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THE ST. AUGUSTINE RECORD

NEIGHBORS

Little history on St. Benedict's school

David Nolan, St. Augustine's historian, spends days every week at the St. Augustine Historical Society Library. We receive the fruits of his research from time to time. Whenever we need special dates or bits of history, a phone call to David brings the answer.

A topic which David and your writers like to talk about is the old St. Benedict's school, now in severe disrepair. It was paid for back in 1898 by Mother Katharine Drexel. In 1898, St. Benedict the Moor School was located on Martin Luther King Avenue (then called Central Avenue). The original name of the school was St. Cecilia School and it was located close to the Cathedral-Basilica.

The name was changed when the new school was built. In 1916 Sisters of St. Joseph, who were teaching at St. Benedict's School, were arrested for violating the state law forbidding white teachers to teach Negro children. But Circuit Court Judge Gibbs ordered the release of the nuns and decided the law was not violated since it didn't apply to private schools.

David sent us recent "New York Times" articles concerning Mother Katharine Drexel. She dedicated her life and vast fortune to opening schools for American blacks and Indians and to serving them. The NYT articles were written after Pope John Paul II announced "Sainthood

for this Champion of Minorities." Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, the archbishop of Philadelphia, said the canonization would take place Oct. 1 at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Mother Katharine Drexel was responsible for the building of St.



DOWNTOWN

Natalie & Tommy
Lucas

824-4180

Benedict the Moor School in Lincolnville. According to our recollection, St. Benedict the Moor was responsible for ransoming captive slaves. A biography of him is not available now, but we'll give you more information on him at a later date.

The school in Lincolnville closed about 1945. Mother Katharine Drexel was heiress to one of the country's largest banking fortunes of her day. Her father was a banking partner of J. P. Morgan. When she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People in 1891, she was 32 years old.

In her lifetime she inherited \$20 million. Almost all of it went for schools for the country's disenfranchised blacks and Indians and for her order.

A spokeswoman for the order, Sister Mary Faith Okerson states: "It was not a matter of charity. She truly

saw God in everyone around her. Her whole method was to go to the people and ask them what they wanted. Almost always the answer came back education." While her extended family lent its name to Drexel University in Philadelphia, Mother Drexel founded Xavier College in New Orleans, the only Roman Catholic university in the United States specifically for blacks. By the time she died in 1955, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, as the order was then named, ran 66 schools in 23 states. "If someone was different from herself in language,

heritage and race, she rejoiced in that," Sister Mary Faith said. "When many people in the United States did not believe in the potential of African Americans, she did."

The famous Drexel fortune is gone now. Most painfully, the sisters recently had to close Mother Katharine's first mission, the 100-year-old St. Catherine's school on the Pueblo reservation in Santa Fe.

A tribal leader, Joe Abeyta Sr., sorrowfully traveled to the Mother house in Bensalem, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia, to pray and get on with Mother Katharine.

The nuns recorded what he prayed: "Mother Katharine, you loved me, you came to my house. You have taught us well, and we are ready to lead."

It would take a miracle to restore the St. Benedict's School. Are there any miracle-workers out there?