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# Augustus Tolton

*The Church Is  
the True Liberator*

Joyce Duriga



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America has been called the most enlightened nation. We will see if it deserves the honor. If America has never seen a Negro priest, it will see one now.

—Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, prefect of the  
Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith,  
April 23, 1886



# Contents

Foreword	ix
Preface	xiii
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Flight from Slavery	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Finding His Vocation	8
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
The Catholic Church and Slavery	15
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
The Healys	21
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Tolton Goes to Rome	29
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Back to Quincy	39
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
Trouble Begins	45
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	
His Friend, Daniel Rudd	53

viii *Augustus Tolton*

*Chapter Nine*

On to Chicago 60

*Chapter Ten*

Fellow Pioneer, Mother Katharine Drexel 69

*Chapter Eleven*

St. Monica's Becomes a Reality 74

*Chapter Twelve*

Final Days of Father Tolton and St. Monica's 83

*Appendix 1*

Key Dates in Father Tolton's Life  
and in American History 89

*Appendix 2*

Saint Augustus Tolton? 95

Notes 99

Index 105



# Foreword

The Catholic Church has been making saints and adding their names to the church's worship calendar for centuries. The church never outgrows the modeling that holy women and men offer to the church militant trying to make a way out of no way in a world of many contradictions. One possibility here is looking back at the African American experience in the United States to discover some individuals tried in the crucible of suffering who might speak as a witness to our times.

Considering the American periods of slavery, legalized segregation, and the corresponding civil rights struggle, no one, black or white, emerges from those human sagas as a saint officially recognized as such by the Catholic Church. There are undoubtedly numbers of such inspiring individuals, black and white, whose stories have yet to be brought to light. Perhaps, our brother, Father Augustus Tolton (1854–97) could be the first or one of the first.

Augustus Tolton says something to us about our handling disappointment, that is, protracted disappointment from minor irritations to outright rejections perpetrated by those we love and by outside forces. The racial climate of the nineteenth century did not offer Tolton much by way of alternatives, a way out of the racial dilemma of that time. He and

others took their chances navigating the choppy waters of racial acceptance in and outside the church. It was risky.

He was told the word “no” more often than not and called some names. He could have taken to drink or some maladaptive form of behavior or some obtuse attitude that would have ended with him killed or in jail. But instead, Tolton remained steady in his ministry with a resolve to create a pastoral situation that would offer hope to a people, poor black people.

A Roman collar around the neck of a black man was a news sensation in the black community and an anomaly in the white community. No one had ever seen such a sight in North America. Tolton had a quiet approach and practiced in his priesthood a novel ministry to black and white and was, unfortunately, resented for it. His own bishop replied to a query from Rome by accusing Tolton of creating a situation that was unacceptable in Quincy, Illinois, instead of seeing the evangelical side to this new situation and the advantages it afforded the church by having a priest of African descent. Tolton was a former slave, one who could, to the church’s credit, penetrate the hesitations of that era and minister to a people ravaged by the brutality of black slavery but who could benefit from the ministrations, salvation, benefactions, and education the Catholic Church offered.

Tolton had every reason to become embittered. But bitterness was alien to Tolton’s soul. Instead, gratitude moved him through to victory. God pulled him through a sinful situation. He was grateful to the church and its priests and nuns who tutored him and advocated to have him recognized by the church for his goodness. His gratitude moved him to declare the Catholic Church the principle instrument for improvement of the plight of the black race following the Civil War and that tumultuous period of putting the country back together in what was known as Reconstruction.

Tolton's holiness stems from his patient suffering, his humble but courageous spirit, and his pastoral heart to all who came to him, both white and black. Tolton's holiness elicits our affection and our empathy; a goodness that attracted people of whatever background to his sermons and ministrations and counsel. His life story inserts a dialectic into a begrudging situation of intransigence to social and moral change, namely, to see dignity inherent in black skin.

