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Jane Quinn

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NUNS IN YBOR CITY: THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH AND THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

by Jane Quinn

In 1891, poverty, poor housing, and language barriers stood as obstacles that had to be overcome in Tampa's Ybor City by parochial school teachers who arrived to educate children of foreign background in their traditional Roman Catholic religion. Before their work was over, these teachers – Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine, Florida – branched out to serve blacks as well as Latins in private schools in Ybor City. Beginning in 1885, Cuban cigar makers working in Key West moved into the Tampa Bay area. By October, 1888, in addition to the estimated three hundred Roman Catholics in Tampa there were probably three thousand Catholics in Ybor City, settlers who followed the early cigar makers to Florida's west coast. Private Catholic school classes conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Augustine began at the Catholic building on the corner of Seventeenth Street and Eleventh Avenue on September 23, 1891.¹

This particular group of nuns originally came to Florida from France in 1866 to serve the needs of the liberated blacks following the Civil War. This mission was modified both by the politics of the period and by the perceived needs of white Catholic children wishing to attend Catholic schools. In addition to teaching children of both races, the Sisters of St. Joseph carried out charitable work. They provided medicines for the poor, visited the infirm, cared for orphans, and helped to advance the salvation of souls whenever they saw the opportunity. Women who volunteered to make simple vows of personal poverty, chastity, and obedience to their congregation, the nuns wore street-length black dresses with long sleeves, white collars, and black veils. From 1866, the headquarters in St. Augustine trained recruits from Florida, from states to the north, from Canada and the British Isles.

Three Sisters opened the Ybor City mission at Seventeenth Street and Eleventh Avenue, calling their school St. Joseph's Academy. Their mother superior, Mother Marie Lazare L'hostal (sometimes written Lazarus Lhostal), came to Ybor City with the three pioneers to assist them in beginning their teaching mission. Mother Lazare first placed a thirty-seven-year old French nun in charge of St. Joseph's Academy at Ybor City. She was Sister Marie Onésime Védrine, recruited from the Sisters of St. Joseph's school in Jacksonville to teach and to run the household in Ybor City.

The other Ybor City pioneers were Sister Mary Catharine Byrne, age thirty-two, and Sister Mary Theophila Sullivan, in her twenties. In 1889, Catharine had been the first superior of a similar undertaking in Orlando, where she led a band of four Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Augustine. Her experience was counted upon to help give Ybor City's academy a strong foundation. Theophila was a novice from Massachusetts, brought from St. Augustine to Ybor City. She had the makings of a strict disciplinarian and was one of the finest grammar teachers ever to staff the Sisters' English classes in Florida.

An original handbill publicizing St. Joseph's Academy.

Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph, St. Augustine, FL.

The St. Joseph Sisters were not the first to undertake Catholic education in the Tampa area. Ten years earlier, four Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, another nuns' congregation, had begun the Academy of the Holy Names in Tampa.² In 1881, the Academy of the Holy Names began in Tampa with thirty-two English-speaking white students in a school held in a rented stable on Franklin and Zack Streets. The Holy Names Sisters offered domestic arts and cultural subjects, and by the end of their first year teaching in the Academy of the Holy Names, the student population had climbed to seventy-eight. A move in 1889 to a two-story building enabled the Holy Names Sisters to serve more Tampa children, many of whom were not Catholics. The Academy of the Holy Names moved to its present Bayshore Boulevard location in 1928, permitting the Sisters to accept boarding students, some of whom were from Cuba and Central America. Boarding students was discontinued at the Academy of the Holy Names in 1972. The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary also began St. Peter Claver Catholic School for black children in Tampa.

Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church in Ybor City was built on property purchased for the Diocese of St. Augustine by the Jesuits of Tampa. Land adjacent to the church was sold for \$2,500 to the Sisters of St. Joseph when they came in order for them to have land for a convent. The year before the Sisters journeyed from St. Augustine, the Jesuits were offered purchase of a lot by the Ybor City Land Improvement Company; hence, Father Quinlan and the land company made the deal. On February 18, 1890, the deeds were signed and the sum of \$1,000 paid as the first installment on the purchase price of this land, one corner of which was Seventeenth Street and Eleventh Avenue. The land cost the Catholic church \$5,000, and in six years, on March 25, 1896, the debt was paid. The Church cost \$1,665.79 and was completed on February 20, 1891; the first services were held in it on April 19, 1891. (It was razed on January 25, 1937). For forty-six years, this frame structure was Ybor City's Catholic church. For four years it was used as an all-purpose building, with the nuns living in rooms at the back and as St. Joseph's Academy until the school was built.

