A Tale of Two Cities

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times in the summer of 1843 when Pierre Antoine Désiré Mégrét traveled down to the southern part of Lafayette Parish, which eventually became part of Vermilion Parish. The Catholic priest purchased property to create a Catholic Church and subsequently the town of Abbeville. Pére Mégrét created his church after arguments between him and a group of laymen from the St. John the Evangelist Church of Vermilion, today's St. John's Cathedral of Lafayette. The group of laymen were called "Marguilliers," they were wardens of the church and were elected by the church members.

Back in the day, before 1844, a church was not allowed to own real property in America. A church was incorporated as a separate body and the corporation was handled by wardens of the church. Until the late 19th century, all of the priests in Louisiana spoke French, which was the primary language during that period. When the first priest arrived, they were shocked to learn that many of the outstanding citizens of Vermilion, both Catholic and Protestant, were members in good standing with a local masonic lodge. This led the clergy to attempt reform of their parishioners' religious practices and attitudes. During the process, the priests managed to alienate many of the local Catholics.

Problems began in 1828, when the St. John Church wardens refused to pay the salary of the local priest, the Rev. Peyret. The conflict deteriorated to the point that threats were made against the life of Peyreti. By the time Pére Mégrét arrived in 1842, the situation had reached its breaking point. Personal attacks and name calling through the local newspaper was the norm. To counterattack the newspaper assaults, Mégrét created a newspaper of his own for a time to advance his cause. The paper was named L'Union, which "...was to be religious, political, scientific, and literary" in nature.

By this time Pére Mégrét was frustrated with the entire situation. He purchased 160 arpents of farmland from Joseph and Clarisse (Trahan) LeBlanc for $400 in July of 1843. The property was located 3 miles upriver from Perry's Bridge and what would later become part of Vermilion Parish. Meanwhile, arguments between Pére Mégrét and the wardens of St. John came to a head in late 1843 when the wardens physically attacked Pére Mégrét on the street in full view of the town sheriff. Pére described his attackers as, "...four masons and the other three were no better."

Pére Mégrét didn't respond the way his attackers would have liked. He refused to say mass and left the church. Apparently, the parishioners were fed up too. A new election was held at St. John's Church of Vermilion and the wardens were voted out. They were ousted but refused to leave. The wardens arranged another election, however, at the encouragement of Pére Mégrét, the parishioners refused to vote. The old clique had finally been defeated when their support disintegrated.

The LeBlanc farm that Pére Mégrét had purchased measured four arpents fronting the Vermilion River by forty arpents deep. The LeBlanc family home was remodeled and dedicated in 1844 as St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church. Thus, Joseph LeBlanc's farm became La Chapelle, and eventually La Ville de l'Abbe or Abbeville. Pére Mégrét led mass at St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church and at St. John's Catholic Church of Vermilion once the feud was settled.

Nearly a decade later, in August of 1853, all of south Louisiana was struck by an unusually large yellow fever epidemic. There was a mass exodus of citizens leaving the surrounding towns in an attempt to avoid the deadly disease. Pére Mégrét was one of the local heroes, who stayed during the entire epidemic, nursing the sick and ministering to the dying. Toward the end of the epidemic, Pére Mégrét had retired to a plantation near Cote Gelee (Broussard), only returning to Vermilionville when his slave died.

Unfortunately, on Dec. 5, 1853, Pére Mégrét had succumbed to the epidemic. He was 56 years of age. Pére Mégrét's church had served its purpose; a new St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church was built sometime in 1884.

On Feb. 9, 1901, an interesting article reported "they (the LeBlancs) have contracted for a large lot of page-woven wire fencing and will enclose the property with a fence which will be horse high, bull strong, and pig tight." They were descendants of the LeBlanc family whose farm was sold to Pére Mégrét in 1843 and subsequently became the site of Abbeville. Ironically, they were also the ones who later purchased and develop Capt. Robert Perry's property, which included the land that Pére Mégrét had originally hoped to purchase for his church.

Incidentally, Joseph LeBlanc was the first LeBlanc to settle in what is now Vermilion Parish. He was a descendant of Daniel LeBlanc, who was born in 1626 in Martaize, France. In 1645, he married Francoise Gaudet and they lived in Port Royal, Acadie, which is now Nova Scotia. Allen LeBlanc of Abbeville, who contributed to this and many other articles, is a direct descendant of Joseph and Daniel LeBlanc. Some of the information in this article was obtained from "The Center—A History of the Development of Lafayette, Louisiana" written in 1972 by J. Philip Dismukes.

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