



Celebrating Over 250 Years of The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ Catholic Church Parish



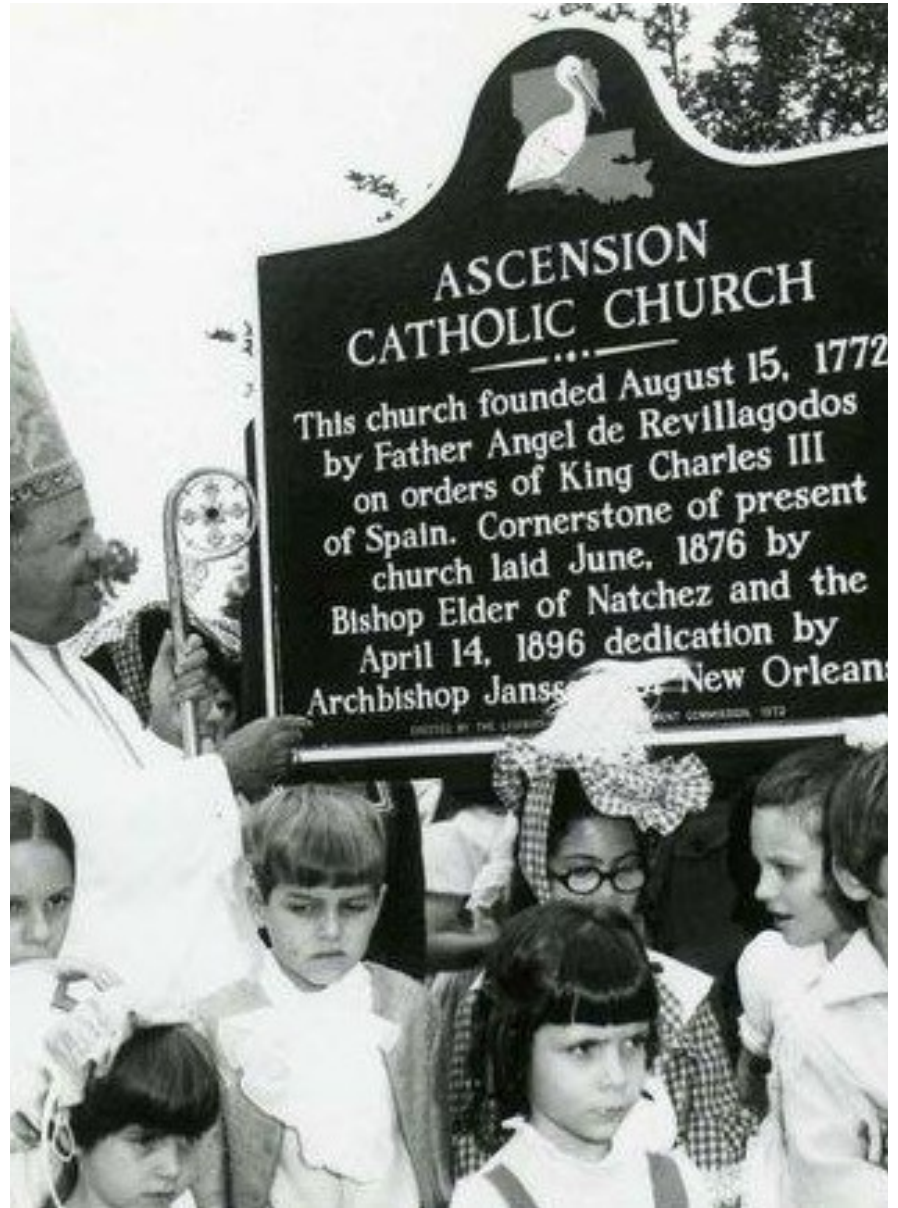
Second larger church building completed in 1843 on the site of the original church building.



The drawing above depicts the original wooden church building built in 1772. No one knows exactly when the first small chapel was constructed, however, the Acadians began to settle the area in 1758, and records indicate that the Spanish militia began construction on a small mission chapel for the settlement on September 10, 1770, on property that remains designated as church property today. It was—as were other churches along the Mississippi River—served by a missionary priest who traveled by boat up and down the River.



Founded by order of King Charles III of Spain in 1772, it has remained the center of faith for Christians here under the flags of Spain, France, Territory of Louisiana, the Confederate States of America, and the United States of America.



St. Vincent's Institute

Founded in 1772 and serving as a school, hospital, orphanage and convent, St. Vincent's Institute is now a part of Ascension Catholic Diocesan Regional School.

It was originally operated by six nuns.





Father St. Cosme

Father St. Cosme entered the Minor Seminary of Quebec at the age of eight. In 1690 Jean Francois was ordained to the priesthood. Service to the Church was common in his family. His parents had administered the farm of the Seminary of Quebec on Ile Jesus. His younger brother, Michel, followed him into the priesthood and the missions while two sisters became nuns in Quebec.