The Sisters of St. Joseph traveled by train, leaving St. Augustine for Ybor City on September 22, 1891, and they settled in the rooms attached to the Catholic church at the corner of Seventeenth Street and Eleventh Avenue. Fortunately they wrote down all of the details of their lives, keeping a diary of daily events as they saw them in their convent at Ybor City. The writer of the first chronicle was not identified, but Sister Mary Catharine probably began this bound book, now in the archives of the Sisters at St. Augustine. The first entry reveals that they were sent to Ybor City by Bishop John Moore of St. Augustine at the request of Father John O'Shanahan, S.J., provincial of the Jesuits, "to labor for the conversion of the Cuban cigar makers." The diary continues:

On Wednesday at two o'clock in the afternoon the sisters arrived at their destination. They were met at the station by Rev. Philip de Carriere (S.J.) who led the way to the church where Father (John) Quinlan, superior of the Jesuits in Tampa was waiting to

receive them with a luncheon. After they had refreshed themselves they were shown their future home, which consisted of three small rooms built back of the church.³

During the week before school opened on September 29, 1891, the Sisters of St. Joseph worked to furnish the rooms provided for them as convent. It was probably on September 24, the day after the foundation of their mission in Ybor City, that Mother Lazare took Sister Theophila with her into the town of Tampa to buy beds and bedding. They got the beds but not the bedding, and the Sisters had to sleep for some days without mattresses or pillows. They could not shop in Ybor City because merchants in the Latin Quarter spoke Spanish only, a language the nuns did not understand.

The nuns made a dormitory from a room thirteen by thirteen feet in the space allotted to them in the back of the Catholic church at Seventeenth Street and Eleventh Avenue. The next room was thirteen by nine and a half feet, and it became their community room for a refectory (dining room) and trunk room (storage space). Right from the beginning, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Ybor City were in debt:

All the beds, bedding, dishes, chairs, tables, stove, cooking utensils, everything in fact except the groceries for the first week had to be bought on credit. When Mother Lazare left the house (to return to St. Augustine) the Sisters had five dollars and a good number of debts with which to start their mission. The number of children in attendance at the end of the year (in 1892) was about one hundred and six.⁴

Having gotten their bearings the first week they were in Tampa, and settled down in Ybor City, the Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Augustine prepared to hold classes in the church. Sister Catharine taught the boys and Sister Theophila the girls. They planned to start school at nine a.m, with the help of Father De Carriere as the interpreter. On the first day of school, September 29, 1891, for the first hour, he gave the nuns a lesson in Spanish until at ten, three bashful girls came to school. More trickled in, for a charter class of fifteen. By November, 1891, there were ninety-five children in school, and three classes were offered, one for older boys, one for older girls, and one for younger boys and girls in the same class. Another novice, Sister Germain, was sent from St. Augustine, to take the youngest as her class.

In 1891, Mr. and Mrs. Vicente Martinez Ybor, the cigar manufacturer, sent their sons, Salvador and Ralph, to St. Joseph's Academy. Other children of both employer and employee families in the cigar factories were listed in the 1891 student body as follows: Aurora Gutierrez, Mary Gutierrez, Anita Gutierrez, Maruka Duarte, Jennie Duarte, May Nadine, Elena Cabal, Joe Cortino, Charley Cortino, Jennie Cortino, Annie Cortino, Rosa Cortino, Theresa Cortino, Cisto Fernandez, Manolo Fernandez, Raymond Fernandez, Ethelrina Fernandez, Brigida Fernandez, Evelina Fernandez.⁵ They were the "wildest, strangest little things" the Sisters had ever seen, described in the chronicle this way:

They were intelligent but utterly ignorant of their religious duties, knowing little beyond the existence of God, and yet with a strange love for our Blessed Lady, St. Joseph and St. Anthony. They make long novenas in their honor, love to have their pictures in their houses, decorate them with flowers and burn candles before them, yet

they cannot be induced to go to Mass or frequent the sacraments. This belief in God and devotion to Our Lady and the saints is confined to the women and children. The men, with very few exceptions, have no faith.

The attendance at Mass has been bad; at first Mass there were only six or eight, at last Mass, twelve or fourteen. The first Sunday we were here there were a good many, probably due to the fact that they wanted to see the new Sisters.

Teaching, under existing circumstances, was difficult. The children were bright but not accustomed to restraint. They would speak aloud in school, leave their places without permission and, as it was necessary to have someone interpret all that was said by teachers or pupils, there was unending confusion.⁶

The Sisters taught academic subjects such as reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, oral composition, oral catechism, and biblical pictures in a primary course. The church was used as a school room for two classes. Sister Germain taught the smaller children in a grouping near the altar of the church. Sister Catharine, teaching the larger boys in a group down by the organ, gave a course of study that included catechism, spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, Bible stories, and elements of grammar and of United States history. On days that these classes were held in the church, the Blessed Sacrament was removed to the vestry room. The priests provided Mass on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays, and classes did not begin until after the weekday Masses in the church. Sister Theophila took her class of the larger girls to the Sisters' community room, giving them the same instruction that Sister Catharine gave the boys covering religion, reading, writing, spelling, English, arithmetic, geography, civics, hygiene, nature study, general science, and history.

It is no wonder, with the confusion in the classrooms, the language barriers, and the poverty that the novice, Sister Germain, tired of the hard life and applied to leave. Fathers De Carriere and Quinlan tried to dissuade her to no avail, and she went home to her family in February, 1892. Her replacement worked with the smaller children from March until December, 1892, when she, too, quit convent life.

