



The Louisiana Purchase and New Orleans Catholics

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In 1803, St. Louis Cathedral rector Father Antonio de Sedella recorded in one of his sacramental “notes for posterity,” that on Dec. 20, American Commissioners Guillermo C.C. Claiborne and Guillermo Winkilsson (sic), in the name of the Congress of the United States, took possession of the Louisiana Province from the hands of Don Pedro Clemente Laussat, colonial prefect representing the French Republic.

The transfer, the pastor added, took place “with the customary solemnity and military pomp.”

Quickly shifting power

The rapid transfer of political authority from Spain to France and then to the United States had lasting effects on the Catholic community that worshiped at St. Louis Cathedral.

The cathedral parish included the whole city; cathedral priests also visited vast outlying areas: the near German Coast (upriver from New Orleans), St. Tammany, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Barataria, St. Bernard and Plaquemines. Many early residents in these areas traveled to the cathedral to be married or have their children baptized.

The city’s sole religious



The 1803 Proclamation signed by William C.C. Claiborne in English, French and Spanish on Dec. 20, transferred ownership of the Louisiana Territory from France to the United States. Claiborne was the incoming governor of the territory at the time. The Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas was established 10 years earlier, in 1793, making it the second Catholic diocese in the U.S. (Baltimore was the first.)

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community of women, the Ursuline nuns, staffed a large boarding and day school for girls as well as a long-standing catechetical program for girls and women of African descent. Amid rumors of retrocession to revolutionary France, 16 nuns left for Cuba before the events of late 1803.

The Louisiana Purchase prolonged the vacuum of episcopal administration that began in 1801 when Bishop Luis Peñalver e Cárdenas was transferred to Guatemala. With the death of the cathedral canons who exercised interim authority, local church jurisdiction was unclear.

Père Antoine, as he was popularly known, and Father Patrick Walsh, who claimed the former bishop’s authority, soon clashed. On March 15, 1805, in a tumultuous meeting, the parish trustees and parishioners “elected” Père Antoine as pastor. Father Walsh withdrew to the Ursuline Chapel and a brief, bitter conflict followed.

On Sept. 20, 1805, Rome entrusted the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Louisiana to Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore. His first two vicars general, elderly Father Jean Olivier and Father Louis Sibourd, found an unwelcoming community.

In 1812, Bishop Carroll appointed Sulpician Louis William DuBourg as apostolic administrator. DuBourg’s reception was so inhospitable that he quickly made his residence upriver in St. Louis. When DuBourg went to Rome in 1815 to request that a bishop be named for New Orleans, Rome appointed him to the position, which he reluctantly accepted.

On the recruiting trail

DuBourg spent two years in Europe recruiting clergy and religious and, upon his return, continued to make St. Louis his principal residence. In 1826, the existing diocese was split in two, with New Orleans and St. Louis as diocesan centers. New Orleans was then governed for three years by Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis.

In 1829, 29-year-old Leon de Neckere, already sickly, was named Bishop of New Orleans; he died of yellow fever in 1833. In 1835, Father Antoine Blanc was named Bishop of New Orleans. With Blanc’s installation – more than 30 years after the Louisiana Purchase – the local Catholic leadership vacuum created by Peñalver’s departure 34 years earlier and initially prolonged by the Louisiana Purchase finally ended.

The Louisiana Purchase initiated a fundamental realignment of church and state, cross and crown, for New Orleans Catholics. Throughout the French and Spanish periods, the government and church theoretically worked hand in hand, though it was frequently not so in local practice.

Although Article III of the treaty guaranteed the local population free exercise of their Catholic religion and Governor William C.C. Claiborne assured the Ursulines “that they would be protected in their persons, their property and the Religion of their Choice,” three questions quickly arose: the ownership of church property;

the general role of government in regard to internal church matters; and the authority of the cathedral lay administrators.

The first question was quickly addressed. The American government recognized church property ownership under the Spanish government.

The question of the Catholic Church’s relation to the government and government intervention in internal church matters became fundamental issues that continue in the courts to this day. In addition, the long-standing French and Spanish government subsidies for the clergy, religious and church property soon ended. Church support now needed to come from the local community and, in time, from mission societies such as La Propagation de la foi in France.

The cathedral church wardens (trustees), their role now changed from financial administrators to an elected body, soon claimed the right to appoint a rector and administer parish affairs in general.

Periodic tension between the trustees and bishops came to a head in 1842, when Bishop Antoine Blanc appointed his vicar general, Étienne Rousselon, as cathedral rector. The church wardens refused to accept him, claiming that the Louisiana Purchase transferred to the American people the King of Spain’s right of presentation. As the parish’s democratically elected representatives, they in turn inherited this right. The obstreperous public controversy that followed was decided in favor of the bishop by the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1844.

The Louisiana Purchase also had long-term consequences for the cathedral’s multi-racial, cosmopolitan congregation. In the two decades following 1803, the percentage of white parishioners grew significantly,

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