Jesuit Father Jacques Gravier forbade St. Cosme to continue his ministry to either the natives or the French. From there on, Saint-Cosme's mission met with little success. His poor facility for learning their languages and the low density of population were formidable obstacles. It may also be that, by this time, he had formed a low opinion of his charges. In letters he called for servants "capable of standing up to the most wicked Indian" and observed that "it is awkward for a missionary to have to punch an Indian." St. Cosme's mission ended during a trip down the Mississippi toward Mobile in late 1706. In the vicinity of what is now Donaldsonville, Louisiana, St. Cosme and his three companions were shot to death by arrows for the Chitimacha Indians. Father St. Cosme thus became the first North American native priest to be killed in the mission fields.

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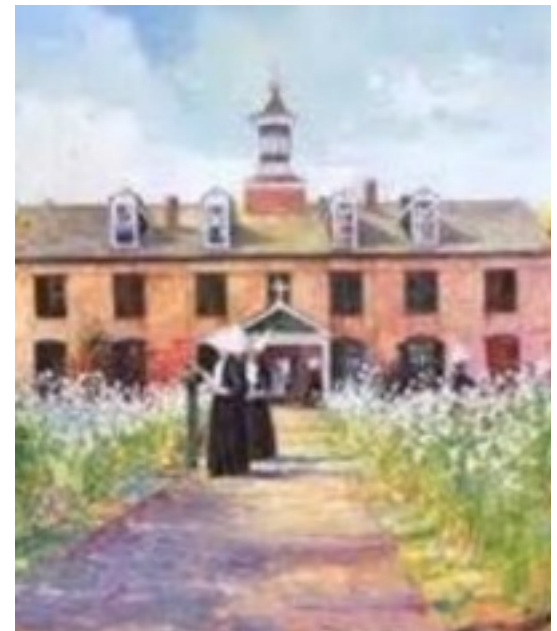


The Daughters of Charity and the Brothers of the Sacred Heart staffed and administered the school until the departure of the brothers in 1968. The following year, the school was consolidated with the neighboring black Catholic school, St. Catherine's School.

In 2019, the convent's roof top cupola was repaired and restored pictured to the far right.



In 1850, a large three-story brick convent building was constructed (still existing) at the school to serve as a hospital as well as a residence for the Daughters of Charity, who would now staff the hospital and school. New Orleans becomes an Archdiocese and Bishop Antoine Blanc becomes the Archbishop.





Daughters of Charity







Presbytery, left
St. Joseph's Commercial Institute, above

Thirty-four years before William Donaldson founded the City of Donaldsonville, Father Angelus Revillogodos, Franciscan Capuchin Missionary priest, had dedicated the Church parish to the Ascension of Our Lord on August 15, 1772. It was officially named "La Iglesia de la Ascensión de Nuestro Senor Jesu Cristo da Lafourche de los Chetimaches." The reference therein is to the Chetimaches Indian tribe which was found by early French explorers at the junction of the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche at Donaldsonville. It had been to the Chetimaches that the earliest French missionary priests had come to evangelize in 1704. The territory comprising the original boundaries of the Church parish included more than the present geographical area of Ascension Civil Parish, which derives its name from Ascension Catholic Church parish.

The original wooden mission chapel was enlarged in 1783, then finally dismantled and replaced by the first official church building, constructed of brick, in 1819. The first ordination to the priesthood in Louisiana was celebrated at Ascension of Our Lord Church in Donaldsonville on October 24, 1823, when Bishop Louis William DuBourg ordained Jean-Baptiste Blanc, a native of Lyons, France. In 1830 Donaldsonville replaced New Orleans as the capital city of the State of Louisiana, but after only a year, New Orleans once again became the capital city. Construction of the second larger church building was begun, and would be completed in 1843 at a total cost of \$19,000.

Twenty-two foreign missionary priests pastored Ascension Church parish for its first 100 years between 1772 and 1872. In 1872 Belgian native Father Francis Xavier Ceuppens became the twenty-third pastor and immediately began planning the third and present church building. Construction began on the church foundation in 1875, and the cornerstone was laid on June 24, 1876.

Construction was slow for want of and waiting for imported materials and because of lacking funds, and was finally halted eight years after it had begun in 1883. Fr. Ceuppens was caught in the middle of a lengthy dispute between the Church's Board of Wardens and the Archbishop of New Orleans over ownership and control of church money and property. Church records attest that the celebration of the sacraments in the parish ended abruptly—presumably indicating that the parish was placed under interdict—and under threat of bodily harm Fr. Ceuppens was forcibly evicted from the rectory by the Board of Wardens for obeying the archbishop's order and refusing to offer the sacraments.

While the dispute was settled legally in favor of the Board of Wardens (the magistrate was related to a member of the Board), church money and property must have been transferred eventually to the archbishop, because in 1885 the apparent interdict was lifted with the appointment of Fr. Jean Honore Dubernard as the 24th pastor.