In May, 1892, the nuns held a fair at the Cuban Lyceum to enable them to build a school for the boys on their lot adjacent to the church. They found it very inconvenient to teach boys and girls together, and besides, teaching in church was at best a temporary arrangement. The Sisters had borrowed \$2,000 from the Jesuits at Spring Hill College near Mobile, Alabama, using no doubt their acquaintance with the Tampa Jesuits to negotiate the loan, in order to pay for their lot in Ybor City. The first fair raised \$123. In July, the nuns held another fair, this time at the Spanish Casino, which realized \$140. The Sisters hired Mr. Scott (the chronicle did not mention his first name), then in Tampa building the courthouse, to erect a frame building on the southeast corner of the lot, at the corner of Eleventh Avenue and Seventeenth Street.

At first, the Sisters thought they would build a one-story building, but thinking it would be too warm, they added another story to the building which was already under construction. It was finished on October 1, 1892, blessed by one of the Jesuit priests, and classes for boys at St. Joseph's Academy were opened in the lower story. By spring, 1893, St. Joseph's Academy was

instructing 176 students. The Sisters had obtained from St. Augustine a nun to take charge of the cooking. Previously they had been obliged to do their own cooking in their hours away from performing their regular teaching duties. They had found this trying and their health and strength suffered.

Sister Theophila did not return to Ybor City for the 1892-93 school year because she had to remain in St. Augustine for her year of study in the novitiate. Her class was taken by Mother Onésime. Sister Clara Agnes, the cook, assisted in teaching small children, and the number of teachers in the convent totaled four when, in October, 1892, Sister Leonide was sent to teach music. The Sisters decided to end the school year with a benefit program, which they called an entertainment. It was held both to make much needed money and to advertise the school to the people of Ybor City. Georgia-born Sister Mary Agatha Brennan was borrowed from St. Joseph's Academy in Orlando to help train the one hundred children who were to present the program. The children did well, and their parents were justifiably pleased; but, only enough money was raised to cover expenses.

Money was earned not only from the small tuition of twenty-five cents a week per child, but from the extra cost for music lessons. Early advertisements of St. Joseph's Academy in Ybor City were handbills printed in English and Spanish. A first-class, English education was promised on this handbill for boys and girls of all denominations, at moderate terms. School fees were reduced for children from the same family. The children received calisthenics to promote strength and graceful movements, the handbill added, and it declared that in addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, the Sisters taught music, singing, drawing, calligraphy, phonography, typewriting, plain and fancy sewing, and embroidery.

The Sisters of St. Joseph Convent in Fernandina Beach sent the Sisters of St. Joseph's Academy in Ybor City a calf in April, 1893. In May, Father William J. Tyrrell, S.J., gave the Ybor City nuns a cow to take the place of an old one they had sold because of its age. Mother Onésime, the Ybor City superior, used some of her personal money to pay off the debts of St. Joseph's Convent and Academy. In 1894, a French priest who served in Florida, Father Stephen Langlade, brought her \$386, part of the money left her by her parents. He carried it to her from her French superiors in Le Puy, France. Mother Onésime used it to pay Mr. Scott \$200 owed for building the school. She disbursed \$65 to build a fence around the convent property. That year, two hundred and nineteen elementary and primary school students attended St. Joseph's Academy. They closed the school year with a benefit program at the Cuban Lyceum on Seventh Avenue, making enough to cover expenses.

The Sisters, meanwhile, were still living in the crowded, makeshift, convent at the back of the church, which they considered unhealthy.⁸ The three rooms at the back of the Ybor City Catholic church had to be used as their temporary convent, Mother Lazare of St. Augustine told Mother Onésime, until the St. Joseph Sisters of Ybor City could put aside \$1,000 to build a proper convent. They started the convent building fund with \$100, putting the case in the hands of their patron, St. Joseph, and by February 1895, they had saved the required amount to build a convent on their lot. The Sisters in St. Augustine contributed fifty dollars; in Mandarin, twenty dollars; in Elkton, twenty dollars; in Palatka, ten dollars. They obtained a loan of \$160 on February 23, 1895, from Mandarin's nuns, fifty dollars from the Fernandina convent, fifty dollars from the St.

Augustine motherhouse, and \$586 from Mother Onésime. They borrowed \$200 also from Joseph A. McDonald, a friend of the St. Augustine Sisters who was associated in Miami with Henry M. Flagler. Pienig and Cooly of Tampa were given the contract to build the convent.

The frame building was erected in 1895 on the Sisters' lot adjacent to the Catholic church in Ybor City. The two-story building cost \$1,675 to construct and provided floor space, forty-eight by thirty-three feet in size, with a first story eleven feet high and the second, nine and a half feet high. An eight-foot wide piazza, as the Sisters called their porch, was on the north and south. The kitchen was a separate room, twelve by fifteen feet, on the first floor. The Catholic church property in Ybor City now boasted three buildings, Our Lady of Mercy Church, the two-story school building, and the two-story convent. Father De Carriere came to bless the new convent on May 5, 1895, going into every room, accompanied by the five nuns who carried lighted candles. When he reached the front door, he turned and said solemnly to them: "The devil has been driven out; and woe to that person who first brings the devil into this new house!"⁹

