B.B. unveils statue in park

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BREAUX BRIDGE — As Gloria Kern’s hands caressed the face of Scholastique Breaux’s statue early Wednesday morning, the crowd of onlookers and passers-by fell silent. Her fingers moved across the alloyed shawl and apron, and the dark patina of the life-size statue shimmered in the morning sun.

“I just love her,” she said. “She’s wonderful!”

Gloria Kern has been blind for more than a dozen years, but she saw as much in the image of the founder of Breaux Bridge as the sighted audience, who continued to watch her stroke the likeness of the homespun Cajun dress worn 170 years ago.

“And she’s so very determined — she knew what the hell she was doing,” Kern said as she felt Scholastique’s left hand on her hip, a rolled plat of Breaux Bridge in her right hand. “Look — she’s looking straight at City Hall.”

The statue had just been removed from the flatbed trailer, on which it had been transported from the foundry in Houston. Workers from Pellerin Marble and Granite, directed by Ray Pellerin, had trussed the 500-pound monument and lowered it gently to the ground so that Kern, wife of Breaux Bridge Mayor Louis Kern, could experience it.

For almost 15 minutes, Kern studied every detail of the figure of the woman who founded Breaux Bridge in 1829, when she was a 33-year-old widow.

Then the sculptor, Celia Soper of Lafayette, joined Kern. Others followed, including the mayor.

Scholastique’s story lay hidden for almost two centuries, buried in the memories of a few who heard the story when they were children from grandparents, tucked away in family Bibles and old church records. There was no comprehensive repository of information on the woman born in 1798, widowed at 31, and a town-builder by 33.

But Scholastique returned to Breaux Bridge Wednesday morning to a small but enthusiastic crowd who applauded and cheered when her statue was finally lowered onto its marble pedestal.

Audrey Bernard of Breaux Bridge is a master weaver and has an abiding interest in historical clothing and textiles. She was asked to help Soper decide what style of clothing Scholastique could have worn in 1829.

“Our first option was to clothe her in what was popular at the time,” Bernard said, “that is, a skirt, a chemise, an apron and shawl.”

Bernard’s research led her to conclude that Scholastique probably wore a handwoven dress.

Soper is a well-known sculptor responsible for many of Lafayette’s public statues. Among her many works is the bust of Herbert Heymann in the John Breaux Wing of the USL Alumni Center.

She is also the great-great-granddaughter of Scholastique, a fact she didn’t find out until she had been commissioned to do the statue. It was logical, then, to use a direct descendant as the model, so her 37-year-old daughter, Rebecca Lowe, posed for the statue.

No one here is certain how many women can take credit for being a city’s founding mother. It’s not a statistic often sought out. The work of finally getting Scholastique’s name in the history books is in the same category.

“Nobody can really take the entire credit for the project because there were so many people involved,” Bernard said.

Melanie Harrington, the director of cultural and economic development for the city of Breaux Bridge, calls it a perfect example of a grassroots project.

The Women of Breaux Bridge has about 30 members, and Harrington says it’s a multi-generational and multi-racial group of women from all walks of life.

The statue will be officially dedicated at 6 p.m. Aug. 9 in City Park across from the Breaux Bridge City Hall.