Construction was slowly but surely resumed on the new church building. A distinctive change in the color of the bricks approximately halfway up on the exterior walls of the church building testifies to the interruption in construction. In 1896, the new church building which had taken 21 years to construct at a cost of \$80,000 was opened on March 31st, and solemnly dedicated on April 14th. When dedicated, it wasn't entirely completed. Fr. Dubernard would see to the final completion in 1900. He died on August 1, 1902, after serving as pastor for 17 years. His body is interred in a crypt under Ascension Church, and the crypt is still visible from a "Chapel of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament," where faithful are in prayer 24 hours daily. This chapel is located directly beneath the main sanctuary of the Church and is accessible from ground level at the rear of the church building.



Adoration Chapel
(located under church altar)



Ascension Catholic Confessional Restored



Having been weakened over the years by strong winds, the steeple structure atop the bell tower was declared unsafe, and was dismantled and taken down in 1936. In 1984, the 1907 rectory was demolished and construction began on a new administration building adjoining the church at the side, and a new clergy residence and both were completed in 1986.

In 1989 the Church parish began a massive preservation effort to arrest deterioration to the church building and furnishings and restore them to their original condition. The efforts, still underway today, have already made roof attic and roof repairs, installed a complete lightning protection system, new attic access for inspecting for leaks and electrical fire hazards, restored the more than 80 year old statues and stations of the cross, repaired, restored, and protected the church's stained glass windows (some of which are original), restored exterior masonry, replaced water-damaged plaster on the interior walls, completely repainted the interior of the church, replaced and modernized the electrical service, rewired the church, and added improved interior and exterior lighting.

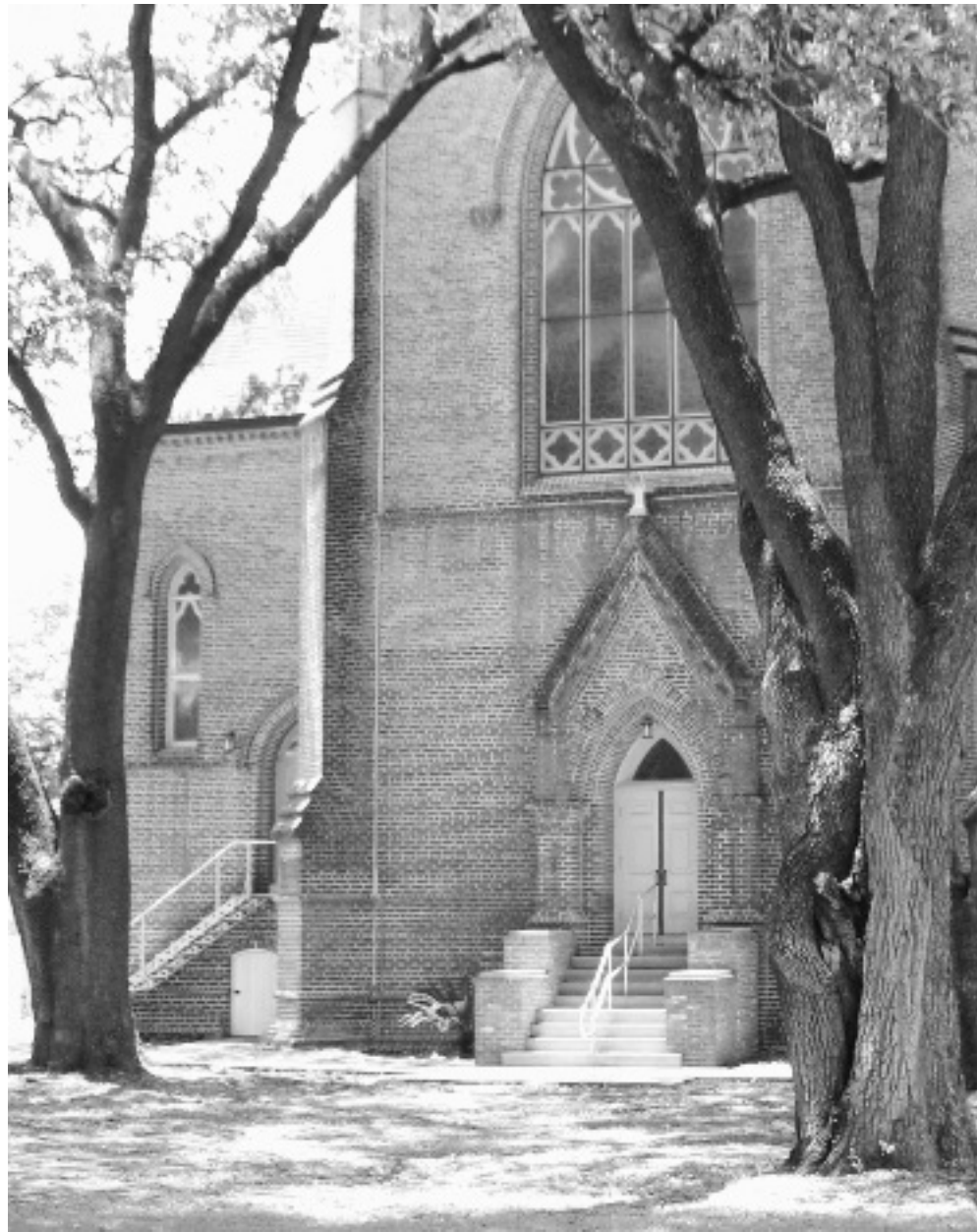
The inoperative mechanical Verdin bell-ringing system which was 54 years old was replaced by a new digital Verdin bell-ringing system. The system rings the three bells in the bell tower, one of which is 127 years old. An inoperative carillon system was also replaced with a new digital Verdin system. In 1996, the year celebrating the 100th anniversary of the church's dedication, the steeple was restored to the church after being absent for 60 years. The community is especially proud of the new steeple. The original steeple for years served as a landmark for travelers and residents in the area by land on both sides of the Mississippi River, and by traffic on the River itself. In the year 2000, more original architectural features were restored to the church's exterior. Two minor spires which had been missing since they were blown off during Hurricane Betsy in 1968 were restored.



