places such as Egypt."

Curious, enthusiastic volunteers did appear from time to time, peering into the excavations and gingerly fingering the sand, the shards and other pieces of artifacts. For most of us, it was a scene never experienced by us before in Tremé or anywhere else. As quiet as the whole operation was, it was nonetheless high drama.

A total of 22 shovel test pits (STPs) along five transects were excavated to 50 centimeters below surface (cmbs) or sterile soil, except where intact features were identified. Tests were cored to a minimum depth of 68 cmbs to confirm sterile soil.

After the archaeologists had started their real dig and had made considerable progress, Dr. Matthews approached the pastor with a progress report and a suggestion.

"I have another request, Father. We are about midway through our dig and have unearthed quite a number of artifacts. With your permission, we would like to set out an exhibit on the veranda of your church hall. It is a large space open to your church members and everyone in the community."

"That will be our privilege to host your exhibit on our hall veranda," the pastor quickly responded. "Our church and community are excited and proud about the wonderful work you and your able crew are doing."

Drawing from church members and local residents, the veranda

exhibit was a success for all involved. It somehow reminded everyone that this was very much like the famous digs that have gone on for centuries in Egypt and other historic places. This drew everyone's interest to the ongoing digging where all tests were positive for cultural remains dating to the historic occupation of the site.

Each revealed multiple strata, though only some appeared to represent intact stratigraphy dating back prior to the 20th Century. The principal feature identified in the testing was a possible brick floor at 40 centimeters below the surface of today's campus. This possible floor was attributed to the last standing house at the site.

Additional features included a terra cotta water pipe at the same depth and a deeper brick floor made of soft brick at 20 centimeters lower. These features were related as well to the architectural development of the site. While sifting through all these things and attempting to understand what they meant, the pastor got a call from an organization that specializes in exhibits.

"Father LeDoux? This is Ann Rowson Love, curator of education from the Ogden Museum of Southern Art at the University of New Orleans. I hear that the Department of Archaeology from the University of New Orleans has completed a successful dig on the property of St. Augustine Church. We have more than a passing interest in the artifacts from that dig. In fact, we want to mount some of them behind glass and be allowed to display them at times as part of some of our exhibits. May I have a meeting with you?"

"By all means! Yes, as pastor, let me assure you that our members of St. Augustine feel honored that you are interested in the unearthed treasures of our historic church grounds. And yes, we do want you to be part of the dig by mounting and displaying some of the artifacts that have been found. We can meet and talk some time this week."

That kind of phone call was quickly becoming almost commonplace as the word of the Tremé dig began to get around the neighborhood and the city. In a word, interest in the crew of the University of New Orleans archaeologists and their work had hit the conversation piece level throughout the neighborhood.

During the meeting, Jan reported some of the things she had been reading and hearing.

"Artifacts recovered in the testing represented the wide temporal range of historic occupation at the site. Artifacts of ceramic, glass, ferrous and other metal, faunal, personal items, and modern materials were recovered. Using standard ceramic dating it was also found that the site contained remains from the mid-19th – century school era and the 18th –century colonial plantation era. Analysis of the locations of early artifacts (i.e., historic aboriginal ceramics, French coarse earthenware, French faience, and British creamware) suggested that the best preserved area of the site was its northeast quadrant. Other STPs suggested that later uses of the site, perhaps by the neighboring shotgun houses along Ursuline Street, had disturbed any earlier remains. Thus, the northeastern area was chosen to be the focus for further investigations."

Jan's report was amazingly detailed and accurate. The upper brick feature was found to be not a floor, but the remains of the building's demolition. The feature consisted of broken brick, mortar and ash. The materials are believed to originate from the buildings' walls which, after they were knocked over, were picked clean of whole bricks, layered with ash to sterilize the soil, watered and rolled flat. This process in effect buried and sealed the earlier remains at the site leaving them in surprisingly good archaeological condition. Ever more curious, the eyes of St. Augustine parishioners and local residents lit up still more as the digging produced more and more artifacts.

"We are going to dedicate a special issue of our university magazine to this dig at St. Augustine," Dr. Matthews assured us. "This dig is extraordinary, and, therefore, our magazine must reflect just how informative and exciting it is."

It was now obvious that Dr. Matthews was taking copious notes as he and his crew went about their work. The story resumes in his own words.

