

The African-American Our Lady of the Assumption School stands within a small Roman Catholic religious complex sited on a residential street in the northeast quadrant of the Lafayette Parish community of Carencro. The one-story, frame building is unstyled. It was constructed in 1934 and, due to increasing enrollment demands, was roughly doubled in size in 1940. Other additions date to the 1950s. Because of the location of the non-historic additions and their complementary character, they have not seriously impacted the building's historic character. Thus, the school remains a legitimate Register candidate.

Our Lady of the Assumption School has a somewhat confusing construction history. In some cases architectural evidence and secondary sources contradict the memories of surviving early students interviewed for this nomination. The following narrative represents the staff's best effort to interpret the physical history of the building. Please refer to the attached drawing as necessary.

As constructed in 1934, Assumption School was a small frame rectangular shaped building with a gable end roof featuring overhanging eaves and exposed rafter tails. A small vernacular portico with single boxed columns on each side protected the front entrance, which was composed of double doors with glazing in their upper portions. A set of triple windows pierced the facade on each side of the doors, and rear windows existed as well. The interior contained a single classroom (which may have had a moveable partition to separate it into two spaces) characterized by beaded board walls and a beaded board ceiling.

Assumption School was expanded in 1940 by attaching rooms moved from the recently closed African-American Sosthene Arceneaux School, located a few miles away. Two of the Arceneaux School's three rooms were connected to Assumption (one to each side), and both rooms were set back approximately two feet from the plane of the original façade. The "new" rooms had the following fenestration pattern: triple windows piercing their facades; a set of high windows on their side; and single doors accompanied by two sets of paired windows opening into their rear walls. A stage was constructed in the "new" southern room, and the wall between it and the original portion of Assumption School was removed. Conflicting information makes it unclear how the rest of the space in the southern room was used. Whether the Arceneaux School's third room was attached to Assumption's rear wall (room D on the attached diagram) or that space is original to the building is unclear, for concrete evidence cannot be obtained without access to Assumption's attic.

Expansion occurred again in 1953 when a classroom was added at the rear. This construction gave the school the footprint of a "T". In the mid-1950s a rectangular shaped kitchen and cafeteria wing was attached at a ninety-degree angle to the school's south wall. A door in the connecting wall allowed staff to enter the kitchen. However, students entered the dining room through doors which opened into a courtyard created by addition of the kitchen/cafeteria to the already existing wings. The kitchen/cafeteria's construction materials were salvaged from another recently closed African-American school, St. Elizabeth's at Prairie Basse. Later, a small restroom wing was attached to the rear wall of the cafeteria.

In addition to all the expansions mentioned above, Our Lady of the Assumption School experienced the following interior alterations at an unknown date:

1. the subdivision of the original large room into a central hall with a room on each side, the insertion of hallways at the rear of the original space to provide access to the rooms added from the Arceneaux School, and the re-configuration of the room between the original building and the kitchen/cafeteria wing to serve as office space. The latter alteration removed the stage and re-sealed the wall between it and the adjacent classroom.
2. the reconfiguration of the rooms within the leg of the "T." By moving one wall and inserting a second, three rooms were created from two classroom spaces.
3. the covering of many of the walls with paneling and of the floors with linoleum.

Despite these changes, Assumption is clearly recognizable as the school opened for African-American children by the Catholic Church in Carencro in 1934 and enlarged to meet enrollment demands in 1940. There is absolutely no doubt that former teachers and students would recognize the building if they should return to Carencro today. As a symbol of the important role which the Catholic Church played in the education of African-Americans in rural southern Louisiana during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and as the only source of education for the African-American children of Carencro for many years, Our Lady of the Assumption School is an outstanding candidate for National Register listing.

Contributing Elements

As mentioned above, Our Lady of the Assumption School is part of a religious complex. Three other resources within that group are contributing elements to this nomination because they are closely associated with the school. A brief description of each follows:

Built in 1925, Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church is a one-story building featuring a low tower, arched window lintels, an apse, and a barrel vault above its center aisle. Originally of frame construction, it is now covered by vinyl siding and has an asphalt roof. The church Rectory is a one story, frame bungalow with a large side addition and an asphalt roof. Its styling suggests that the original portion of the building was erected at or near the same time as the church. Both buildings pre-date the school and represent the religious order which founded it.

The Convent is a one-story frame building constructed in the mid-to-late 1940s. Originally subdivided into small dorm-like rooms for nuns, the interior was remodeled in the late 1960s or early 1970s into a large meeting room with kitchen facilities for parish members. There is also a frame wing containing restrooms and a chapel. The convent was specifically constructed to house school personnel (see Part 8).