A cupola atop the apex of the church which had been missing since 1910 was also restored. In addition to this preservation work, a new choir section was built in the west transept of the church, an entirely new and effective sound system was installed in the church, and second floors in the two forward sacristies were constructed. More phases of the preservation work will restore the clock in the bell tower, repair and refinish the pews, kneelers, and wood floors, and restore the decorative wrought iron fencing around the church property perimeter. The church, in its original state with steeple, has been the subject of paintings by such distinctive and renowned Louisiana artists as Robert Rucker and George Rodrigue.



Surrounded by stately oaks and crepe myrtles, the Church of the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ Church Parish continues to serve the community of Donaldsonville today as it has for more than two hundred and fifty years.







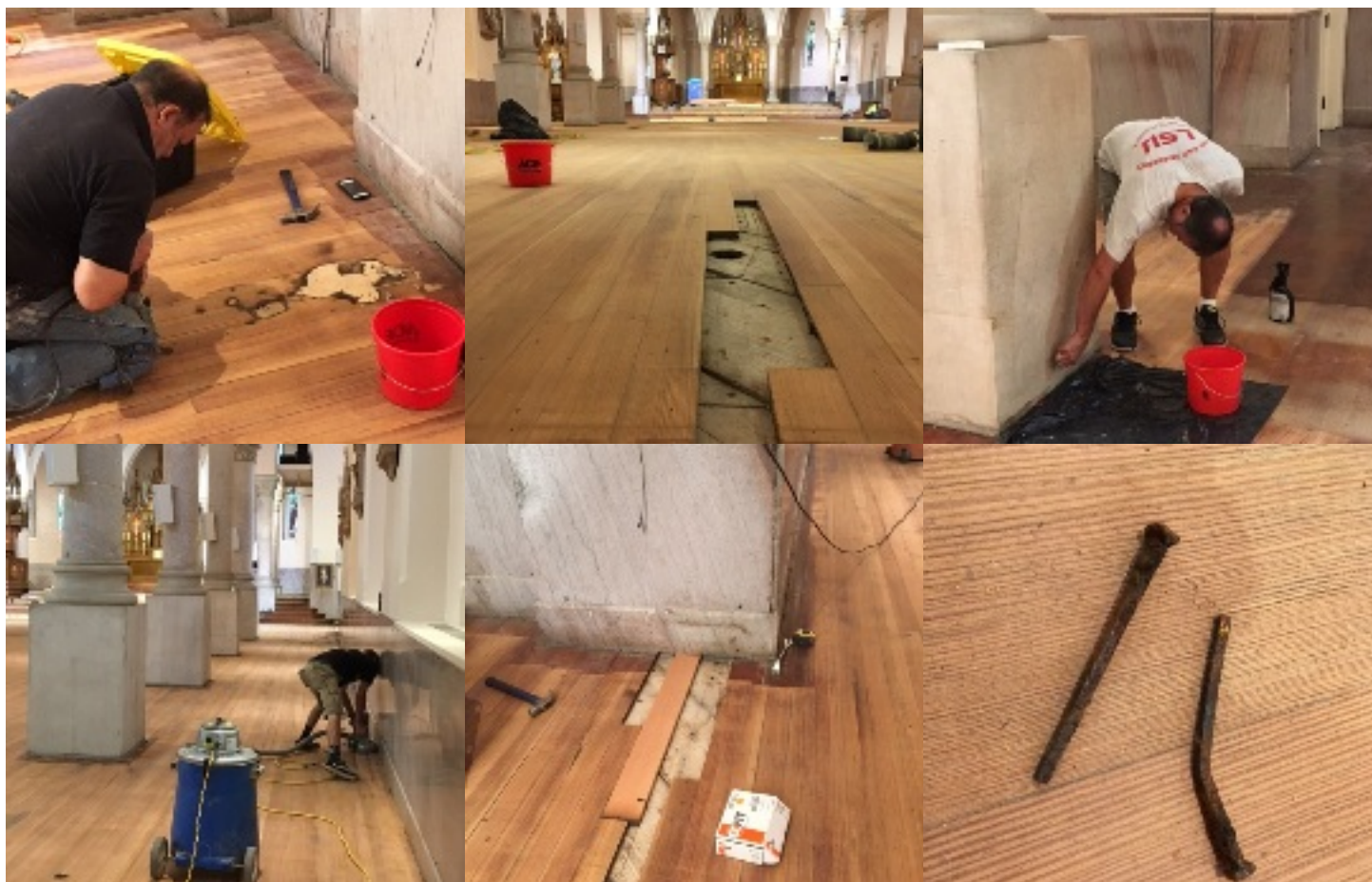
Photos of the interior of
the present church
building.



