



The Ursuline Nuns' Lost Landmark on the Mississippi River

1824-1912

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ON THE MORNING of September 7, 1912, fifty-two veiled women in black habits boarded a streetcar on Dauphine Street in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. For some it was their first venture into the city since before the Civil War; for others, it was their first ride on an electric car. They were cloistered Ursuline Nuns and they were heading uptown, because their downtown home since the year 1824 was about to be demolished.

The Sisters of the Order of Saint Ursula came to New Orleans from Rouen, France in 1727, a few years after the arrival of the Capuchins and Jesuits, as part of an attempt to “civilize” the roguish colony with the Catholic faith, education, health care and the presence of women. After six years living in provisional quarters, including Governor Bienville’s house at present-day 301 Chartres St., the nuns in 1734 moved into their own building eight blocks downriver on the same street (called Condé at the time). Designed by Ignace Broutin and Andre de Batz and built by Michael Zeringue, the original three-story Ursuline Convent had cross-timbered walls, a steep hipped roof with a double pitch, and a towering cupola. But it was its lack of protective stucco that led to the rapid deterioration of its *colombage*, forcing Broutin to redesign it in 1745 and Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil to rebuild it, sans the cupola, by 1753. The new building exhibited a majestically austere French Colonial institutional style typical of the reign of Louis XV. Inside, the nuns would operate their school and control the four surrounding blocks as well as rural parcels throughout the French and Spanish colonial eras.

By the early American years, population growth had put urbanization pressure on these and other city lots. It also made the nuns’ life, dedicated to contemplation and education, increasingly untenable in these inner-city environs, especially with the City Market and bustling riverfront being but two blocks away. So in 1821, the Ursulines acquired a rural parcel in the lower *banlieue* — that is, the downriver outskirts — and had erected, according to the designs of architects Gurlie and Guillot, a graceful convent dramatically fronting the Mississippi River roughly two miles from their old locale. They took occupancy of the new building in 1824, making it New Orleans’ third Ursuline Convent.

Over the years, ancillary buildings and landscaping would make the site into a campus-like compound, comprising the distinctive St. Ursula Chapel (1829), the boarding academy for girls, a cloister, a chaplain’s residence (likely a pre-existing plantation house), space for an orphanage and other evolving social and religious needs, and dependencies for everything from

cooking and dining to steam laundering, storage and even a dairy. When the street grid of neighboring faubourgs was extended through the area in the 1840s, the convent found itself set back from North Peters Street (formerly the River Road) by about 100 feet, with Dauphine Street three blocks to its rear and the spaces for Royal and Chartres subsumed by the compound. The convent itself was renovated in the 1850s with a mansard roof and a baroque clock, which would become a local landmark for generations.

From the 1820s to the 1910s, the Ursuline Nuns lived, prayed, performed rituals, educated girls, welcomed visitors, aged and died among the oaks and gardens of their Old World-style nunnery. Once she took her vows, a sister would circulate for the rest of her years in and among 15 buildings distributed between the levee and Dauphine Street, and from Manual to Sister streets. Life inside was structured, simple and pious: “Rising early for their matins [nighttime liturgies],” described K. K. Blackmar in 1912, “attending early mass in the convent chapel, long hours in the classrooms or the sewing-rooms, with brief recreation in the handsome parks or in the



ABOVE: St. Ursula Chapel, built in 1829 and demolished prior to 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress TOP: Main building of third Ursuline Convent, built in 1824 and seen here a few years before its 1912 demolition. Courtesy Library of Congress MIDDLE: Detail of baroque clock, a landmark along the river for decades, courtesy Library of Congress



ABOVE: Footprint of third Ursuline convent compound overlaid on Google satellite image. Map and analysis by Richard Campanella

well-stocked libraries, with vesper office and long night prayers: these things represent the sum total of the day of the cloistered Ursuline nun.” Students came from the elite families of the city and region, but despite their wealth and privilege, the girls dressed in simple blue uniforms, lived Spartan lives alongside their mentors, and emerged with the best education attainable for girls in this time and place.