The Sisters installed a statue of their patron, St. Joseph, as a token of protection, and they moved in on May 10. They waited until necessary permission had come from the bishop to have the Blessed Sacrament permanently in their chapel tabernacle. They had a table for an altar, set up on two steps. Bishop Moore gave them a tabernacle made in Rome, Italy, and they placed candles and flowers on each side. The bishop himself canonically erected the Stations of the Cross in the chapel. The motherhouse in St. Augustine lent a chalice and ciborium, sacred liturgical vessels, for use at Mass. Some friends in Orlando sent white vestments for the priests to use in celebrating Mass. Mother Lazare gave purple vestments and large altar candlesticks. The St. Joseph Sisters in Mandarin gave the Stations, vestments of other liturgical colors, and the Mass cards upon which the liturgy and eucharistic prayers were printed in Latin. Among the benefactors who helped furnish the Ybor City convent were Miss Kate Jackson, Mrs. John Toomey, a Mrs. Schwabb and a Mrs. Arguelles (the chronicle did not give the first names of the latter two women).

Difficulties continued to present themselves. In 1896, the Sisters were threatened by Mr. Scott with suit if they did not finish paying him. They paid him \$475, and at the same time, paid back \$150 to Mr. McDonald on his account. To do this they had to borrow more funds from convents in Elkton and Mandarin. They borrowed \$200 on March 1, 1896, from the nuns at Mandarin. In the early part of 1896, due to a fever epidemic (the chronicle did not explain whether it was influenza or yellow fever), the number of children attending classes at St. Joseph's Academy gradually decreased. School that year was closed without end of the year exercises. War was going on between Spain and Cuba, making it impossible for the nuns to arrange for presentation of a program in either the Spanish Casino or the Cuban Lyceum. They wrote in their chronicle:

Party feeling ran high between Spaniards and Cubans. As we had many from both nations in our school and there was no American hall to which we could go, we were obliged to omit the exhibition entirely.¹⁰

Sister Mary Euphrasia Masters, a St. Augustine native of Minorcan descent, was a promising music teacher.¹¹ Arriving in May, 1896, to help with classes and teach music, she remained at Ybor City while others went away for the summer. In five years, the staff in Ybor City had



The Sisters of St. Joseph moved into the convent on May 10, 1895, With the six “choir” Sisters of St. Joseph is a seventh “lay” Sister, lower in rank and wearing the traditional lay habit of a smaller collar and bow and a different kind of veil.

Photograph courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

grown from three to seven Sisters. By this time, they were teaching the Latin children mostly in English. Their handbill had advertised a first-class English education and attracted both Spanish and Cuban parents who wanted their children growing up in English-speaking America. More than sixty children enrolled for fall classes in 1896. In one of the rooms behind the church, a class in English was opened for Italians.

Those who came to the St. Joseph Academy in Ybor City increasingly were unable to pay tuition as easily as before “owing to the poverty of the Cubans produced by the drain on their resources to support the Cuban rebellion.”¹² No closing exercise was given in 1897 either, because of the continuing conflict between Spaniards and Cubans. During the summer, two nuns remained in Ybor City to look after their buildings, chickens, and cow. The class for Italians proved a failure (the chronicle did not explain why, but perhaps the children did not like being placed in a separate class from their peers of Cuban and Spanish backgrounds). With no class for Italian children, the teacher was released to resume a class she had taught before.

While Ybor City seethed with Cuban revolutionary activity, the economic effect was felt by the convent school. Sixty-eight boys and 102 girls registered for the year 1897-98. Forty-two of the children were taught gratis, and many of the rest were unable to pay all of their tuition. The Sisters would hardly have been able to make ends meet if it had not been that the United States

began to prepare for war with Spain, and Tampa was selected for the mobilization of troops. While the soldiers encamped in Tampa, the Sisters of St. Joseph visited them. They gave the soldiers medals and scapulars and tried to persuade them to make their peace with God by receiving the sacraments (if they were Catholics) before going to Cuba. The men “in gratitude for the interest taken in them gave little donations that enabled the Sisters to meet current expenses which the proceeds of the school would not have done.”¹³

Tampa’s military population swelled to 33,000 men by May 22.¹⁴ Although an armada moved toward Cuba in mid-June, thousands of men were left behind in Tampa. The convent in Ybor City benefitted from the wartime prosperity, and the Sisters were able to furnish the chapel with a carpet and an altar. It was in June, 1898, that the school boys were organized into St. Joseph’s Society, the object of which was to keep them together and faithful to their religion. Father Tyrrell wanted them to sing in Our Lady of Mercy Church, and the Society boys formed a choir for Ybor City’s Catholic Masses on Sundays.

In 1898, Mother Onésime was sent to Orlando as superior, and she was replaced at Ybor City by Mother Marie Louise Hughes. Marie Louise was born in County Armagh, Ireland. She had entered the convent in Jacksonville, Florida, at the age of eighteen, on December 3, 1874. After she served out her term as Ybor City superior succeeding Mother Onésime, she was elected mother superior of all the Sisters of St. Joseph in Florida. The St. Joseph Sisters were putting their best leaders and teachers in Ybor City to make a success of the St. Joseph’s Academy there.