Thirty-four years BEFORE William Donaldson founded the City of Donaldsonville, Father Angelus Revillogodos, Franciscan Capuchin Missionary priest, had dedicated the Church parish to the Ascension of Our Lord on August 15, 1772. It was officially named "La Iglesia de la Ascensión de Nuestro Senor Jesu Cristo da Lafourche de los Chetimaches." The reference therein is to the Chetimaches Indian tribe which was found by early French explorers at the junction of the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche at Donaldsonville.

The earliest French missionary priests had come to evangelize the Chitimacha Tribe in 1704. The territory comprising the original boundaries of the Church parish included more than the present geographical area of Ascension Civil Parish, which derives its name from Ascension Catholic Church parish.





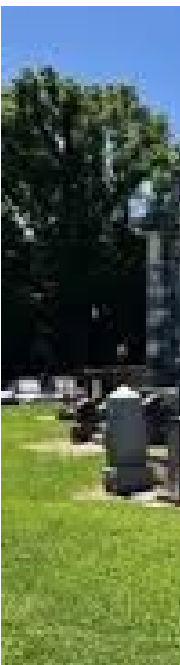
2017 Floor Restoration



Interior stained glass window

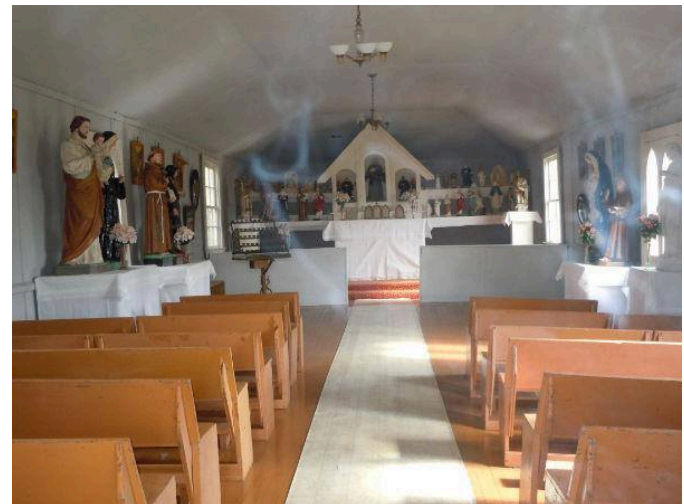
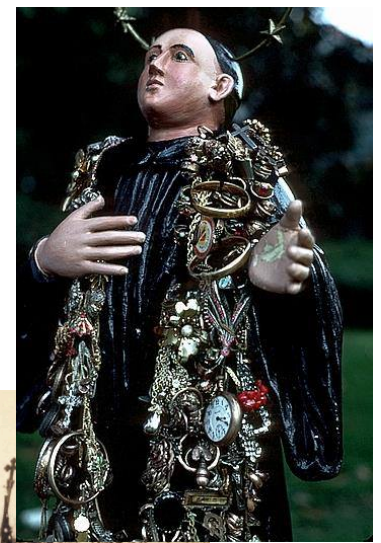


Church Cemetery









Chronological History of Ascension of Our Lord Parish

- 1682 French explorer De LaSalle explored the lower Mississippi River region and claimed it in the name of France, naming it Louisiana in honor of French King Louis XIV. Bayou Lafourche was so named because the mouth of this tributary at Donaldsonville represented "the fork" of the Mississippi River at which located the Chetimaches Indian tribe. Bayou Lafourche begins at the Mississippi River at Donaldsonville and extends to the Gulf of Mexico.
- 1699 French explorers Iberville and Bienville explored the Bayou Lafourche area, and Bienville would later be appointed governor of the Louisiana territory.
- 1704 French missionary priests often accompanied exploratory expeditions, and had come to Lafourche to evangelize the Chetimaches Indians. The Chetimaches murdered Father John Buisson De St. Cosme and companions as they slept on the Mississippi River bank. Only his Indian guide/translator escaped to tell Bienville, who would then bribe other Indian tribes to make war on the Chetimaches for the next 15 years.