"The deeper excavation of the four units revealed that the area was to the rear of the main house, probably between the house and a rear outbuilding, and was the location of a series of courtyards and outdoor activity areas. In all, three buried historic surfaces were identified. The earliest surface likely dates to the first use of the site in the 1720s. It was a soft-brick surface which was worn down to the point that individual bricks were hard to identify. It is believed

these were bricks made on this plantation.

"The second courtyard dates to the subsequent generation and was made by burying the first brick surface with bousillage (a hybrid mud brick) and brick rubble and a new soft-brick courtyard surface. These surfaces acted to provide a solid ground level for household activities such as food preparation and cooking. Artifacts recovered included items representing a wide range of household activities such as food preparation and cooking, as well as numerous and varied household materials such as ceramics (of both European and Native American origin), glass faunal remains, and architectural materials such as bousillage and nails. Over these remains was laid the third historic courtyard surface. Unlike the previous surfaces, the latter was not a wide expanse of brick, but was a brick step adjacent to a mortar surface dating to the era of the convent and school.

"To the south of the step two adjacent pits were identified. These pits were only partially excavated as they continued to the south, east and west of the Area 1 excavation. The pits themselves were cut through the earlier two courtyards and into sterile soil probably during the late 18th or early 19th centuries based on the presence of British pearlware. Also, it seems to be the case that the pits were filled up at once since the contents of the fill preliminarily date to a very narrow range. It is suggested here that they were dug and left open for a while, perhaps used for laundering or cooking. It is also the case that the eastern of the two pits contained mid-19th-century artifacts in its upper levels suggesting that the pits may have not been used simultaneously, or that the eastern pit remained partially open after the western pit was filled. Another possibility is that these pits were evacuated in conjunction with the construction of a new kitchen building in the 19th century. This kitchen is identified behind the main house... A map overlay suggests this structure would have stood in this location."

Dr. Matthews and his crew had much more to report, much of which is technical. Their full report can be found in a booklet, Management Summary for Archaeological Investigations at the St. Augustine Site (160R148). The booklet was submitted to the Louisiana Division of Archaeology on November 5, 1999.

Just as promised by Dr. Matthews, the special November, 1999 issue of *Conquest*, the University of New Orleans magazine, fea-

turing the archaeological dig on the Claude Tremé home site at St. Augustine Church, was very colorful, elegant, informative and laced with engaging pictures.

At the conclusion of the dig in September, 1999, a total of about three dozen 1'x 1' cardboard boxes of artifacts and sundry shards had been collected by the archaeologists. But who would take over at this point, analyze, research, explore and prepare the collection for viewing by the public?

Enter The Ogden Museum of Southern Art from the University of New Orleans. "The excavation," writes Ogden, "funded in part by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, uncovered substantial remains that interpret the site's history dating back to the early 1700s... The goal of Art and Archaeology: St. Augustine's Shards of History is to: a) bring the objects back into the community from which they came; b) use the objects to teach the community about the rich cultural history of the area; c) promote further research and analysis of the objects; d) use the objects as the inspiration for the creation of ceramic works as part of professionally mentored community art activities; and e) educate the community about the archaeological process through a series of scholarly lectures and informative brochure. The project will culminate with a public exhibition of both the old artifacts and the new ceramic works at The Uphill Gallery & Studio located in the Tremé."

In a two-page handout given by The Ogden Museum in October 1999, the museum staff pledged to pursue the archaeological enterprise through a series of workshops with the community in order that, through the community itself, the wide range of historic occupation of the site with its history and culture will be introduced to and explained to all of Louisiana.

On a much smaller scale, the campus of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Faubourg Tremé ranks right up there with the world-famous digs of Egypt, Rome and the environs of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. For the church members and the neighborhood, it was another signal blessing, another wonderful instance of providential serendipity in their lives.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN THE WAR OF THE PEWS SEEMED TO BE OVER

Is this Father Jerome LeDoux, the pastor of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans?"

"Yes, this is," the pastor answered, puzzling over the strange sound of the phone as if the call was coming from some distant place.

"Good! This is Bernd Schweinberger from Germany. I am a tour guide and own a travel agency in Pforzheim. I want to bring 70 visitors with me to New Orleans. Since I hear you have a good Gospel choir, we want to celebrate with you at the Easter Sunday Mass. We will be coming to New Orleans on the Thursday before Easter."

