

Church stands as symbol of cultural history

The red-brick twin spires of St. John the Baptist Church in Edgard are visible from the levee on the east bank, as is the rosette window set between them. The building's exterior — rectangular, balanced and simple — gives no hint of its interior glory.

Its design is from the 1920s. Called Roman Renaissance, it belies the church's long history in the River Parishes.

Inside, the high walls support a rounded ceiling frescoed with religious paintings and framed by tall, elegant stained-glass windows. Facing the river, the rosette window sheds its light from above the pipe organ. The sun filters unobstructed through the windows' rich colors, for the church sits on its land unaccompanied by trees. The large sanctuary, divided by three straight aisles leading to the Carrara marble altar, is filled with wooden pews. Statues grace corners and walls.

Outside, what's left of the old cemetery sleeps unshaded under the sky. White tombs sit next to crumbling, fern-riddled, brick tombs. Several D'Arensbourgs are buried there as are John Slid-



Upriver Memoirs

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then was that he had less need of the land.

The land was granted to the Church of the Upper German Coast, according to records. On some maps of the time, it is named the Bonnet Carre Church.

The first church building was finished about 1772. Church records begin then, according to Laurent, "with the entry of the marriage of Anton Manz (now Montz), who married Sibylla Bischof, daughter of Joseph Bischof and Anna Maria Raeser."

Three years later, the church parish was divided into two districts, which also became government districts: St. Charles was called the 'First German Coast,' and St. John was the 'Second German Coast.'

The original church was replaced in 1822 after a flood dam-



St. John the Baptist Church in Edgard.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA RAINWATER

ell and the wife of Confederate Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard.

As with any place that has been inhabited for centuries, Edgard's history is spotted with good and bad. Much of it centers around the church, which has stood on that land, in several incarnations, for 220 years. It has seen flood, fever, fire, foolishness and, sadly, murder within its precincts. Yet, like all such temples, it stands as the symbol of hope, love and goodness for its community. It was the only church in St. John and served both banks of the river.

"Every Sunday," wrote historian Lubin Laurent in "A History of St. John the Baptist Parish," "the people on the other (east) side of the river crossed (it) in flat-boats pulled with oars to attend the services."

Commissioned by Spanish Gov. O'Reilly in 1769, the church took land from Joseph Dubroc (or Dubrocq), a single man who owned enough land that about four acres would be no major loss to him. He also had no family to support, so the reasoning back

aged it, according to local history. But there are no written reports of a flood during that time that local historian Michael Maurin could find when he researched the church's history for a paper presented to the German-Acadian Coast Genealogical and Historical Society. And if the church was lost to the floodwaters, why wasn't the rectory lost as well, he wonders. All of the church records are still intact from 1772.

In researching levees for an earlier column, I found that the levees here had been periodically "rolled back" since 1820 to accommodate the vagaries of the snaking river, so it's possible that the church was torn down when the levee was moved. Much of the church cemetery has been lost for that reason.

The first recorded event in the new church was the baptism of Catherine Selina Mialaret, born to parents with poetic French names that fall sweetly from the tongue: Yves Louis Jacques Hippolyte Mialaret and Marguerite Aimee Becnel.

In 1826, parishioners petitioned the state to be incorporated. Every landholder of the parish signed the document. It reads like a Who's Who of the River Parishes: Arensbourg (D'Arensbourg), Aubert, Ayme, Cambre, Cicet, Becnel, Haydel, Madere, Laurent, Ory, Marmillion, Defresne, Duhe, Fontenot, Fourcelle, Granier, Jacob, Keller, Landaiche, Laiche, Montz, Perilloux, Rome, Webre, Tassin, St. Martin, Triche, and Tregre. All names are extant now, and there are more whose families no longer exist here. The petition was granted.

That newer church, designed for \$12,500 by architect Jean Francois St. Gees, burned down in 1917 and was replaced by the present building. According to Marcia Gaudet in "Tales From the Levee," the bells from the 1822 church were saved from the fire.

"The three bells, named Jeanne, Marie and Josephine, were in a belfry near the church, and they were saved."

It's not known if the three are

still serving the parish in the present church. The Rev. Donald L. Duffy, St. John's current pastor, said there are three bells in the belfry, and that there were "godmothers" for them (which is an honor), but he could not say what the bells were named. Once rung by hand, they are now rung electronically.

In 1864, the church parish was divided, creating St. Peter Church in Reserve. After that, the west bank's population declined while the east bank's grew. The west bank remained agrarian while the east bank increased its commercial possibilities.

St. John the Baptist Church will always be necessary not only to Edgard, but to all the parish. It is an enduring symbol of God and of the rich cultural history of this area.

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Births

The following births were reported by parents in the River

Parishes:

Lakeside
Michael Anthony Joseph, son of Lois Joseph of Lutcher, March 4.

Shangquille O'Neil Matthews, son of Donna Matthews of LaPlace, March 12.

daughter of Lisa and Darris Eugene of St. Rose, March 18.

Rebecca Lynn Burkhamer, daughter of Rosalie and Aubrey Burkhamer of St. Rose, March 19.

Alexianna Tara Raglin, daughter of Rachelle Raglin of LaPlace, March 20.

of Bobbi and Huey Melancon Jr. of Gramercy, March 13.

Angel Talmica Pierre, daughter of Linda Pierre and Michael Fe-milling of LaPlace, March 14.

Angelle Diane McNabb, daughter of Miriam and Brett McNabb of LaPlace, March 14.

Kenneth Joseph Berthelot, son of Kenneth and Bernice Berthelot, March 14.

