



St. Louis Cathedral: A sacred icon for an exotic city

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Contributing writer

St. Louis Cathedral is the third church to stand at the head of Jackson Square. When New Orleans was laid out in 1721 according to a plan prepared by Royal Engineer Le Bland de la Tour, the site of the future cathedral was designated for a Catholic church, which under the Code Noir was the only faith legally allowed in the colony.

The plan for the city followed the principles of French urban planner Sebastien Vauban. It was to be a walled city with a Catholic church overlooking a public square, initially known as the Place de Arms.

Despite the clergy's repeated request for a church, one was not begun until 1724, and it took three years to complete.

The church was designed by French engineer Adrien de Pauger. It was the first structure in New Orleans to employ brick, locally made at what is today the site of the African-American Museum in the Treme. The bricks were placed within a heavy timber frame known as colombage, and the wood and brick combined was known as brique entre bateaux.

Nomadic liturgical services

Before the completion of the 1727 Church of St. Louis, Mass in the city was celebrated in several make-do places. The first site was likely a building in what is today the 600 block of St. Ann. It was destroyed in the



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1727: The first permanent church of St. Louis was designed by French military engineer Adrien de Pauger. The church was destroyed in the Great Fire of Good Friday, 1788.

hurricane of 1722.

Jesuit Father Charlevoix in 1722 recorded that a "wretched warehouse" on Toulouse Street near the river was serving as the church. The following year, Mass was being celebrated in a converted tavern on Decatur Street between St. Louis and Toulouse. Capuchin Father Luxembourg described it as cramped and dilapidated.

When the Company of the Indies built a large barracks on St. Ann Street facing the square, Mass was said in the barracks until the Church of St. Louis was dedicated on Christmas Eve 1727. De Pauger, designer of the church, died a year before the church was completed and requested to be buried in the unfinished church. At least 10 others would be buried in the church.

Even then, a pesky problem

The French priest ordered

window glass, art work, a silver cross and candelabra from France and petitioned for a stone tabernacle because the numerous rats would gnaw through a wooden one. Many have claimed that city father Bienville had a small wooden church erected on the site shortly after founding the city in 1718; however, that is impossible, since the city plan had not begun to be laid out until 1721, and there is no official record of one.

With the secret Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762, Louisiana was transferred to Spain, where Roman Catholicism also was the only official religion. The following year, the church was in such a state that it had to be abandoned. Masses were again held in a warehouse, this time in the king's warehouse in the 500 block of Dumaine.

Once the church repairs were completed, it was

again used until it was destroyed in the Good Friday fire of March 21, 1788.

That was not a very good year for New Orleans: In addition to the fire, which

destroyed 80 percent of the city, the river flooded the city and there was an epidemic.

Some say the city and

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