



# St. Louis, King of France

## *Between St. Louis Cathedral and the Presbytere*

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No other American city has a cultural history as rich and vibrant as New Orleans does. Its roots are numerous and diverse, but the taproot extends into French soil.

The original French settlers made their way from the Gulf of Mexico into Lake Borgne and through the Rigolets into Lake Pontchartrain. From there, they traveled down Bayou St. John and trekked over land to a place near the Mississippi River, where they established the settlement. In charge was explorer Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. In 1721, Bienville's engineer, Adrien de Pauger, laid out the initial plans for a fortified city, a rectangular area bounded by Decatur Street, Rampart Street, Canal Street, and Esplanade Avenue. These plans included space for the Place d'Armes, which would serve as military parade grounds with a cannon placed in the center. The square is bordered on one side by Decatur Street. On the opposite side is St. Louis Cathedral, flanked by the Cabildo and the Presbytere. The two other sides are comprised of the Pontalba buildings.

Today, the French Quarter is the heart and soul of New Orleans in the world's imagination. In times past, the Place d'Armes (now known as Jackson Square) was the French Quarter's center, both figuratively and literally. As the following chapters will show, many historic events took place there.

St. Louis Cathedral is the focal point of Jackson Square. The original wooden structure was built in 1718. A second church of brick construction was completed in 1727. One year after this church was consumed in the Great New Orleans Fire of 1788, construction of the current cathedral began and was completed in 1794. Benjamin Henry Latrobe designed the central tower in 1819.

Although Louis XIV was the king of France when Iberville and his brother began to explore the Gulf Coast, it was for Louis IX, St. Louis, that the cathedral was named.

St. Louis was the only canonized monarch of France. He was born on April 25, 1214, and died at the age of fifty-six on August 25, 1270. He was known for his religious devotion. He served in two crusades, the seventh and eighth. He commissioned the building of La Sainte Chapelle, which still stands in the heart of Paris. It houses his personal collection of relics, including the Crown of Thorns.

In the early 1900s, the New Orleans statue of St. Louis was donated in memory of the ordination of Rev. A. M. Barbier. It is a typical depiction of the king. In his right hand is a sword, a reminder of his role in the crusades. Although indiscernible from street level, the other hand grasps a pillow, upon which rests a crown, the Crown of Thorns.



# Joan of Arc

## *Place de France*

### *Decatur Street*

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This statue is an enduring reminder that New Orleans is the flower of French culture in America.

Born in 1412 in Domremy, France, Joan helped to end the siege of Orleans, our city's namesake. Her statue is as fitting here in the French Quarter, the United States' own European hamlet, as Fremiet's original in Paris. In 1958, the people of France donated to the city of New Orleans the monument of Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans. From the day that Bienville founded our city in 1718, French culture became the bedrock for New Orleans society. Its influence is discernible in local law, religion, language, literature, cuisine, and customs.

From the Napoleonic Code that forms the basis for our current civil code to the street names in the French Quarter, the French influence is evident. The much-used term "Creole" defines a descendant of the original French settlers. A Creole general, who didn't speak English until the age of twelve, fired the first shot in the Civil War. Fencing schools were as popular in New Orleans as in Paris. Lafcadio Hearn wrote:

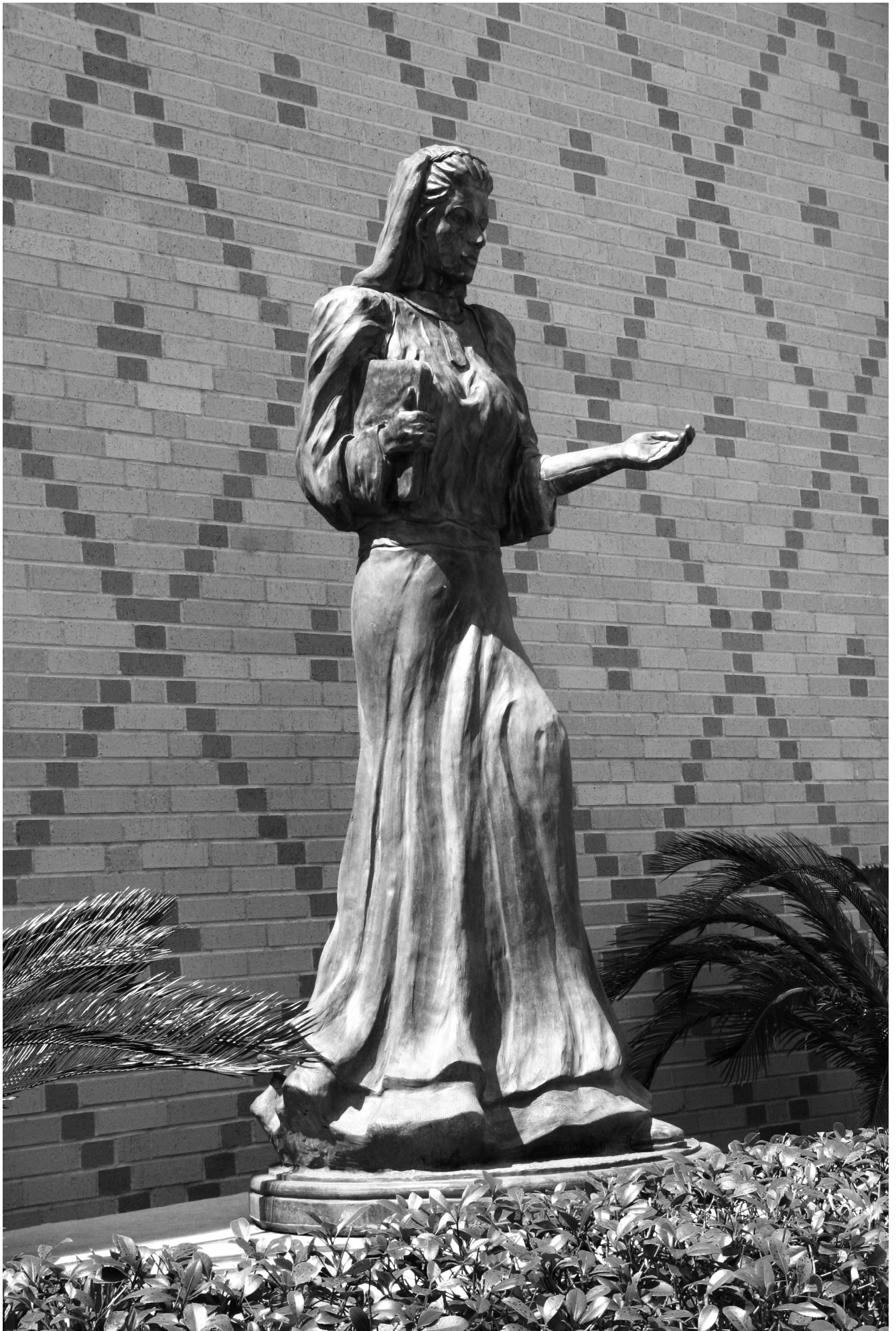
At that time fencing was a fashionable amusement. It was the pride of a Creole gentleman to be known as a fine swordsman. Most of the Creole youths educated in Paris have learned the art under great masters; but even these desired to maintain their skill by frequent visits to the Salles d'Armes at home. Indeed, fencing was something more than a mere amusement; it was almost a necessity.

The flavor of New Orleans has been undeniably French. The opulent French Opera House reflected the Gallic interest in opera and classical music. The Athénée Louisianaise, a

prestigious organization founded in 1876 by prominent members of the French-speaking community, was dedicated to the preservation of French language, culture, and literature. Its presidents included Dr. Armand Mercier, Gen. G. T. Beauregard, and Prof. Alcée Fortier. The primary literary vehicle for this society was the *Comptes Rendus*, published from 1876 until 1951. A local French newspaper, *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans*, was in publication until 1925. Today, L'Alliance Française continues to preserve French culture and language.