I, in turn, am grateful for Joyce Duriga's contribution here to the Tolton record, adding to the small number of qualified reporting on Tolton's life insofar as research has made this available thus far.

We are called to holiness in our own situations. We each have a mission of the cross in life to make a difference, to win this world for God, and to get to heaven. Tolton leaves us a shining example of what Christian action is all about, what patient suffering is all about in the face of life's incongruities. He was a bright light in a dark time. His life and ministry still speak to the problems of our day where communities, neighborhoods, and churches continue to evidence separations among race and class and the disturbances that arise periodically from these social contradictions. Tolton is a model for priests and laity who live and work in these situations.

The uncovering of history has opened up the troubling chapters of a former time in America and in the church. Father Tolton's sanctity comes to light in retrospect through the process of our reflection and our determination to improve our social relations with one another.

Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry  
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago  
Vice-Postulator for the Cause of Augustus Tolton



# Preface

The life of Father Augustus Tolton could be a Hollywood movie.

Born into slavery on the eve of the Civil War, he escaped to freedom with his mother and siblings when he was just nine years old. Though they were free, the Toltons still lived a humble life working long, hard hours in a cigar factory while taking other jobs to sustain the family. They lived under the threat of the times when blacks were often captured, beaten, and often hanged. At almost every turn, Augustus encountered racism and discrimination but also love and acceptance from some priests and religious men and women in Quincy, Illinois.

Every seminary in the United States turned down his application for priesthood but he didn't despair and was eventually ordained a priest in Rome. But God threw him a curve on the eve of his ordination—he wasn't going to Africa to be a missionary. Rather, he was going back to the United States as the country's first recognized black priest.

He was a sacrificial lamb in some ways, as are all pioneers in history. But he didn't let the racism he faced from fellow Catholics—especially racist priests—change his ardent belief that the Catholic Church was the true liberator for black Americans. He didn't give up or turn away from the church.

Instead he worked harder and gave his all for his flock and it eventually deteriorated his health. He died in Chicago at the age of forty-three.

I first encountered Father Tolton's story through Franciscan Sister Caroline Hemesath's book *From Slave to Priest*. Even though Sister Hemesath used creative license in creating dialogue between Tolton and others that doesn't actually exist, I am grateful for her popular history that introduced me and thousands of others to this powerful story.

My love for Father Tolton was cemented when Cardinal Francis George, OMI, introduced his cause for canonization in the Archdiocese of Chicago in 2011. As editor of the archdiocese's newspaper, I've had a front-row seat to all things Father Tolton ever since. One of the highlights so far was witnessing the exhumation of his body. Seeing his remains made him more real (see appendix 2).

As the story of Father Tolton's life spreads I hope more research comes to light that can fill in some of the gaps in his story, like that of his name. There is evidence of several versions of his first name being used at different times during his life. His baptismal record from St. Peter Church in Brush Creek, Missouri, has no record of a first name. Rather, the entry reads "a slave child," with Stephen Elliot as his owner.

He was likely named after his maternal grandfather, Augustus Chisley. His confirmation record uses the name "August." In Quincy he was called "Augustine" or "Gus." In Rome, "Augustus." For the book's purposes we use "Augustus," which is the name used in his cause for canonization.

A slave's heritage was not considered important enough to write down, so names were incomplete or changed later in life. Slaves were considered property and cataloged as livestock so it is not surprising that records are incomplete. The dates in Tolton's early life have been verified according to documents uncovered prior to the publication of this

book. The last name “Tolton” first appears on his confirmation record. At this time, no documentation exists as to where that last name originated. Slaves were not allowed to have last names or use their African names because last names gave a person an identity. Once free, they picked up last names as they moved within society legally or illegally. Some people changed their last names any number of times to avoid recapture, allay discovery, or retain some sense of dignity.

