

Three Centuries of Chivalric Tradition and Lazarite Presence in Louisiana

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While embracing mainstream American lifestyles and culture, the citizens of the State of Louisiana perpetuate the chivalric and charitable traditions instilled by their ancestors – the administrators and colonists who hailed from Mother France during the early 18th century. Spaniards under Hernando de Soto explored what is now Louisiana in the 1540s, but it was the French who claimed the country and named it *La Louisiane* in honour of King Louis XIV during the expedition of Rene Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle in 1682. The province of *La Louisiane* was a major part of *La Nouvelle France* or France’s Western Hemisphere holdings and constituted much of the present United States, centering upon the drainage basin of the great Mississippi River and its tributary streams.¹ Settlers from France, including military officers and troops, governmental officials and craftsmen, established *La Nouvelle Orleans* (New Orleans) and subsequent communities, and the province thrived due to its agricultural fecundity. Descendants of the colonial French families have traditionally been referred to as *Creole*, signifying Old World ethnicity and culture transplanted in the New World.

Historian Charles Dimitry related how many Louisiana colonists came from Brittany, which he called “a land of chivalry, of poetic and romantic memories, of a people pious, of brave soldiers and sailors,” and from Normandy, “the dwelling place of knights and *seigneurs* of old, whence went with William, their duke, the barons whose names are read in the roll of the Battle Abbey.... Some came with their titles of ancient nobility, with commissions signed by the three Louis kings of France, as *Chevaliers...*, as officers of the army, while others, bearing no titles, came to Louisiana breathing the free and ennobling air which

¹ Fortier A. *A History of Louisiana*, 2nd edition by Jo Ann Carrigan, Vols. 1 and 2. Claitor’s, Baton Rouge

constituted for them and their posterity a liberal and sufficient patent of nobility".²

One of the first *Chevaliers de l'Ordre de Saint-Lazare* noted in the Louisiana province was Jean Baptiste de Valigny, a former master-at-arms of the Order's marine operations at Rochefort. Though Governor Antoine de La Mothe, Sieur de Cadillac, referred to the elderly, peg-legged Valigny as "a quarrelsome blunderer" who failed to rise in military rank, this Lazarite had in 1710 supplied the fledgling *Isle Dauphin* settlement with 25 men for a garrison as well as munitions and provisions.³

A number of Louisianans descend from the marriage of *Sieur Francois de Maille' de La Tour Landry* and *Dame Diane Francoise de Rohan-Gie'*, both of whose families counted several distinguished Knights of Saint Lazarus. Many of the forebears and collateral relations of the Rohan-Gie' were leading Lazarites as well, including members of the families Bourbon-Dampierre, Laval-Montmorency, Chabert, Clermont, and Beaumont. Progenitors of these noble lines included the early rulers of nearly every European nation, Russian grand princedom, Constantinople and Jerusalem, many of the oldest Italian houses, and Saints Charlemagne, Louis of France, Margaret of Scotland and Vladimir of Kiev.

The rolls of Officers and Knights of Saint Lazarus invested from the 17th through the 19th centuries include surnames prominent in Louisiana history and culture including: Billouart de Kerlerec, Rigaud de Vaudreuil, de Marigny, de la Vergne, de la Houssaye, Grandpre, Saint-Amand, Rouer de Villeray, de Mezieres, d'Hauterive, Saint-Romain, de la Barre,

² Clisby A.S., Campbell Huchet de Kernion G., Patton Dimitry C. *Old Families of Louisiana*. 1931, Claitor's, Baton Rouge, pp.18-19

³ Gaillard McWilliams R. *Fleur de Lys and Calumet, Being the Penicaut Narrative of French Adventure in Louisiana*. University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 1988, pp.132-133

Pecquet, Beauvais, Lamirault, Ferrier, Pellerin, Pelletier, du Plessis, Berthier and Pujol.⁴

As to the colonists' fortunes in the New World, historian Elizabeth Shown Mills stated: "The wilderness frontier that Louisiana was all throughout this [French colonial] period was a land that enriched some men and impoverished others. Especially outside the capital city [i.e., New Orleans], noble families frequently lost their lustre, while the offspring of peasants became plantation lords".⁵ Most of the Lazarite surnames herein listed survive in 21st century Louisiana and, despite the vicissitudes of fortune and fame experienced by some of the families through time, current members retain a keen knowledge of their noble ancestry. Much of the present-day chivalric and charitable tradition evident in Louisiana stems from the precepts of the Church and the military valour of many of the French forefathers, who introduced to the New World a veneration for the Virgin Mary and the saints, defence of the vulnerable from hostile human and natural forces and financial and prayerful support of churches, institutions and those in need.

