



Descendants of Isleños still worship at St. Bernard

By Christine Bordelon
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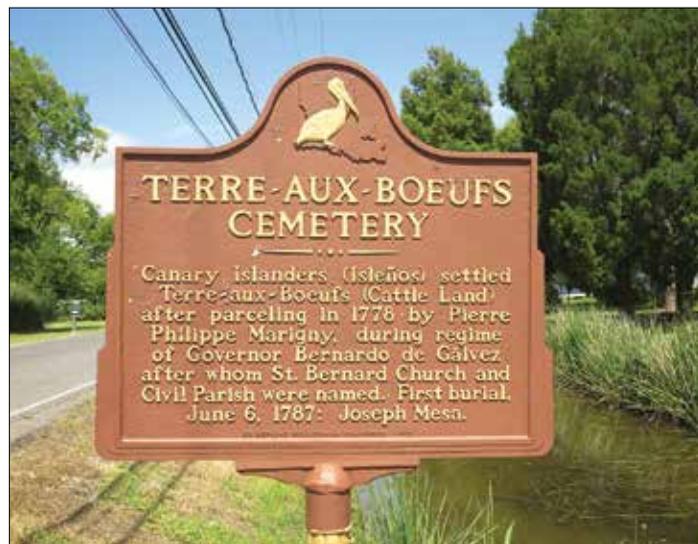
The history of Catholic faith in St. Bernard Parish can be traced to the king of Spain, who sent Canary Islanders, in several waves, to Louisiana beginning in 1778. These “Isleños” established St. Bernard Catholic Church at the first settlement, said Tony Fernandez Jr., a parishioner whose heritage stems from early settler Felix Marrero.

“There were several settlements along south Louisiana, but this was the most successful,” Fernandez said of Bayou Terre-aux-Boeufs, which he described as “a colony within the colony of Louisiana” with its own government, subservient to the colony’s governor.

Along with a church, there were militia and government buildings and a cemetery in close proximity, as was common in early Spanish colonial settlements. Fernandez said parish historian Bill Hyland found an 1848 state site map verifying this.

With many relatives among the early settlers – and because his father Anthony Fernandez Sr. and uncle Frank Fernandez were educators – history was a common topic at the Fernandez home. His Uncle Frank also was parish historian emeritus.

Tony Fernandez’s historical interest in St. Bernard led him to seek the exact location of the first permanent church, begun in 1787 and completed in



Canary Islanders sent from Spain were early settlers in St. Bernard who established the church in the first settlement in Terre-aux-Boeufs.

1791, the courthouse and early cemetery. The church parish, dedicated to Gov. Galvez’s patron, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, is among the oldest in Louisiana. It was first ministered by Father Mariano Brunette in 1785, then by Spanish Recollect Father Agustin Lamar from 1787-93.

Cemented the history

In 2000, Fernandez hired a company to conduct thermal imaging around St. Bernard Catholic Church and cemetery. Soil temperature differs when it is disturbed by digging, possibly indicating a grave or building foundation.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed those original documents, so in March 2017, Fernandez conducted another non-invasive technique – Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) – to re-document possible anomalies that could indicate structural remains.

Search grids were mapped in an area next to the existing church, which was built in 1924-25. An earlier structure, dating to 1851, was destroyed by a 1916 fire. The GPR also was used across Bayou Road in the church cemetery.

The GPR survey found a 6-by-12-foot burial vault next to the church, 14 potential non-vaulted burial sites, a potential water well in front of the church and two potential structural foundations in the church rear (possibly the Spanish courthouse and a privy) and one mass burial site (possibly due to the 1918 influenza epidemic) in front of St. Bernard Catholic Cemetery across Bayou Road.

“Both scientific processes showed the same thing,” Fernandez said. “It showed some subsurface foundation of brick for the government building and a privy.”



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St. Bernard Church parishioner Tony Fernandez works to preserve history of St. Bernard. He descends from Isleños.

Catholics from beginning

Fernandez’s Marrero ancestor was an early St. Bernard Catholic Church elder. He certified and listed early parishioners, who paid for a family pew, and led an 1813 church financial drive and a campaign for new bridge construction over the bayou, Fernandez said. He also gave an affidavit to Congress describing how this area was settled so the United States could, in 1832, recognize land grants received from the king of Spain.

He believes Felix Marrero was a farmer, like most Isleños, given a land grant by Spain. He was literate and “seemed to have more means than others,” Fernandez surmised.

By the early- to mid-1800s, sugar cane was grown profitably in St. Bernard.

“It made this area like a gold mine,” Fernandez said.

“So, wealthy people came here and bought up the land. The Reggios, the Oliviers, the Bienvenus bought as much ground as they could from the Isleños and raised sugar cane on plantations they farmed. Some Isleños worked on plantations as overseers. Others moved to Land’s End near Lake Borgne and Delacroix Island, Reggio and Shell Beach during tough economic times in St. Bernard and became fishermen.”

Tony’s grandfather Francisco – about whom he is writing a story – emigrated from Spain in 1909 and was a commercial fisherman who married an Isleño from Shell Beach.

“Spanish immigrants went to Shell Beach because the area was growing economically,” he said. “When the railroad was built, it went to Shell Beach from New Orleans. The railroad hauled seafood, so Shell Beach had a means of selling seafood. In that era, they also had slab boats that came into Lake Borgne from Biloxi and Gulfport to buy shrimp during shrimp season.”

Isleños were fur trappers and sold pelts for coats, and hunters sold ducks commercially in New Orleans.

Marker to go up

From decades of research – he started as an inquisitive LSU student with access to the university’s library and continued as a law school student – Fernandez realized there were unmarked burials on the church’s east side. He estimates approximately

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