In 1859, five years after Augustus was born, his mother, Martha Jane, and a man named Peter Paul were given permission to marry by their respective owners. It is not believed that Peter was Tolton’s biological father but would have been the only father he knew. Father Tolton never mentions Peter Paul as his father in any research discovered to date.

Evidence suggests that Martha Jane is Augustus’s mother, but the father could be someone else by the name of Tolton or the name Tolton may have simply been randomly chosen when they were free in Quincy and needed a last name for school and other purposes.

Martha Tolton is worth a story by herself. Her courage in fleeing with her children while being hunted and facing capture never ceases to inspire me and everyone I share the story with. To date there are no recorded conversations with her, but we know she was a woman of faith who stood by her son’s side throughout his ministry. “Mother Tolton,” they called her. She was a respected figure in the community. I have no doubt that many people sought her advice in the face of life’s challenges. I know I would have.

I want to offer a special, heartfelt thanks to Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, the vice-postulator of Father Tolton’s cause for canonization. Throughout the process of writing this book he has been tremendously generous, sharing the research of the cause and answering my many questions.

Heartfelt thanks also go out to Robert Lockwood for his wisdom and advice from beginning to end and to Denise Duriga, Olivia Clarke, Laura Jacksack, Dawn and John Vidmar, and Thomas Howard for their support and help reviewing the manuscript.

It's my hope that through this short book many will fall in love with and be inspired by the story of Father Tolton. He is a man for all Catholics. He was a faithful servant who saw past human imperfections in the Body of Christ to the true teachings of the church that have always proclaimed every life—no matter the race, class, nationality, or creed—is sacred and created in God's image and likeness.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Flight from Slavery

In the summer of 1863 the United States was in its third year of the Civil War. Just a few months earlier, in January, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that all slaves in Confederate states were free people. While the proclamation did not mean owners freed their slaves overnight, it changed the tone of the war to a battle for freedom.

Those changes were felt on the small Elliot plantation in Brush Creek, Missouri. The owner Stephen Elliot died in July, leaving the plantation in debt. In a bid to pay down the debt, Elliot's wife Ann had their property appraised, and that included their slaves. Among the slaves was a family of five—husband and wife Martha and Peter, and children Charles, Anne, and Augustus. Martha was appraised at fifty-nine dollars, Charles at one hundred dollars, Anne at seventy-five dollars, and Augustus at twenty-five dollars.<sup>1</sup> If Ann Elliot decided to sell the slaves it was more than likely that the family would be broken up and sold to different owners. Perhaps it was this knowledge that gave Martha the final courage to flee to neighboring Illinois in a bid for

## 2 *Augustus Tolton*

her family's freedom. Knowing that, if captured, she and her children would likely be beaten or killed, Martha—likely under the cover of darkness—rounded up her three children, Charles, Anne, and Augustus, and set out on foot crossing twenty miles of prairie and woods filled with not just vermin, but people hunting runaway slaves.

There is some speculation that other slaves fled with the family but that is unclear. It is also unclear what they had by way of food or protection but they were certainly fleeing for their lives. These were the days when the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was still enforced. This law forced non-slaves to participate in the capture of escaped slaves. If they refused, they faced a fine of \$1,000 (\$32,000 in 2018) and six months in jail. The act also refused slaves a jury trial. Documents from the Elliot estate indicate that the slaves went missing between July and September in 1863. Records from the Elliot estate that year show that Ann Elliot paid ten dollars, about one hundred dollars in modern currency, to bounty hunters to search for the missing slaves. She also took a credit in the final estate settlement for the missing slaves. Later, Augustus recalled the experience in interviews and speeches, sharing that a bounty of \$200—about \$6,000 in modern currency—was put out for them to be captured dead or alive.

