reaching for the Heavens

Photographs by Arthur D. Lack / Text by John Stanford

A St. Martin du Tour Catholic Church
ST. MARTINVILLE — Established in 1765 by French missionaries, St. Martin du Tour Catholic Church is one of the oldest parishes in Louisiana. The church is named for a fourth-century missionary bishop who began his adult life as a soldier in the Roman army.

According to tradition, the church’s baptismal font and early crypt were gifts from King Louis XIV of France.

The belfry houses seven bells, the largest of which weighs 2,500 pounds. In keeping with an old tradition, the bells were named and baptized.

The first four bells, Agathe, Marie-Angélique, Marie Stephonie and Marie Auguste, were dedicated in the 1690s.

The last three, Marie Léontie, Marie Antoine and Marie Editha were added in the 20th century.

St. Peter Catholic Church
NEW IBERIA — Built in 1930, St. Peter Catholic Church shows Spanish influence in its design. Twin towers, each adorned with twin windows, French doors and black iron balconies, rise 90 feet above the main floor. Rosaries hang from the upper curves of the roofs. Inside the church, a large column supports a dome above the altar. The area of the rese timent is a detailed octagon, inspired by the Basilica of Trapen en Rome, built in 98 B.C. The church was built to replace an earlier wooden church in 1836 and was dedicated to St. Peter, Prince of Apostles. The first church stood on the land now occupied by the church parking lot. Prior to establishment of the church and the parish of New Iberia, the area had been a mission of St. Martinville.

A Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist
LAFAYETTE — The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist stands on property donated by Jean Mouton, the founder of what is now Lafayette. The structure dating on St. John Street is the third to occupy the property and to bear the name.

The first church, a converted sugar mill, was blessed in 1817. Soon after the end of the Civil War, the church was demolished and a new wood-frame church was built on the site in 1867, with a steeple being added in 1889. The new steeple collapsed during a storm in 1871 and the church was rebuilt in 1877, preserving its original structure.

The present brick edifice was completed in 1916 under the direction of Monsignor J.V. Toups, who was the vicar-general of the diocese in 1916 when the Diocese of Lafayette was established. The church received the new designation, "cathedral," with John B. Jeannet serving as Lafayette's first bishop.

Romantic arches are found throughout the church under a ceiling that rises 50 above the floor. During 1984 renovations, marble floors, oak pews and a new organ were installed in the church.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church
GRAND COTEAU — St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, built in 1879, is the second to bear that name. The first church, which had been established in 1818, stood on the land now occupied by Our Lady of the Oaks Retreat House and was used for meetings, Catholicism and the celebration of French Masses until it was dismantled in 1918. The original plans for the building, designed for an asylum by New Orleans architect James Fekete, called for a brick structure. The $60,000 construction costs for the proposed church were prohibitive, however, and the plans were modified to bring the final expenditure down to $15,000, a sum raised by the Julaines and the Sacred Heart sisters.

New Orleans architect George Hendel and completed in 1891. It was again gutted by the 1961, leaving only the exterior structure intact. Under Monsignor Richard Moroney, an extensive restoration project was completed in 1980. The six bells housed in the tower were removed from the area, the largest and smallest bells were restored. The largest bell bears the name of St. Joan of Arc, said to have heard the voice of God in the village church bells.

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