- 1719 In return for peace, the Chetimaches Indians were forced to move about 15 miles north to Bayou Goula. This opened the land at the mouth of Bayou Lafourche for settlement by French traders
- 1762 In a secret treaty France ceded Louisiana to Spain, but the first Spanish governor did not arrive until more than three years later. It was under Spanish government that Louisiana welcomed the exiled Acadian settlers to the banks of the Mississippi River here between 1768 and 1785.
- 1770 On September 10th, the Spanish militia began construction on a small mission chapel for the settlement at Bayou Lafourche and the Mississippi River.
- 1772 With 350 French and Spanish settler-families resident in the community, Spanish Missionary Fr. Angelus de Revillogodos, O.F.M.Cap., dedicated the Church parish as "La Iglesia de la Ascension de Nuestro Senor Jesu Cristo de la Fourche de los Chetimaches". Within the territory of what would much later become the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Ascension of Our Lord now was the fourth territorial church parish to be established, whose resident priest would serve an expansive (though yet uninhabited at the time) area covering more than what is today Ascension Civil Parish.[1]
- 1783 The original wooden mission chapel was enlarged to accommodate a growing settlement

- 1790 The first diocese is established in the United States: the Diocese of Baltimore. Its territory took in all of the United States territory, including Louisiana. The first bishop was John Carroll.
- 1793 The diocese of New Orleans is established. The first bishop was Luis Penalver y Cardenas, until 1801. New Orleans is without a bishop from 1802 to 1804.
- 1800 Through another secret treaty between Spain and France, Louisiana once again became a territory of France.
- 1803 Through the Louisiana Purchase, the territory of Louisiana was sold to the United States of America.
- 1805 New Orleans diocese is administered by Diocese of Baltimore, under leadership of Bishop-elect Francis Porro in New Orleans, until 1815.
- 1806 William Donaldson purchased from the widow of an original Spanish land grant recipient an extensive farm bounded to the north by Bayou Lafourche and to the east by the Mississippi River, and had plans drawn to build "Donaldson Town."
- 1808 Diocese of Baltimore becomes Archdiocese, and Bishop John Carroll becomes Archbishop.

1812 Louisiana was admitted as the 18th of the United States of America

1815 Louis William DuBourg becomes Bishop of New Orleans

1819 The original wooden mission chapel was dismantled and replaced by the first official church building, constructed of brick.

1822 Donaldson Town was renamed Donaldsonville by the Louisiana State Legislature

1823 The first ordination to the priesthood in Louisiana was celebrated at Ascension of Our Lord Church in Donaldsonville on October 24, 1823, when Bishop Louis William DuBourg ordained Jean-Baptiste Blanc, a native of Lyons, France.

1824 Joseph Rosati named Bishop-coadjutor of Diocese of New Orleans

1829 Leo De Neckere named Bishop of Diocese of New Orleans

1830 Donaldsonville replaced New Orleans as the capital city of the State of Louisiana, but after only a year, New Orleans once again became the capital city.

- 1835 Antoine Blanc named bishop of New Orleans
- 1840 Construction of the second larger church building was begun, and would be completed in 1843 at a total cost of \$19,000.
- 1845 On January 1st, six Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph completed a forty-four day journey from Emmitsburg, Maryland, to arrive by boat in Donaldsonville to establish at Ascension of Our Lord Church what would be the first Catholic school in the territory comprising the Diocese of Baton Rouge.
- 1850 A large three-story brick convent building was constructed (still existing) at the school to serve as a hospital as well as a residence for the Daughters of Charity, who would now staff the hospital and school. New Orleans becomes an Archdiocese and Bishop Antoine Blanc becomes the Archbishop.
- 1854 The hospital and school would also serve as home for children left orphan by the 1853 yellow fever epidemic which killed more than 10,000 in the greater New Orleans area.
- 1861 Louisiana seceded from the Union and joined the Confederacy. The Civil War began, and the convent ceased serving as a hospital. Jean Marie Odin becomes Archbishop of New Orleans.

- 1862 Union troops occupied New Orleans, and bombarded Donaldsonville in retaliation for Confederate troop guerrilla activities along the River. The convent and church survived the bombardment.
- 1870 Napoleon J. Perche named Archbishop of New Orleans
- 1872 Priests of the Archdiocese of New Orleans replaced the religious order missionary priests who had served Ascension of Our Lord Parish for 100 years[4], and Belgian native Fr. Francis Xavier Ceuppens became the 23rd pastor of the parish and immediately began planning the third church building.
- 1875 Construction began on the complex and uniquely engineered foundation for the third and present church building[5] The population of Donaldsonville, mostly Catholic and of Acadian exile ancestry, numbered 1,600.

