



St. Charles Borromeo: Second-oldest parish (1723)

By Christine Bordelon
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It was known for 100 years as the “Little Red Church,” standing as a landmark for travelers on the Mississippi River. But historical records (according to “A Southern Catholic Heritage,” Volume 1 written by Dr. Charles Nolan) show that St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, abutting River Road and the Mississippi River in Destrehan, actually grew from St. Jean des Allemands (St. John the Baptist) Church established in 1723 in Edgard on the river’s west bank, 38 miles from New Orleans.

Here in 1722, French Capuchin missionaries approved by the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome and appointed by the vicar general of the bishop of Quebec served a mostly Catholic German population that first arrived in 1719-21 to escape war and start a new life in the Americas.

The ‘Gold Coast’

Their home would be on free land obtained from the Company of the Indies (La Compagnie des Indes). Many of the new German Coast settlers came as workers with the Company of the Indies that German-Swedish officer Karl (Charles) Friedrich D’Arensbourg brought here in 1721. The German Coast also was called the Cote D’or, or Gold Coast, for its “food, family and faith,” according to Roger Baudier’s “The Catholic Church in Louisiana.”

When the population shifted to the east bank and included French settlers, a new church dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo in Destrehan was built in 1740 on the old Trinity Plantation. A cemetery on its west side is the oldest existing cemetery of Germans on the river, according to “A Southern Catholic Heritage.” It dates to 1740, but was moved when the Mississippi River levees were built. Remains were transferred to a new



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What was known as the “Little Red Church” in Destrehan, predecessor of St. Charles Borromeo Church.

cemetery.

When fire destroyed the original log church, a new frame church painted red was built in 1806. A rectory fire in 1877 destroyed some parish records. The only records remaining today in the archdiocesan archives start in 1896.

Troubling times

In 1890, Archbishop Francis Janssens placed an interdict and closed the church when church trustees would not submit a new charter showing church ownership. A new charter was adopted in 1918, and church ownership reverted to the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

The parish’s current Spanish Colonial-style stucco church was built in 1921, with the foundation laid in 1918 under Father John Basty, who was pastor from 1918-49. It was designed by Burton and Bendernagel architects of New Orleans, and built by A.C. Babin and Sons of New Orleans for \$47,379.19.

It was blessed and dedicated on Jan. 25, 1922, by Archbishop John Shaw. The bell for the new church was donated by George Kugler and made by the Menelly Bell Company and was blessed by Bishop J.M. Laval Nov. 26, 1921. The original parish parcel of land – 10 by 40 arpents – was donated to the

church for religious purposes by Spain in 1770. Seven years later, another 40 arpents was granted for a total of 617.68 acres. The land was registered with the U.S. government in 1821. E.B. Rowan bought 600 acres of parish land in 1902 for \$40,000.

The parish’s elementary school building was built in 1929 and was ministered by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. In 1933, the original church organ was donated for \$2,665.35. The auditorium (Infant Jesus Hall) and school annex were built in 1936. Father Basty opened a chapel in 1942 for the people of Norco, the Chapel of Sacred Heart. In 1956, it became a separate parish and Father Basty bought St. Matthias Church in New Orleans for \$1,000 and had it moved and rebuilt in Norco for parish use.

Other parish expansions: St. Charles Borromeo School in 1951, 1953 and 1954; and the building of Immaculate Conception Hall in 1950. When Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965, the church incurred more than \$14,000 in damages.

Parish buildings were renovated in 1972 for the parish’s 250th anniversary in 1973. Gov. Edwin Edwards came to the celebration.

While fairs were never used to sustain the parish, the



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The present-day Spanish-Colonial St. Charles Borromeo Church was blessed and dedicated in 1922 by Archbishop John Shaw.

popular Little Red Church Food and Fun Festival has been in place since 1980 and is held the first week in May. Today, St. Charles Borromeo has 2,200 registered families and remains a generous parish. Just recently, parishioners contributed more than \$6,000 in gift cards for St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic Church in Beaumont, Texas, and more than 100 backpacks for St. Anne Catholic

School, also in Beaumont after the flooding from Hurricane Harvey. It has a Ministry of Care Pantry that distributes Thanksgiving baskets.

(Also referenced for this article was the “250th Anniversary Celebration St. Charles Borromeo Parish” publication, published in 1973.)

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Louisiana was part of Archdiocese of Quebec

The first explorers of Louisiana traveled down the Mississippi River from Canada. Robert Cavalier de la Salle planted a cross and a plaque with a fleur de lys on Louisiana soil in 1682, “claiming the lower Mississippi Valley in the name of God and the French King and baptized the colony ‘Louisiane’ in honor of Louis XIV.” An early map of the Americas shows ‘Louisiane’ near the tomb of Francois de Laval (canonized in 2014) inside the Notre-Dame de Quebec Basilica-Cathedral in Old Quebec. It is North America’s first cathedral, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Quebec and the Catholic faith in the New World. Louisiana was once governed ecclesiastically from Paris and the See of Quebec.