Academy began as institute for girls

Sacred Heart started with eight students and two nuns

Jim Bradshaw
jbradshaw@theadvertiser.com

GRAND COTEAU — When the Academy of the Sacred Heart accepted its first eight students, it was called the Institute for the Education of Young Women.

That was in October 1821, after Mrs. Charles Smith offered the Sisters a two-story building, 50 acres of land and enough money for two nuns to come to Louisiana from their convent in St. Charles, Mo.

It recently was discovered that Smith may have intended for two schools to be built on the land but that fact was long ago hidden away in the historical record.

The two nuns’ were Mother Eugénie Aude and Sister Mary Layton. They traveled down the Mississippi River to New Orleans by steamboat, and then crossed the Atchafalaya Basin by flatboat, horseback, and ox cart, according to historical documents kept by the school.

When they got to Grand Coteau, the two-story building they’d been promised was indeed on the land, but it was more barn than convent, with dirt floors and no amenities.

Nonetheless, the two women were able to turn the building into a convent and classrooms and begin their first courses of instruction. Then, as now, the school drew young women from far away.

According to old records, one of the first students was from Philadelphia, two were from New Orleans, two from Opelousas, and one from Grand Coteau. Two other young women were enrolled but were traveling in France when the school term began.

The main building of the present academy was constructed in 1830, using bricks made from the soil of nearby fields.

The school has been in continuous operation since its founding, despite floods, epidemics and battles fought around it during the Civil War.

During the war, it was given the personal protection of Gen. Nathaniel Banks, commander of the invading Federal army, because his daughter was taught by the Religious of the Sacred Heart in New York.