

History Of the Academy of the Sacred Heart Grand Coteau, Louisiana

The rural community of Grand Coteau is home to one of the most remarkable educational institutions in Louisiana. Currently noted as an area of serenity and spiritual enlightenment, Grand Coteau has a history of religion and education with its roots in the early years of the 19th Century. In 1821, Mrs. Charles Smith, widow of a wealthy Opelousas planter, offered the Religious of the Sacred Heart a two-story building, 50 acres of land, and funds for the journey of two nuns from St. Charles, MO to Grand Coteau. In early August of that year, Srs. Eugenie Aude' and Mary Layton began the arduous trip, leaving the relatively civilized surroundings of a metropolitan city to travel to South Louisiana. The first part of their trip was by steamer, leaving St. Louis on the Rapides and arriving in New Orleans 2 ½ weeks later. They disembarked in Plaquemine and continued their travel by flat boat, horseback and ox cart, through the heat and mud of south Louisiana to Grand Coteau.

Expecting to find a building suitable for the establishment of a convent and school, they were somewhat dismayed to discover that the building provided for them was a barn-like structure with dirt floors. Undaunted, the religious persevered and on October 5, 1821, the Academy then called the Institute for the Education of Young Women, opened its doors to eight pupils. From the very beginning the student body reflected a diversified populace. One of the pupils was from Philadelphia, two from New Orleans, two from Opelousas, and one from Grand Coteau. The other two students were traveling with their family in France, and space was held for these young women until their return. Today, the student body of the Academy continues to reflect the ethnic diversity of South Louisiana and the cultural diversity of students from Central America, Mexico, Europe and the Pacific Rim nations.

The main building of the Academy was begun in 1830, the architecture following the lines of classic Georgian buildings on the eastern coast of the United States. The bricks were created from the soil of nearby fields surrounding the Academy and cemented in a unique pattern, known as Flemish Bond. Other construction materials included virgin cypress from nearby swamps and the native bousillage, a mixture of plaster, moss and deer or horsehair. The glass for the windows was imported from France and many of these same windows still bear evidence of their hand-blown origins, complete with the dimples and waves characteristic of their creation.

At about 1835, the formal gardens which grace the area in front of the main building were begun. The elegant, yet simple design was sent from France, based on the formal garden of the Archbishop Bossuet. The flowerbeds were delineated by bricks in the traditional shapes of diamonds, circles, and hearts. Over the decades, the grounds were planted with a wide variety of indigenous plants and trees, including at one time, rose trellises and sweet olive trees. These formal gardens were restored in mid-1980's after a severe freeze damaged many of the shrubs, including the 100 year-old camellia trees. Alumna Karen McGlasson took charge of the garden project, restoring the grounds to their former beauty. Mrs. McGlasson continues to spearhead the efforts to maintain the grounds.

Another outstanding feature of the Academy grounds is the alley of oak trees, known as Oakdale, which runs from the front gate of the Academy to the town of Grand Coteau. The trees were planted by the first Jesuit rector of St. Charles College. The Religious of the Sacred Heart were cloistered at that time and the Jesuit priests served as chaplains for the religious and the students of the school. With an eye towards the blazing sun and the ever-present rain of South Louisiana, the rector planted these trees to protect the visiting priests as they walked or rode horseback between St. Charles and the Academy. Today the oaks are an evergreen bower that is the setting for the graduation ceremonies of the Academy and the location for innumerable bridal portraits taken by local photographers.

Although the Academy continued to prosper and grow in the intervening years between 1821 and 1860, the school was not immune to the ravages of the Civil War. In 1863 a large contingent of Federal Troops were stationed in Grand Coteau, under the command of General Nathaniel Banks. In essence, the women of the Academy, both student and religious, were surrounded by thousands of soldiers in the adjacent fields. General Banks' daughter was attending Manhattanville Convent of the Sacred Heart in New York. The Superior of this school, Mother Aloysia Hardey, was a former student of the Academy in Grand Coteau. Concerned for her Sisters at the Academy, Mother Aloysia asked Mrs. Banks to tell her husband to look after the nuns and students at Coteau. General Banks

responded by issuing orders to his Commissary Officer to supply the Academy with staples, such as flour, sugar, coffee and tea. His generosity allowed the Academy to remain open and to continue to function. Additionally, General Banks issued orders which protected the property and residents of the Academy. Because of the general's generosity the Academy stayed open through the remainder of the Civil War, allowing the Academy to become the oldest continuously operating Sacred Heart School in the world, oldest school west of the Mississippi.

In 1866, Grand Coteau achieved additional recognition when it became the site of a miracle. Because of this event, the Academy of the Sacred Heart has the only shrine in the United States situated on the exact location where a miracle has taken place. Mary Wilson, a young woman preparing to enter the convent, offered a novena to John Berchmans, an unassuming, but very holy, Jesuit priest from Belgium, who had died at a young age. Mary, who had a prolonged and serious illness, was immediately cured after having a vision of the priest. Mary Wilson, and several other local inhabitants, offered written testimonies that were forwarded to the Diocese of New Orleans and eventually, to Rome. The powerful testimony of this young woman describing her vision of John Berchmans led directly to his canonization. Today, over 3,000 pilgrims visit the shrine, located on the 2nd floor of the Academy's main building.

The school grounds reflect the rich history and traditions of the Academy. The original architecture and beautiful gardens have been preserved and added to over the years. Many of the campus buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and a museum detailing the rich history of the Academy is located in the former cloister of the convent. The original 50 acres and wood-frame schoolhouse have developed into a thriving campus with several buildings and over 250 acres of property. Changing and growing over the decades, the Academy remains loyal to the original philosophy of Sacred Heart education, showing a deep concern for each individual student's total development. The value-oriented education being offered to our students is structured within philosophical goals to which we are strongly committed: faith which is relevant in a secularized world; a deep respect for intellectual values; a social awareness which impels to action; the building of community as a Christian value; and personal growth in an atmosphere of wise freedom.

A pioneer in 1821, the Academy is still in the forefront of educating young women to assume their rightful roles as leaders in their professions and their communities.