Hesitating momentarily for joy and excitement, the pastor answered enthusiastically, "That is just wonderful! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance over the phone. And, yes, we do want you to come and join us in worship! You are most welcome!"

As the pastor mulled over the upcoming dramatic visit of the Germans, his mind reeled with history, reviewing quickly the singular events that took place at St. Augustine Church over the years. The First Battle of the War of the Pews, featuring the mad scramble over purchasing pews in late summer 1842, was minor compared to the acrid social and legal struggle of the Second Battle that pitted Plessy v. Ferguson in 1892.

Most bitter of all was the Third Battle that was saddled with all the bitter gall manufactured since the dreaded U.S. Supreme Court decision in favor of Ferguson on May 18, 1896. That Third Battle's opening salvos were fired on May 17, 1954 in the landmark decision rendered by the U.S. Supreme Court in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka litigation, ruling that racial discrimina-

gustine Church. That would be the fourth battle of the War of the Pews, already recounted in Chapter 3.



CHAPTER TWENTY  
THE FUTURE OF ST. AUGUSTINE  
AS THE HUB OF TREMÉ

Dedicated on October 9, 1842 as the hub of free people of color, mostly Catholic Haitians in Faubourg Tremé, St. Augustine immediately became the perfect foil for Congo Square, the epicenter of African cultural expression, whither slaves would go soon after leaving their own pews bought for them by the free people of color.

So intimately bound up with the reality and destiny of Congo Square that the bonds between the two can never be ruptured, St. Augustine revels in its history as the hub of Faubourg Tremé, contributing its own spiritual roots and beliefs as a complement to Congo Square.

It is no surprise whatever, then, that St. Augustine Church welcomes any and all exchanges and cultural relations with all peoples of all origins, colors, tongues and cultures. The St. Augustine Faith Community wants to join with all comers to celebrate birth, life, growth, rites of passage, rebirth in God, marriage, family, education, work, recreation, joy, sorrow, health, illness, death and the homegoing of all, especially those dear to us. The more all these things can be ritualized and developed into a pulsing celebration of life, the more fulfilled will the Faith Community of St. Augustine be.

On any given day, visitors or tourists from New Orleans, from another state or another country may drop in for a visit or a tour. Quite often, passersby are attracted by the huge marine chain cross at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. After reading the commemorative plaque and viewing the cemetery, they work their way inside

the church.

As it turns out, any day is a good day for a tour. There are single-sheet handouts that explain the history of St. Augustine Church, the historic personages of St. Augustine Church, the genesis of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, the Legend of the Livery, the story of the stained glass window of St. Augustine, and other important features.

### GENESIS OF THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE

Speaking of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, how did that mysterious shrine come to be? It is quite an involved story that began with a 1992 letter from William – he prefers to be called Bill – Savoy, the lay rector of St. Luke Episcopal Church in New York. Bill's abiding interest in St. Augustine Church stems from his grandfather's baptism there many decades ago.

The letter to Pastor LeDoux suggested that he and the church congregation institute the Tomb of the Unknown Slave somewhere on the property of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans. Since Bill left all the details up to the pastor and congregation, the idea formed slowly, gradually morphing from having some actual slave bones, dust or ashes housed in small cylinders and set into the marble of the St. Joseph altar, to an altar-like shrine outside the church with or without bones, to a simple garden plot with a number of crosses, chains and shackles.

For several years, the pastor pursued the idea of obtaining some kind of slave remains, whether dust or tiny bone fragments, until he received word from the State of Louisiana that strict laws forbade any transfer of said remains.

In September of 2004, Anna Ross Twitchell, an avid student of slavery and slave plantations, suggested that an altar-like shrine would be pretentious, considering that the slaves had little or nothing. Plain crosses stuck in the ground in a given area around an explanatory plaque on the church wall would more than suffice to depict the stark fact that numerous unknown slaves are buried at random here and in many locales around the nation.

Happening upon the scene, John Peter "Jay" Matranga, an associate parishioner and factotum around the church property, listened with interest as Father LeDoux recounted his conversation

with Anna Ross Twitchell. Jay ran up to his room in the church hall and returned with a proposed diagram of a shrine to the Tomb of the Unknown Slave.