The oldest institution in Louisiana is the Catholic religion, having been brought by missionaries accompanying the Spanish and French explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries. Clergy and religious sisters were sent to the province to minister to the French colonists, the Africans, who were imported as the labour force of a plantation economy, and the indigenous Native American peoples.⁶ The oldest records preserved in Louisiana are sacramental acts of baptism, marriage and burial, the earliest dating from 1720 in the Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France in New Orleans. The most valued artefacts in Louisiana are religious ones reflecting noble munificence, the oldest known being a gold chalice

⁴ Costello B.J.. "Antecedents and Descendants of Francois de Maille' de la Tour Landry and Diane Francoise de Rohan-Gie'," unpublished

⁵ Shown Mills E. "Parallel Lives: Philippe de la Renaudiere and Philippe (de) Renault, Directors of the Mines, Company of the Indies," *The Natchitoches Genealogist*, Vol. 22, April 1998, pp.3-18

⁶ Baudier R. *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*. Louisiana Library Association, Public Service Section, New Orleans, 1929

bearing the date 1696 and the arms of Jean Rene Bouwens van der Boyen, Baron de Neerysche, donor, in the treasury of Saint Mary of False River Church, upriver in the town of New Roads.⁷

French rule of Louisiana ended in 1762 as a result of the Seven Years' War, known in America as the French and Indian War, when King Louis XV of France ceded the territory on the west bank of the Mississippi as well as the east bank below Bayou Manchac and including the city of New Orleans to his cousin King Carlos III of Spain. In the following year, the Treaty of Paris affected the transfer of all remaining French lands east of the Mississippi River to the British. In the portion of Louisiana controlled by Spain, several mainland Spanish and *Isleno* families established new homes and many were assimilated into the French population, contributing to Louisiana's increasingly rich Creole diversity. In 1800, Spain transferred its Louisiana holdings to the French Republic through the Treaty of San Ildefonso. A mere three years later - in 1803 - Napoleon Bonaparte sold Louisiana to the United States in a conveyance popularly dubbed the "Louisiana Purchase" and vastly increased the size of the young nation of the United States of America and gave it control of the strategic Mississippi River. In 1812, the State of Louisiana was formed from the southernmost part of the old Louisiana province as the 18th American state. Other states were subsequently created from the balance of the old Louisiana territory.

Meanwhile, four additional waves of French settlers had made their homes in Louisiana: the Acadian French expelled from their long-established homes in *Acadie* (Nova Scotia) by their new British lords; noble *émigrés* fleeing the French Revolution; sugar cane planters and their families escaping the slave rebellion in *Saint-Domingue* (Haiti); and former Bonapartist officers and soldiers. Subsequent ethnic groups relocating to Louisiana for political or economic reasons included the Irish, Germans and Sicilians. Those newcomers who married into the

⁷ Costello B.J. *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupee: a Faith Journey*. Randy DeCuir & Associates, Marksville, Louisiana, 1995, p.23

native French population were usually assimilated into Louisiana's Creole macro-culture.⁸

Since the transfer of Louisiana from French to Spanish rule in the 1760s, it is unlikely that many Louisianans were admitted into the French chivalric Orders. That period, however, was marked by a manifestation of the Lazarite tradition harkening to the Order's origins in the Holy Land: the care of leprosy patients. The disease was first reported in Louisiana in 1756, soon after the arrival of Acadian French exiles, and subsequent cases were reported among the enslaved African peoples brought into Louisiana from the slave ships of France, Spain, England and the American colonies.⁹ Sufferers of leprosy congregated in New Orleans to solicit alms.¹⁰ Alarmed, Governor Antonio de Ulloa was accused of proposing in 1776 of sending leprous children from the city to the inhospitable settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi River, which suggestion was met by public outcry.¹¹

