First Church of Christ, Scientist, was completed on Park Boulevard in the Garden District in 1920.

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER Advocate staff writer

First Church of Christ, Scientist, listed on National Register of Historic Places

At the edge of Baton Rouge's Garden District is one of the city's most beautiful little churches, the First Church of Christ, Scientist. The brick, colonial-style building was completed on Park Boulevard in 1926 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Christian Science was founded in Boston in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy and a group of her followers. In 1866, Eddy had an immediate recovery from a severe injury after reading an account of healing in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

"The Bible was my textbook. It answered my questions as to how I was healed," Eddy later published her principle work, "Science and Health," later called "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures." This book, described as the textbook of Christian Science, contains the basic tenets of the religion.

By the time Eddy died in 1910 branches of the church extended throughout the United States and around the world.

The local congregation dates to 1916 when a group of students of Christian Science began holding informal meetings in a member's home. Later that year they were joined by others from Prairieville.

They rented space in the Singletary building on Third Street and began holding services on Sundays and Wednesdays evenings. They also opened a reading room for the study of Christian Science literature.


Most prominent among the charter members was J.Y. Sanders Jr., an attorney and son of Gov. J.Y. Sanders, who served from 1908 to 1912. J.Y. Sanders Jr., who grew up as a Baptist, spent his senior year in law school at Thlane University.

"Col. Hester was a student of Christian Science," said Mary Elizabeth Sanders, daughter of J.Y. Sanders Jr. "My father was a debater. Being a Baptist, he would argue Christian Science with Col. Hester. Col. Hester got tired of this upstart, so he presented him with a Bible and a Book of Common Prayer."
First Church of Christ, Scientist, in March 1926, and the building was completed in July.

During the time of construction, services were held in the auditorium of Dufrocq school two blocks away.

The new church was built to seat 300 including seating in a balcony over the front entrance. "When the church was built in 1925, they hoped to build more balconies, but they were never needed," Mary Elizabeth Sanders said.

In 1944, Moore left the church and built the church, pictured above, on North Boulevard two years later. The building now houses an architectural firm.

Some time ago, Sunday services were moved to 10 a.m. "We wanted to beat the Baptists to the podium," Moore said.

Reading and study are an important part of the religion, and congregations establish Christian Science reading rooms. The King James version of the Bible, the writings of Eddy and all authorized Christian Science literature published by the Christian Science Publishing Society in Boston are available in the reading rooms.

First Church of Christ, Scientist, established its first reading room in the Louisiana National Bank building in the early 1920s. It was later moved to the ground floor of the Louisiana Hotel and from there to 410 Laurel St. In 1964, a reading room was opened at 207 Convention St.

In later years, the reading room was located in the Rebel Shopping Center until it was moved to a church addition that opens on Wisteria Street.

Christian Science churches have no minister but are led by readers, who sit on the left of the rostrum, reads from "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures." The second reader, seated on the right, reads the Bible.

Tommy Simmons, a fourth-generation Christian Scientist, grew up in the Second Church on North Boulevard but later joined the First Church. She explained that, unlike many other denominations, only children attend Sunday school in Christian Science churches.

She remembers when members of First Church would drop their children at Sunday school and then walk down together to Griffon's Drug Store for a cup of coffee before they attended church at 11 a.m.

"I had come back a long time before that," Moore said.

Some members were thwarted, others were leaving during the last hymn. "Victor Sessions would say, 'Services are not over until the benediction,'" Mary Elizabeth Sanders said.

J.Y. Sanders Jr. died in 1960 after an outstanding career as a lawyer, legislator and community leader. He served as a state senator and in the U.S. House of Representatives from the same district that his father had represented.


"In his many activities, both in private and in public service, J.Y. Sanders Jr., was known for unusual ability and his devotion to the public good. He believed in trying to do what he thought was right. His outstanding service to the state was as a foe to the Louisiana corruption of the late 20s and early 30s and as a foe to the dictatorship which was set up in this state during those years," the editorial said.

Tom Dutton, a New Orleans businessman who once belonged to the local clairy Baker's funeral service.

"He (Tom Dutton) told me of my grief at my father's funeral," Mary Elizabeth Sanders said. She and her father were extremely close, and she was devastated at his death.

"He just looked me in the eye. He was telling me, 'Your father would not approve of that,'" she said.

J.Y. Sanders Jr.'s father, Gov. J.Y. Sanders, never did become a Christian Scientist "but he was the attorney who made it legal for Christian Science practitioners to practice in this state," Mary Elizabeth Sanders said.

When the Second Church closed, its congregation was combined with First Church. "We used that money to remodel the church," Mary Elizabeth Sanders said.

The $20,000 remodeling project in 1968 included the addition of a covered canopy area with iron grillwork at the front of the church. Beveled glass doors were added opening to the auditorium, which was painted a pale peach.

Mary Elizabeth Sanders continues to be active in the church her father helped establish. She has served on the board, as chairman of the board and as a Sunday school teacher since she joined in 1946.

At present, she serves as clerk of the church. She writes letters, keeps the minutes and maintains the church files.

Moore, too, has remained an active member. She has served on the board, taught Sunday school, worked as librarian and served as an usher.

It has been nearly a century since the church was built. "We tell our religion still attracts followers from all over the world," Christian Scientists continue to return to study her writings.

Her words, "Divine Love always has met and always will meet everyone's need," are in constant view at the front of the little church on Park Boulevard.

Even though the membership of the local church is small, services are still held every Sunday and every Wednesday.

These days, there are even some children in the church nursery. "We are grateful to say that we have kids back here now," Mary Elizabeth Sanders said.