Non-Contributing Elements

The Rectory garage is a one-story building with a metal roof and a modern vinyl covered door. Its facade is also covered by vinyl; however, its other walls feature board and batten siding. Although some of the structure may date to around the time of the Rectory's construction, the alterations render the garage non-contributing.

A modern frame Storage Building with a metal roof and a vinyl-covered garage door stands near the rear end of the kitchen/cafeteria wing.

SIGNIFICANT DATES:	1934-1951
ARCHITECT/BUILDER:	Unknown
CRITERION:	A

Our Lady of the Assumption School is of local significance in the area of education as a rare representation of the important role the Roman Catholic Church played in the education of blacks in rural southern Louisiana during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, the school provided the only opportunity to obtain an education available to the African-American children of Carencro. The period of significance for the nomination ranges from 1934, the year of Assumption's founding, through 1951, the fifty-year cutoff. Assumption continued to provide Carencro's African-American community with its only chance for an education until the first public school for blacks opened in 1959.

It should be emphasized that to a very large extent black Catholic schools were the only places where blacks could receive high quality, consistent elementary education in rural southern Louisiana. Although there were other educational opportunities available, they were either of poor quality or of tenuous existence. The home school, where a mother taught groups of neighborhood children, was one alternative to black Catholic education. But these only existed sporadically, instruction was not consistent, and the teachers were often poorly educated themselves.

The other alternative was the state-supported school system, such as it was. After Reconstruction, a legislative act provided for a system of separate "public" education for blacks and whites. This was, in effect, more a quasi-public effort because the state provided only some of the funding, with local sources providing the building and other necessities. The schools were usually located in churches or lodge buildings, and teachers were poorly qualified. With the retrenchment politics of the day and the general lack of interest in public education, funding was woefully inadequate for even a single school system, let alone the dual system mandated by segregation. From the beginning black schools were generally not treated equally in the distribution of funds, and received an increasingly disproportionate share as white schools grew in number and importance. Also, of course, the notion of educating blacks certainly ran contrary to the racial attitudes of the time.

Indeed, black "schools" were really not schools at all. Essentially meager public subsidies were used to support quasi-private efforts. As T. H. Harris, State Superintendent of Education from 1908-1940, reported in his autobiography: "In most cases Negro churches were used for schoolhouses and the only equipment in these churches were the benches used for church services. The school term was from two to four months and the teachers were uneducated and wholly unequipped to instruct children."

Although the Catholic Church had been active in education in Louisiana as early as the colonial era, its efforts increased dramatically after the Civil War. In 1866 Roman Catholic bishops, convening in plenary council in Baltimore, decreed that every effort should be made to establish Catholic schools for the newly freed black children. At the next plenary council, held in 1884, the bishops created a permanent "Commission for Catholic Missions among the Colored People and Indians." Its goal was to provide an administrative framework for the educational endeavor. Encouraged by area bishops, several religious sisterhoods responded to the call. Between 1866 and 1944 (when a master's thesis chronicled the work accomplished to date), these orders had established over fifty schools in urban and rural areas of south Louisiana. Some closed after a few years, but the majority survived. In contrast to the effort of home schools and the state's quasi-public black schools, the black Catholic schools provided good facilities with motivated teachers. They remained the one bright spot in black education in rural southern Louisiana until the coming of the philanthropic Julius Rosenwald schools in the 1920s.

Especially important in establishing rural schools was the order of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People (SBS). Mother Katharine Drexel (now St. Katharine) established this order in 1891 and financed it with her own considerable fortune. The order established or assisted dozens of schools for African-Americans in New Orleans and Acadiana between 1915 and 1955, when Mother Katharine died. These facilities included Our Lady of the Assumption School at Carencro.

The project of Reverend Francis Smith, pastor of Carencro's Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church and a member of the Holy Ghost order, the school opened in 1934, nine years after construction of the church and accompanying rectory. Smith located the school on newly purchased land behind the two existing buildings. Although she did not pay for the school building itself, Mother Katharine did pay the salaries of Assumption's lay teachers in 1935. Many parishioners believe the nun to have continued this support, but no concrete evidence exists to document her further financial involvement during the school's early years.

Because of its convenient location, Assumption School attracted large numbers of students. Some of these children had previously attended the Sosthene Arceneaux School south of town or St. Elizabeth's at Prairie Basse (a rural community east of Carencro), which closed in 1936 and 1955 respectively. Both of these facilities were founded and funded by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. As a result of decreased enrollment, Mother Katharine closed the Arceneaux School in 1936. Father Smith immediately began a campaign to move the closed building to Assumption School, where more room was desperately needed. Mother Katharine agreed to the plan. However, Father Smith was unable to accomplish this goal until 1940 (see Part 7). Another way Mother Katharine assisted the school was through teacher training. Xavier University in New Orleans, also founded by her, graduated teachers who then staffed the SBS rural schools. Every summer these lay teachers attended an educational institute held at the SBS school in New Iberia.