The Gallic symbol of the fleur-de-lis has been an integral part of our city since its inception. Bienville brought with him the flag of the House of Bourbon, a white silken banner with three golden fleurs-de-lis arrayed centrally. This flag fluttered over the Place d'Armes until the Spanish began their rule. On February 5, 1918, the official flag of the city of New Orleans was adopted during the Bienville Bicentennial Celebration. It was a composite of the ideas of two men, Bernard Barry and Gus Couret. The flag was comprised of a field of white with a top border of red, bottom border of blue, and three golden fleurs-de-lis centrally placed. It was very similar to the flag of the House of Bourbon. On July 9, 2008, Gov. Bobby Jindal authorized the fleur-de-lis as the official symbol of the state of Louisiana. Today this symbol is ubiquitous.

In 1999, the Joan of Arc statue was placed at its current location at the Place de France on Decatur Street. With her oriflamme (war banner) thrust high, the coruscating statue of *La Pucelle* (The Maid) appears prepared to challenge any threats to New Orleans.



# St. Angela de Merici

2635 State Street  
(Statue faces South Claiborne Avenue)

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In the early eighteenth century, New Orleans was a place missionaries were sent *to*, not *from*. Here, harsh living conditions and disease were bigger concerns than converting indigenous peoples. Because of the ongoing presence of missionary orders, New Orleans has always been perceived as a “Catholic city.” Of the early orders, the Ursulines remained one of the two most influential through what Charles Gayarré, the notable Louisiana historian, called the French, Spanish, and American “dominations.”

The Ursuline Order, named for the patron saint Ursula, was established in 1535 by St. Angela de Merici for the education of girls. Nearly two centuries later, Fr. Nicolas Ignace de Beaubois, the New Orleans Jesuit Superior, was instrumental in arranging for the Ursulines to come to the city. Enduring a difficult voyage aboard the *Gironde*, twelve Ursuline nuns arrived at La Nouvelle Orléans from France in 1727. The sisters stayed in a home located at the corner of Chartres and Bienville streets and remained there until the work on their convent was concluded seven years later. Shortly thereafter, because of structural problems, the convent had to be rebuilt. Work commenced in 1745 but was not completed for another seven years.

Five years after the beginning of Spanish rule, twelve Creoles attempted to overthrow Spanish authority in a coup called the Conspiracy of 1768. Spanish governor O'Reilly ruthlessly crushed this revolt by condemning five of the conspirators to death. The prisoners were to be executed in the barracks yard, which was adjacent to the Ursuline Convent. Families of

the condemned were drawn to the convent in search of solace. Relatives and nuns cringed and trembled as the rifle shots rang out.

The nuns were again huddled in the convent during the Great Fire of 1788. The fire was raging and consuming most of the city, putting their home and their lives in great peril. As they prayed fervently, the prevailing winds suddenly changed, and the convent was spared. For this reason, it is the oldest French structure in the entire lower Mississippi Valley.

During the early part of the American domination, British invaders besieged the city on January 8, 1815. Again the nuns prayed, this time for the success of the numerically inferior American forces. The mother superior vowed a yearly solemn High Mass and a Te Deum if the Americans were granted victory. That pledge continues to be honored to this day.

In 1824, the convent was relocated uptown. The Archdiocese of New Orleans renovated the original French Quarter convent, which now serves as an archive and museum.

The Ursuline nuns have served the community in many ways over the years. They have had an orphanage, boarding school, and hospital. They even ran a plantation. But their primary purpose has always been to teach young women. Baroness Pontalba was one such pupil, and so was Marie Maxent, who became the wife of Bernardo de Galvez. Ursuline Academy, established in 1727 along with the convent, is still operational today on State Street, making it the oldest girls' school in the United States. Facing Claiborne Avenue is the statue of the founder of the order, St. Angela de Merici.