A novice who could sing, Sister Mary Seraphim Curran, came in the fall of 1898 from north Florida to Ybor City. She had entered the convent that year from Pennsylvania. Sister Mary Agatha Brennan, recuperating from an illness, came to Ybor City in January, 1899. She organized a choir consisting of some youths who had left school, considering it a good way to bring them to Mass on Sundays. She also organized the Children of Mary Sodality in May, 1899, at the behest of Father Tyrrell. Sodality is another word for organization, and the Children of Mary were organized in local groups of young people to live in Christ through the sacraments of the Catholic Church, under spiritual direction pledged to accept Mary as Christ’s gift to be the mother, intercessor, and model of loving service to her divine Son.¹⁵ The Jesuits founded the first Sodality in Rome in 1563; in Florida, Jesuits spearheaded the adoption of the Children of Mary Sodality as a Catholic youth association.

To pay some outstanding bills, the Sisters obtained the free use of *Centro Español* to give a benefit school program in December, 1899. This project raised eighty dollars. After the show, Mary Agatha became quite ill due to overwork in preparing the children for the program. The nuns wrote, of her recovery:

For weeks her life was despaired of and when she did recover the doctors admitted that medical science had nothing to do with it. We all think it was the many prayers offered for her that kept her on earth.¹⁶

The Sisters faced other challenges that year. Mother Lazare had come to Ybor City on October 12, 1899, with a novice, Sister Joannes, who was to take Sister Seraphim’s class in order that Seraphim could return to St. Augustine for her year in the novitiate training. Three days later, on

October 15, in St. Augustine, Mother Lazare was removed from the Sisters' highest office of mother superior in Florida and returned to the ranks of the Sisters. By November, 1899, the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Augustine, at the request of Bishop Moore, cut their connection with the motherhouse in France and placed themselves under the general direction of the bishop and his successor-bishops in St. Augustine.

When this happened, Mother Lazare was sent from St. Augustine to teach a class in Ybor City. The other nuns wrote:

Mother Lazare took Sister Augustine Curry's place as teacher of the little girls. She bears her heavy cross with patience that is truly remarkable but we are all a little embarrassed with her. Having looked up to her so long as our Superior it is very difficult to treat her as a simple Sister. There is an unavoidable constraint in our intercourse.¹⁷

Mother Lazare had been superior in St. Augustine from 1878 to 1886, then provincial superior from 1886 to 1899. Her unusual removal from office was occasioned by the wish of Bishop Moore to Americanize the administration of the nuns in Florida, and her chronicle suggests that her Gallican peers, the pioneers of the congregation, were not pleased with turning over the administration of the convents in Florida to the bishop.

Unless one was familiar with convent life in that generation, the constraint the other Sisters felt with their former superior might be difficult to understand. Lazare had set the tone for the French Sisters' rules and life style as mother superior for twenty-one years, when she left office on October 15. Sisters lived according to their original French constitutions. Their rule told them how to live and pray and work, what to wear, and to obey the mother superior in practically everything. Even their demeanor towards friends and relatives was regulated. The nuns were asked to love their superior as their mother, and to salute and obey those she placed in charge with respect and reverence. Haste, anxiety, confusion, and noise were foreign to these women. The Sisters needed the superior's permission in sending correspondence. Meals were eaten in silence, in the convent only, while a Sister read aloud from some pious book or from the rules. Innocent recreation followed the day's last meal, when the nuns would not speak of worldly news that might distract them, or engage in loud laughter or unbecoming behavior. Any conversation beyond a half hour's time required permission. The rule governed their behavior even when they were out of the convent, and because it was not written down at the time, the nuns learned how to conduct themselves inside and outside the convents from the Sisters charged with training novices and from observing other nuns' example.

In Ybor City, Mother Lazare continued to be called Mother; that was etiquette. She may have shared with her colleagues the dissatisfaction she and other French Sisters felt with the new arrangement in Florida. Bishop Moore, not the French superior, became the authority figure to whom newly elected mother superiors would be accountable. If the Sisters understood anything well, it was authority, for their rule had sanctified it. Lazare probably believed she had lost face with the other nuns. The Ybor City chronicle notes:

Some of the French Sisters were not satisfied with the change of Superiors and decided to leave the Florida mission. Others still looked on Mother Lazare as Superior, and this was a cause of disorder and division. The Bishop told her she had better go. She left this house April 27, 1900 and set sail for France from New York May 10, 1900.¹⁸

Mother Onésime was one of the nuns who returned to Le Puy. She was the founding superior in Ybor City, who, while her community was still in debt from the new wooden school building, planned the first convent in the Cigar City. She raised money at home and in France to pay off the debts in Ybor City, and she even used personal funds that were left to her by her parents. Onésime, who was with the seventh group of French Sisters to come to Florida in 1880, shared many of the trials of the early French nuns in the state. She had nursed yellow fever victims in Jacksonville and had come down with it herself. Onésime and Sister Octavie Fabre, who had come from France in 1894, spent a few weeks in Fernandina before leaving for France. With the departure of many of the French nuns, the Sisters of St. Joseph began a new chapter in their history in Florida.

