



Make that fleur de lys, not the common fleur de lis

By Gilles-Antoine Langlois
Contributing writer

The question of the fleur de lys is a mix of fact and legend.

The spelling in French is “lys” and not “lis,” which means that the question concerns an old symbol (lys) rather than a flower (lis). In French, there is no difference in the pronunciation of lis or lys; the difference is only in the spelling.

There is a historical context why, from St. Louis, the ninth king of France, the French began to use the “fleur de lys” as the symbol of the kingdom and the royal authority.

For centuries, in the ancient regime before the French Revolution, people accused of committing a bloody crime against the

king’s law were marked or tattooed on the shoulder with a fleur de lys.

Article 32 of the Code Noir of 1724 used in Louisiana stipulated that in the case of an escaped slave (maroon): “L’esclave fugitif qui aura été en fuite pendant un mois, à compter du jour que son maître l’aura dénoncé en justice, aura les oreilles coupées et sera marqué d’une fleur de lys une épaule; s’il récidive un autre mois pareillement du jour de la dénonciation, il aura le jarret coupé, et il sera marqué d’une fleur de lys sur l’autre épaule; et, la troisième fois, il sera puni de mort.”

“The fugitive slave who has been on the run for a month, counting from the day his master has denounced him in court, will have his ears cut off and will be marked with a fleur de lys on one shoulder;



The French symbol of the fleur de lys can be found all over New Orleans and represents many different things, including royalty of the French in Quebec and Louisiana, the Holy Trinity in the Catholic faith (as seen in top left detail from St. Louis Cathedral) and the New Orleans Saints professional football team.

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refutation of the trustees’ position later formed part of the final legal decision.

An interim peace that was reached included Father Dominic Bach’s brief tenure as rector; he died on Sept. 19, 1843. Bishop Blanc then wrote the trustees, outlining his conditions for the appointment of a new rector. On Oct. 27, the trustee sympathizers held a public meeting, denouncing Bishop Blanc as a usurper. Four days later, the trustees refused the bishop’s conditions and claimed they alone had the right of presentation.

Bishop Blanc charged the trustees with schism and said no priest would be subject to the trustees’ orders. On Nov. 7, 1843, the trustees charged the bishop with schism and further stated that no papal bull could be published without the permission of the sovereign, whose office the people themselves held in Louisiana.

Bishop Blanc again explored the possibility of moving the cathedral to another parish. The trustees also filed

an unsuccessful \$20,000 lawsuit against the bishop for damages to the cathedral resulting from the failure to appoint a rector.

Early in 1844, the trustees filed their case against Bishop Blanc in parish court. On Feb. 25, the local court decided against them. On March 20, the trustees appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court. Three months later, the Supreme Court also decided against the trustees, noting that all parallels regarding church-state relations in European countries or colonies and the United States were irrelevant; the trustees’ claim to the Spanish king’s authority was without merit. The court also asserted it could not authorize the wardens to intervene in Catholic internal doctrinal and disciplinary matters.

The controversy also had a democratic conclusion. At the trustee elections later in 1844, a complete slate of new trustees, favorable to the bishop, was elected. Father Constantine Maenhaut was reinstated as rector, a position he held until his death in 1866; St. Louis remained New Orleans’ cathedral parish.

if he repeats another and, likewise, on the day of the denunciation, he shall have his shank (leg) cut off, and he shall be marked with a lily flower on the other shoulder; and the third time he shall be punished with death.”

Branding with the fleur de lys was the same rule in France, so we cannot link the fleur de lys exclusively to slavery. It refers to the old times in France when the same symbol could be placed on the flag of the royalty and on the shoulder of a criminal – representing the power of

the king.

The fleur de lys was commonly used in decoration (wooden, iron, painting work, etc.) in Quebec and Louisiana during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, in memory of the French presence. It was adopted on the flag of New Orleans for the Bicentennial of the City in 1918, then by Quebec in 1948 and by the Saints (NFL) of New Orleans in 1967, for example.

Let’s go back in history: Why did King Louis IX decide to use the fleur de lys as a symbol of royalty? The rea-

son is probably that for a very long time, since the reign of Clovis (5th-6th centuries), the fleur de lys was given as a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

In 496, Clovis won the battle of Tolbiac against the Germans by exchanging his shield, adorned with three toads, for another, adorned with three fleurs de lys.

That became the symbol of the strength of faith in a Catholic country.

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