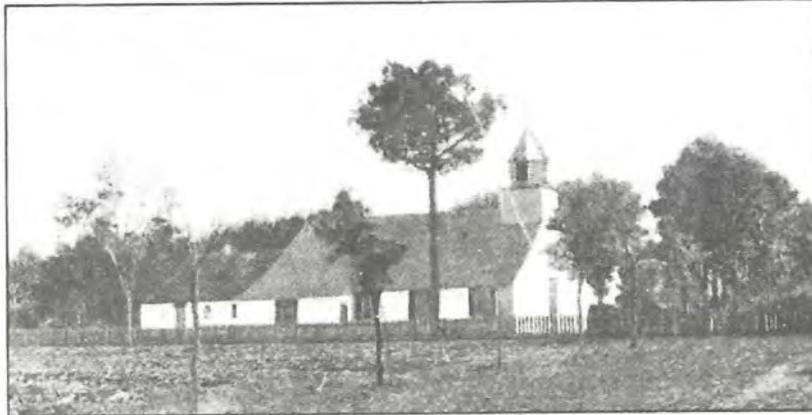


## Early History of St. Charles Borromeo Parish

Excerpts by permission: Bonnie Barry, *For the Greater Honor and Glory of God, A History of the Building of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church of Grand Coteau, LA (1987)*

St. Charles Parish was established in 1819. It is the third oldest parish in the Diocese of Lafayette, pre-dated only by the church in St. Martinville and St. Landry of Opelousas.



### **The original St. Charles Church, erected 1819 - served the parish until it was dismantled in 1910**

Records indicate that as early as 1874, plans were being made for a new church in Grand Coteau. The old church, which was nearing its sixtieth year, had fallen into disrepair and was no longer adequate for the growing congregation. In addition, parishioners desired a church that had more aesthetic value than the modest, unadorned one in which they worshiped. As stated in a newspaper article of the time, they desired "a church worthy of Almighty God where the rich and the poor could worship in spirit and in truth,"<sup>2</sup> a church more like the magnificent ones a person might see in Europe.

In spite of the run-down condition of the old church, located where Our Lady of the Oaks Retreat House now stands, it was not to be dismantled. After completion of the new church, the old one would be used for meetings, catechism, and the celebration of French Masses. As a result of this decision, a new site had to be chosen for the future church. A series of negotiations transpired between the Jesuits, who owned the property, and Archbishop Napoleon Joseph Perche of New Orleans, until the matter was finally resolved. In order to understand the full meaning of these negotiations, it is necessary to backtrack in history to the beginnings of the parish.

The following summary which traces the transfer of church lands from 1819 to 1878 clarifies the matter.

Bishop Louis William Dubourg in 1819 bought from the Smith heirs 87 arpents of prairie land and 53 arpents of woodland for \$10,000. Bishop Antoine Blanc on 31, July 1837, gave the use of this land to the Society of Jesus upon arrival in Grand Coteau.

Bishop Blanc in 1856 sold this land (87 arpents and 53 arpents) to the Society for \$3,500, with the understanding that the sum was to be paid only if the Society should sell the lands, close the college, or leave Grand Coteau. Out of the 87 arpents, the Bishop reserved about 20 arpents for the parish church and graveyard. Income of the church was to go to the Society, and the Society in turn would maintain and preserve the church and presbytery as long as it operated in Grand Coteau.

Sometime between 1875 and 1878, the Jesuits obtained permission from Archbishop Perche of New Orleans to build a new church on Jesuit property. The land offered for the site was directly in front of the old St. Charles College which at the time was in a general vicinity south of the present Jesuit graveyard.

The Archbishop agreed on the site and gave the Jesuits all rights to the new church and the property it occupied, provided they agreed to leave the church, an area around the church sufficient for processions, and the entrance to the church, to the Diocese, in the event they left Grand Coteau. The Jesuits agreed to the stipulations, but requested a favor in return - that the Archbishop cancel the Jesuit debt of \$3,500 to the Diocese which was to be paid in the event that the college should close, the lands be sold, or the Society leave Grand Coteau. The Archbishop agreed, and the negotiations came to a satisfactory close.