In Ybor City, St. Joseph's Academy and convent continued to provide education and spiritual example to Latins and Italians. Mercy Church was elevated to parish status, separate from Tampa's St. Louis Church, on March 2, 1900. Father Th. DeBurne, formerly of Miami, was the first Jesuit pastor of this pioneer Ybor City Catholic parish. He and Father F. Barry, S.J., were chosen for Ybor City because both spoke Spanish as well as English. Ybor City counted about 15,000 persons when Solemn High Mass was offered on March 4, 1900 at Our Lady of Mercy Church. Since about one-fourth of that population was Italian, the Jesuits began to study the Italian language. The next year, sermons were in three tongues, the Italian at 7 a.m., English at 9 a.m. and Spanish at 11 a.m. The Sisters recorded the new parish in their annals in this manner:

Ybor has at last been made a parish....Saint Joseph seems to manage everything in this place. For a long time the [Jesuit] Fathers spoke of coming, preparations were made, everything was ready but they did not come till the first Sunday in March – Saint Joseph's month. Anything of note that takes place here for the furtherance of religion begins or takes place in his month or on some feast of his. The building of the convent was begun on the first Friday of March 1895; it was blessed on the feast of the patronage of Saint Joseph, May 5. The first Mass in the Ybor church was also said on [Saint Joseph's] feast of patronage.¹⁹

Other personnel changes followed. On October 4, 1901, Sister Anna Clotilde Kohler, a St. Johns County native, was sent to Ybor City, and in a few years her life would be dedicated to teaching blacks. Sister Mary Clare Brennan, aged forty-five, was sent to open St. Benedict's School for the Colored on Columbus Drive and Twentieth Street in Ybor City in February, 1903. Her class in Ybor City's white St. Joseph's Academy was taken by Sister Mary Philomena Salmon, a novice from Cleveland. All the Sisters of St. Joseph in Ybor City visited the new St. Benedict's School on March 19 1903, their patronal feast day.²⁰ St. Benedict's, built by the Jesuits, was a two-story brick building that had four classrooms and an auditorium. The auditorium also served black Catholics as a place of worship on Sundays and holy days. (The chronicle of the Sisters did not indicate how many students were first enrolled at St. Benedict's

School.) Thus, twelve years after the nuns came to Ybor City to teach Spanish, Cuban and Italian children, they began to teach blacks in a separate school. Sister Anna Clotilde was on the faculty of St. Benedict's for nearly the entire time, more than forty years, that the Sisters of St. Joseph taught blacks in Ybor City. Sister Clotilde became principal of St. Benedict's in August, 1906. A fire swept through Ybor City in March, 1907, destroying everything between the convent next to St. Joseph's Academy and St. Benedict's School on Columbus Drive and Twentieth Street. The convent escaped the flames except for its fence, but the furnishings were moved out, and some articles were lost in the excitement.

In May, 1910, Miss Matilda Aviles, a Mrs. MacWilliams and Mrs. John Aviles planned and held the first benefit lawn party at St. Joseph's Academy, Ybor City. From July, 1910, until January, 1911, there was a labor strike, making money scarcer than ever for the Sisters. Every day, poor people went to the convent to beg for food and clothing. "The Sisters had hardly money enough to pay their expenses, but they prayed to St. Joseph and he always helped them," the chronicle recorded.²¹ In September, 1910, the Academy opened for one hundred and nine pupils. About a third of these were able to pay the tuition of .twenty-five cents a week. Many were unable to purchase books they needed, owing to the strike. The blacks' school opened on October 3, enrolling fifty pupils. By the end of the month its attendance increased to eighty-nine.

The Sisters' chronicle recorded another fire affecting their property at St. Joseph's Academy, on May 12, 1911. It occurred at two p.m. just before classes were dismissed. Some of the St. Joseph Sisters sought housing that night in Tampa with the Sisters of the Holy Names and the rest remained in the damaged Ybor convent, mopping up water when it rained. Insurance covered the repairs that took about ten days. At the same time, the nuns had a contractor put four dormer windows in the attic to enlarge living space. A Captain Dixon, president of the Southern Lumber Supply company which did the work, donated two gold crosses for the roof of the convent.

In October, 1911, the Sisters of St. Joseph opened a Sunday School at the church for black and white children who did not attend their schools. There were eleven teachers, eight nuns and three secular women. In 1912, Mother Katherine Drexel of Philadelphia promised to pay twenty-five dollars a month for a nun to teach blacks at St. Benedict's School. An Irish girl, Sister Mary Rita Hehir, was sent to help instruct the blacks.²² One of the older black children would teach as an aide until 10:30 a.m. when Sister Rita, who had an earlier class to cover at the Academy, would arrive to teach for the rest of the school day at St. Benedict's. The teacher's aide received music lessons in return for her work.

The cigar factories, mainstay of Ybor's economy, had been on strike since the previous Christmas, and very few pupils at either school were paying tuition. However, the Sisters of St. Joseph had established close ties with civic and business leaders. On June 20, 1912, classes in St. Joseph's Academy closed with a program at the Cuban Casino on the corner of Tenth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. Salvador Ybor allowed the use of the casino free of charge. After the 1912 retreat in St. Augustine, ten Sisters of St. Joseph were sent to Ybor City to staff their two schools. During the fall and winter Sunday School classes, six nuns took most of the classes. In addition, Mrs. Alicia Neve taught the girls who spoke only Spanish or Italian, and Sisters Clotilde and Francis taught the blacks their catechism.



