St. Louis Cathedral

(Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis, King of France)

Jackson Square

Since 1727 New Orleanians have worshiped on this site, although not always in such a striking building. In the first years of the settlement, the construction of homes and of commercial and government buildings took priority for architects and financiers. Several makeshift worship places, including a tavern and half of a wretched warehouse, preceded a brick-and-wood church designed by Adrien De Pauger. Dedicated to Louis IX, it served from 1727 until 1788, when it succumbed to the Good Friday fire. The homeless parish then celebrated Mass in a succession of structures: government buildings, Charity Hospital, and the Ursuline Chapel.

Don Andrés Almonester y Roxas, a Spaniard with a gift for successful real estate ventures in New Orleans (and father of the Baroness de Pontalba), underwrote much of the construction of the new church, dedicated on Christmas Eve, 1794. Its exterior was plastered, and the hexagonal towers on the front corners bore bell-shaped roofs. In 1819 the City Council paid for a clock and bell, as well as a central tower designed by Benjamin H. B. Latrobe to house them. The bell, named Victoire, commemorated the 1815 victory over the British and still rings hourly. St. Louis Cathedral housed the citys only Catholic parish until the establishment of St. Patricks Church in the American sector in 1833.

The Cathedral, however, suffered from some of the problems that have plagued other churches in this city: it could not accommodate its growing congregation, and structural weaknesses developed. In addition, the new architecture on Jackson Square dwarfed the aging cathedral. As a result, the plans of J. N. B. de Pouilly for a new building were finally approved, almost all the old church was razed, and in December 1851 the present structure was dedicated. The ceremony lasted four hours and included a 21-gun salute.

Now over 150 years old, the Cathedral has undergone several renovations of its interior decorations. Dramatic baroque paintings greet the visitor or worshiper. Originally painted in 1872-1873 by Erasmus Humbrecht, the murals have been repainted several times. They include the Sacrifice of the Divine Lamb (ceiling over the altar); St. Louis IX Announcing the Seventh Crusade (wall behind the great altar); and the Nativity of Christ, Jesus Bestowing the Primacy on Peter, and the Archangel Michael (ceiling of the nave). The center altar dates to 1852.

Music has always been an important part of worship at the Cathedral, and the choir has long been praised. Above the organ pipes are painted three figures associated with music: King David, St. Cecilia, patroness of music, and Pope Gregory, father of the Gregorian chant.

The official status of St. Louis Cathedral has risen over the centuries. At first a parish church, it was elevated to a cathedral, as mother church of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas, in 1793. The designation of the church as a metropolitan cathedral, seat of an archbishop, is indicated by the patriarchal, or double-barred, cross on the roof of each tower. In 1964 Pope Paul VI bestowed upon the building the title of Basilica of St. Louis, King of France, for the spaciousness and splendor of the edifice, and the remembrance of historical events [occurring in it]. Its basilica status is symbolized by the twelve stylized fleury crosses on the candle brackets on the walls and by the *canopeum* (partly opened umbrella) and basilica bell flanking the altar. In 1966 Archbishop Hannan restored the namebeloved by New Orleanians--St Louis Cathedral, although the church remains a minor basilica.

The stained glass of the Cathedral adds to the pervasive feeling of light. Overhead glow amber windows, probably the oldest in the cathedral, and at the balcony level the pastel Victorian-style art glass windows complement the interior colors. The elaborate principal windows are signed and dated 1929 by the Oidtmann Studios in Linnich, Germany, and portray the life of St. Louis IX (12141270). Unseen behind the altar are two patterned windows, probably American and possibly dating to the 1890s. The downstream tower holds two windows portraying St. Louis by the Emil Frei Studios of St. Louis but are not recognizable as stained glass because their light source was blocked during a renovation. They date from the 1960s and reflect the role of Spain in the development of this diocese.

Two windows by New Orleans artist Ruth Goliwas honor the Venerable Henriette Delille; these are found in the Henriette Delille Prayer Room, housed in a former baptistery.

**St. Louis Cathedral Windows**

Altar

Louis IX as a boy being tutored by his mother, Louis receives keys to the city of

Queen Blanche of Castile Damietta, Egypt, conquered by the French in 1249

Louis crowned, at age 12 (1226) Louis ministers to the sick (7th Crusade)

Marriage of Louis to Marguerite of Provence (1234) Louis dies during the 8th Crusade (1270)

Louis builds Sainte Chapelle (ca. 1241) Body of King Louis IX returns to France (1271)

Louis leaves for 7th Crusade (1248) Louis is canonized by Pope Boniface VIII (1297)

**Organs of St. Louis Cathedral**

The story of its predecessors is long and sketchy. It is believed that the 1727 building was equipped with an organ sometime after 1732. This organ, if it did exist, would certainly have been brought from France. The 1794 structure, according to written accounts, had an organ by 1800. This, too, would have been imported from France or Spain.

One pamphlet mentions the importation of yet another French organ in 1832, but this cannot be confirmed. The contract for rebuilding the Cathedral in 1849 called for refurbishing the existing organ, although the amount actually spent $2,000indicates that a new organ was purchased instead.

Organs for this building include:

1850: Henry Erben

1870: Pilcher (2 manuals)

1930s: Austin Opus 868 (3 manuals, 14 stops)

1950s: M. P. Möller Opus 8158 (3 manuals, 76 stops)

1967 (1975?): modifications and upgrades by Otto Hoffman, from Texas

2002: Holtkamp upgrades to the Möller organ (3 manuals, 77 stops)

post-Katrina: new Holtkamp instrument

*Visited*

*September 27, 1998*

*October 28, 2018*

See also: Leonard Victor Huber, *The Basilica on Jackson Square: The History of St. Louis Cathedral and Its Predecessors, 1727-1987.* 1989.

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Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, 2021.