- 1883 Construction on the church had been slow for want of and waiting on imported materials, and for lack of funds, and was finally halted 8 years after it had begun. Fr. Ceuppens was caught in the middle of a lengthy dispute between the Church's Board of Wardens and the coadjutor-Archbishop of New Orleans, Francis Xavier LeRay, over ownership and control of Church property. Church records attest that the celebration of the sacraments in the parish ended abruptly (presumably indicating that the parish was placed under interdict), and under threat of bodily harm Fr. Ceuppens was forcibly evicted from the rectory by the Board of Wardens for refusing to offer the sacraments in obedience to the archbishop. Fr. Ceuppens was given sanctuary by townspeople in the nearby community of Smoke Bend on the outskirts of Donaldsonville to the north (the result of which was the establishment of St. Francis of Assisi Parish). Archbishop Perche dies, and Bishop LeRay becomes Archbishop of New Orleans
- 1885 While the dispute was settled legally in favor of the Board of Wardens, some compromise must have been reached to persuade Archbishop LeRay to acquiesce and lift the apparent interdict. The church reopened on July 5th. Fr. Jean Honore Dubernard was moved from the church at Bayou Goula and was assigned as the 24th pastor. Having been defamed, misjudged and mistreated in the archbishop's stead by a minority of controlling parties affiliated with the Board of Wardens, Fr. Ceuppens vehemently objected to the reopening. He was assigned to the church in Bayou Goula. Construction was slowly but surely resumed on the new church building. A distinctive change in color of the bricks approximately halfway up on the exterior walls of the church building testifies to the interruption in construction. The Sisters of the Holy

- 1885 Construction was slowly but surely resumed on the new church building. A distinctive change in color of the bricks approximately halfway up on the exterior walls of the church building testifies to the interruption in construction. The Sisters of the Holy Family were asked to come to Ascension of Our Lord Parish to open a school for African-American children, which was named St. Augustine School.
- 1886 The Brothers of the Sacred Heart came to Ascension of Our Lord Parish to begin a school for boys, which was named St. Joseph Commercial Institute.
- 1888 Francis Janssens becomes Archbishop of New Orleans
- 1896 The new church building which had taken 21 years to construct at a cost of \$80,000 was completed. Fr. Dubernard conducted the first Mass in the new church on March 31st. New Orleans Archbishop Francis Janssens presided at the solemn blessing and dedication two weeks later on April 14th. When dedicated, the church was not entirely completed. Fr. Dubernard would see it completed in 1900.
- 1897 Archbishop Janssens died on June 9th. Fr. Ceuppens died at Hotel Dieu hospital in New Orleans on July 20th. Placide Louis Chapelle is named new Archbishop of New Orleans on December 1st.

1902 Fr. Dubernard died in Donaldsonville on August 1st, and was interred beneath the church.
Fr. John M. T. Massardier was named the 25th pastor.

1906 James H. Blenk is named new Archbishop of New Orleans on April 20th.

1907 A \$20,000 debt was incurred to construct a new two-story rectory behind the old 1840 church

1911 The old 1840 church building was demolished

1914 Outbreak of World War I

1915 Upon the death of Fr. Massardier on December 19th, Fr. C. M. Chambon was named the 26th pastor

1918 John W. Shaw is named new Archbishop of New Orleans on January 25th.

1922 The debt incurred some 15 years earlier to build the rectory was paid off, and repairs to the church were undertaken.

- 1930 With St. Catherine Church having been established in 1924, for ministry to the African-American community, St. Augustine School changed its name to St. Catherine School.
- 1935 Joseph Francis Rummel is named new Archbishop of New Orleans on March 9th.
- 1936 Having been weakened over the years by strong winds, the steeple structure atop the bell tower was declared unsafe, and was dismantled and taken down at a contract cost of \$2,000.
- 1938 Msgr. Chambon was reassigned to New Orleans parish, and Msgr. Raphael C. Labit was named 27th pastor.
- 1941 Outbreak of World War II
- 1950 Korean conflict. Msgr. Labit was reassigned to St. Joseph Parish in Thibodaux in December, and Msgr. Edwin J. Gubler was named 28th pastor.
- 1962 Diocese of Baton Rouge is established from territory of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, within which Ascension of Our Lord parish is located. Robert E. Tracy is named the first bishop of Baton Rouge.

