

The Bells of St. Mary's

By Martin Cortez & Eric Ordoyne

The Story of the *Marianne* Bell

Gratien Thibodeaux, Godfather and Mary Anne Smith, Godmother

By: Martin Cortez



St. Mary's Nativity Catholic Church became a parish in 1853 with Father Amedeé Beccard as the first Pastor. From that time on to the present day, St. Mary's Nativity has never been without the service of a priest—a period of 165 years to this date on May 2, 2018. The church was officially blessed on the 3rd of August, 1850 by Father Charles Menard, the Apostle of Bayou Lafourche, as St. Mary's Nativity. (This is a fact as it was written in the church registry by Father Menard.) According to information passed down through the ages, the cemetery grounds were named St. Mary Pamela which became a bit of a problem because after careful research the name Pamela was not among the names of Saints. So the story goes, it is believed that Pamela was the wife of a land owner, who donated land for the cemetery around 1840. This author has never been able to find the land owner or a wife named Pamela. In 1812 Judge Bela Hubbard confirmed church title to the land stated in testimony that the land had been possessed and used as cemetery (church) land for more than 15-years or as early as 1797. So the name Pamela could have come about as early as 1797. The first eyewitness that recorded his observation was Rev. Peter Nies who found an old iron cross on a grave listed before 1820, but did not give the exact date. On November 3, 1967 the name Pamela was officially taken off the roles and the church in Raceland became officially St. Mary's Nativity Catholic Church as well as the cemetery.

Gratien and Marianne Thibodeaux approached Father Beccard to give the first bell to St. Mary's Nativity. Fr. Beccard, pastor at the time, recorded the following: "In the year 1856, the 26th of May, the feast of St. Philip Neri, Archbishop Antoine Blanc, having confirmed in the Church of St. Mary 98 persons, consecrated or blessed the bell of the Church, which received the name of *Marrienne*." According to the records that we could find, the Smiths were living in Raceland possibly as early as 1854. No information has been found why!

Marianne Smith was born on September 5, 1828 and died on May 27, 1871 on the Steamer St. John which exploded in the port of New Orleans. With her was her 16- year old son, C. (Charles) Gratien Thibodeaux, Jr. born September 27, 1855, who also died as a result of the explosion on October 6, 1871. They were buried in the St. Mary's Nativity cemetery. They are buried side by side; each in a separate coping that was covered with bricks to preserve their tombs. Surrounding their graves is the only Enclosure in the St. Mary's Nativity Cemetery. Enclosures in country cemeteries were unheard of, because they were expensive art pieces made from wrought and cast iron. The fence part was painted white and connected at each corner by black-painted posts. Of particular interest to the author is the representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the top of the fence in the form of a "fleur de lis" which is the symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (This is confirmed by the stained glass window #4 in the church entitled the Blessed Mother) How fitting this was - St. Mary's Nativity Church and the symbol of Mary on the grave of the Godmother of the first bell.

The monuments were made and bought in New Orleans from a mason known as Florville Foy, a free man of color. Both monuments are signed, a rarity today, making them much more unique and valuable. Foy was a leading builder of the 19th century. He was known for early Step Tombs in the Sarcophagus style. Although most of his work is found in St. Louis Cemeteries I & II, Raceland has this one and Holy Savior in Lockport has one. The "Marianne" is the beautiful bell found in the vestibule of the Church on the school side and is the smallest of all the bells. It is a 200 lb. bell in the Chord of F. The bell was cast by George Lucius Hanks Co. who started their business officially in 1857. Perhaps the bell was made by the company unofficially in 1856. The name G. L. Hanks is on the bell.





The Marie Rose is the large bell found in front of the Church. On February 4, 1894, the bell was blessed by Fr. Eugene Vigroux. This bell is in the chord of A and is made of steel weighing 2,000 pounds. The donors for the bell were: Mrs. Robert Brupbacher, Mrs. Z. Foret, Mrs. Josephine Breaux, Axelle Breaux, Alex Theriot, Dalmas Robichaux, Firmin Robichaux and Nelson Foret. This large bell was purchased for the old Church and was quite suited to fit the large belfry.

The Gabriel became the first electrically controlled bell and was cast in bronze by the John G. Stuckstede Bell Foundry in St. Louis, Missouri. It was blessed on September 20, 1960 by Father Sebastian Arjonilla. It is an 875 lb. bell in the Chord of G. It was donated by Mr. & Mrs. Martin St. Romain, Sr.



The Raphael became the second electrically controlled bell and was also cast in bronze by the John G. Stuckstede Bell Foundry in St. Louis, Missouri. It was blessed on September 20, 1960 by Father Sebastian Arjonilla. It is a 450 lb. bell in the Chord of C. It was donated by Mrs. Conrad Robichaux, Sr., Conrad Robichaux, Jr. & Thomas Robichaux in memory of Conrad Robichaux, Sr.

The Michael became the third electrically controlled bell and was also cast in bronze by the John G. Stuckstede Bell Foundry in St. Louis, Missouri. It was blessed on September 20, 1960 by Father Sebastian Arjonilla. It is a 300 lb. bell in the Chord of D. It was donated by Dr. & Mrs. Richard E. Robichaux in memory of Alcide Philip Robichaux.



It has been said that the last time the bells rang were to signal the death of Rev. Kermit C. Trahan in 1979.

Removal of the Bells of St. Mary's in 1980