A solution resulted through the benevolence of *Don Andres Almonester y Rojas* who in 1785 built a hospital and bathing canal for the segregated housing and care of sufferers of the disease. Located behind the city, the facility was popularly called *La Terre des Lepreux*, or Lepers' Land.¹² Officially, however, the hospital bore the name San Lazaro or Saint Lazarus, the patron of leprosy sufferers.¹³ Almonester's continued financial support of the San Lazaro Hospital was but one of his many charitable acts on behalf of the city, province and Church, for

⁸ Fortier A. *A History Of Louisiana*. 2nd edition (Jo Ann Carrigan), Vols. 1, 2 & 3., Claitor's, Baton Rouge

⁹ *Sanitarium* (May 1890), citing report of Dr. Isadore Dyer, first president of the Louisiana Leper Board

¹⁰ Gayarre C. *History of Louisiana*, Vol. III, William J. Middleton, New York, 1866, p.332.

¹¹ Gussow Z. *Leprosy, Racism, and Public Health: Social Policy in Chronic Disease Control*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1989, p.44

¹² Farnsworthand J.M., Masson A.M. (editors). *The Architecture of Colonial Louisiana: Collected Essays of Samuel Wilson, Jr. F.A.I.A.* The Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987, p.278

¹³ de Castañedo J. Report of Accounts with San Lazzaro Hospital. Miscellaneous French and Spanish Documents, No. 247. New Orleans Public Library, 1801

which benevolence he was knighted in the Most Distinguished Order of Carlos III.¹⁴

San Lazaro Hospital reportedly housed as many as 40 patients,¹⁵ but by 1799 only five remained and the state of affairs had deteriorated since Almonester's death in 1798.¹⁶ From the latter years of the leprosarium's history are references in which Father Thomas Hassett of Saint Louis Cathedral stipulated almsgiving in compensation for marriage dispensations. In 1801, one affianced couple gave 10 *pesos* to San Lazaro and in 1802 another couple gave 30 *pesos* while a third couple donated 15 *pesos*.¹⁷ In response to reports of unsanitary conditions and evidence that none of the remaining five residents had leprosy, San Lazaro Hospital was closed in 1806.¹⁸ Cases of leprosy were noted again in several Louisiana cities in the 1870s, but it was not until 1894 that another facility for the care of sufferers of the disease was established in the state, this time 75 miles upriver of New Orleans at Carville. Established by Tulane University dermatologist Dr. Isadore Dyer, the facility was purchased by the State of Louisiana in 1905 and by the United States government in 1921. Until 1999, it was the only in-patient centre for the care of leprosy patients and was, therefore, known as the National Leprosarium. The Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul ministered to the patients for more than a century, beginning in 1896.¹⁹ The absence of data on the care of leprosy patients in Louisiana between 1806 and 1894 is simultaneous with a paucity in detailed information on the works of the Order of Saint Lazarus in Europe.

¹⁴ Glenn R.C. (editor). *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*. The Louisiana Historical Association in cooperation with The Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette, vol. I, p.11.

¹⁵ Robertson J.A. (editor). *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France and the United States*, A.H. Clark Company, Cleveland, 1917, vol. 1, p.97

¹⁶ Farnsworth, *op cit.*, pp.278-279

¹⁷ Notre Dame Archives, documents V-3-d L.S., A.D.S., D.S.; and V-3-e A.D.S., D.S., correspondence of Father Thomas Hassett and Francisco Bermudes.

¹⁸ Farnsworth, *op cit.*, pp.278-279

¹⁹ Gaudet M. *Carville: Remembering Leprosy in Louisiana*. University Press of Mississippi, 2004, Chap. 1

Significantly, however, the exiled Louis Stanislaus Xavier, Comte de Provence - the future King Louis XVIII – admitted to the Order men of the Orthodox and Lutheran faiths, making it an ecumenical body.²⁰ This action mirrored the growth of religious diversity in 19th century Louisiana. French- and African-American Catholics remained the majority of Louisiana’s population, but they had been joined after Louisiana was acquired by the United States by Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the eastern states. Despite some theological differences, a remarkable tolerance has existed among the various religious bodies in the state and numerous are references of Catholic support of nascent Protestant congregations.²¹

For generations, the Lazarist Fathers, officially the Congregation of the Mission, administered several Louisiana churches, hospitals and seminaries. Two Lazarists, Giuseppe Rosati and Leo de Neckere, served in turn as Bishop of New Orleans while a third, Jean Marie Odin, as Archbishop.²² Relics treasured in the rural religious centre of Grand Coteau included those certified in 1877 by Archbishop Napoleon Joseph Perche’ as being of “Saint-Lazare de Massiliens,”²³ this title reflecting the ancient belief that Lazarus was first bishop of Marseille. Such reminders of Saint Lazarus, the recounting of his resurrection and his role as an intercessor for the afflicted and dispossessed were cherished by generations of Louisianans. Consequently, many male infants were named “Lazare” in his honour.