Sister M. Rosalie Andreu, music teacher at St. Joseph's Academy, kept this announcement and picture of Adelaide Aviles and her doll "saying prayers" in the memorabilia from the Academy. The child's mother was a student of Sister Rosalie.

Photograph courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St., Joseph.

After sending a draft for \$500 to Spring Hill College on November 25, 1912, the Sisters owed only \$500 to the Alabama Jesuits. On May 23, 1913, the debt was paid in full, and after twenty-two years, the Sisters at last owned the property the convent was built on.

The Sisters constructed a pagoda on the convent grounds in the spring of 1913, using it for May procession, an ice cream festival, and school gatherings. They purchased a Remington typewriter in installments and paid weekly installments to lay sidewalks for \$375 on three sides of their lot. School closed on June 17, 1914, with an afternoon program at the *Circulo Cubano*, Tenth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. The blacks closed their school with a musical in St. Benedict's hall on June 25 in the evening.

The people of Spanish heritage remembered Sister Anastasie Marsein as the Angel of Mercy of Ybor City. She spent almost half a century teaching children there. In the afternoons, she would visit the sick and take food to the poor. She was the instructor who brought many to the sacraments before they died. In the end, she was paralysed herself. She lived through the time when the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s had repercussions in Ybor City. There were two local factions, those who supported the Loyalists and those who sided with Francisco Franco in Spain. Because Catholics generally supported Franco's forces, Ybor City Catholic residents who favored the Loyalists picketed the nuns, threatened the families of Francophiles, and withdrew their children from the Catholic school. As a result, attendance at St. Joseph's slumped.

Another much admired teacher was Sister Anna Clotilde Kohler. A stabilizing influence in the black community she served, Sister Anna Clotilde arranged for a stage to be built to the satisfaction of parents and children. In 1916, she began two societies, St. Joseph's for boys and St. Cecilia's for girls. Every fourth Sunday, members of each would march to Our Lady of Mercy Church for integrated services of Mass, and the children took special pews beside the banners they carried. Sister Anna Clotilde completed sixty-five years of religious life, dying in Miami on May 21, 1962. For forty-three years, until the Sisters of St. Joseph withdrew from teaching schools in Ybor City, Sister Clotilde taught at St. Benedict's. With little financial help, she trained three generations of boys and girls in elementary education and music. Like the other Sisters of St. Joseph, she worked under the direction of men's orders, Jesuits, Salesians,



Pictured are Esther Salas Franco, who had been a pupil at the Academy sometime in the period 1900-1910. The photograph was taken in 1915. Her small son, Joe, age five at the time, is costumed as George Washington.

Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Josephites and Redemptorists, and got along with them all. After St. Benedict's ceased to be a mission of the St. Joseph nuns, Sister Anna Clotilde was transferred to Fernandina where she taught blacks at St. Peter Claver School for another dozen years. Even in her old age, she retained active interest in the blacks of Ybor City and Fernandina and carried on an extensive correspondence with her former students who did not forget her work for them.

Meanwhile, in 1913, the state legislature made it unlawful for white teachers to teach blacks in a black school. Sisters were doing so in several areas of the state besides Ybor City, and continued to do so with the encouragement of the bishops of St. Augustine. The law was tested in 1916, with the arrest of Sisters in St. Augustine for violating the statute. Sister Rita's own blood sister, Sister Thomasine Hehir of St. Augustine, brought the suit. While her case was in court in St. Johns County, April 24 through May 20, 1916, Ybor City nuns suspended their classes for blacks. The judge of the Fourth Judicial Court of Florida overturned the law in question as class legislation depriving teachers of privileges which were not denied to any other class of citizens, thus, violating a liberty guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. When the case was settled in St. Augustine, the Ybor City nuns resumed their classes for blacks until the close of the regular school year; but, they did not make up the time lost during the trial.

St. Joseph's Academy was relocated in 1921 from the former school building the Sisters had built to a three-story one constructed by Father Tyrrell. It fronted on Eleventh Avenue and dominated Tenth Avenue and Eighteenth Street. It had 398 windows, measured 135 by sixty feet, and rose sixty-five feet in the air. Father Tyrrell's magnetism brought donations in 1921 for this new school from Catholics, Protestants, Jews and those of no creed who were simply his friends. In 1934, this school became the parish school and was no longer run by the Sisters of St. Joseph as St. Joseph's Academy. It became known as Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, the name change given to it when the Redemptorist Fathers changed the name of the parish church at 1701 Eleventh Avenue to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The Redemptorists took over the former parish of Our Lady of Mercy, razed the old frame church, and built a handsome brick one on the spot where the old one stood. Sisters of St. Joseph continued to teach at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parochial School until 1943, when they were replaced there by other teaching nuns.

Although the Sisters of St. Joseph are no longer in Ybor City, they still serve on Florida's west coast, at Cor Jesu Home for the aged in Tampa and at St. Joseph's School in St. Petersburg.

