Born the middle child of Catholic slaves, Martha Chisley Tolton and Peter Paul Tolton, Augustine spent the first years of his life on a farm in Ralls County, MO. After the Civil War broke out, Peter fled to St. Louis hoping to join the Union.

In 1862, Martha, unsure of her husband’s fate, escaped to Quincy with the children, eventually learning of her husband’s death in St. Louis shortly after his arrival there.

birth record naming augustine “slave of stephen elliott”
Upon arrival in Quincy, 9-year old Augustine attended St. Boniface School intermittently while working at Harris Tobacco Factory. His family attended the 2,000-member church which was predominantly German. Young Gus learned the German language from attending the church, however he was forced to leave school due to prejudice.

The Toltons began attending St. Peter’s Church, where *Fr. Peter McGirr welcomed them and took steps to ensure that Augustine would do well in his parish school. Augustine studied at St. Peter for the next several years for 3-4 months at a time, working the remainder of each year at the tobacco factory.

At 16 Augustine received his First Communion at the Church of St. Peter on the Feast of Corpus Christi. He graduated from St. Peter at the age of 18.

*Father McGirr remained a key advocate in the fair treatment and furtherment of Augustine well into Augustine’s priesthood.

When no other seminary in the US would accept Augustine because of his race, several Quincy priests outlined a study plan for him. In 1878 St. Francis College (now Quincy University) enrolled Augustine.

Augustine proceeded on as a seminarian to the Propaganda in Rome and was ordained at St. John Lateran Basilica.

Augustine returned to Quincy as a missionary and celebrated his first Solemn High Mass in the community at St. Boniface in 1886.
Augustine Tolton became Pastor of St. Joseph Church—the first black priest in the United States. After three years of overseeing the church & school, Fr. Tolton was granted reassignment to Chicago due to extreme opposition from a new priest at St. Boniface.

The original St. Peter Church was destroyed by tornado in 1945 and rebuilt at its current location, with a chapel and statue dedicated to Fr. Tolton.

"As long as I was in that school I was safe. Everyone was kind to me. I learned the alphabet, reading and arithmetic."
While Augustine pastored St. Joseph he lived in a building here which was part of St. Francis College.

Site of Harris Tobacco Factory, where young Gus worked.

Now Quincy University; site of St. Francis College when Augustine attended.