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at the Brickyard 400

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Weather
HIGH: 86 LOW: 70
Mostly cloudy, 30 percent
chance of afternoon
showers and storms

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Bittersweet Memories



CATHERINE MEACHEM PEREZ, 91, sits in front of the building that used to be the St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School on Martin Luther King Avenue. She graduated from the school in 1926, nearly 15 years after the school was opened. At that time, the road in front of the school had trolley service. Today the school building is one of the most threatened historic sites in St. Augustine. By **JUSTIN YURKANIN**, justin.yurkanin@staugustinerecord.com

Now defunct school is one of the most endangered historical buildings in town

By **LORY POUNDER**
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The trees she used to hide behind to escape the nuns still tower over the grounds, but the building stands in disrepair.

As Catherine Meachem Perez, 91, viewed St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School, she paused to thoughtfully remember childhood days. She is one of the oldest graduates of the school that opened in the early 1900s and closed in 1964.

"I never thought I'd see these grounds again, but here I am," Perez said as she looked at the brick building on Martin Luther King Avenue.

She graduated in 1926, about 15 years after the kindergarten



CATHERINE MEACHEM PEREZ, pictured in 1924, while in sixth grade at the St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School. Perez is third from the left. Contributed photo

through 8th grade school for black residents opened. It has been more than 30 years since her last visit to the city. Perez

currently lives in Springfield, Mass.

Perez laughed. "I remember my teacher taking me by the ear

and sitting me in the fire place for talking too much," she said.

She remembered having fun
PLEASE SEE SCHOOL/10A

FROM THE FRONT

SCHOOL

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and getting into all sorts of trouble. Merle Mabroy, 90, was her partner in mischief.

"She was my right hand," Perez said. "If she got a whipping I got one too because we were both into the same thing."

One day, Perez and Mabroy decided it would be fun to go play at the fishing docks on Riberia Street. They picked at the shrimp and decided to sell them.

The girls returned home proudly with change in their pockets. Their triumph quickly turned to trouble when the two were reprimanded for their scheme.

Although Mabroy and Perez live in opposite parts of the country, they still keep in touch. It's been 30 years since their last reunion. Barbara Vickers, Perez's niece, graduated from St. Benedict's in

1938. Vickers was excited when Perez arrived Thursday night. The two stayed up talking until 3:30 a.m.

"I'm going to pick her brain before she goes," Vickers smiled with anticipation of the history she will discover and relive during her aunt's visit.

Perez and Vickers laughed at the slices of life the school brought to their thoughts. Knowledge and experience of changes in the past decades shows in their eyes. Tuition at St. Benedict's was 10 cents, they said.

"My mother used to give me extra dimes for the kids that couldn't pay," Vickers said.

Historian David Nolan described the school's founding. He said,

Sister Katherine Drexel from Philadelphia used inheritance money to set-up schools for blacks and American Indians around the country. Drexel established more than 60 parochial schools through the

Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People.

St. Benedict's is the oldest brick school building in St. Augustine, Nolan said.

A few years after the school opened, a Florida law made it illegal for whites to teach blacks. Perez remembers the nuns went to jail. They were freed when a judge ruled the law unconstitutional.

Drexel was canonized a saint in Rome in 2000. Vickers attended the service.

Vickers along with members of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church are trying to have the abandoned school restored.

Although she does not know when it will happen, Vickers has high hopes plans will soon be put into action.

"I'd be much happier if she (could) come back to see it when the school (is) renovated," Vickers smiled, looking at her aunt.

The school is an endangered his-

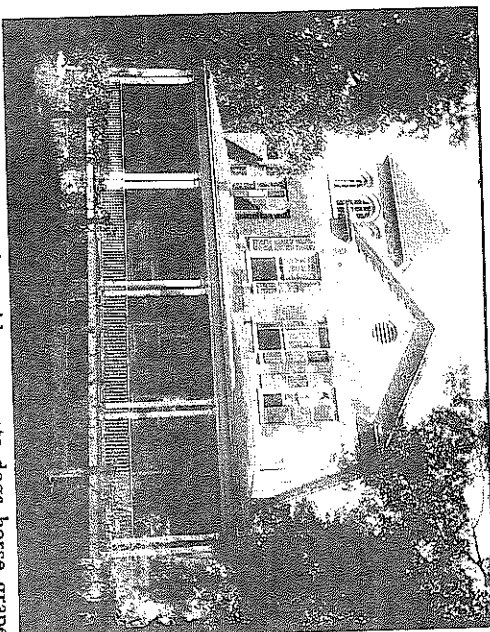


PHOTO-GRAPH of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School taken in the 1920s. Photo by Richard Twine

toric site in the city, Nolan said. "It's really a crime that it's gone to wreck and ruin," he added.

Before Perez and Vickers left the area, Perez wanted to see her old neighborhood. She grew up at 83 St. Benedict St. The billy goat,

cats, dogs, horse, grapefruit and bananas may be gone, but Perez heard the pecans might still be growing where the back yard of he house used to sit.

"I just want to take a peep at it," Perez smiled.