St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church

River Road, Convent

Like St. James Parish, the story of St. Michael Church includes both sides of the Mississippi. Its history began in 1770 on the West Bank as St. Jacques de Cabahanoce (now St. James Catholic Church), and in 1807 St. Michael’s was incorporated as an independent parish on the East Bank.

Although most sources state that work began on the current church in 1825, the “cornerstone,” over the front door documents the year 1831. Thus, the building is about as old as any church in New Orleans (the Mortuary Chapel on Rampart was built in 1826–1827). The reference to Belgium in the cornerstone is an acknowledgment of generous donations from that country.

The painting of St. Michael over the altar, as well as the statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, date to the original construction, and the hand-carved altar was imported from Paris after the 1889 World’s Fair. The years 1869–1885 also saw the addition of the transept and the sacristy, as well as a steeple. Hurricane Betsy removed the steeple, but the funds raised for replacing it were used instead to replace the parish hall. An extensive renovation around 2000 by the Conrad Schmitt Studio restored the interior to its original beauty.

Dating to 1857, the Henry Erben organ is the oldest continuously operating pipe organ in the state and has been cited by the Organ Historical Society for its exceptional historic merit. Its electric motor dates to the 1940s. For several decades the New Orleans chapter of the Organ Historical Society has helped preserve and bring attention to the organ, and Roy Redman of Fort Worth restored it completely in 2005–2006. A unique feature of St. Michael Church is the 1876 Lourdes Grotto, which is built from clinkers created by the process of making bagasse.

Other than the windows at the ends of the transept, the stained glass windows in the sanctuary are non-figurative. Rather, their geometric panes in pastel colors create an ambience of peace and warmth. The figurative windows in the transept, sacristy, and grotto may date to the 1869–1885 additions.

St. Michael Church has participated actively in the education of area youths, beginning in 1825 with St. Michael’s Academy run by the Religious of the Sacred Heart for girls. In 1867 the St. Joseph School was established as the first parochial school for African Americans in the South. Mother Katharine (now St. Katharine) Drexel contributed to the support of the school in the 1930s.

**Windows of St. Michael the Archangel Church**

Grotto

St. Simon Stock & scapular St. Dominic

Revelation at Lourdes Mary Appearing to the

Children of La Salette (1846)

Sacristy Area

St. Augustine St. Philomena

Altar

St. Mary St. Joseph

Above the entrance

Rose window