Both he and the pastor were astounded to see how the two of them had independently arrived at virtually the same design with chains, shackles and crosses. "Made with huge marine chains!" they both said, practically in unison. "Like the big marine chains on Poland Avenue!" they continued, again virtually together. From that point on, the project took wings.

Opey Joseph Thibodeaux, Jr., a friend of Jay's, began to scour the West Bank of the Mississippi River and old sugar mills around Donaldsonville and thereabouts to find old chains. He eventually came upon a huge marine chain – free for the taking – that had been used to hold a buoy in the Mississippi River, another place, incidentally, where numerous slave bodies were dumped.

Half in jest, he showed the chain to Jay who, to his surprise, said, "That's exactly what we're looking for!" The outsize chain was then sandblasted to remove excess rust. Another friend, David "Thib" Thibodeaux, who has a welding facility in Sorrento, Louisiana, took the chain, cut it into two pieces to form a cross, and then suspended the longer piece from a hook in his large, hangar-like workplace.

This enabled him to put a double weld wherever the links touch one another, thus rendering the chain rigid and strong. His right hand man, Michael "Cuttinhead" Simoneaux, did most of the welding. Each link weighs 45 pounds, giving the cross a total weight of 1500 pounds.

Now rigid, the cross was set in a fallen position with one big steel foot welded to the bottom of the cross and another big steel foot welded to an arm of the cross bent down to ground level. Awkward though it was, Thib managed to transport it to St. Augustine Church on a flatbed truck, unload it with a tractor with an arm designed to lift and transport, and place it squarely atop a reinforced concrete foundation that Jay had laid a week before.

Once in place, another yard of concrete was poured over both steel feet of the cross until it became completely rigid, strong and stable. Not an artist by any stretch of imagination, Thib Thibodeaux

donated his labor and expenses in thanks to God for a favor rendered. A welder and contractor by trade, Thib fashioned what everyone considers a true piece of art.

Therefore, who is the creator of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, since the idea came from Bill Savoy through Father LeDoux to Anna Ross Twitchell to Jay Matranga to Thib Thibodaux? With the Providence of God obviously at play every step of the way, we would have to declare divine Serendipity the Creator of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. How could it just so happen that a handful of the right people were all in the right place at the right time? It is clear that God left no room for anyone to have bragging rights. So, to God be the glory!

The metal crosses were fashioned by friends of Jay's, including the small welded chain crosses done by Charlie Brown. Dwayne Cooley made the wooden crosses and fence of Spanish cedar.

Stark, gaunt, rusty and forbidding, the hulking marine chain cross effects a simultaneous, double depiction of the fallen Christ along the Via Dolorosa as well as of the slaves who fell so often during their hellish daily ordeals. Many visitors find it to be a transfixing medium of painful historical perspective and of raw, poignant meditation. Two planned wrought iron or steel benches welded to the fence along a stone path in the flowerbed opposite the shrine will afford rest for those who desire to sit awhile and meditate.

Affixed to the church wall adjacent to the outsize cross is a plaque that states the purpose of the tomb and commemorates the plight of the slaves who suffered through numerous ordeals in life and sometimes the ultimate disgrace of anonymity in death. Here follows the wording on the plaque of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave.

**BRONZE PLAQUE OF THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE**

"ON THIS OCTOBER 30, 2004, WE, THE FAITH COMMUNITY OF ST. 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 TREMIÉ. THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE IS COMMEMORATED HERE IN THIS GARDEN PLOT OF ST. 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. THIS ST. AUGUSTINE/TREMIÉ SHRINE HONORS ALL SLAVES BURIED THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES AND THOSE SLAVES IN PARTICULAR WHO LIE BENEATH THE GROUND OF TREMIÉ IN UNMARKED, UNKNOWN GRAVES. THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE CAMPUS OF ST. 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 TREMIÉ 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."

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**DEDICATION OF THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE**

While St. Augustine Church was celebrating a rousing open-stage Gospel Musical with numerous visiting vocalists and choirs

in the church parking lot on October 30, 2004, Archbishop Alfred Hughes made an early appearance at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. Threading his way through a number of appointments and finding an open window of time, the Archbishop accepted an invitation from St. Augustine Church to bless the Tomb of the Unknown Slave.

