Mississippi Valley’s oldest church
Beacon on the river

St. Gabriel Church dates back to arrival of Acadians

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The interior of the Gothic-style church, as seen from the choir loft.

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Original windows of the 1769 church are intact.

Acadians—men with names like LeBlanc, Leardi, and Broussard—were the first to settle down near the Mississippi River in the late 1700s. They established villages and churches, including the Old St. Gabriel Church, which dates back to 1767. Today, the church is a symbol of the Acadian heritage and a见证 of the region’s rich history.

The church was built by the Acadians, a group of French-speaking settlers who arrived in Louisiana in the late 1700s. They called the church the "Manchac Church" because it was located near the Manchac Swamp.

The church was originally a simple structure with a square plan and a gable roof. Over time, the church was expanded and modified to meet the needs of the community. The nave was extended, and a small tower was added to the west end of the church.

The church was consecrated in 1799, and the sanctuary was completed in 1804. The church was damaged in a storm in 1813 and was repaired in 1816. The church was again damaged in a storm in 1817 and was repaired in 1818.

Today, the church is a popular destination for tourists and history buffs. The church is open to the public, and visitors can tour the historic building and learn about the Acadian heritage.

The church is located on the banks of the Mississippi River in St. Gabriel, Louisiana. The church is a historical landmark and a testament to the Acadian heritage of the area.

The church was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1969. The church is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Two choices in restoration

Preservationists have two choices in restoring the church: restore it to the 1870s Gothic design or reconstruct it to look like the original 1769 church. Opinions differ. “Most preservationists would rather see the building restored to the 1870s style but be able to see the frame of the older structure,” Edwards said.

“However, my attitude is that each building is unique. You should let the circumstances that surround each individual building determine how you restore it. We have lots and lots of Gothic-idiom churches in Louisiana, and from the outside, St. Gabriel looks no different from those other churches. “What’s inside is absolutely unique in the Mississippi River Valley. Only one other church has been restored, in Kohokia, Ill. It is a timber-frame church with no gallery. It has some aspects of the framing, like the under ridge. People up there have been claiming it’s the oldest church in the Mississippi Valley. It was built in the 1790s. This one was built 20 years earlier and is more important. I would sympathize with a different approach to restoration for this building. We could reconstruct the original building, providing a unique look at our past which isn’t available anywhere else,” Edwards said.

As a lover of Louisiana’s cultural French past, Edwards said he would like to see the church restored to its original form. Edwards said there’s a house in Pointe Coupee Parish, La Cour House, that he’d like to see moved to a site near the church. La Cour House, built in 1730, was a military post house that survived the Natchez Massacre and was bought by an indigo planter, who moved it and converted it to a plantation house.

“That old Creole plantation house is preserved because it was completely encased in a Victorian house,” he said. “Some day, somebody should get these two buildings together so the public can appreciate what 18th-century architecture was like.”

Sid Gray, a historic building consultant, realized that you can’t look at the outside of a building to determine its historical significance. You have to look at its structure.

“My feelings are there are many things that need to be considered. I’ve been involved with this church for 10 years or so. I have made historic buildings my career. I live in St. Gabriel and knew of the church. I knew it was supposed to be an old church, but it was not until I crawled under the church and went up in the attic that I realized how old it was. I was amazed to find the biggest timber-frame building I have ever seen,” Gray said.

Gray said he enjoys “the process of discovery.” “When a building’s been altered over time to where the building is not recognizable, it becomes a process of detective work. I learn something new everyday. I learn by looking at other old buildings. It adds to my inventory, pieces of the puzzle.”

The old church has not been used as a church in 40 years and needs restoration. Among the debris of generations is lumber dating back to the original church.

But now, “different people have got to put their heads together to decide what to do with the building. The building, as a church, is absolutely one of the rarest buildings not only in Louisiana but on the entire North American continent. What we’re talking about is the survival of a very important old building. Then it becomes a matter of which form it will take,” Gray said.

Gray, who restored the Kleinpeter House, pointed out that there may be other possibilities as to the origins of the Old St. Gabriel Church. He said that the Kleinpeters arrived by boat in 1774 with six sons and two daughters. The Kleinpeters were affluent German Catholic immigrants. The property owned by all the members of that family once stretched from the gates of LSU far out Highland Road.

National Register designation

The church was put on the National Register of Historic Places 20 years ago. It is an old church even in its redesigned form, points out Gene LeBlanc, called the “keeper of the flame” by both Broussard and Gray.

LeBlanc said he “always felt it was a treasure in our midst. I want to keep it, not let it deteriorate. What has happened over the years is its transformation to its present appearance has hidden its original shape and form. I’m not for restoring it to its original form. It’s been that way for over 100 years.

“Everybody in the community who was baptized there, confirmed there, married there, remember it as it looks now. People around would not appreciate changing it. The video, plus the model of the original church, would enable people to see what it was like in its original form,” he said.

“My goal over the past 20 years was to make sure it didn’t deteriorate. Pioneer Chemical helped by donating the money to put a new roof on the church, and Pioneer and CIBA split the cost of painting it.”

He said his family has lived in St. Gabriel for generations; in fact, some branches of his family were among the Acadians who first settled there.