In "Living Waters," a commemorative pamphlet marking a century of Christian education and charitable service in Florida, the Sisters of St. Joseph recalled that they shared their lives with the multilingual population of Ybor City for long years, through strikes, unemployment, political disputes, and war. They found inspiration among those they served, and in turn, they inspired deeper understanding of the Catholic religion in the lives of those they taught. They supported themselves on the income from their private academies, the music lessons so well loved by the Latin children and their families, and by gifts and loans. At the same time, they built the Ybor City school and taught the classes of blacks.

Despite language barriers, they transformed buildings into schools and convents, and shared their slender resources with the poor and sick. Their work in Ybor City is now a happy memory,

and their good deeds are being repeated elsewhere in the Tampa Bay area where they now teach and carry on other apostolates.



In a 1920 photograph, Sister M. Rosalie Andreu, S.S.J., is pictured in the pagoda built in 1913 at St. Joseph's Academy. Seated on either side of Sister are music aides from the adult community. The rest are the music pupils of the St. Cecelia Music Club meeting at St. Joseph's Convent.

Photograph courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

¹ Handwritten annals or chronicles of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Ybor City, now found in the Archives of the Sisters (AS), St. Augustine, Florida; hereafter, *AS*.

² Bishop Augustin Verot, first bishop of St. Augustine, Florida, secured five Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in 1868 from Montreal, Canada, for a private school in Key West. That school became known as the Convent of Mary Immaculate.

³ *AS*, September 23, 1891.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹ The Minorcans from the island of Minorca (now Spanish) in the Mediterranean Sea came to Florida as British subjects, bringing their Catholic Spanish culture with them in 1768, bound by contract to cultivate a British plantation established at New Smyrna. In 1777, the Minorcans abandoned that plantation and were welcomed as citizens of St. Augustine by the British governor of East Florida. They sank their roots and their descendants still flourish there in the twentieth century. Some went to several parts of Florida also, as, for example, in 1818, Antonio Maximo Hernandez, Minorcan native of St. Augustine, owned a farm on the east shore of Tampa Bay. Other early Minorcan families who migrated from St. Augustine to Tampa were Oliver Andreu, John P. Leonardi, Bartolo Leonardi, Antonio Papy (who was of Greek descent), Andrew Pacetti and Andrew P. Canova.

¹² *A.S.*, p. 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, (Tampa: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1957), p. 200.

¹⁵ Cf., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, V. 9, p. 894, under the citation, "Miraculous Medal." This medal, struck in Paris in 1832 and given papal approval in 1842, became the badge of the Children of Mary Sodality. A nun who was a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, St. Catherine Labouré, on November 27, 1830, designed the medal from a vision of Mary she claimed to have had at the time in Paris. The vision promised great favors to those who wore the medal around the neck and because remarkable things followed for those who wore it, it became popularly known as the "Miraculous Medal." It featured a drawing of Mary on one side and symbols with the letter M on the reverse side.

¹⁶ *AS*, p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63. St. Joseph Academy's Ybor City student enrollment between 1900 and 1910 included these regulars:

Eddie Fernandez, Mary Fernandez, Tom McGaghey, John McGaghey, Mary McGaghey, Esther Salas, S. Colia Salas, Elvira Aris, Ofelia Pedras, Amalia Pedras, Carmenlina Bustamente, Maria Fernandez, Maria Hernandez, Juanita Cassas, Petronella Cassas, Eulogio Maderas, Mary Rodriguez, Joe Shuman, Arthur Schleman, John Frese, Gregory Frese, Helen Frese, Marie Christ, Mary Eisle, Ed Eisle, Eugene Fernandez, Henry Fernandez, Albert Fernandez, Oscar Fernandez, Mercedes Fernandez, Marie Fernandez, Mary Shepherd, Sofia Rodriguez, Justo Rodriguez, Manuel Alvarez and Beatrice Adams.

Another list of the same era shows as students of the Sisters of St. Joseph: Magdalene Christ, Oddine LaCourse, Mable James, Lottie LaCourse, Assuncion Salguiero, Myrtle Osborne, Providencia Florita, Viola Klassen, Earnestina Noriga, Paselina Razza, Angelina Risceli, Anuncion Martinez, Juaquina Rubio, Provincia Puazia, Carela Montio, Dulchina Gairlan, Gracie Cortino, Isabella Sanchez, Rafaelita Pando, Nattala Corwin, Mary Noriega and Maria Suarez.

²² Katherine Drexel of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, became a Catholic supporter of education of blacks and American Indians. She was the granddaughter of a wealthy banker, Francis Martin Drexel. She was two when her own mother died. Katherine and her sister, Elizabeth, educated at home by governesses, were society belles. Their father, Francis Anthony Drexel, married as his second wife, Emma Bouvier, who was devoted to her stepdaughters. When the parents died, Katherine inherited a fortune. In a papal audience at the Vatican, she told Pope Leo XIII she wanted to give the money to the work with the Indians and Negroes of the United States. Upon his recommendation, she founded the Blessed Sacrament Sisters for Indians and Colored People in 1891. Soon, Mother Katherine began to answer requests for help from Catholic dioceses and other Sisters teaching blacks on the proverbial shoestring, and from Catholic Indian missions in the Southwest. She put more than \$12 million of her inheritance into the work. The annals of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Ybor City faithfully record checks received from Mother Katherine Drexel for their work with black education in the Tampa area.