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River of Faith

300 YEARS AS A NEW ORLEANS CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
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PAGE 21

Church sued state over improper burial of a slave

By Mark Lombard
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Death is seen as a great leveler of both the lowly and the lofty.

Yet, in an unusual case before the colonial Superior Council of the Province of Louisiana within two decades of the founding of New Orleans, it was the Catholic Church that helped right a serious wrong in bringing suit against a powerful and influential member of the society.

In June 1738, it was discovered that a 12- or 13-year-old black slave was found to have been buried outside St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery and without the ceremonies of the Church. Father Matthias, curate of New Orleans and vicar general of the Bishop of Quebec, of which this colony was then a part, brought a suit against Louisiana's colonial treasurer-general, Sieur Loquet de la Pommeraye. The priest was "incensed at the violation of the laws of both the Church and the colony," said archdiocesan archivist Dr. Emilie Leumas.

Code Noir set expectations

The Code Noir of 1724 (see story, page 34) sanctioned Catholicism as the only religion of the fledgling colony and required all slaves to be baptized and instructed in the faith. As a consequence, masters were required to provide burials in consecrated ground for their Christian slaves who died.

In his petition addressed to Monsieur de Salmon, first judge of the Superior Council, Father Matthias complained that the treasurer disregarded the ordinance in the Code Noir of the king of France who "wills and intends that the masters be obligated to inter the bodies of their baptized slaves in the cemetery, with the ceremonies of the Church." He further demanded that the official be cited and sentenced and that the body be exhumed and reinterred in St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery, according to the rites of the Church.

The petition, which was not required to be brought by the attorney general, demonstrated the courage of the priest, who did not hesitate to attack a high official to protect of rights of someone of humble birth who had died.

The judge acted immediately, ordering the defendant to be cited and "that the body of said negress be exhumed to be transported to the cemetery of this city."

Within three weeks of the suit being brought, the court ordered the body to be exhumed and reinterred in the cemetery, assessed fines that were applied to fencing around St. Peter's and prohibited any similar violations in the future.

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In 2015, members of the Treme Brass Band led a second-line procession from St. Augustine Church to St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 to honor the lives of 15 persons – some of whom may have been slaves – whose bones were recovered in a 2011 excavation of the old St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery during renovation of a French Quarter property.

CEMETERIES

the funeral service at any church from July 1 through December 1. As the city was predominantly Catholic and St. Louis Church was the only Catholic church in New Orleans, it was decided to establish a separate site for funeral services.

Two lots on Rampart Street at the corner of Conti Street were sold to the wardens of St. Louis Church for $425 for the construction of a chapel, which would be outside the city limits. Père Antoine (Friar Antonio de Sedella), vicar general of the diocese and priest of St. Louis Church, blessed the Old Mortuary Chapel, which began on All Saints' Day 1827 to receive bodies of the deceased and provided for religious services. The burial procession was just a few, short blocks to St. Louis Cemeteries Nos. 1 and 2. That chapel became the current Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in the 400 block of North Rampart Street.

Yellow fever precautions

"The reason that there was a mortuary chapel is because during these epidemics – especially of yellow fever – we had tens of thousands of people dying," Leumas said, noting that there were yellow fever epidemics in the 1820s and especially the 1850s when some 40,000 people died.

"Proportionally, a large amount of the city was lost in several waves of epidemics. We had typhoid at some point, we had cholera at some point, but most of them were yellow fever based," she said, adding that the last yellow fever epidemic that hit New Orleans was in 1905 that took the life of Archbishop Placide Louis Chapelle as one of its last victims.

For those who did succumb to one of the epidemics, "they were then buried or processed" from the mortuary chapel "rather than bringing those bodies into the city," she said.

"If they died in the city, they would have died on the canal, the Irish Channel, building all of those canals as they were dropping. When you died, you died at home, you were waked at home. The body, instead of going to a church, your church, would have gone to that chapel for the service, which was outside the gates" of the city at the time, Leumas said.

As the city grew in population and ethnic diversity and expanded outward from the French Quarter into the Central Business District and newer neighborhoods, more cemeteries were created. St. Louis No. 2 opened in 1823, only a few blocks from its predecessor. St. Louis No. 3, two miles away from the original site, opened in 1854.

Today, there are 13 archdiocesan cemeteries in New Orleans, including St. Patrick Nos. 1, 2 and 3, initially established in 1841; St. Joseph Nos. 1 and 2, initially established in 1854; St. Vincent de Paul Nos. 1 and 2, initially established in 1859; and St. Roch Nos. 1 and 2, initially established in 1874. St. Charles Cemetery in Luling, the 13th archdiocesan cemetery, was acquired in 1970.

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The first Louisiana Council of the Knights of Columbus is established in New Orleans.

Sacred Heart Orphanage, precursor of Cabrini High School, dedicated March 4.

Annunciation Church in Bogalusa dedicated May 12, the first Catholic church in Washington Parish; Annunciation School opens on Sept. 1, 1939, the first Catholic school in Washington Parish.

The Jesuits in New Orleans merge Loyola College, founded in 1904, and the College of the Immaculate Conception, founded in 1847; the uptown college branch receives a state charter as a university in 1912. The college and high school departments separate in 1911.

1902   1903   1905   1906   1907   1907   1910

1902

St. Scholastica Academy in Covington begins its first year.

James Hubert Blenk is appointed seventh archbishop of New Orleans, April 20.

John Justin Plantevigne becomes the first African-American from the New Orleans Archdiocese ordained for the Josephites, Sept. 21.

1910