

ST. BENEDICT THE MOOR SCHOOL

Located on this site was the former St. Benedict the Moor School, a Catholic school for black children that was one of the most important buildings associated with black history in Tampa. The property was purchased for \$600 on March 15, 1900. The school, a two-story brick building, was completed several years after the acquisition of the property. It housed four classrooms and an auditorium that also served as a chapel. St.



St. Benedict the Moor Students, 1903.

Photograph courtesy of Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, St. Augustine, Florida.

Benedict was built under the vision of Bishop Augustin Verot, who in 1858 was given jurisdiction of Catholic parishes in Georgia and Florida. In 1866, Bishop Verot used his authority to bring the Sisters of St. Joseph from Le Puy-en Valey, France to St. Augustine to establish schools dedicated to the spiritual enrichment and education of ex-slaves. Over the next several decades, they established schools throughout Florida. By 1903, they opened the St. Benedict School in Tampa. The School matriculated 30 children during the 1904-1905 school year. St. Benedict's students were mostly Afro-Cuban children of workers in Ybor City and West Tampa cigar factories. In an era governed by racial segregation, the noble goal of educating black children was hindered by a 1913 law passed by the Florida legislature entitled "An Act Prohibiting White Persons from Teaching Negroes in Negro Schools." Defiantly, the Sisters of St. Joseph throughout the state challenged this law and continued to teach black students. In April of 1916, three sisters were arrested in St. Augustine for teaching African-American children. Following the arrest, St. Benedict's in Tampa temporarily closed. On May 20, 1916, a judge ruled that the 1913 law only applied to public schools, and the sisters had



St. Benedict the Moor Students, October 8, 1931.

Photograph courtesy of the Josephite Archives, Baltimore, Maryland.

not violated the law by educating black children in a private school. Although understaffed, under equipped, and crowded, the Sisters of St. Joseph met their calling in the face of adversity and continued teaching until 1944, when the administration of the St. Benedict School in Tampa was transferred to the Allegany Franciscans who led the school for another eight years. St. Benedict's closed in 1952 when it was severely damaged by fire. The school building fell into ruins over time and was demolished in 2001. This plaque stands in recognition of the vital role the St. Benedict the Moor School and the Sisters of St. Joseph played in the education and enhancement of Tampa's black community for almost 50 years.