

FROM THE CABILDO TO THE CREOLE COTTAGE

Historic Architecture in the French Quarter of New Orleans



A view of the lower Pontalba building in Jackson Square. The upper and lower Pontalba buildings which flank either side of Jackson Square, were built by Micaela Almonester, the Baroness de Pontalba. The Baroness inherited much of the property from her father Andres Almonester y Roxas, the wealthy Spaniard whose money financed the St. Louis Cathedral, and made it her priority to beautify the area.



Micaela Almonester, Baroness de Pontalba (1795-1874)

The Baroness is greatly responsible for the way that Jackson Square appears today.

Justin C. Oakley
Dr. Perky Beisel



Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop. This structure is an excellent example of the Creole Cottage style of building that took root in New Orleans after a wave of immigrants from Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) arrived in the city during the late eighteenth century. Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop was constructed in 1795, and as its name suggests, claims at least a mythical connection to the famous pirate. The symmetrical design of the structure and its surrounding doors which open the interior to the exterior, are very much influenced by the sort of structures that were found on Saint Domingue and other Caribbean islands, the idea being to maximize the amount of exposure to breeze and to minimize the sweltering heat of the climate.



Photo by Justin Oakley

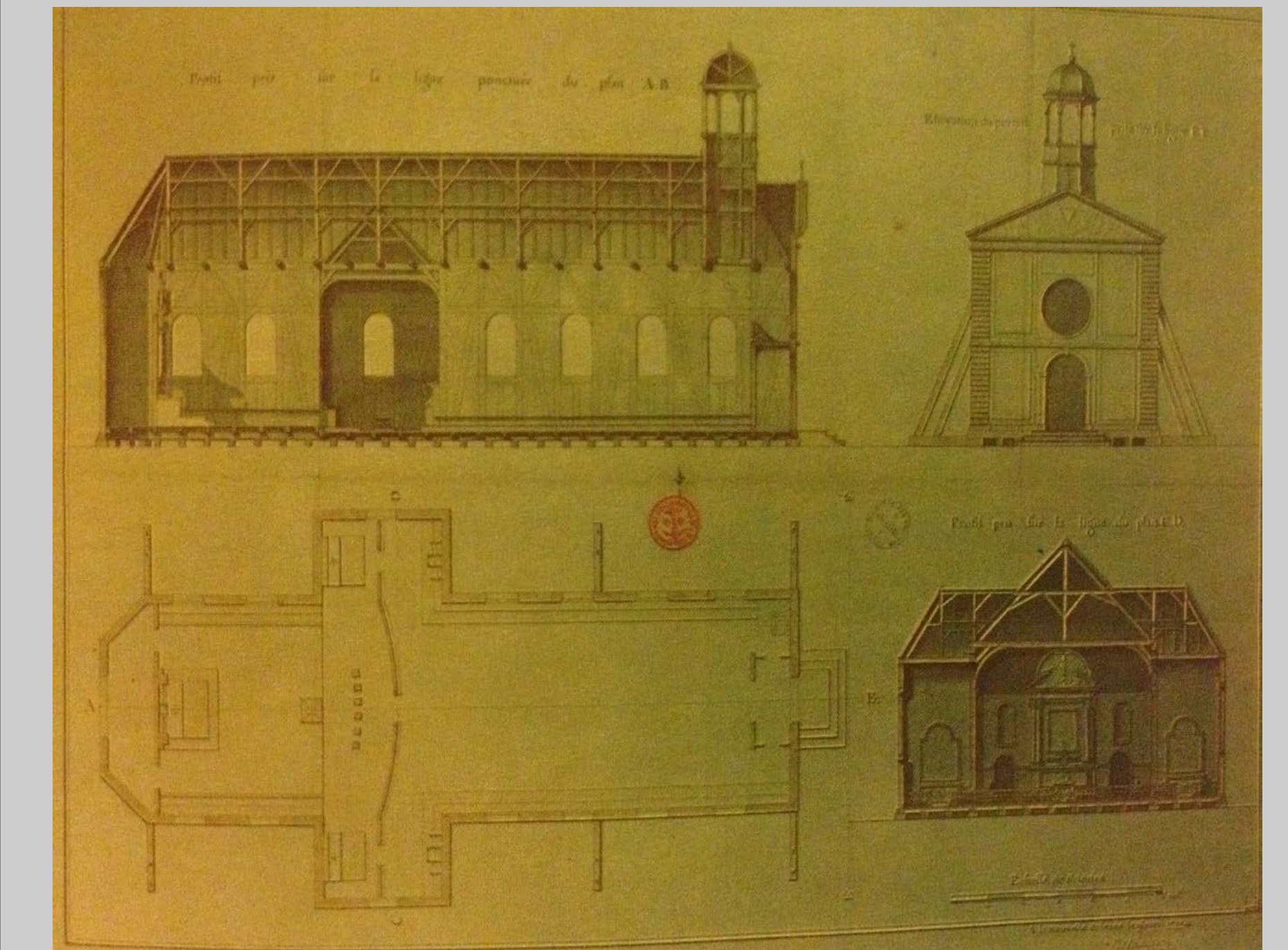
The St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square is undeniably one of the architectural crown jewels of New Orleans. The current structure dates from 1794, the previous structure being destroyed (along with much of the city) in a colossal fire. The current structure features a central bell tower designed by famed architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, completed shortly before his death in 1820.