Throughout its history, Louisiana has suffered from periodic levee failures which emit devastating floods of the Mississippi River and distributaries, as well as tropical hurricanes, epidemics and crop failures. The sufferers’ dependence upon charity was especially acute in the

²⁰ de Sibert P.E.G., Ustick M. (translator). *History of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem*, with preface by the Duc de Brissac and afterword by Guy Coutant de Saisseval. MHOSLJ, 1772

²¹ *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Louisiana*, Vol. II (1892). The Goodspeed Publishing Company, p Chicago, p211

²² Baudier, *op cit*.

²³ Perche J.N.. Statement of. Record VI-3-a, University of Notre Dame Archives, 1877

latter part of the 19th century and extending well into the 20th century. In response to Louisiana's many needs, several individuals stood out by their humanitarian works. The Italian branch of the Order of Saint Lazarus - the *Ordine dei Sancti Maurizio e Lazzaro* - named as *Cavaliere* three of New Orleans' most distinguished laymen: Vice Consul and Knight of the Crown of Italy Charles Papini²⁴, financier Charles de Balathier Claiborne²⁵ and Knight of Saint Gregory the Great and Grand Commander of the Legion of Honour Dr. Arthur de Roaldes,²⁶ Similarly, many of the state's religious bodies and fraternal organizations offered what assistance they could, but the need for a large-scale charitable institution was great, and it was from the Lazarite tradition of Mother France that the aid eventually came.

The continued spiritual protection of the Order of Saint Lazarus by the Melkite Patriarchs and its placement in the temporal lead of Grand Masters from Louisiana's beloved former ruling family, the Spanish Borbons, provided stability for the Venerable Order.²⁷ Fortunately for those individuals descended from *cadet* lines of the nobility, the Order's ranks are open to non-armigerous members, of which historians James Algrant y Canete and Jean de Beaugourdon stated: "It was naturally prepared to adapt itself to the evolution of modern society, while at the same time remaining an aristocratic institution in the real sense of the word.... Thus, nobility renews and perpetuates itself in the defence and exaltation of the ideals of Western humanism and Christianity".²⁸

²⁴ Fifty Years at Home under Foreign Flag: Chevalier Papini, Vice-Counsel for Italy in New Orleans, Achieves World Prestige in Diplomatic Services. *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, 24 October 1926, p.85

²⁵ "C. de B. Claiborne Financial, Social Leader, Expires," *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, 10 March 1936, p.3

²⁶ "Medical History Written in Hospitals of New Orleans," *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, 25 January 1937, Section H, p.5

²⁷ Coutant de Saisseval, G. *Les Chevaliers de Saint-Lazare de 1789 à 1930*, Drukkerij Weimar, The Hague, undated. Also, Savona-Ventura, C. *The History of the Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem*. Nova Science Publishers, New York, 2014

²⁸ Algrant y Caneta J.J., de Beaugourdon J. *Armorial of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem*. A.A. van der Akker, Delft, 1982, p.cccxxii.

The Order of Saint Lazarus was established in the North-eastern United States in the 1930s, counting among its early members Cardinals Hayes and Spellman of New York, Dougherty of Philadelphia, and O’Connell of Boston. World War II suspended most of the work of the Order in the United States due to the nation’s focus on the war and rehabilitation efforts. By the 1960s, however, the Lazarite ministry spread to the Western states, the Grand Priory of America was inaugurated in 1971, and the nation divided into jurisdictions to facilitate administration and works.²⁹

Meanwhile, Louisiana and much of the American South continued to be an area of need. The mechanization of agriculture in the mid-1900s displaced thousands of labourers who, having few other employment options and limited education, languished with little hope of socio-economic advancement. A wide disparity in income, with a striking percentage of the population existing below the poverty level, under-education, unemployment and urban crime are tragic facts of 21st century life.³⁰