In summary, the Jesuits were freed of their debt; the parishioners had land on which to build a new church; and the Diocese was assured that should the Jesuits leave, the people of the Grand Coteau area would not be deprived of a place of worship. All parties concerned seemed happy with the final outcome.

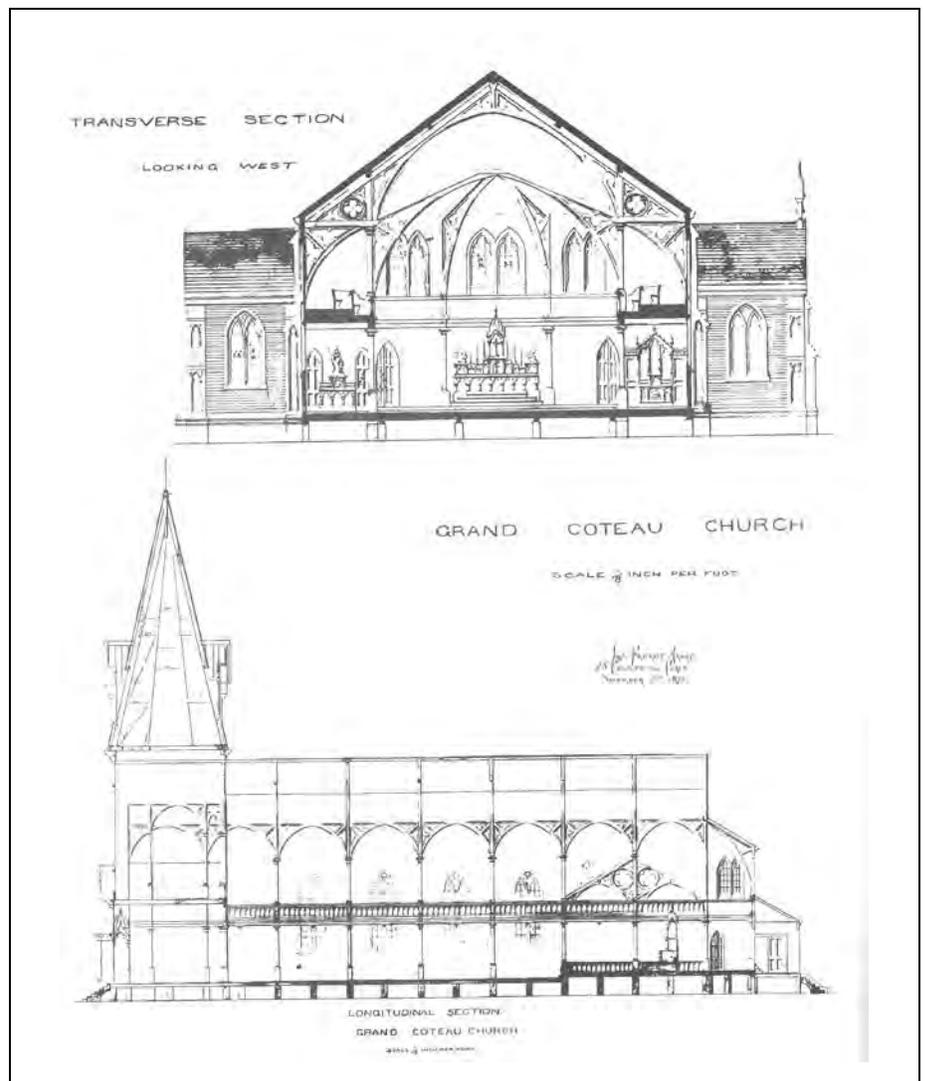
### **But what about the church building?**

Even before the land negotiations had been entered into and resolved, the parishioners had the floor plan of the new church in hand.

In 1875, New Orleans architect James Freret had completed the drawings, and these had been sent to Rome for Papal approval. By October of 1876, the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, had reviewed the plans, blessed the blueprints, and sent word in his own handwriting that the undertaking had his full approval .

*" Deus vos Benedicat, et quoniam ipse  
coepit, ipse quoque solidabit,"*

"May God bless you, and since He has begun this thing, He will also confirm it" the Pope wrote.



