

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The September 29, 1843 contract recorded in the courthouse of the Parish of Lafourche Interior, State of Louisiana, between Absalom Kees and James Frost, house builders, and the Building Committee of St. John's Episcopal Church refers to the erection of the building "on a site adjoining Thibodaux". Today St. John's, located on its original site, faces a busy thoroughfare in the heart of the town. The church and its 3.3 acre property with historic cemetery and old oaks is visually set apart by streets which borders the site on four sides.

The original contract leaves little doubt that the building as designed and constructed was in the Greek Revival style, with accommodations to usage, available local building materials and Southern climatic requirements. The structure is still predominantly Greek Revival, although alterations and additions dating prior to 1867 or 1868 have diluted this feeling somewhat with the introduction of arched windows on the enclosed portico and the cupola.

Constructed of solid brick walls, the structure is built on a rectangular plan of thirty-six feet width, by sixty-two feet depth. Wood framing consists of conventional roof construction with square iron nails at roof and at floor. Floors are of random width cypress with joists over sills on masonry piers.

The, 1843 contract railed for a portico of twelve feet to be included in the depth of sixty-two feet. The original prostyle building was modified somewhat in 1856 when the portico was enclosed to create a vestibule with stairway leading to a choir gallery above.

The entrance, which is to the east, is flanked by four pilasters and surmounted by a pedimented gable end with raking wood cornice and a copper domed wood belfry which rises above.

The west end terminates in a parapet wall with double chimneys.

All wood trim, predominately cypress, is painted white, both exterior and interior.

Pilasters surround the building on three sides, as does a cornice with dentils. The front entrance is surrounded with a heavy architrave and above the door is a cast iron grill. Two arched windows on the front contrast with the square-headed windows on the sides.

Five specific references in the contract are made to the "plan by Bishop [Leonidas K.] Polk." A reference to the "style of Lafever" suggests that he may have used one of the builders' guides by Minard Lefever. Charles F. Hawley is mentioned as executing a design for a specific detail.

As described in the contract and as actually erected, the walls were to be eighteen inches thick, twenty five feet high above ground, and to be "laid in good lime mortar, made with the ordinary sand of the country except for the outside course which is to be laid with mortar made with sharp sand."

Pilasters on each side of the building were utilized "to give strength to the walls".

While the contract specified a cypress shingle roof, apparently slate was substituted, for in his address to the annual convention of the Diocese of Louisiana in June of 1844, Bishop Polk states that the building was "covered with slate". Slate of a size fitting the specifications for the cypress shingles can still be found on the church grounds. The slate roof was removed in 1940 and replaced with hard asbestos shingles.

The roof was to be so framed "that it will receive a cupola.... according to the Plan originally proposed by Bishop Polk". The builders apparently anticipated a problem with rain seeping through

this cupola, as sheet lead flooring was used. The bell was presented to the church in 1855 and it is possible that the cupola was not actually constructed until this time, or that renovations were required to enlarge and raise the cupola to accommodate the bell, which would account for splicing of timbers which is evident at the roof line.

The contract specifics "The front of the Church to be built with a pediment supported on four columns, cornice to extend across the front and back ends and on each side with a raking cornice to correspond; the front to be finished on the doric (sic) order, the front door in accordance with the plan of Bishop Polk".

The portico was to have a floor laid in brick, "the steps for ascending...to go all round the portico and to be painted in imitation of stone or granite. In June of 1856, a new front was built to the church which required enclosing the portico to accommodate a vestibule and choir gallery above. To the right, as one enters the vestibule, is a curved stairway leading to the choir gallery. The stair is extremely simple, well constructed, with a comfortable riser ratio and a walnut handrail above turned balusters.

Double interior entrance doors with flat recessed panels open into the church proper.

The original contract called for a music gallery across the interior front of the church, supported by two fluted columns ten feet high, with an "appropriate architrave entablature and cornice, with two stairways at each end of said gallery with banister and railing to correspond to the finish of the pews."

The stairs were removed in the 1856 renovation and the music gallery modified at that time. Splices on the opposing side window frames give some indication of the depth of the original gallery, now modified to a smaller cantilevered balcony, reached by the vestibule stairway.

The windows are triple hung 12/12/12 glass lights, with check rail and pulley and weight sash balances. The windows have operating exterior wood louver shutters with leaf and pin hinges, barrel bolts and pivoted pin type, shutter dogs.

The original contract called for an architrave above the windows on the interior, "Similar to the style of Lafever." Subsequent covering of the interior plaster walls with vertical wood boards may have modified this treatment, but a simple Lafever inspired architrave is still discernible.

The original walnut capped cypress pews with recessed paneled sides are still in use in the church. Kneeling benches are built in an immovable position between up and down. The pews were painted white sometime after 1894 but the walnut trim was left natural.

The walls of vertical beaded boards have lower boards terminated at the level of the window sill with a wainscot cap moulding. At the chancel wall, this wainscoting consists of flat recessed paneling, which strongly suggests that this paneled portion, as well as the choir stall surround which matches the present balcony, were originally part of the larger choir gallery.

