

(former) St. Monica's School  
Historic Landmark Designation Report  
Prepared for the Raleigh Historic Districts Commission

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## Architectural Description

The former St. Monica's School, now the New Bern Avenue Day Care Center, stands at 15 N. Tarboro Street in central Raleigh. The school is located at the corner of a 3.18 acre tract, owned by the city of Raleigh, at the northwest corner of N. Tarboro and Edenton streets. The rectangular building stands at the extreme corner of the tract and faces Edenton Street to the south, although its address is Tarboro Street. Access to the day care center is the rear door, facing a small parking lot. The remainder of the tract contains Tarboro Park, which consists of a recreation center, tennis courts, and picnic and playground facilities.

St. Monica's School, built in 1930, is a one-story brick building of a simplified Gothic style that might be termed "scholastic Gothic." With the exception of window replacements, the building has not been altered since its construction. The flat-roofed rectangular block has a three-bay main (south) facade and six-bay side elevations. Walls are covered in brick veneer laid in a one-to-five common bond variation, and extend above the roof level in a parapet with concrete coping. The stepped parapet over the center bay of each elevation gives emphasis. Front and rear entrances are identical, with a double glazed and paneled door surmounted by a Gothic-arched transom, set into a deep reveal. Each has a concrete cross set into the brickwork above the transom, and flanking shallow brick buttresses with concrete coping. The most striking feature of the building is the central bay of the east elevation, facing Tarboro Street. Not only does the parapet call attention to this bay, but it contains a full-height concrete cross set into the brickwork. At the center of the cross is a seal that presumably represents the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh. Flanking the cross are a pair of lancet-shaped windows with six-over-six sash, and a pair of buttresses. The corresponding bay on the west elevation has the stepped parapet and lancet windows, but lacks a cross and buttresses. The religious symbolism and architectural elaboration of the east bay served a double purpose. It created a visual relationship to Tarboro Street, the only original street that bordered the school, and symbolized the altar of the temporary sanctuary created on Sundays by opening up the two classrooms on this side of the building.

The building rests on a high brick foundation, with concrete steps and iron railings leading to the front and rear entrances. The front and rear entrances are located in annexes that are narrower, with lower roof lines, than the main classroom block. These annexes contain entrance foyers and small flanking office and bathrooms. Wall surfaces flanking the entrances are treated with large blind panels decorated with Flemish bond brickwork. Windows occur only on the east and west side elevations, to illuminate the four classrooms. Each classroom is lit by a band of four tall six-over-six sash windows with transoms. The original wooden sashes were replaced in August 2000 with vinyl

reproduction windows. A small shed-roofed frame storage shed has been attached to the west rear corner of the building.

The interior of St. Monica's School has changed very little from its appearance during the Catholic school era. A wide hallway extends on a north-south axis through the center, with two large classrooms opening to each side. The front section of the hallway, set apart from the main hallway by a Gothic arch, functions as the foyer. On the west side is a small office, with a short, high side window; on the east side a bathroom with a tall six-over-six sash window. At the rear, the arrangement is the same, with a bathroom to the east and a room to the west. The interior is simply finished with linoleum flooring, plaster walls, and tall plaster ceilings. Original glazed and paneled doors with tall transoms open into the classrooms; smaller flat-paneled doors open into the bathrooms and office. Along the west wall of the hallway is a wooden coat rail that is probably original. Only a few minor alterations were necessary to convert the school into a day care center. In place of the original folding partitions between the two east classrooms, a solid partition wall was installed. The small west rear room was converted to a kitchen, and a small pantry was created out of space in the adjacent classroom.

The original school playground was located along the west side of the building, and has disappeared. The playground for the day care center, located on the same site, is enclosed by a chain link fence.

### **Historic Significance**

St. Monica's School in Raleigh, which educated African American children from 1930 to 1967, was located at 15 N. Tarboro Street in east Raleigh. The school building, occupied since that time by the New Bern Avenue Day Care Center, is a well-preserved landmark of one of the most significant schools for African Americans in Raleigh during the segregation era. St. Monica's was the sixth church and school for African Americans established by the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, which covered fifty-four counties from Burlington to the coast. Among these were the Mother of Mercy School, Washington (1927) and St. Joseph High School in New Bern.<sup>1</sup> St. Monica's was the only Catholic school for African Americans established in Raleigh. The old school building stands as a reminder of the role played by mission schools in African American education during the Jim Crow era before integration. St. Monica's School is significant in the area of ethnic education, and has architectural significance as a well-preserved example of religious school buildings in Raleigh.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannigan press release; school catalogue "Catholic Education in North Carolina," 1958.