- 1970 Msgr. Gubler was reassigned to St. Jules Church in Belle Rose, and Bishop Robert Tracy named Msgr. Leo Guillot 29th pastor.
- 1971 Bishop Robert Tracy named Fr. James Kinkead 30th pastor.
- 1972 The Bicentennial of the Establishment of Ascension of Our Lord Parish was celebrated
- 1974 After 12 years as Ordinary, Bishop Tracy resigned and Bishop Joseph V. Sullivan was installed as the 2nd bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge
- 1976 Fr. Kinkead was reassigned to Our Lady of Peace Parish in South Vacherie, and Fr. Clarence Waguespack was named 31st pastor by Bishop Joseph Sullivan
- 1978 A massive capital improvement plan was drawn up over the next several years with the assistance of professional consultants to remodel the church interior, to build a new parish hall, and a new rectory. The plan to remodel the church interior was met with such vocal opposition that this plan was abandoned. Efforts were then concentrated on the other two elements of the plan. The rectory was in such poor condition that its replacement was the first priority. More than \$300,000 in pledges was raised for the project. After studying various plans and models, it was decided to house offices in a new administration building, which would be separate from a new residence for the clergy. General parish support for this decision became divided on the issues of the design, location, and cost of the buildings, but diocesan authorities approved the project. The financial situation of the diocese at the time was such that bank financing would be necessary.

1983 After 8 years as Ordinary, Bishop Sullivan died in September 1982, and Bishop Ott was installed as the 3rd bishop of Baton Rouge in March.

1984 The 1907 rectory was demolished and construction on the new rectory and administration building began. Church offices would be housed in one rented 14'x60' mobile home on the church grounds, while the pastor and associate pastor shared another rented 14'x70' mobile home also on the church grounds. As construction progressed, the projected cost was increased substantially to nearly \$800,000 due to numerous and unanticipated change orders and cost overruns. The contractor was unable to complete the project to the satisfaction of the parish because he was in financial trouble and filed bankruptcy, and added costs were incurred to complete the project satisfactorily.

1986 After the new buildings were completed and furnished and occupied, Fr. Waguespack was reassigned to Our Lady of Peace Parish in South Vacherie, and Fr. Sean Sheehy was named 32nd pastor by Bishop Stanley Ott.

1987 After 142 years of service to the parish, schools, and community, the Daughters of Charity withdrew from Donaldsonville.

- 1989 Because significant structural and architectural elements and furnishings of the church building were in critical disrepair, a Church Preservation Committee was re-activated and developed a comprehensive plan to facilitate the restorative repairs in phases. The immediate need was for roof and attic repairs, and when the need was communicated to parishioners, \$40,000 in cash was donated for the work.
- 1990 A Cemetery Board was created and devised a means of operating and managing the cemetery and mausoleum so it would pay for its upkeep and needed improvements.
- 1991 Deteriorated 84 year old statues and Stations of the Cross in the church became the second priority of the Church Preservation Committee's restorative efforts. When the need and plan to restore these items was communicated, more than \$3,000 cash was donated to accomplish this work.
- 1992 Fr. Sean Sheehy was reassigned as Pastor of St. Anne Parish in Sorrento in July, and Fr. Randy Cuevas succeeded him as 33rd pastor. In October, Fr. Cuevas introduced and established a Perpetual Adoration Chapel at Ascension of Our Lord Church. After 9 years as Ordinary, Bishop Ott died in November.

- 1993 \$152,000 in donations was received to repair, restore, and protect stained glass windows. A program of annual Parish Mission opportunities for spiritual enrichment of parishioners was instituted. Small Faith Communities are organized and implemented to further meet personal spiritual needs of parishioners. Bishop Alfred Hughes was installed as the 4th bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge in November.
- 1994 Ascension Civil Parish voters opt for a home rule charter and Tommy Martinez is elected and inaugurated as the first President of Ascension Civil Parish. An inaugural Mass is celebrated at Ascension of Our Lord immediately preceding the inauguration ceremony. A new addition to the mausoleum was completed.
- 1996 Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Present Church Building. Church Preservation Committee sees the donation of \$300,000 to restore and anchor to the church's bell tower a new main steeple, which had been missing from the church for sixty years. The additional donation of \$244,000 saw the completion of church roof repairs, exterior masonry restoration, the repainting of the interior of the church and exterior architectural features.

- 1999 Twin minor spires on the façade of the church, blown off during Hurricane Betsy in the mid 1960s, were restored; the cupola atop the apex of the Church, missing since 1910, was restored. This restoration was made possible by the generous donation of \$150,000. The parish to continue pressing preservation work on the historic church building, including complete waterproofing of the church's exterior.
- 2001 Baton Rouge bishop Alfred Hughes is installed as the Co-Adjutor Archbishop of New Orleans on May 2nd, and becomes the Archbishop of New Orleans in December upon the retirement of Archbishop Frances Schulte.
- 2002 Bishop Robert W. Muench is installed as 5th bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.
- 2003 Electrical system renovations and lighting improvements in the church building are completed. Construction begins on the new Sciences Laboratory Building and Computer Science Building on the Ascension Catholic High School campus.



Ascension Catholic
Diocesan Regional School