That same month, the Jesuits purchased a 200-acre tract of cypress woodland, north of Bayou Bourbeaux, from Ludgu and Lucien Lastrappes, at the cost of \$10 per acre. This was to provide the main source of wood for building the new church.

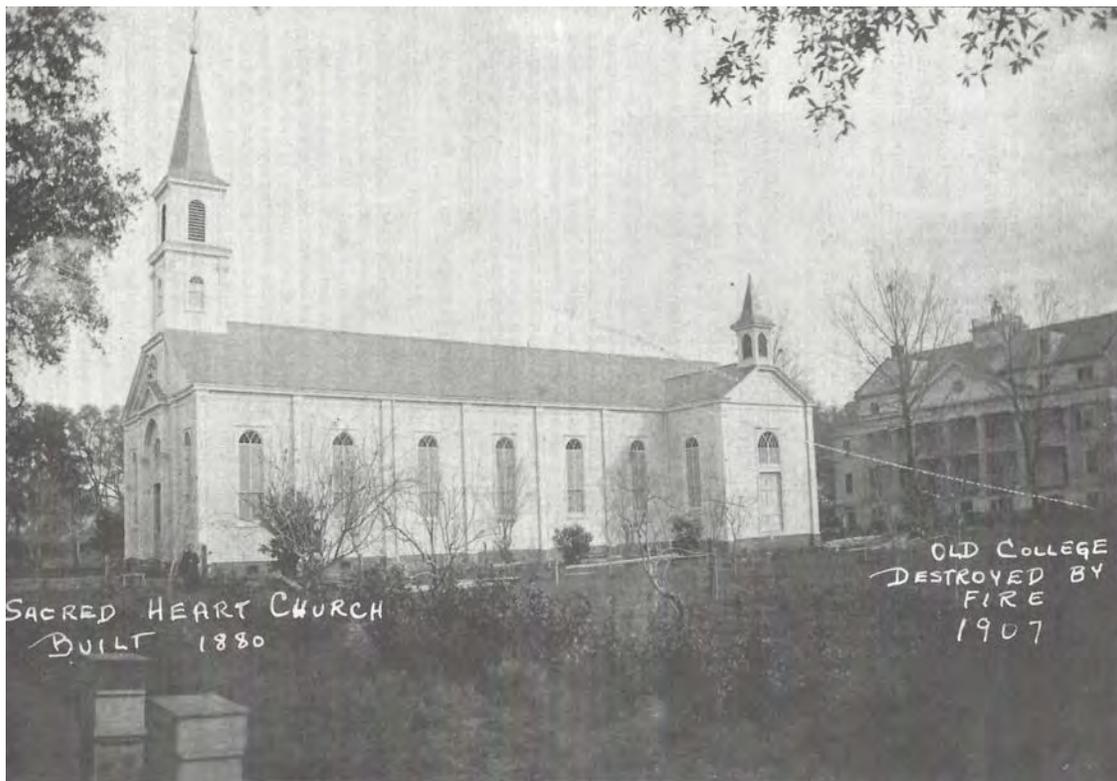
According to the Jesuit treasurer, approximately \$50,000 would be needed to fund the church designed by Mr. Freret. Though not shown in the plans, the proposed structure was to be of brick. Just as woodland had been purchased to supply lumber, a machine was purchased to make bricks, and the long, tedious process began. According to the Minister's Diary, as many as 8,000 bricks were made on some days.

The parishioners, in the meantime, went about the business of raising funds. The Jesuits and the Sacred Heart nuns helped tremendously in this endeavor, but it soon became apparent that plans would have to be modified. The brick-making process was taking far too long, and the sum of money needed was beyond the capacity of the people to raise. It was decided that a wooden church would be built instead of the proposed brick church. In addition, the original plans, which had called for a second-floor balcony around the entire nave, were scaled down and simplified. With these adjustments, the cost of building materials was reduced to \$15,000.

By 1879, the sum was realized, with the parishioners, the Sacred Heart nuns and the Jesuits each contributing roughly one-third of the total needed. By March 19 of that year, construction began. The new church was on its way!

