The Louisiana Architect

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Academy of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau

Sacred Heart Academy of Grand Coteau, Louisiana
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STRONGWALL Reinforcing Grips Masonry Walls Four Ways!
Academy of the Sacred Heart

GRAND COTEAU, LOUISIANA

On the outskirts of the little Acadian town of Grand Coteau, on a large site established with pines and live oaks, camellias and other flowering plants, stands the old Academy of the Sacred Heart. The large, three-storied, galleried and dormered main building is flanked on one end by a handsome Greek revival chapel and on the other by compatible buildings of more modern construction. The Academy was established in 1821 in the heart of French-Acadian country by nuns sent from near St. Louis, Missouri, by Blessed Philippe Duchesne, the French founder of the Sacred Heart Order in the United States. She had arrived in New Orleans in 1818 and after a brief but grace-giving visit with the Ursuline nuns there, had proceeded up river to establish her headquarters. Soon afterwards she received an offer from Mrs. Charles Smith a wealthy widow of Grand Coteau, to establish a school there. Mrs. Smith gave the nuns her old French Colonial plantation house which served them for some time.

Within a few years, as the institution grew, a new building was erected at a cost of $9,200.00, a contract being signed on June 12, 1830, for two story brick building which still stands and is the oldest section, the lower center part, of the present building. This first building, about fifty feet in length, was built of red brick laid in Flemish bond, reflecting the growing influence of American architectural style in French Louisiana. This is not surprising for the local superior of the Ursulines, Madame Xavier Murphy and the builder, William Moore, were both obviously of Anglo-Saxon stock rather than French origin. The same style is to be seen in the house that William Brand designed and built in New Orleans in 1831 for Samuel Hermann, now the Christian Woman's Exchange at 820 St. Louis street. The style had also been used in the buildings of the College of Louisiana, (later Centenary College) at Jackson, built in 1832 by Alexander Smith. Americans moving into Louisiana had brought with them this familiar Jeffersonian style of Virginia and other Eastern states, red brick, white trim and green blinds, often with classical white columns. Soon after completion of the first building, Madame Murphy in 1834 contracted with Samuel Young, another local American builder, to enlarge it to more than twice its original size. The contract, dated May 30, 1834 states:

(The building is) to be attached to the East end and to make a part of the new brick convent at that place. The building to be constructed according to a plan thereof...and building shall be seventy eight feet six inches front and be placed on a line with the front of the building above mentioned...the door to be of the same workmanship as those of the building above mentioned...the front door of the building to be so constructed or made as to add beauty to the front...the front door window to be circular and pilasters and all in the rear square heads and finished with architraves...the roof to be composed of red or yellow cypress shingles...the walls of all the rooms shall be well plastered with good strong lime and sound mortar like the first story of the house of Hyppolite Crenich...Evidently the red brick walls of the original building proved unsatisfactory, either from an appearance standpoint or from the practical point of waterproofing, for the entire front walls of both the old and the new buildings were specified to be “well plastered and finished with platter of lime and sharp sand or marble dust, so as to show a uniform front the whole way.” Corner windows were added to the old building at this time, each in front and back, as well as four each in front and back on the new structure. Both buildings had gable ends rather than the hip roof form generally preferred by the French. It is interesting to note the mention of the nearby plantation house, Crenich Point, built in 1831 for Hyppolite Crenich by Samuel Young and Jonathan Harris, carpenter and bricklayer, which was also of red brick with a plastered front. The roof of this notable house, however, is hipped, a concession perhaps to its French owner. The details of doors and windows of the convent including the dormers, compare favorably with the best examples of the Federal and post-colonial styles in New Orleans and elsewhere.

An old photograph in the convent archives shows the appearance of the building before the addition of the present third story. A second addition, however, had been made by the time of this photograph (ca 1860). This was a three story structure at the left end, an addition built between the original building and the chapel. Subsequently, the third story was extended over the entire building, the old dormers being apparently re-used in the new roof. It was probably at this time that the cast iron, galleried columns and railings were added to the entire front in place of the original columns which were of turned wood with wood balusters.

On May 30, 1834, the same day as the contract for the first addition, Samuel Young also contracted with Madame Murphy for the erection of a brick kitchen in the rear. This was a one story building eighty-eight feet long by nineteen and a half wide with a six foot wide gallery. This contract states:

The house to be divided into four rooms, as per plan, by three partitions, two to be of plank and one of brick, with a kitchen fireplace in the room... adjoining the kitchen to have two wash boarders set in its faces; a fireplace in the east end of the building, an inside chimney.

A new kitchen replaced the old one in 1922 preserving something of the original character with the six foot gallery. By another contract dated August 8, 1835, another American builder, Phillip Carroll agreed to build a “Viviers” or pond, 125 feet by 36, five feet deep and to do certain grading and clearing for the fish pond.

The chapel, built in 1850, reflects the changes that the fire of the day; piers, columns and railings were added to the entire front in place of the original columns which were of turned wood with wood balusters.

In 1854, a fire, large brick barn was erected behind the chapel, one hundred and forty feet long and forty wide, with “five arched openings of ten feet wide, with one square door and two square windows on the side facing east.” John Caswell signed a contract on December 2, 1854, to do the brick work for this building for John Doyle. Other early buildings in the rear, used as servants quarters, together with the refectory built by E. W. Phillips of New Iberia in 1899 and more recent buildings designed by Hay's Town, architect, complete one of the most interesting landmark groups in Louisiana.

Contracts and other information quoted here were obtained through the courtesy of the Sacred Heart nuns by Mary Pellingue and Craig W. Mannum, students in Louisiana Architecture at Tulane University. The photographs by Richard Koch some years ago, before the plaster was removed from the brick walls of the main building.
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