Benjamin Henry Latrobe by Filippo Costagalli.jpg

Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820)

Latrobe as a renowned British-born architect whose most notable works include the United States Capitol and the Waterworks of New Orleans. Among Latrobe's final work was the central bell tower in the St. Louis Cathedral.



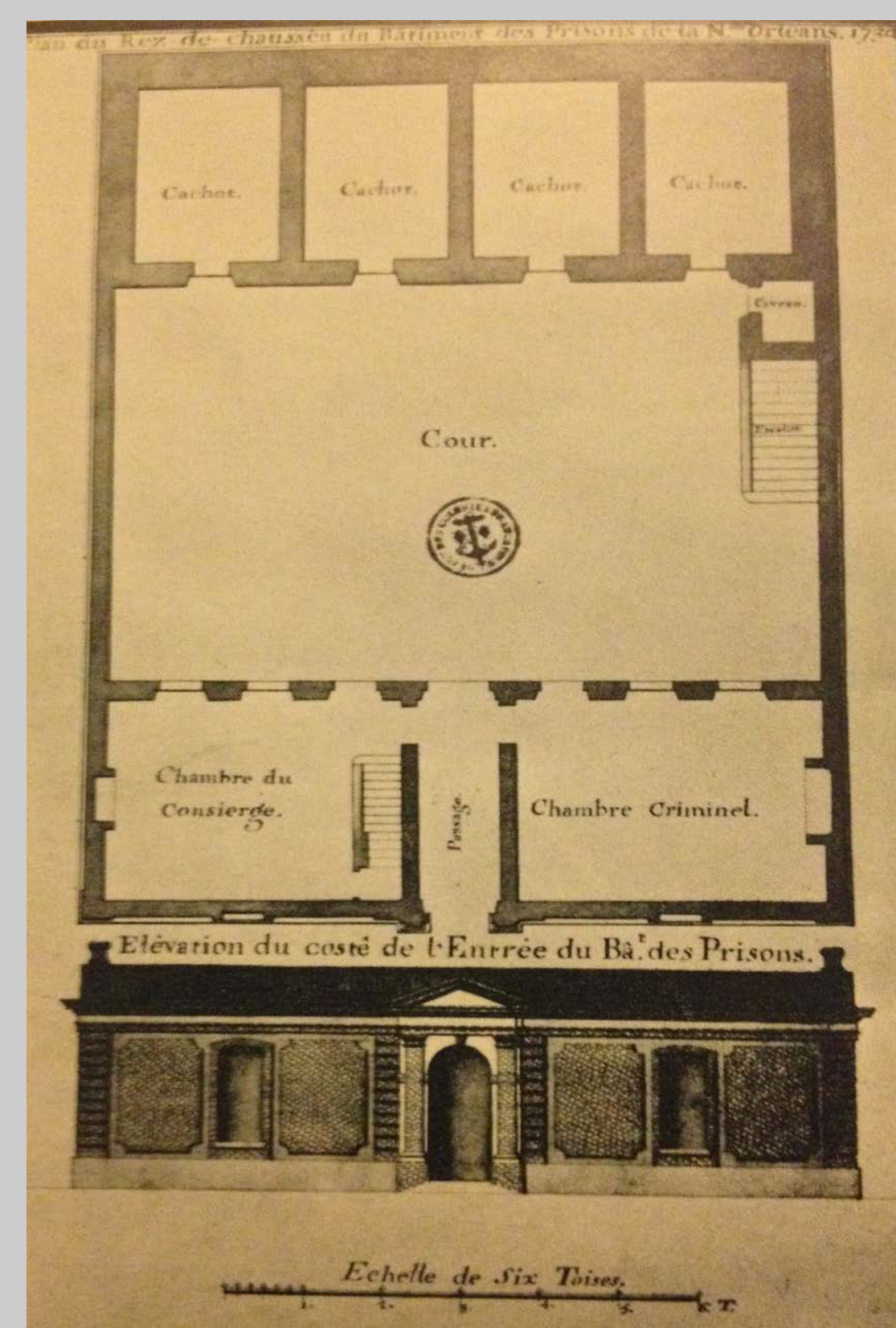
Plan, sections, and elevation of the church to be built at New Orleans. Ink and watercolor by Adrien de Pauger, May 29, 1724. Taken from Bienville's New Orleans, 20.