Under clear skies and the proverbially beautiful weather of October, vocalist/organist Leon Vaughn and others who were doing their numbers on the big stage took a 40-minute break at 2 pm to repair to the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. Soon, a burgeoning crowd filled Unknown Slave Square, down the sidewalk in front of the tomb, and onto the wide sidewalk adjacent to Governor Nicholls Street.

It was a very impressive, devout crowd drawn from every walk of life and hailing from Tremé, the French Quarter and from around New Orleans, together with a goodly sprinkling of visitors from out of town. Since there was no musical instrument handy, Leon Vaughn led the introductory song and the rest of the music, his strong pipes supplying ample foundation to encourage all to sing.

Deacon Ron Guidry, who accompanied the Archbishop, distributed a special printed program for the blessing/dedication of the tomb, then emceed the communal prayer. Quoting directly from Poet Laureate of New Orleans Brenda Marie Osbey's book of poems, *All Saints*, Deacon Ron Guidry had Father LeDoux read "Invocation," which is the first poem of that book of poems about the black people of the city of New Orleans.

*The slave ancestors who lie beneath the swamps, inside the brick of which our homes, our streets, our churches are made; who wrought iron into the reves that hold together the Old City and its attachments; [God] and ancestors; musicians and street dancers; saints and their little Catholic consins...our saints continue to live among us. May they never leave us.*

*All: Hear us, O Lord!*

*May the newly sanctified find their way home to us also.*

*All Hear us, O Lord!*

*All May they feed well and be pleased with these offerings.*

*All Hear us, O Lord!*

*Lay Person: And soon*

*One day*

*May we all be counted among them.*

*Opening Prayer*

*Archbishop:*

*God of justice and mercy, you adorned the human race with a marvelous diversity, yet clothed each of its members with a common dignity that may never be diminished.*

*Put within us a respect for that dignity and a passion for the rights which flow from it, that we may always champion for others the justice we would seek for ourselves.*

*In remembering here today the ancestors of our people, the ancestors of our city, may we hear the cry of the poor, break the power of the oppressor and set the downtrodden free.*

*Turn our hearts to the way of the Gospel that peace may triumph over discord and our justice mirror your own.*

*Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.*

Facing dozens of chrysanthemums of many colors and flanked by fox ferns at The Tomb of the Unknown Slave, Archbishop Hughes launched forth into a spirited speech in which he bemoaned the horrific plight of slaves who were taken from Africa by force and herded like cattle into the United States and other countries. In a voice strained by evident emotion, he openly apologized for all the atrocities inflicted on the slaves by whites, his own ethnic group.

Above all, he begged forgiveness for the terrible sins his people committed against the slaves. His concluding hope and prayer was that the terrible sin of racism will soon disappear from our midst and from around the whole world and that it will be replaced with the respect and love which come from our commonality as daughters and sons of one God in heaven.

"He apologized!" a woman said quite audibly. "The Archbishop apologized for what his own white people did to the slaves!"

"And he asked forgiveness in the name of all white people!" another moaned.

Not a few of the audience worked their jaws continually in

anguish, astonishment and thanksgiving. Many eyes grew misty and quite a number shed tears openly. Two women who had been standing very close to the Tomb of the Unknown Slave were so smitten and overcome by the tomb itself and the poignancy of the moment that they were forced to withdraw tearfully to the rear of the group.

Standing at the ready with his trusty trumpet, Coroner Dr. Frank Minyard blew a soulful "Just a Closer Walk" at the end of the ceremony. Mayor C. Ray Nagin had a bit of trouble getting there, but he made it before the celebration came to a close. For one and all, the prayerful ceremony was a moment frozen in time, an unforgettable experience.



photo by Jim Belton

### STATUS OF THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SLAVE

By its very name, description and meaning, The Tomb of the Unknown Slave became an instant shrine, a tourist destination and place for prayer, reflection and meditation. It was an overnight sensation that kept on growing as a neighborhood fixture and blunt statement on the local and national conditions of the slaves. Immediately, proud denizens of Faubourg Tremé took possession of it and eagerly explain it to visitors from near and far.

"It's where they were buried!" Marion Colbert says. "It was

made for that."

Allen Harris adds: "We all know slaves were buried all around here. We just don't know precisely where. But we salute all of them here and around the nation."

