



NUNS FACE JAIL FOR TEACHING BLACKS

By Julie Crum

On Easter Sunday, 1916, the day the Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine were to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their community's arrival in the United States, they had a terrifying surprise.

Just as they were about to leave the Convent of St. Joseph on St. George Street for an afternoon at the beach, their mother superior, Mother Marie Louise Hughes, was summoned to the telephone.

She listened to the message, hung up the phone and gathered her sisters around her to tell them what was happening: Sisters Mary Thomasine Hehir, Mary Scholastica and Mary Beningus were arrested April 24, 1916.

Mother Marie Louise, and the three sisters were ordered to appear at the St. Johns County Courthouse at 9 a.m. Their crime was this: They were white and they were teaching blacks. A law of the State of Florida prohibited white teachers from teaching black students; Sister Thomasine was principal of St. Benedict's School for black children in St. Augustine and the two other sisters were teachers there.

The law had been passed three years earlier. At the time, attorneys advised Bishop William John Kenny that the law was unconstitutional, so he continued to allow the sisters to teach their black students.

Ironically, the women were being arrested for the very reason their religious community came to Florida to begin with. In 1866, soon after the

end of the Civil War, Augustin Verot, the first bishop of St. Augustine, had the vision to see that blacks would need education to be able to function well in their new free status. He enlisted eight sisters from his native France to come to his Florida diocese to teach black children.

In her biography of Jeannie Gordon Brown, *The Story of a Nun*, Jane Quinn describes the event.

"Because she was the principal of St. Benedict's, Sister Thomasine was regarded as the main agent in the breaking of the law," Quinn writes. Sisters Mary Scholastica and Mary Beningus were released on their own recognizance, but Thomasine refused to pay the \$25 bond. As she was being led to court, accompanied by her mother superior and her pastor from the cathedral, the other sisters watched apprehensively from the second-floor porch.

The court documents, *State of Florida vs. Sister Mary Thomasine*, stated that Thomasine was arraigned on the offense of "a white teacher

St. Benedict's School, pictured right, served St. Augustine for more than 60 years. It housed black students in grades one through eight.

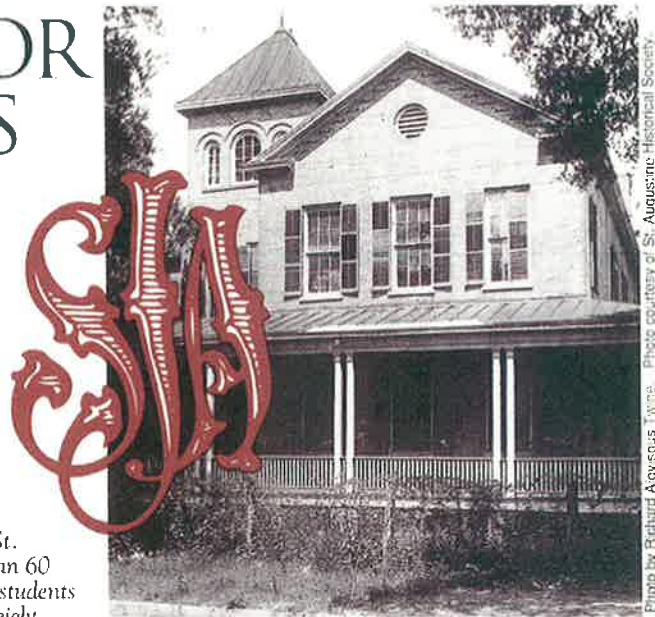


Photo by Richard Kovsousky. Photo courtesy of St. Augustine Historical Society.

teaching negroes in a negro school." Because she refused to provide the \$25 bond the court was "commanded to convey the said Sister Thomasine to the county jail and deliver her to the keeper thereof."

She was released to the custody of cathedral pastor Father John O'Brien, who was responsible for seeing that she returned to court at the time of her hearing.

Jane Quinn describes the outcome of the case: "Finally, Judge [George Couper] Gibbs called the law in question 'class legislation depriving teachers of privileges which are not denied to any other class of citizens.'" He dismissed the case on May 20, 1916 almost a month after Thomasine's arrest.

Undaunted by their unpleasant experience with the law, the Sisters of St. Joseph kept on teaching black students. Most of the schools from that time have closed. However, the sisters continue to teach at Jacksonville's St. Pius V, founded in 1921, five years after the highly publicized arrests.