The small family set out for the free state of Illinois and had relatively safe passage until they arrived at the shore of Mississippi River in Hannibal, Missouri, the boyhood home of Mark Twain. On the river's edge, Confederate soldiers accosted the family and tried to arrest them. Luckily, some Union soldiers were nearby and claimed that the spot where the family stood was federal ground and therefore they could cross the river freely. The Union soldiers also helped Martha find a boat to row across the Mississippi River. Once across the river, which at that point would have been almost

a mile across, the four refugees were directed to the town of Quincy, Illinois, twenty-one miles away. Quincy was a stop on the Underground Railroad and they would be safe there. Though feeling safe from Confederate troops and those hunting escaped slaves, Martha did not dally on the river's shore. She took her three children and, while probably weary, hungry, and aching with blistered feet, trudged to freedom. Augustus always described his mother as a faith-filled woman, who taught them the Ten Commandments even though she couldn't read. Martha must have been praying to Jesus, Mary, and all the saints for her family's safety. Her courage was remarkable. She did not know what the future had in store, and did not have a husband with her to lean on. What she did have was her faith, her children, and a hope for a better life. That life would include her son Augustus becoming the first native-born American of African descent being ordained for the Catholic Church in the United States.

Martha Jane Chisley, Augustus's mother, was born to Augustus Chisley and Matilda Hurd on the John Manning Plantation in Meade County, Kentucky, just southwest of Louisville. She worked as a domestic cleaning the home and cooking for the family. The Mannings were Catholic and had their slaves baptized and educated in the faith. Martha worshipped with the family—albeit in a segregated section—in a church in Flint Island, Kentucky. In 1849, when the Manning's daughter Ann married Stephen Elliot, Martha was given away as part of the dowry. This meant moving away from her parents to the Elliot's plantation in Brush Creek, Missouri, located about five hundred miles west of Meade County. The Elliots were not wealthy plantation owners and their daughter Savilla gave the slave children classes in the Catholic faith.

#### 4 *Augustus Tolton*

Augustus was born April 1, 1854. He was baptized on May 29, 1854, by Father John O’Sullivan, pastor of St. Peter Parish, a log-cabin church in Brush Creek. The entry doesn’t have his name, just “a slave child” with Stephen Elliot as his owner. In 1859—five years after Augustus was born—their respective owners gave Martha Jane and a man named Peter Paul permission to marry. Peter Paul was a fellow slave who worked on the neighboring Hagar plantation in the distillery. Given the years between Augustus’s birth and the marriage, it is unlikely that Peter was Augustus’s biological father but would have been the only father he knew. Later in life, Augustus never referred to Peter as his father.

For his part, Peter Paul decided to enlist in the Union Army. Many male escaped slaves entered into service of the Union and, by the end of the Civil War, it is estimated that around two hundred thousand freed blacks had fought and served in the Union Army and Navy.<sup>2</sup> Most didn’t see battle but filled domestic or labor positions. Military records show that Peter Paul enlisted in Hannibal, Missouri, on September 20, 1863, and used the last name Lefevre, that of the priest who baptized him. He entered the Third regiment, Arkansas Infantry, and was five feet six inches tall, aged twenty-five. He died just a few months later on January 12, 1864, at a military hospital in Helena, Arkansas. He never made it to Quincy with his family.

Quincy has a long abolitionist history thanks to bordering Missouri and the fact that Illinois officially abolished slavery in 1824. Home to the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo tribes, the first Europeans came to the area in 1818. The city of Quincy was formerly established in 1825, and in 1841 a wave of German immigrants settled there and helped expand the town.

It wasn’t unheard of for those hunting slaves to cross the border to Quincy where skirmishes between them and abo-

litionists ensued. One incident garnered national attention and went all the way to the US Supreme Court. In 1842, Dr. Richard Eells,<sup>3</sup> a physician in Quincy whose home was a stop on the Underground Railroad, was caught helping a runaway slave named Charley flee to the North. Charley swam across the Mississippi River where he encountered Barryman Barnett, a free black man and an agent in the Underground Railroad. Barnett took Charley to Eells who then set out with him in his buggy on the way to a safer hiding place. Along the way they encountered a posse hunting for Charley. Eells told Charley to run and then set off back home to divert their pursuers. The posse soon caught Charley and took him back to Missouri.