The chancel is framed in a curved arch with reeded pilasters. The recessed chancel with domed ceiling was added around 1867. The window originally installed above the altar in the 1867 addition was replaced in 1937 by a predominately blue leaded glass window. The addition also houses the sacristy.

Partial renovations and improvements in 1969 included replacing rotted floor joists and sills, sandblasting brick walls to remove paint, repainting exterior and interior wood work, and installation of an air conditioning system. Exterior walls were treated with a clear 10% silicone waterproofing compound. Copper gutters and downspouts, believed installed in the late 1800's, were removed at

this time. The gutters, in a bad state of repair, were causing water to overflow in the building, their extreme height making periodic cleaning and maintenance impossible. Before they could be repaired and guard screens installed, they were stolen from the church property.

Exterior woodwork shows evident pitting from aging as well as from sandblasting.

All structural alterations to the church were done prior to 1867 or 1868.

St. John's Cemetery is located behind the church and occupies approximately two-thirds of the square. Ornate tombs mingle with simple unmarked graves. An iron fence surrounding the cemetery was built in 1889.

On the southeast corner of the property, at approximately 100' to the right of the church, is a modern parish hall/educational building which was built in 1967. The building is of cream colored brick (to match the painted brick of the church at the time the parish hall was built) and was designed to harmonize with the church and its surroundings while serving the needs of today's congregation.

The parish hall/educational building is the third structure to occupy its site. The first was a small two-room house which was moved onto the property in 1856 to be used as a rectory. This small house was moved off again in 1884 and "a new and commodious rectory of pleasing design and tasteful appearance" was built. This two-story dwelling was demolished in 1966 when it was no longer used as a rectory, to make way for the parish hall.

SPECIFIC DATES 1843-1845
BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St. John's Episcopal Church is locally important because it is the oldest remaining church building of the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana west of the Mississippi River. The square on which it is located has been the home of the church parish since it was organized by Bishop Polk on February 9, 1843.

Even though the building underwent some alterations in 1856 and again in 1867-68, it is still a good example of the Greek Revival style, with its classical pilasters across the front and two sides, its entablature with dentiled cornice, and its pedimented gable end on the front. The use of the Greek Revival style for St. John's Church, probably due to its 1840's date of construction, separates it somewhat at least visually from the other Episcopal churches started by Bishop Polk in Louisiana. Most, if not all, of these other churches, which were built in the mid-nineteenth century, are believed to be in the Gothic Revival style.

St. John's Cemetery, which occupies approximately two-thirds of the square it shares with the church, contains both ornate tombs and unmarked graves. Families who were associated with several historic Louisiana plantations are buried here. Of particular local interest is the family tomb of Francis Tillou Nicholls. Nicholls was a West Point graduate of 1855, a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army, twice Governor of Louisiana and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana. It was for him that Nicholls State University in Thibodaux was named.

The church parish was incorporated by Act No. 129, Louisiana Legislature, 1843, as "one body politic and corporate, in deed and in law, by the name, style and title of 'Parish of St. John's Church, Thibodeaux (sic), Louisiana'." The listed incorporators were: Andrew Collins, Thomas M. Williams, A. C. Antill, R. G. Ellis, George Guion, Alfred Millard, C. F. Hawley, R. D. Darden, C. Armitage and W. T. Benedict.

Land for the church was donated by George S. Guion. By September 28, 1843 the newly incorporated parish entered into a contract for the construction of a church building with Absalom Kees and James Frost, "house builders." The building committee who represented the Vestry of the church was composed of: Richard C. Ellis, Charles Hawley, Andrew Collins, James A. Scuddly and John C. Beatty. (The contract itself has been preserved and is a detailed document, containing dimensions, building details and materials. It is therefore possible to verify the building as it stands today.)

By January 1, 1844, Bishop Polk had laid the cornerstone and recorded the event as follows: "I laid with the usual solemnities the cornerstone of a remarkably neat church in the village of Thibodaux, for the congregation of St. John's Parish. It is built of brick and covered with slate and is nearly ready on consecration." (Journal of the Diocese, 1844, p. 9) St. John's Episcopal Church, Thibodaux was consecrated on March 16, 1845. The Rev. David Kerr was installed on March 23, 1845 as the first rector.

On May 8, 1855, Mr. M. P. Zills presented a bell to the church costing \$500.00. In June, 1856 the first rectory was built. Also at that time changes and alterations were made to the church building, consisting of "a new front to the church, including a vestibule, choir gallery, etc." costing nearly \$5,000.00. (Duncan, The Diocese of Louisiana, 1838-1888.)

St. John's suffered interior damage from occupation by Federal troops during the Civil War. Services were suspended at that time. The church was repaired and refurbished after the Civil War, and a recessed chancel was built in 1867-68, with a stained glass window in the west wall, at a cost of \$1,500.00 This was the last structural change to the fabric of St. John's Church, although the original stained glass window was replaced in 1937 by the present one. The exterior brick received a cumulative layer of yellow paint, covering the soft red brick until 1969 when it was removed. Thus, St. John's Episcopal Church now appears to passersby on Jackson Street as it did in the mid-nineteenth century.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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