On March 19, 1879, the cornerstone of the new church building was put into position and blessed. The primary builders were two Jesuit brothers: Cornelius Otten of Holland and Joseph Armand Brinkhaus of Grand Coteau.

The following year the church was consecrated under the title of the Sacred Heart. This was done by popular demand of the parishioners in gratitude to the Sacred Heart who had protected them from the yellow fever epidemic and to the Religious of the Sacred Heart who had donated one-third of the cost of construction of the new edifice. In recent years, the church was renamed under the original title of St. Charles Borromeo.



The church was built only about 50 feet in front of the original building of St. Charles College and separated from it by several pecan trees. The photograph above shows the church, without its present bell tower, and the old college before it burned in 1907.

## LOG OF THE BUILDING OF ST. CHARLES CHURCH

The Minister's Diary, a daily account of happenings within the Jesuit community, has been kept since the arrival of these priests in Grand Coteau in 1837. Thanks to their faithful recording of day-to-day events, St Charles parishioners have the privilege of knowing what transpired during the planning and the building stages of the present church structure between 1874 and 1880. The following are the entries that were made during that time period in regard to the erection of the church which still stands today.

### 1874

- Jan 24 Fr. Superior insists on having a general plan for the future buildings. Our consultants agree upon one!!  
Fr. Treasurer goes out in order to collect money. Times are hard
- Apr 29 Fr. Anthonioz attempts many times to cross the Bayou Bourbeaux to see Mr. Lastrappes in view of contracting for wood for the new church, but fails to succeed on account of inundation

### 1876

- Mar 6 Rev. Fr. Rector receives the news that Rev. Fr. General had contributed \$1000 and Rev. Fr. Provincial \$500 toward the new church
- May 15 Our Brothers and workmen began making bricks.
- May 17 3000 bricks today.
- May 20 Stopped brick making for the moment machine sent to New Orleans for repair.
- July 4 American Independence. Solemn High Mass. Brickmaking has been going on for the last four weeks without interruption - about 8000 bricks made per day.

### 1878

- Dec 23 Our workmen bring here 10,000 bricks for the foundation of the new church
- Dec 28 Brother Otten goes to New Orleans to buy wood and other materials for the new church

### 1879

- Jan 2 We begin floating logs for the new church
- Jan 29 Fr. Abbadie plants eight trees in honor of St Francis de Sales in the new avenue of the church
- Feb 1 Bro. Otten comes back having made a good bargain for the ceiling of the new church.
- Feb 12 Bro. Blatter and Bro. Brinkhaus go to Barry's Landing and bring freight for the church.
- Feb 16 Bro. Otten goes to Barry's Landing (Port Barre) to meet the boat at Bayou des Gloires, loaded with wood for the church.
- Mar 17 Five workmen come from Opelousas to lay the foundations of the new church
- Mar 19 Feast of St Joseph. At 4: 15 p. m, sermon and Benediction immediately after. Blessing of the first stone of the new church. Fr. Abbadie says a few words and blesses the first stone.
- Jun 8 Putting up the first columns of the new church
- Jun 20 Bro. Otten and Bro. Joe Brinkhaus go to Verrnilionville (Lafayette) in quest of workmen for the church. Their voyage useless.
- Aug 1 Three new carpenters for the church come from New Orleans.
- Aug 27 Painter begins to paint the new church outside.
- Sept 18 They put up the cross on the steeple.
- Oct 9 New church flooring is finished.
- Oct 29 Accident in church. A scaffolding 20 feet high falls down with Bro. Otten and Victor Breuillee. It is nearly a miracle that they escape without an injuzy!
- Dec19 Fr. Minister and Mr. de Stockalper go to Washington to buy 3200 ft of barbed wire to put up fence around the new church.
- Dec 20 They put the statue of St Joseph between the new church and the College. They cut down the four oak trees in front of the new church.
- Dec 22 Three of our wagons bring the altars of the new church from Barry's Landing.
- Dec 26 They begin to put up the fence around the new church.

### 1880

- Feb 10 Mardi Gras - Theatrical amusements for the benefit of the new church.
- Feb 16 Mr. Humbrecht, painter, arrives from the City. (New Orleans)
- Mar 9 The organ for the new church is brought from Barry's Landing. Mr. Pilcher, of Louisville, arrives to put it up.

