First Presbyterian Church

5401 South Claiborne Avenue

The congregations of the First Presbyterian Church and the First Unitarian-Universalist Church hearken back to common roots in 1818 and thus rank among the oldest non-Catholic parishes in New Orleans. (Christ Church Cathedral celebrated its bicentennial in 2005.)

In its long history, First Presbyterian Church has suffered devastation by fire, wind, flood, and church politics. The first building was dedicated on July 4, 1819, at St. Charles Avenue between Union and Gravier streets. Fifteen years later, its minister, Theodore Clapp, was censured by the Presbyterian synod for his views on universal salvation. He and the majority of his parishioners converted to Congregationalism and evicted the Presbyterians. Soon thereafter Reverend Clapps adherents converted to Unitarianism, and the descendants of that congregation now worship across the street from First Presbyterian Church. The ousted Presbyterians worshiped temporarily in a former warehouse opposite Lafayette Square.

The next First Presbyterian Church, in Greek Revival style, was built in 1835 but was destroyed by fire in 1854. Plans for rebuilding began immediately, and Henry Howard designed an impressive new Gothic-style church on Lafayette Square, where the first services were held in November 1857. A novel feature was the use of cast iron in some of the construction. Unfortunately, the Hurricane of 1915 toppled the steeple, which had been the tallest in town, and inflicted other major damage. The church was rebuilt the following year but with a much shorter tower in lieu of the steeple.

By the 1930s many of the church members had moved uptown, and when the federal government showed interest in the property on Lafayette Square, the congregation decided to relocate uptown. The neo-Gothic building seen today, designed by Sam Stone and Douglas Freret, was dedicated in April 1939.

The windows of opalescent glass along the side walls came from the previous church. This American glass provides a soft glow while shielding the worshipers from the busy world outside.

The massive Memorial Window behind the altar dates to the construction of the church and was created specifically for this building by the Emil Frei Company of St. Louis. It is marvelous, rich in symbolism and detail. These symbols relate the life of Christ, and its balance of colors includes the proportions of blues and other colors that scholars consider correct for the neo-gothic style.

Built for the Lafayette Square church, the Austin organ celebrated its centenary in 2016. Since then, a trumpet-en-chamade and a new Austin console have been added. A Goodrich organ installed in the 1800s, a Hall and Erben organ in the 1820s, and a Hutchings model in the 1870s all preceded the Austin instrument.

First Presbyterian Church and First Unitarian Universalist Church, neighbors across the street, suffered severe flooding after Hurricane Katrina. Both are once again serving as spiritual homes to their devoted parishioners.

*Visited*

*March 20, 1994*

*March 7, 2010*

Samuel Wilson, Jr., *The First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans: Its Building and Its Ministers.* 1988. New Orleans: The Louisiana Landmarks Society.

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