Five years after the Order of Saint Lazarus inaugurated its Grand Priory of America, New Orleanians formed the Southern Delegation in the American bicentennial year of 1976. Principal founders were Delegate Harold Stream, Almoner Charles Gresham, Grand Prior Monsignor Patrick Ryan, and Bailiff Dr. Hans von Leyden. Fourteen aspirants were invested in New Orleans’ historic Saint Louis Basilica on January 30 of that year, and two days later, members made the 75-mile trip up the Mississippi River to the National Leprosarium at Carville for celebration of Sunday Holy Mass.³¹ Notable among the members of the Order of St. Lazarus was Dame Corinne “Lindy” Claiborne Boggs, a United States Representative, champion of equal rights and Ambassador to the Holy See during 1997-2001. The pre-eminent laywoman in the

²⁹ www.stlazarus.us, accessed 9 April 2015

³⁰ “Louisiana,” www.spotlightonpoverty.org, accessed 13 April 2015

³¹ “OLJ to Induct 14 Aspirants,” *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, 29 January 1976, Section 2, p 5

United States, Madame Boggs was also a Dame of the Order of Malta, the Constantinian Order of Saint George, the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Pian Order.

The Delegation of the South rapidly grew to a Commandery and to a Grand Commandery, comprising the contiguous states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas, all of which had been part of the old Louisiana province. Membership growth in and around Lake Charles, Louisiana spurred the founding of the Calcasieu Delegation. Successive capable Commanders have led the ministry of the Grand Commandery of the South, the present being Chevalier James Jeter and his immediate predecessor being Chevalier Grand Cross Hugh Straub, current Chancellor of the American Grand Priory.

Through the commitment and generosity of its members, the Grand Commandery of the South has engaged in a wide range of local and international ministries. It provides funding for the National Hansen's Disease Program; mentors in the English in Action program to help qualified newcomers master the language and prepare for citizenship; and is a leading supporter of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference, the chief venue of ecumenical dialogue among the state's Christian bodies. In its prison ministry, the Grand Commandery of the South supports the Louisiana Prison Chapel Foundation; helped provide a steeple for the Forcht Wade Correctional Center chapel; donated literally a ton of Bibles to the imprisoned; and provides Christmas cards for female incarcerates to communicate with loved ones. The Grand Commandery also sponsors a grant program for charitable endeavours; has donated to free clinic programs, mission schools, Hansen's diagnosis and other scholarship programs, religious orders ministering to the needy, empowerment programs for homeless women, Christian outreach services, and the repair of residences of the poor and elderly. The Grand Commandery led in the establishment of a chapel at Xavier University dedicated to local saint Mother Katharine Drexel.

Ever mindful of the Order's origins and the continuing plight of the population of the Holy Land, the Grand Commandery of the South has assisted the Children's Treatment Center and has relations with St. Louis French Hospital and the Mount Carmel Sanctuary. Similarly, the Grand Commandery supports the work of leprosaria in Mexico and in the projects fostered the Grand Magistry and Grand Priory.

New Orleans suffered its greatest crisis in 2005, when floodwaters driven by Hurricane Katrina inundated 80 percent of the city, destroyed infrastructure and claimed more than 1,800 lives in the region. The Grand Commandery of the South, supported by the American Association of Saint Lazarus, partnered with Habitat for Humanity and built a new post-Katrina home for the Johnson family and supplied meals to all workers throughout the torrid summer heat. Upon completion, Saint Lazarus chaplain Father Val McInnes blessed the home.³²

As Grand Commandery of the South comprises a large percentage of the American Lazarites, Confrere J. Luis Baños successfully proposed locating the American National Shrine of the Order in New Orleans' Old Ursuline Convent. The Ursuline Sisters came from France in 1727, and this building dates from the reign of Louis XV, Protector of the Order of Saint Lazarus and last French King of Louisiana. The National Shrine opened in 1980, following an investiture with New Orleans Archbishop Philip Hannan and Prince Francisco Enrique de Borbón y de Borbón, 47th Grand Master of the Order, presiding.

Drawing its human resources from Christian men and women of a community long noted for its chivalric and charitable heritage, the Grand Commandery of the South of the Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem is nearing its fourth decade of service to the people of Louisiana and the world. The commitment of its members and the contributions received from neighbours who support the Order's work help ensure the viability and visibility of one of the oldest institutions in Western and Christian civilization.

³² www.st-lazarus.us, accessed 9 April 2015