Mar 20	Mr. Pilcher goes away. He receives \$1000 for the organ, but as we did not find his work quite satisfactory, it was stipulated that the balance would not be paid until it could be examined by two competent judges.
Mar 29	Fr. Holaind and Mr. Stutzer come to examine the new organ.
Mar 30	The organ is found very good A concert is given gratis for the benefactors of the church. A punch is served to the musicians after the concert
Mar 31	Dinner for the musicians. Dr. Millard, who gave \$1000 for the organ, was present. Mr. Stutzer and Mr. Pilcher leave. Mr. Stutzer promises \$65 for the picture of the Blessed Virgin in the Sanctuary.
Apr 14	The foundations of the new church are cemented.
May 1	In the new church, the scaffolding is taken down, except in the Sanctuary. Everything there appears beautifully well
May 5	Mr. Hurnbrecht, the painter, having finished the church pictures, leaves us.
Jul 4	The pews of the church have been sold at auction after High Mass. It took two and one-half hours to effect the sale. It realized nearly \$1000. It is considered a success, especially as there are yet some 30 pews unsold

Judging from these daily journal entries, it is evident that several trips were made to and from the " City" (New Orleans) during the period when the church was being built. At the present time, a trip to New Orleans can be made with relative ease due to the convenience of interstate highways; however, in the late 1870's, this was not the case. In order to better appreciate the difficulties of such a journey, an entry from the diary of Father Albert Biever, S.J. who described his experience in traveling from New Orleans to Grand Coteau in 1875, is quoted here:

*"There were no railroads to Grand Coteau at that period, and the journey often prolonged over four or five days had to be made by water transportation from New Orleans to Port Barre or Washington in St Landry Parish. There lay the mighty river lined with merchandise of every description. The boats looked different from any others we had seen. At the sound of a bell, a deafening whistle was heard and the "Fleta" left its mooring and swung into mid-river, all the while the big stern wheel lashing the muddy waves of the Mississippi River.*

*Landings were numerous and much amusement was caused by the laborers running o'er the gangway carrying all sorts of merchandise shoreward. whilst the boat Captain uttered clamorous invectives, that were, I was told, not always decorous. The food was served in numberless little dishes. It was good and plentiful and we enjoyed it heartily.*

*The Fleta left the Mississippi and swung into the Red River, From the Red River. We launched into the Atchafalaya. Then we left the Fleta and went aboard a miniature little stern wheeler that brought us up Bayou Courtableau to Port Barre. There was not much of a port at Barre, and our little vessel was the only one in Sight*

*Two vehicles were waiting for us, one belonging to the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and the other to St Charles College, the objective of our long voyage. Pat (the driver's name) who knew the devious paths through the woods well, was in charge of the Convent's barouche. Brother Blatter, a faithful lay brother of the Society of Jesus and a man of herculean build and strength, drove our more humble conveyance.*

*The night was dark and the paths lay through thick and almost primeval forests that added to the darkness of the night All the bayous were out of bounds and our wagon pulled by two sturdy mules were in water up to the hubs of the wheels. The silence of this nightly solitude was interrupted by the ominous and weird screeching of owls. The experience was indeed novel,. but alarming, especially when the good Brother told my two companions who spoke English: "Fear not, worse is coming." In fact, the worse came when we crossed the frail bridges over the bayous. Not feeling over sure that they had not been lifted from their supports by the rushing waters, Brother Blatter, who was fearless, before crossing them with his team, would step out, examine them carefully, and then return to us with the reassuring words, "All is well" At last we reached the foot of Grand Coteau's hill, and as an encouragement we heard Brother Blatter say, "Now we will soon be home."*

*[In celebration, my English-speaking companions said]. "Let us break forth into a hymn of thanksgiving to our Lord because we have reached at last the goal of our ambitions!"*

With that description of this journey in mind, it is plain to see that the building of the church in Grand Coteau was no simple task. Just getting to and from New Orleans, one of the major sources of supplies, was both challenging and dangerous, a fact which should increase in present-day worshipers a greater appreciation for the forefathers who made this church possible.