The Tomb of the Unknown Slave likewise became a venue for events such as the Agape after the 2004 New Year's Eve 10:30pm Mass that ended at midnight sharp. With a pleasant atmosphere of mild 60-degree weather and a slight hint of mist, classy homemade round tables from the hall were deployed all over the onetime driveway that quickly became known as "Unknown Slave Square."

Placed against the wall of the rectory, three long tables held seafoods, meats, vegetables, fruit, hot eggnog and other drinks. Cooks such as Sandra Gordon, Mama D and the Guccione sisters, Laura and Ann, had left their strong culinary imprint on many of the offerings that filled the night air with an enticing aroma.

A cursory glance might leave the impression that this was a gathering of the rich and privileged. Well, privileged and rich they were, but only as God's children overjoyed in sharing the cornucopia of ordinary people willing to give as well as take and partake of the many gifts and good things in their lives.

Bubbling over with New Year's Day cheer and camaraderie, the festive crowd helped themselves to the bounty of the long tables, then sat or milled around in shirts, light pullovers or jackets, thoroughly enjoying the hallowed ambience of The Tomb of the Unknown Slave, the adjacent live oak and garden.

As a crowning touch, the side door of the church was left open, allowing piped Christmas music of angelic-voiced Johnny Adams and others to gladden and inspire the revelers, most of whom hung around munching, chatting and laughing for a couple of hours.

### A ST. JOSEPH ALTAR IN ST. AUGUSTINE CHURCH

Within five months of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, two local sisters came to St. Augustine Church. They came with a purpose, literally scouting the premises for a promising venue to do honor to St. Joseph on March 19.

"Look at this; it is just waiting for an altar," Laura Guccione said to her sister Ann as they stood viewing the St. Joseph altar. Proud owners of Little Shop of Fantasy & New Orleans Masks on

Dumaine Street in the French Quarter, Laura and her sister Ann made their way around St. Augustine Church, exploring everything, especially the altars, until they eventually bumped into the pastor, Father LeDoux.

"We would like to do a St. Joseph Altar here!" the very forward, alert and attractive Laura told him, looking and gesturing toward the altar of St. Joseph in particular. "You have a perfect place for a St. Joseph Altar. We will do all the organizing, all the work. We have some ladies who will do the cooking, but we do welcome help from your parishioners or anyone else who would like to pitch in."

"What can I say?" the pastor smiled. "This sounds like nothing but good. This is an offer I cannot refuse."

Those were the magic words Laura and her sister Ann were waiting to hear.

"Fine! We'll start right now. We'll let you know what progress we are making and when we will have to get into the church to work around the altar of St. Joseph."

"That will not present a problem," the pastor assured them. "This is great news! This is wonderful for us here at St. Augustine Church, for Tremé and the city."

Watching a St. Joseph Altar grow from scratch was a first for the pastor and most of the people who looked in on the production. Laura and Ann were joined by cousin Jackie Marchese and Jay Matranga as aides who knew a lot about St. Joseph Altars. Eventually, they got some 30 people to donate and otherwise help them get the altar together.

With the altar of St. Joseph as a perfect backdrop, the statue was adorned with palm fronds, while its shelf served as the third tier of the St. Joseph Altar. Do not be confused by the seeming redundancy. From 1926, the church altar of St. Joseph was there to begin with. Laura and Ann had the wisdom to see that old altar as the perfect base for an Italian custom, a St. Joseph Altar. Reflecting Laura's and Ann's Palermo roots, this was a providential twist linking them to a 1926 Sicilian-built altar at St. Augustine Church and a hallowed Sicilian custom.

Various food items were placed on the two lower tiers of the altar, while several smaller and two long tables took the main

burden of the many scores of comestibles. Cakes there were in abundance, some baked in creative shapes such as crosses, and one fashioned as a Sacred Heart wrapped in a crown of thorns. Other baked breads, some dyed and seeded, included shapes such as a ladder to heaven, a palm frond, a crown of thorns, a sandal and other creative symbols.

With help from her mother, daughter and sister, longtime church member Sandra Gordon cooked much of the food for the feast. Dessert items rounded out the cooked lineup with an abundance of fig and sesame seed cookies, biscotti, macaroons and St. Augustine special peanut butter brittle and pralines.