The history of St. Monica's School extends back to John O'Rorke, a wealthy Irish merchant who arrived in Raleigh about 1820, and became one of the county's earliest Roman Catholic residents. In the 1840s he built a homeplace east of town, at the intersection of New Bern Avenue and Tarboro Street, which played a prominent role in Catholic affairs for over a century. During his lifetime O'Rorke established a Catholic cemetery on an acre of land located a few blocks to the northeast of his homeplace, on the east side of Tarboro Street. Gravestones dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stand in the cemetery. The homeplace passed to his descendants, the Ferralls. In February 1930 the Reverend William J. Hafey, Catholic Bishop of Raleigh, North Carolina, purchased for \$100 about four acres bounded by New Bern Avenue, Tarboro Road, and E. Jones Street, with a nineteenth century two-story white frame house at the front corner<sup>2</sup>. These four acres would eventually be the site of a church, auditorium, rectory, convent and a parish hall in addition to the school. The dates of construction and demolition for some of these buildings are unknown. Sanborn maps indicate that the site was developed shortly after the school's construction in 1930 and the moving of the school in 1967 was likely followed by a series of demolitions. The former school and the convent are the only two buildings that remain. The convent, which was the house that stood on the property when Reverend Hafey purchased it in 1930 has been moved outside the city limits and restored as a single family house.

In April 1930 Bishop Hafey, who resided in Raleigh, explained in a letter to Mother Mary William of Maywood College in Scranton, Pennsylvania, his intentions to construct a school on the property and to use the old house as a convent for the Sisters who would teach at the school. He beseeched her to send Sisters from her order as teachers:

Raleigh, being the Cathedral city and the Capitol of the State, I am convinced that an evidence of the Church's interest in the Colored should be given without delay.... [The property] comprises about four acres on three streets and in the center of three Colored sections. The house would serve admirably as a Convent. It has recently been remodeled. Years ago Mass was said in this house when Raleigh was but a mission. The early Bishops made it their stopping place. The spot seems destined for a great purpose<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina*, 385n, 181; Survey plat of John O'Rorke Homeplace, 1922, in Diocese of Raleigh Archives, 715 Nazareth Street, Raleigh; Wake County Deed Book 589, 505.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Bishop Hafey to Mother William, April 21, 1930.

Bishop Hafey consulted with Father Michael McInerney, at Belmont Abbey near Charlotte, about the plan for the new school in Raleigh, telling him that:

I have decided to more or less duplicate the Greensboro school at Raleigh. Four (4) large class rooms, of equal size, with folding doors separating each pair, would probably be an economical building. We might also make provision for a teacher's office and a smaller recitation room.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently Father Michael drew up the plan, which did indeed resemble Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal School, the Catholic elementary school in Greensboro that was the model for the Raleigh school. The Greensboro school, built in 1928 by Bishop Hafey, was of modest scholastic Catholic style, with parapeted gables, a brick cross over the entrance, and bands of large sash windows.

Bishop Hafey contracted in June 1930 with Southeastern Construction Company, of Charlotte, to build a one-story brick mission school for \$19,084. The new school was completed in time for classes to begin in September 1930. Three sisters of the Catholic Order of Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, from Marywood College, Scranton, Pennsylvania, moved into the house on that property and commenced teaching in September. By October 7 five sisters were teaching the 155 pupils enrolled in St. Monica's School. St. Monica's offered grades one through eight. Each of the four classrooms must have held a combined class of two grade levels. All children wore blue skirts or pants, white blouses and sailor ties.

The first priest in charge, Father Charles J. Hannigan, described the new school in this way:

The Church-School building is of tapestry brick with sandstone finish. It is thoroughly modern even to its built-in radio equipment. St. Monica's buildings are in the midst of as beautiful a site as all Raleigh contains. The lot is two hundred by seven hundred feet, two whole city blocks, right in the midst of the finest homes of the best of Raleigh's Colored people, and within sight of its large hospital and college. The school rooms are standard size, and with quite the best equipment<sup>5</sup>.

Father Hannigan held Sunday mass in the two classrooms in the east rear of the school, which could be converted into one room by opening the accordion doors that separated them. He apparently remained at St. Monica's School only a few years, long

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Bishop Hafey to Father Michael, April 26, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> News release written by Father Hannigan, October 7, 1930, copy in Diocese of Raleigh Archives.

enough to make certain that the school was off to a good start. The old priest had been in charge of St. Joseph High School in New Bern prior to his service at St. Monica's. He found the Raleigh mission school to be a special place:

The interest manifested by the non-Catholic Colored people of Raleigh in this the latest expression of Bishop Hafey's interest in their spiritual welfare was quite the most extraordinary thing this old missionary among the Colored people has ever seen. ...Never in the long service of this old missionary has he seen anything like the interest the Colored people of Raleigh is showing in the work at St. Monica's<sup>6</sup>.

The school flourished among the African American community in East Raleigh, a large area bounded by St. Augustine's College, an Episcopalian mission school to the north, and Shaw College, a Baptist mission school to the south. By 1958 182 pupils were enrolled. The Reverend W. James Tierney directed the school from 1940 to 1965, the longest tenure of any director. The state catalogue of Catholic schools noted in that year that:

The school is especially noted for its beautiful melodies which spring the heart of each child. In addition, the studies of French and German have been introduced and special art classes are conducted for talented pupils. Thus, the students are well-grounded in a culture that will influence their future lives<sup>7</sup>.