Like all other plantations in the lower *banlieue*, the Ursuline parcel extended all the way back to the Forty Arpent Line, now Florida Avenue. An arpent measuring 192 feet, 40 arpents usually marked the full 1.5-mile-wide span of the higher, drier, more fertile natural levee in this region, behind which lay water-impounded cypress swamp. Over the decades, those 40 arpents transformed from sugar cane plantations and rice fields, or multi-use French

working farms and pasturelands, to street grids with low-density housing, and finally, in the closing years of the 1800s, to fully urbanized neighborhoods. The Ursulines likely would have eventually sold off their unneeded rear arpentage and retained their riverfront compound, from North Peters to Dauphine, where they lived and worked.

But the Mississippi, and the New Orleans Levee Board, had other designs. River currents had long scoured these particular banks, and the Board had decided that the levee had to be realigned, heightened, and strengthened. Authorities expropriated the nuns’ main convent and annexes for demolition — a fate also shared by a number of other historic riverfront structures, including the two front turrets of Jackson Barracks — but left the chapel and buildings in the rear of the complex. This undertaking also explains why North Peters Street, which fronts the French Quarter as well as the Lower Ninth Ward and Arabi, does not exist between Press Street and Andry Street: the artery and its edifices got wiped out by the levee realignment.

Resigned to the project and aware that most of their students lived uptown, the order decided to donate part of their land to the city and, selling the rest to raise funds, erected a new institution on State Street and South Claiborne Avenue. On that September morning in 1912, the nuns took a special streetcar directly to their new uptown campus, New Orleans’ fourth Ursulines Convent, carrying with them sacramental records and religious treasures dating to the early 1700s.

Demolitions ensued along the Ninth Ward riverfront, but they would be the least of the changes to come. City leaders and the maritime industry in this era, inspired by the recent opening of the Panama Canal and an envisioned canal connecting Chicago with the Mississippi system, had been clamoring for the construction of a new “inner harbor” with a fixed water level for industry and shipbuilding. In July 1914, the city received authorization from the state to build a deep-draft canal linking the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. Where exactly? Sufficiently wide and perfectly positioned, the Ursuline parcel provided the answer, and because it was largely undeveloped, its acquisition precluded costly expropriations and house relocations. All remaining buildings formerly owned by the order were acquired and razed, and with the Dock Board in charge and the renowned George W. Goethals Company as consulting engineers, ground was broken for the canal and lock on June 6, 1918. Over the next year and a half, the Ursuline land and other properties along the right-of-way were literally wiped off the face of the earth. On May 5, 1923, the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, which would come to be known colloquially as the Industrial Canal, was formally inaugurated.

The Ursulines thrive today in their State Street campus where they operate the oldest continually operating girls’ school in the nation. As for the circa-1753 Chartres Street convent, it became the residence of the bishop of the archdiocese of New Orleans and would later serve as a school, rectory, office, archive, and today a Catholic center and museum. Inside, visitors

can see the circa-1727 cypress staircase from the original convent, arguably the oldest structural artifact in the city. Now known as the Old Ursuline Convent (1112 Chartres St.), the edifice ranks as the oldest documented complete building still standing in the Lower Mississippi Valley and delta plain, and the most aged in New Orleans by a margin of about 30 years.

Of the circa-1824 third Ursuline Convent, however, only the adjacent five-block-long Sister Street recalls its century-long presence. So eradicated is the old estate that it’s hard to say whether it would be in today’s Bywater/Upper Ninth Ward or in Holy Cross in the Lower Ninth Ward, because the waterway that obliterated the land also gave rise to the very notion of an “upper” and “lower” Ninth Ward.

Next time you head down St. Claude Avenue and cross the canal, look 2000 feet to your right. While much of the nuns’ six-block compound is now mostly water, the site of the main building sits partially on that spit of land jutting into the mouth of the canal. Locals call the spot “World’s End,” and for good reason.

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