Thanks to Jay Matranga and his contacts, fresh vegetables of many kinds, including artichokes, cardoons dry beans, particularly fava beans, were to be seen at a select spot on one table and in its drawer. Oranges, lemons and grapes completed the circuit, along with red and white wine, one bottle depicting St. Joseph and the Infant Jesus. Jay Matranga noted that the fava bean is sometimes cooked for altars and eaten "out of sacred tradition," but does not go down easily.

"The cattle have a hard time eating it. If you wanted to eat it, you'd boil it and peel it, because if you ate the peelings your stomach might not tolerate it. According to custom, people keep a fava bean in their cupboards, wallets or purses for good luck."

The "lucky" fava bean is said to have saved Sicilians during a famine. The only thing that grew during the famine, the fava bean was used as fodder for cattle and kept them alive right through the famine. Thus, we understand that the St. Joseph Altar, especially this aspect of the fava bean, is of Sicilian origin and is a way of giving thanks to their patron, St. Joseph, on or around his feast day, March 19.

On a solitary table on the side were canisters of salt, brought in and placed there by parishioners to be blessed by the pastor with the rest of the altar. Parishioner Marie Dase observed that her mother always kept blessed salt in the cupboard, but never cooked with it. Though unmarked, the kids knew better than to touch it. "One time I dared to touch the salt, and I paid for it! I caught it!" she said.

Rounding out the St. Joseph Altar exhibit were finally the non-

edibles such as Italian and American flags, twisted stalks of wheat fashioned into a bouquet, photographs of Madonna and child, St. Philomena, St. Katharine Drexel and Henriette Delille. There was a statue of St. Martin de Porres side by side with a maid doll that Laura Guccione brought from Alia, Sicily, where she spent her 6th birthday. With strong Sicilian roots in New Orleans, most of her family hails from Palermo.

That year of 2005, March 19 fell on Saturday, the best possible day of the week for people to visit at leisure. The St. Joseph Altar was a smash hit with everyone, not least of all with some Sisters of the Holy Family and some of their friends. A steady stream of visitors poured in to admire the resplendent St. Joseph Altar, some of them like author Poppy Z. Brite and her husband, Christopher DeBarr, who were making their nine St. Joseph Altar stops to complete a novena.

Happy visitors thrilled to the piped rendering of the Negro spirituals by Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong amid the tolling of the three wonderful bells from the 1884 World Cotton Exposition that took place in Audubon Park. All the while, visitors wrote petitions in the special book on a center table, made small donations, took goodies from the altar, then, courtesy of Sandra Gordon and family, sat comfortably and contentedly outside to share in the feast of pasta, salads and gumbo.

This was probably the first St. Joseph Altar at St. Augustine Church, since there are no records of any other. In any case, this one was a time to remember and, everyone was hoping, the beginning of a precious tradition. Laura and Ann, who very mistakenly thought the 2005 St. Joseph Altar would be just a small start, were amazed at its size, magnificence and great success and were all fired up for the next year's St. Joseph Altar.

However, unbeknown to everyone, looming beyond the horizon was an evil wind called Katrina and an archdiocesan death struggle of St. Augustine Church to survive as an autonomous parish. Unfortunately, for an indefinite time to come, another St. Joseph Altar was to be a dream deferred.

### THE ST. AUGUSTINE OFFICE OF TOURISM

As it turns out, a St. Joseph Altar, Tomb of the Unknown Slave

— any day is a good day for a tour of St. Augustine Church and its campus. It can and does happen just any day, any time. The pastor and several others are wont to say that about the church and grounds of St. Augustine. One such conversation took place some time in 2004.

"That's right!" agreed Drex Brumfield. "Any day is a good day for a tour! In fact, we are at the point where St. Augustine Church needs an office of tourism to oversee and direct tours of the church and of our campus here. I have been thinking about this for some time and have some ideas about how to do it.

"For starters, we need an office space, and that space looks like the storage room next to the church sacristy. The storage room has no significant use at this time except for housing our boxes of vigil lights and cassocks for altar servers. While continuing to store these things, the room is quite large enough to serve our touring needs."

"I think you have something there," the pastor concurred in deep thought. "I see no reason why the church storage room would not be the perfect place for the St. Augustine Tourist Center. It is certainly in the right location: within the church itself and next to the sacristy where the church lights and the PA system are controlled. If nothing else, it is the ideal place to start up the office. Should the situation need to be tweaked, that is not hard to do. So why not? Full speed ahead!"