African-American parents viewed St. Monica's as one of the surest means to insure a better future for their children. The success of those students upon reaching adulthood, when they assumed leadership positions in the community, is proof of the value of the education they received. Many of Raleigh's most prominent African Americans today speak respectfully of the discipline, structure, sound instruction, and love that they experienced in St. Monica's classrooms. When Howard B. Pullen was in the fourth grade, his parents pulled him out of Lucille Hunter Public School and sent him to St. Monica's, where he stayed through the seventh grade. He received such a good education that he wanted to continue in a Catholic high school, but there was not one in Raleigh, so he attended a public high school. Beatrice Hamlin and all seven of her brothers and sisters attended St. Monica's, where her father was the first janitor<sup>8</sup>.

Eventually the church moved from the school into an adjacent building, a quonset hut that was constructed northwest of the school for this purpose. This burned in the 1970s.

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<sup>6</sup> News release written by Father Hannigan October 7, 1930, copy in Diocese of Raleigh Archives.

<sup>7</sup> "Catholic Education in North Carolina," 84.

<sup>8</sup> Simmons-Henry and Edmisten, *Culture Town*, 149, 140.

A third structure, a boy's club, was also erected on the campus during the existence of the school. This narrow building stood a short distance west of the school. It had been demolished by 1968<sup>9</sup>.

St. Monica's School gave African American children a sound education for over thirty-five years, from 1930 to its closing in 1967. When the Catholic diocese integrated its white and black facilities, St. Monica's was merged into Sacred Heart School, the white Catholic school in Raleigh, now also known as Cathedral School. Thus there was no longer any need for a separate African-American Catholic school<sup>10</sup>.

In 1968, Jorean Debnam and Mary Sharp rented the vacant school from the Catholic diocese and opened the New Bern Avenue Day Care, a non-profit institution. The old school building proved to be a wonderful structure for this adaptive use, and the day care center has flourished up to the present.

About 1972 the city purchased the property from the Catholics and continues to own it. At approximately the same time, the city extended Edenton Street, which had ended at the Catholic property, through to the east. This cut the convent off from the school, and completely altered the school's setting by eliminating its front yard.

Since the city acquired the school property, it has leased the old school building to the day care center. In 1981, in order to save the old Home-Convent from demolition, Mr. and Mrs. Sherrill Register moved it to a new site on Brassfield Road in north Raleigh, and restored it as their residence<sup>11</sup>.

### **Historic Context: African American Education in Raleigh**

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Raleigh's African American community had a strong educational ethic. This was a legacy of the slavery era when education of slaves was illegal, and of the post-Civil War period when education became the means by which blacks could better themselves and their race. During the Civil War, as northern religious denominations and government agencies such as the Freedmen's Bureau were able to move into areas of the Confederacy occupied by Union troops, Negro schools were set up to bring the former slaves into a state of literacy. Most of these schools were insubstantial frame buildings that vanished long ago, but a few of them grew into substantial institutions that still survive. Both of Raleigh's black

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<sup>9</sup> Sketch map of Catholic school property, City of Raleigh, no date. Copy in Designation Report File.

<sup>10</sup> Raleigh City Directories: the school, at 11 N. Tarboro St., is listed in the 1966-67 directory, but in 1968 the address is listed as "vacant."; Father Thomas Hadden, Wilmington, telephone interview by the author, November 7, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Sherrill Register, interview by Ruth Little, October 30, 2000.

colleges, Saint Augustine's and Shaw, were established by northern missionary groups during the immediate post-war period.

Both public and private elementary schools were established during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those provided by the city school system generally had inferior facilities to those of white elementary schools. One of the finest public elementary schools for blacks in Raleigh was Washington Elementary School, at the corner of South and McDowell streets, built about 1900. This was a two-story frame building of stylish Victorian design. Lucille Hunter Elementary School was built at 1018 E. Davie Street in the 1920s during the consolidation era, when small frame schools were consolidated into large, modern brick school buildings. Crosby-Garfield Elementary School on E. Lenoir Street was a frame school that burned, and was replaced with a modern brick school in 1939. The freedmen's community of Method, in west Raleigh, had an elementary and high school called the Berry School, founded about 1900.

In 1930 the establishment of St. Monica's School in east Raleigh by the Catholic diocese fulfilled a strong educational need. Although it is likely that few students at St. Monica's School actually converted to Catholicism as a result of their educational experiences, most of them grew into the solid, upstanding citizens of whom the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were proud. St. Monica's School is probably the last example in a long tradition of white religious and philanthropic groups providing mission schools for the education of African Americans in Raleigh.



## **Bibliography**

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### **Boundary Description and Justification**

The attached Wake County Tax Map, Parcel 1713198560, specifies the entire parcel known as "Tarboro Park," containing 3.18 acres. The amount of acreage to be included in this landmark designation is approximately .73 acre that includes St. Monica's School, the parking lot to the rear, and the playground along the west side. The dimensions of this lot, as shown on the tax map, are approximately 169 x 178 x 28 x 150 x 183. The remainder of the Tarboro Park parcel contains a recreation center building, tennis courts, and park landscaping that date from the late twentieth century and do not relate to the period of historic significance of St. Monica's School, which ended in 1967.



South Façade



East facade





North Façade



West and South facade