The exact number of children educated by Assumption School is unclear, for records detailing activities before the SBS assumed control in 1948 have not been discovered. However, the reminiscences of former students indicate that the building was always full. One former student remembers being "packed in like sardines," while another estimates there were 70 – 80 children in the first grade alone. Post-1948 SBS records confirm the large numbers. It is probably safe to assume that several thousand children received instruction at Assumption School, although not all completed their studies. Because there was no bus service, many of these children walked several miles, rode on horseback, or were driven to school in buggies. Sometimes older children were in the same grade as younger ones. However, the age of children in each grade seems to have worked itself out appropriately as time passed and the opportunity to obtain an education remained available. Former students disagree upon whether or not the school charged any fees. Most children brought their lunch. Those who had no food from home were fed without charge from a small soup kitchen (now destroyed) located next to the school and operated by a member of the community. For many years, the school had no plumbing, so teachers and students alike were forced to use the nearby privy (also destroyed). The lay teachers usually rented rooms from local families.

Assumption's curriculum and teaching methods were similar to those used in rural schools throughout the state. During the early years, the school seems to have had an average of seven grades plus a kindergarten-like class which former students remember as being called "premer." It was in this class, as well as in first grade, that some children learned to speak English, or at least to speak it better. With an inadequate number of teachers and only three rooms to house seven grades, two or more grades shared a single room and instructor. While one grade worked with the teacher, the other was expected to quietly review its lessons. Subjects taught included math, spelling, reading, writing, history and religion. In the higher grades, science and geography were added. Although not a formal subject, discipline was a skill which many students learned and appreciated. At one point long tables served as desks, with six or so children sharing a table. Other students remember having individual desks. Books were in short supply, so the children shared. The length of the term seems to have varied, with 4.5 to 5 months perhaps being an average length.

Reverend Andrew Sheridan eventually succeeded Father Smith as pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish. He began urging the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to send nuns to staff the school and built a small convent between the school and the church to house them. The teaching sisters finally arrived in 1948, at which time the school officially came under the control of the SBS. At first, the school and its operation changed little except for the addition of an eighth grade. The first three SBS nuns described the structure they had inherited as "a three room, barn-like building." Their first year, 107 children enrolled in the first grade alone. Although the term beginning date was delayed until October, some children had to miss class when they were needed to help harvest crops on their family's farm.

Things began to get better at Assumption School just as the historic period for this nomination ends. In 1953 officials built another classroom, allowing the institution to accommodate slightly over 300 children. Eventually there were six (see the alterations section of Part 7). In or shortly after 1955, a kitchen/cafeteria wing was erected. The materials for this addition came from St. Elizabeth's at Prairie Basse, which was closed after Mother Katharine's death in that year. (Because of the terms of her father's will, the nun's fortune reverted to specific charities when she died, leaving the order she had founded with only limited funds to continue its work.) In addition to their regular educational efforts, the Sisters began taking the children on field trips to experience cultural activities such as the opera. These trips, plus the experience of travel to cities such as New Orleans and Baton Rouge, widened the children's' formerly narrow horizons. Although the first public school for blacks in the area opened in 1959, Assumption School operated until 1971. In that year it merged with another Catholic school, the two becoming Carencro Catholic School. For ten years the former Assumption School served as a campus of Carencro Catholic, with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament continuing to furnish teachers. However, in 1981 the order was unable to provide teaching personnel and the campus closed. Today, the building is used for catechism classes.

As mentioned above, the Catholic Church built over fifty African-American schools in south Louisiana between 1866 and 1944 and assisted a number of others. Although a complete survey has not been done, it is reasonable to assume that almost all of the original buildings have been lost. Black schools were often part of larger Roman Catholic school complexes and consequently have been subject to improvements, enlargements, and incorporation into larger buildings. Rural black Catholic schools have been disassembled and their parts used elsewhere, as happened to both the Arceneaux and Prairie Basse schools. As background research for a recent article on schools established by Mother Katharine, staff of the LA SHPO visited several communities in southern Louisiana, only to find mainly modern church complexes. This survey, along with other staff knowledge, revealed only four known historic black Catholic school buildings remaining in rural southern Louisiana. The Assumption School, therefore, is of great importance as a symbol of the historic role of the Roman Catholic Church in black education in the region. Additionally, it is significant as the only place where Carencro's African-American community could obtain an education for many years.

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