With a broad smile of triumph, Drex slapped his hands together and exulted, "So let's get underway right now! Watch my dust!"

The St. Augustine Tourist Center took off from there. Already well-connected to the New Orleans Tourist Center, hotel concierges and other official contacts, Drex began to plug St. Augustine Church into the network of the tourist circuit. This was an easy sell, since St. Augustine Church had recently hosted a meeting of the tour guides of New Orleans plus many major events involving tour guides and their clients.

One of the main roadblocks to tourists at St. Augustine Church had always been the lack of a constant presence in the church so that it was not feasible or prudent to leave the church unlocked throughout the day. In Drex Brumfield, such a presence was now possible, if not all day long, at least through much of the day. There

was also the additional alternative that Drex could be called at a moment's notice or that a person or group could make an appointment with him beforehand. Yes, it was becoming more and more true that anytime was a good time for a tour of St. Augustine Church and its campus.

Sadly, besieged by serious illness, Drex cheated death a half dozen times over the last 15 years. At length, on the night of December 20, 2010, as the moon hung about 8 degrees west of zenith, Drex returned to God. According to NASA, the last total lunar eclipse that happened on the winter solstice was Dec. 21, 1638. The next one will be Dec. 21, 2094.

Among the myriad stories told by the coppery-red moon occluded by our earth's shadow, one was the epic tale of our own Drex Brumfield who ended an up-and-down life with a two-decade flourish of total dedication to his beloved St. Augustine Church, the musicians of Faubourg Tremé, and the fabled culture of the city of New Orleans.

As the moon was slipping into total eclipse, Drex was slipping into the Everlasting Arms of our Father in heaven. It was befitting that the celebration and allegory of his life should morph into cosmic allegory at his death.

And where else could his funeral Mass be but at his beloved St. Augustine Church in Faubourg Tremé? A sizable crosscut of New Orleans folks were there, attesting to their love for Drex and his contributions to St. Augustine Church, Faubourg Tremé and New Orleans. At 46, still in the early fall of his life, after a Second Line to St. Louis Cemetery #1, Drex was interred in the Musicians' Tomb donated by Paul (& wife Onelia) Barbarin, the family of Sylvia Barker.

"And he was buried on the Twelfth Day of Christmas!" exulted Laurie Toups, Director of North Rampart Main Street with which Drex was deeply involved, and onetime Director of the French Quarter Festival that sponsored the annual Satchmo Weekend Celebration on the first weekend of August, so precious to Drex who instituted the corresponding Satchmo Sunday Gospel/Jazz Mass at St. Augustine Church. Yes, January 6, King's Day, the Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, a total lunar eclipse. That was Drex all right.



## EPILOGUE: FINALLY, LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Nearly three weeks after the occupation of the rectory began, parishioners and Archbishop Alfred Hughes reached an agreement to keep the parish open for 18 months, at the end of which the parish would be re-evaluated relative to the eleven performance benchmarks.

Bishop Roger Morin assured Father Moody and the parishioners that St. Augustine actually was not facing a hard, imminent deadline or specific date. There was no sense of urgency, but rather an indication of progress being made. He added that St. Augustine is a valuable community presence where it is with all the historic factors going for it as well. Every effort was being made to help that parish family to continue.

At length it became evident that Bishop Roger Morin turned out to be one of St. Augustine Church's staunchest defenders. Church members said a heartfelt, "Thank God for Bishop Morin!" In the late 1980s, then Monsignor Roger Morin had shown his mettle when he was the personal guardian of Father LeDoux's cousin, Bishop Harold R. Perry, S.V.D., in his final years of illness. No one could have done a better job.

### ST. AUGUSTINE CHURCH CAME IN JUST UNDER THE WIRE

Just how much in doubt and danger St. Augustine Church was is epitomized by later events such as the one mentioned below, courtesy of Bruce Nolan, journalist of New Orleans' newspaper *The Times-Picayune*. It would seem that only its historicity as the oldest predominantly African-American Catholic parish in the United States ultimately saved St. Augustine Catholic Church from closure.

On Tuesday, January 6, 2009, Bruce Nolan of the Times-Pic-