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EXPLORING PARISH CHURCHES

St. Joseph: a parish of firsts

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PENSACOLA | It was a different time and the world was a different place when, less than a mile from the “mother church” of St. Michael the Archangel in Pensacola, the congregation of St. Joseph Catholic Church formed in 1892 to serve the Creole, African-American and poor populations of the city.

One of the influential factors in the founding of the new parish was the St. Joseph’s Colored Society. Father Roache and Mrs. Mercedes Sunday Ruby of St. Michael Parish organized the group in the late 1880s to nourish the spiritual and temporal welfare of its members, according to the St. Joseph Church archives. Ruby traveled to Molino to meet Bishop Jeremiah O’Sullivan. She asked the bishop to give the blacks of Pensacola their own church and the bishop agreed.

Because the church’s location had been designated in a part of the city where many Italians, Irish and



Courtesy Photo

In this article, the sixth in a series on historic parishes in the Diocese of Pensacola - Tallahassee, the *Florida Catholic* reviews the history of St. Joseph Church, 140 West Government St., Pensacola.

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Germans lived, there were questions from the people about whether St. Joseph Parish would exclude all other populations except Creole and African-American. The Pensacola Daily News announced Dec. 3, 1891, that “the new church was not to be built to exclude anyone from it or St. Michael and that it was being built for the convenience of those living near the site of the new church.”

Bishop O’Sullivan’s diary revealed something different. He wrote, “Although the church is for the colored race, white persons will be allowed to rent pews. But the colored people must always have the first right to pews, etc.”

St. Joseph was, in fact, the first black parish in the Diocese of Mobile, Ala.

To acquire land for the church and school, Ruby convinced her brother, John Sunday, to sell his plot of land on Government and Barcelona (now Spring) streets, where he had originally planned to build a house.

The new frame church was dedicated Dec. 4, 1892. Less than one year later, in June of 1893, plans for a sturdier brick building were already being made. Four months later, parishioners laid the cornerstone.

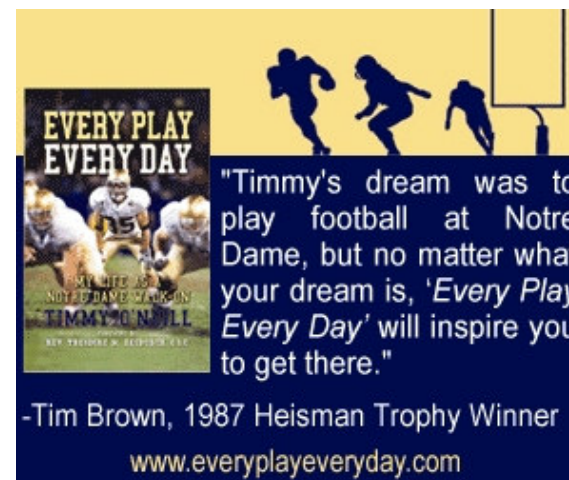
“It is important,” wrote the bishop on Sept. 4, 1893, “that the foundation be made solid – hard brick and Portland cement – in the lower courses. Give plenty room for the passage of air between the ground and the floor, and put in a chimney or two in the building.”

Dedicated April 1, 1894, this second St. Joseph’s Church, according to The Pensacola Daily News, featured a “cool and inviting appearance ... with the softened light created by stained-glass windows.”

In addition to the church, the parish also included St. Joseph’s Colored School, which was housed in the old frame church on South Baylen Street, and St. Joseph Creole School on Barcelona Street. In 1899, the St. Joseph Cemetery was established.

Under Father Charles Hartkoff of Mobile, the parish continued to expand in 1907 with the institution of St. Joseph Boarding School and Orphanage. When he died, however, Father John J. Raleigh, the third parish pastor, closed the colored and Creole schools, as well as the St. Joseph Boarding School and Orphanage in

St. Michael the Archangel
Blessed Sacrament
St. Patrick Parish
St. John The Evangelist
St. Dominic Church



1938. The Sisters of Mercy, who had staffed the schools for 61 years, left.

One year later in 1939, four Sisters of Charity from Convent Station, N.J., traveled to Pensacola to reopen the schools. In 1942, the old Creole School reopened as a high school and in 1953, a new building was built for the same purpose. Sister Maureen Joseph Kirwan, another Sisters of Charity community member, still serves the parish.

Father Patrick H. Foley is the current pastor of St. Joseph Parish’s diverse congregation. In 2004, the church suffered heavy damage from Hurricane Ivan. The historic stained-glass windows and heavy oak doors were spared, however, and the members now worship in a renovated sanctuary.

Aside from hosting events such as Bible studies, the parish plays a significant role in the community. It is home to the St. Joseph Clinic, a weekly free health center facilitated by volunteer doctors and nurses.

The church also hosts Friday lunch for the homeless as well as “Caring and Sharing,” which distributes food and clothing to the homeless and needy.

Parish: 850-436-6461; St. Joseph Clinic: 850-434-8162. Carlisle Semmes helped to research this article. Work cited: “The History of St. Joseph Church and Parish” by Martin de Porres Lewis. (Self-published.)

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