Old photograph of the church complete with hitching post for horses, reveals what a visitor of 1891 might have seen

## THE PARISH CHANGES ITS NAME

The latter half of the 1870's was a time of change in the parish. A new church was being planned. A new site had been chosen. New furnishings had begun to arrive, even before the first brick was put into place. And, in the midst of all these goings-on, parishioners began petitioning for a name change. Why? What was their motive?

People of the area have long held the belief that the name of their church was changed in the late 1880's from St Charles Borromeo to Sacred Heart, out of thanksgiving to the Lord Who had answered the people's prayers for protection from the yellow fever epidemic. Although there are no records which prove conclusively that this was the case, an examination of certain facts and circumstances of the time indicates that the people's desire for a name change could have been influenced by their gratitude to the Sacred Heart for protection from the fever.

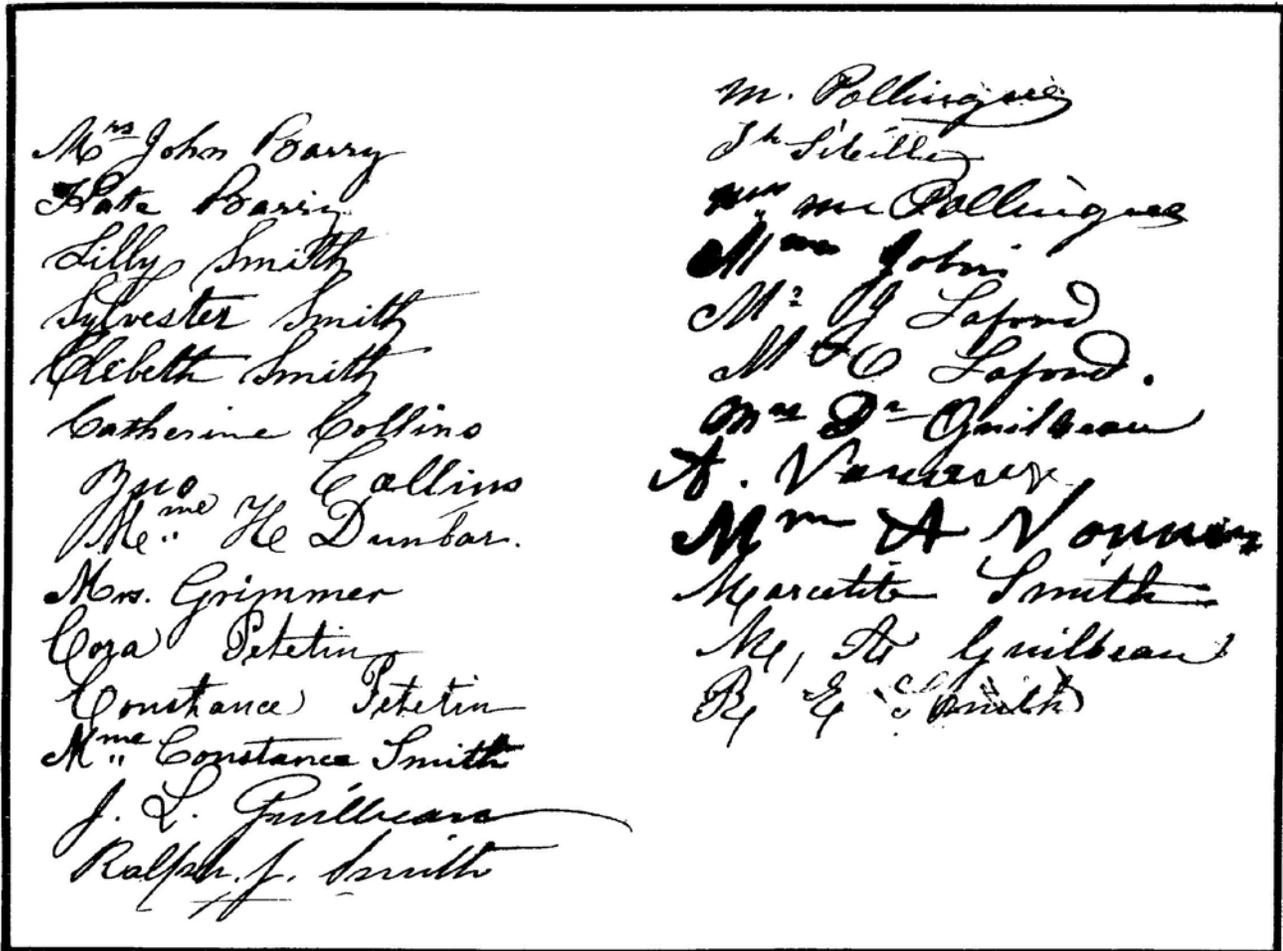
According to the Minister's Diary in the St Charles College Archives, a novena in honor of the Sacred Heart began in the Grand Coteau church of St Charles on August 25, 1878, for the specifically stated purpose of "preservation from yellow fever." On August 31, 1878, bleak news arrived from New Orleans about the epidemic. By October, matters had become so grave that the Governor of Louisiana issued a state-wide mandate designating a certain day for "fast, humiliation, and prayer to obtain from the Almighty the cessation of yellow fever." People were dying like flies, but in spite of the grim statistics elsewhere, Grand Coteau remained untouched. To the present day, in fact, the only known yellow fever fatality that occurred within the town limits was the case of Thomas Paige, a Pennsylvania well-digger who happened to be passing through at the time he fell sick and died. Apparently, he had contracted the disease elsewhere, because no subsequent cases occurred. As one source put it, "the disease seemed to have died with him"