A common type of brick construction, known as briques entre poteaux or "bricks between posts" was utilized in several of the earlier structures of French New Orleans, most notably in the church of St. Louis (present day St. Louis Cathedral). This church was designed to fit within the plan of the Engineer-in Chief of Louisiana LeBlond de la Tour. The specific site of the church was designated by the French engineer Adrien de Pauger who completed the design of the church after de la Tour's death in 1723. The church, primarily built of the abundant cypress in the area, stood an estimated 108 feet long by 32 feet wide. This initial church stood near the location of the present day structure, in the heart of the city near the Place d'Armes, the military parade grounds near the banks of the Mississippi. It served as the center of religious life in the city for over six decades until it was destroyed by the fires of the late eighteenth century, which claimed almost all of the original wooden structures built by the French. The current St. Louis Cathedral, as well as most of the buildings in the French Quarter, were built under Spanish rule and to Spanish building codes, which were specifically designed to minimize damage from fire.



Photo by Justin Oakley

The LaLaurie mansion on the corner of Royal and Governor Nicholls streets. Built in 1831, the house is a fine example of the Creole townhome style which is found throughout the French Quarter. Infamous for its connection to Delphine LaLaurie, whose cruelty to her slaves earned her a place among the most infamous murderers of New Orleans, the LaLaurie mansion also exemplifies the period in which it was built and serves as a symbol of the transition period that the city underwent in the early nineteenth century. Not only does the building display hallmarks of Creole architectural styles, but it also shows signs of the budding American influence in New Orleans in the Neoclassical motifs that appear throughout the structure.



Plan, sections and elevation of the prison of New Orleans. Dated 1730. Taken from Bienville's New Orleans, 23.

The first brick structure in New Orleans was a prison. This prison stood adjacent to the St. Louis Cathedral on the site of what is now the Cabildo in Jackson Square. The prison, an obvious necessity to any settlement in the new world, especially one which was from its inception populated by debtors, political dissidents, and the petty criminals of France, was most likely designed by Pierre Baron, the chief engineer of Governor Etienne de Perier. The prison itself appeared to be a fair sized two-story brick structure of symmetrical and uniform build, with the characteristic lack of finer detail which is representative of the great mass of colonial buildings from this time period, especially those constructed in French Canada.

The Vieux Carré

The French Quarter of New Orleans is home to some of the most fascinating and beautiful historic architecture in the American South. The variety of styles and buildings is as varied, colorful, and blended as the people who have made the city what it is today. From its origins as a far flung backwater colonial outpost of the French empire, to its time as a Spanish city, to its absorption into the United States, each period and people have left their mark on the city, specifically what is now known as the French Quarter or the *Vieux Carré*. It has become a gross cliché to describe New Orleans as a "gumbo," but this comparison nonetheless holds a great amount of truth to it; as the food, language, music, and especially the architecture can attest to it. The influences of France, Spain, the Caribbean, the American South, and the west coast of Africa have mingled and blended in the city's buildings. Spanish Colonial buildings, Creole townhouses and cottages, shotgun houses, and Neoclassical American houses stand in colorful array up and down the streets of the French Quarter. The historic architecture of the French Quarter has also been defined by two great infernos which engulfed the city in the late eighteenth century, the arrival of different peoples, the rise and fall of the sugar and cotton industries, and early nineteenth century politics all had their hand in shaping the city, literally and figuratively.



Photograph by Wally Gobetz on Flickr.

The Presbytere or the *Casa Curial* as it was known at its construction in 1791, was built to be the home of the Capuchin monks in New Orleans. The Presbytere, despite its name and intended function, never actually housed any clergy or ever saw any other religious use. The building, designed by Guillemard like the Cabildo, took much longer to complete than the Cabildo, construction finally ending in 1813. Before the additions to the structure by the Baroness de Pontalba in the 1840s, the Presbytere, like the Cabildo, was two stories, built of brick, with a flat, balustraded roof, decorated with urns.