Despite slavery being illegal in the state, harboring or helping runaway slaves remained illegal under Illinois and federal law. Eells was arrested and Judge Stephen A. Douglas—who later became famous for debating Abraham Lincoln—heard the case in April 1843, and fined Eells \$400 (\$12,000 in 2018). The physician appealed his case to the Illinois Supreme Court, which handed it over to the federal courts, saying that only they could rule on cases related to fugitive slaves. In 1853, the US Supreme Court ruled against Eells. The case devastated Eells financially and emotionally and he died before the Supreme Court decision. Illinois Governor Pat Quinn finally pardoned Eells in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its history of harboring fugitive slaves, most did not make their home in Quincy. When the Toltons arrived, Quincy had a population of about fifteen thousand people, about three hundred of whom were fellow free blacks. This group took Martha and her three children under its wing and found her work cleaning homes and offices. The family moved into Quincy's "Negro Quarter." That same year, Augustus's brother Charles died. He was ten. Augustus, nine, found work in the Harris Tobacco Factory on Delaware

## 6 *Augustus Tolton*

near East Street earning fifty cents a week. Then he moved up to a stemmer, a position considered the lowest rung on the ladder where the workers stripped the stems from the large, dried, sticky tobacco leaves. He received six dollars a week as a stemmer for a roller. In the hierarchy of cigar making, rollers rolled the leaves into cigars and earned about five dollars a day. They hired several stemmers to prepare the leaves for them. Tobacco farming and making cigars was labor-intensive work. Nicotine in the tobacco leaves was easily absorbed into the skin of those working with it, causing nausea, dizziness, and nicotine addiction. Tobacco dust filled the air and was especially thick in the summer months, making it hard for workers to breathe. Augustus worked at the factory for nine years.

Eventually the family moved into a small shanty nearer to the Catholic churches of St. Lawrence (later St. Peter) and St. Boniface. In 1868, at the age of fourteen, Augustus took classes at the log-cabin Lincoln School near 10th and Oak streets for three months, when the tobacco company was closed for the winter. His time in the segregated Lincoln School was not a good one for the tall, dark-complexioned youth. Because he could not yet read or write, teachers placed him with the younger children, for which he likely received taunts from the older students. A year later he moved on to St. Boniface School at the behest of the pastor Father Herman Schaefermeyer. That lasted only one month. White parents and parishioners of St. Boniface demanded that Augustus be removed from the school. They wrote letters in protest and threatened to leave the church and withdraw their financial support. The white students also taunted Augustus in class.

Soon after, the Toltons began attending St. Peter Church where they met the pastor Father Peter McGirr. A native of

County Tyrone in Ireland, Father McGirr<sup>5</sup> was a strong man with red hair, fair skin, and freckles. His family was one of the nearly one million who fled Ireland during the Potato Famine of 1845–1849. They made their way to the Quincy area and became farmers. He was ordained for the Alton Diocese, which included Quincy, in 1861. By all accounts, Father McGirr embraced the Catholic Church's view that all people, regardless of class or race, were children of God.

Augustus spent the last four years of his education at St. Peter School, attending during the winter months when he wasn't working at the tobacco factory. He also held a paid position of church custodian. While he was treated well by the priests and the sisters, Augustus endured taunts and slurs by the white students. He graduated from St. Peter's in 1872 at the age of eighteen. Earlier, in 1870, Augustus received his First Communion and confirmation at St. Peter's on June 12, 1870, from Alton's Bishop Joseph Baltes. He was among forty-eight boys and forty-eight girls to be confirmed that day. This is the first public record of the last name Tolton. It was while Augustus was a student at St. Peter's that Father McGirr noticed the signs that the young man may have a vocation to the priesthood. Augustus attended Mass regularly, served in the church, and was generally found to be good, humble, and devoted to the faith.