On December 6, 1878, just three months after the Novena to the Sacred Heart, and when it had become obvious that Grand Coteau would be spared from the dreaded affliction, a letter stating the fervent desire of the people to change the name of the church from St Charles Borromeo to Sacred Heart, was sent to the Jesuit Superiors of the Lyons Province in France. (In 1878, Grand Coteau was a part of the New Orleans Mission which was, at the time, under the jurisdiction of the Province of Lyons). The "people" of whom this letter spoke included the parishioners, the Religious of the Sacred Heart, and the Children of Mary, a group of lay women dedicated to Christian growth and service. On February 21, 1879, a second letter was sent. Eight points supporting the idea of the name change were listed - the first stating that this was the unanimous choice of the people. Even members of the Smith family, whose ancestor Charles Smith was honored in the original title, signed the petition to change the name of the church to Sacred Heart. In light of these circumstances and considering the sequence of events: panic about yellow fever, the Novena to the Sacred Heart for protection, Grand Coteau's remarkably clean health record during that trying time, and finally, the petition for a name change; it seems safe to say that though it is not specifically stated, the people of that time were influenced in this decision by their fervor for the Sacred Heart. The other supporting arguments sent to the Provincial were:

- The new church will replace the old one which serves the parish but since the old one will not be destroyed, it can keep its own name, St Charles, as long as it lasts.
- The new church will be built on a completely different site with completely different materials, even in regard to the interior. Hence, a name change seems appropriate.
- This church belongs to the Jesuits who are great promoters of the Sacred Heart
- The old church was named for its principal benefactor and the new one should be named for its principal benefactors, the Sacred Heart nuns. In addition to the parishioners, the nuns have requested the change.
- Great favors have been promised those who are placed under the protection of the Sacred Heart
- The Holy See encourages us to raise monuments honoring the Sacred Heart
- St Charles will remain the principal patron of the College and the secondary patron of the church.

After having cleared the matter with the Jesuits, the petitioners sought approval from Archbishop Perche of New Orleans. On May 17, 1879, they received his response: "I approve completely of your desire to put your new church under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I have no opposition to such a change and since it is the desire of the parishioners, I have no reason to refuse your request It will be a good way to be faithful to devotion to the Sacred Heart which we so greatly need and which is so fitting and appropriate to the desires and the spirit of the universal Church. St Charles will continue to be the primary name of the College, and it will be the secondary patron of the church"

In July of 1880, the new church was consecrated by Bishop John Quinlan of Mobile, under the title of the Sacred Heart, and it remained that way for the following ninety-one years. During the interim, black parishioners formed a separate parish in 1931 under the title of St Peter Claver which was later changed to Christ the King. In 1971, Sacred Heart Parish and Christ the King Parish were reunited into one body and renamed under the original title of St Charles Borromeo.



Mrs John Barry  
Kate Barry  
Lilly Smith  
Syvester Smith  
Lebeth Smith  
Catherine Collins  
Mrs Collins  
Mr. H. Dunbar.  
Mrs. Grimmer  
Coza Petetin  
Constance Petetin  
Mrs Constance Smith  
J. L. Guilbeau  
Ralph J. Smith  
M. Pallinguer  
J. Sibille  
Mrs M. Pallinguer  
Mrs John  
M. J. Lafond  
M. O. Lafond.  
Mrs D. Guilbeau  
A. Nouron  
Mrs A. Nouron  
Marcella Smith  
Mr. St. Guilbeau  
By E. Smith

A page from the original petition containing 98 signatures and requesting that the name of the church be changed to Sacred Heart. Though not shown here, the petition was also signed by Virginia B. McPherson, President of the Children of Mary, Mary A. Lee, Vice President, and Ella M. Smith, Secretary.

## Connected History of the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau

The Society of the Sacred Heart ([www.rscj.org](http://www.rscj.org)) was founded by St. Madeleine Sophie Barat in 1800 in Amiens, France. The mission of the Society is to discover, live, and announce God's love in the heart of the world through the service of education for transformation in diverse ministries, particularly, addressing the needs of children, young people, women and those in society who are marginalized. The members of the Society of the Sacred Heart are called Religious of the Sacred Heart.

In 1818 at the invitation of Bishop William Dubourg, bishop of the Louisiana Territory, four members of this new congregation sailed across the Atlantic and settled in St. Charles, Missouri, under the leadership of Philippine Duchesne, now also a canonized saint. Three years later, Mrs. Charles Smith, a wealthy widow of a Grand Coteau planter, offered to fund an all-girl Catholic boarding school in Grand Coteau. At Bishop Dubourg's request, two sisters, Mother Eugenie Aude and Sister Mary Layton, came to Grand Coteau and began a mission of education and retreat work for girls and young women that has continued unbroken until the present day.

**1821** The Academy of the Sacred Heart was begun.

**1837** The Jesuits came to serve in Grand Coteau and the surrounding area. Through the years the sisters, students and staff at the Academy of the Sacred Heart benefited greatly from the spiritual guidance and support of the Jesuits.

**1875** At the initiative of Reverend Olivier S.J., the superior of the Jesuits in Grand Coteau, a school for African American girls was begun on the Academy grounds and was administered by the religious. A few years later, boys were included.

**1888** A new structure for African American school children was built on the Academy grounds and administered by the religious.

**1890** The Sacred Heart Parish School in Grand Coteau, which is now St. Ignatius School, was begun and administered by the religious until 1950. The Sisters of St. Joseph took over the direction of the school until 1975 when the Religious of the Sacred Heart resumed the administration of the school until 1986.

**1917** The Sacred Heart College and normal school was started. The college provided a liberal education for many women and trained many teachers until 1956 when the college was closed.

**1939** The school for African American children was moved to Grand Coteau and named St. Peter Claver School. The religious continued to administer the school until 1947. The school was given to Father Thensted S.J., who built a new high school. The Sisters of the Holy Family took over the direction of the school. The Religious of the Sacred Heart continued to teach at St. Peter Claver High School and at the Christ the King Mission school in Bellevue into the sixty's. In connection with St. Peter Claver School many retreats were hosted, in collaboration with the Jesuits in Grand Coteau, serving nearly 400 men and women yearly.

**1981** Following the closing of St. Peter Claver High School in 1977, the high school building was renovated and opened as the Thensted Center. The Thensted Center became the social outreach service center of St. Charles Borromeo Church. Religious of the Sacred Heart continue to serve in social outreach ministry through the Thensted Center.

**2006** A Sacred Heart school for boys was begun on the Academy grounds and was named St. John Berchmans School. With the establishment of the boys' school, the Academy of the Sacred Heart for girls and St. John Berchmans school for boys is officially named Schools of the Sacred Heart ([www.sshcoteau.org](http://www.sshcoteau.org)).