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# Saint Martin de Tours

Église Catholique



St. Martinville – Louisiana  
[www.saintmartindetours.org](http://www.saintmartindetours.org)

*St. Martin de Tours*

# History

**S**aint Martin de Tours Church is one of the oldest Catholic churches in America and the third oldest in Louisiana. It was founded in 1765 by a group of Acadian exiles who arrived that year, the first of many of the unfortunate refugees driven from Canada by the English, who came to Louisiana over a period of some twenty years. It was these exiles who established the Acadian culture and traditions that have left an indelible imprint upon the state of Louisiana.



By an act of the State Legislature, approved March 7, 1814, the church was incorporated; and another act, approved March 16, 1820, authorized the congregation to conduct a lottery to raise funds to build a new church. The current church structure was dedicated on June 2, 1844.

Saint Martin de Tours Church has been the center of religious and cultural activities of St. Martinville and the Attakapas Nation since colonial days.

Three historic buildings sit on the church square. The current church structure, although enlarged and renovated over the centuries, was built in 1836. The church is flanked on the right by a two story rectory, called the “Presbytere” and a two story parish hall on the left. Both buildings predate the Civil War.

All three historic buildings face a large grass covered and tree shaded park, forming a dominant and impressive element in the town plan.

In front of the church stands a statue of Father Jan, an early pastor; in front of the rectory is a statue of Saint Martin of Tours, patron of the town and parish; and in front of the parish hall is a statue of a Native American from the Attakapas Nation.

Over the years, the church has become a place where countless faithful have encountered God.

Saint Martin de Tours Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 10, 1972. It is recognized as the Mother Church of the Acadians.





# Architecture and Style

The original Greek Revival church building was designed in 1836 by Pierre Benjamin Buisson, a well-known architect from New Orleans. Buisson had been an engineer of Napoleon's and designed the first custom house in New Orleans. Construction on the church began in 1836. For a variety of reasons, including low water in the Bayou Teche which prevented the shipping of building materials, the project spanned seven years and was completed on June 2, 1844. The church was enlarged in 1874 when the nave was extended and the apse and north and south transepts were added creating the church's current cruciform shape.

The church was originally a simple rectangular plan of the Roman basilica type, the nave being separated from the side aisles by rows of sturdy Doric columns on simple square pedestals. In the 1870's the church was enlarged by the extension of the nave and the addition of the semi-circular apse and the transepts. A handsome octagonal belfry with a bell-shaped roof was placed at the apex of the apse. There are four tall, semicircular head windows on each side of the building with two more similar ones in each transept.

The front of the church is divided into three bays by projecting pilasters, reflecting the interior division of nave and side aisles. In each bay is a tall, semi-circular headed entrance door, recessed in an enframement of Romanesque type mouldings which were added when the facade was remodeled

in the 1920's and 30's. The facade is crowned by a tall square steeple with a tapered spire.

On the interior, the walls and columns are plastered over brick and the ceiling is wood. The ceilings of the side aisles and transepts are flat while those of the nave and apse are barreled. A deep cornice surrounds the nave and apse, with smaller cornices for the side aisles and transepts. The sacristies flank the sanctuary in the continuation of the side aisles. One of these has been utilized as a Blessed Sacrament Chapel and a modern, two story addition has been made to the other sacristy.



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*The 11' x 13' canvas oil painting of the patron saint hanging above the main altar was painted by Jean Francois Marie Mouchet of Dijoin, France during the 1830's.*

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## *St Martin de Tours*

Above the main altar is a fine painting of Saint Martin painted by Jean Francois Mouchet. The oil painting depicts Saint Martin de Tours on horseback giving aid to a poor beggar. Legend has it that Martin, born in Hungary in 315, was the son of a Roman military tribune. He became a soldier when he came of age and was sent to Amien in Gaul, now known as France. En route, he met a beggar and cut his heavy cloak in two with his sword offering half to the poor beggar so he could cover himself for warmth.

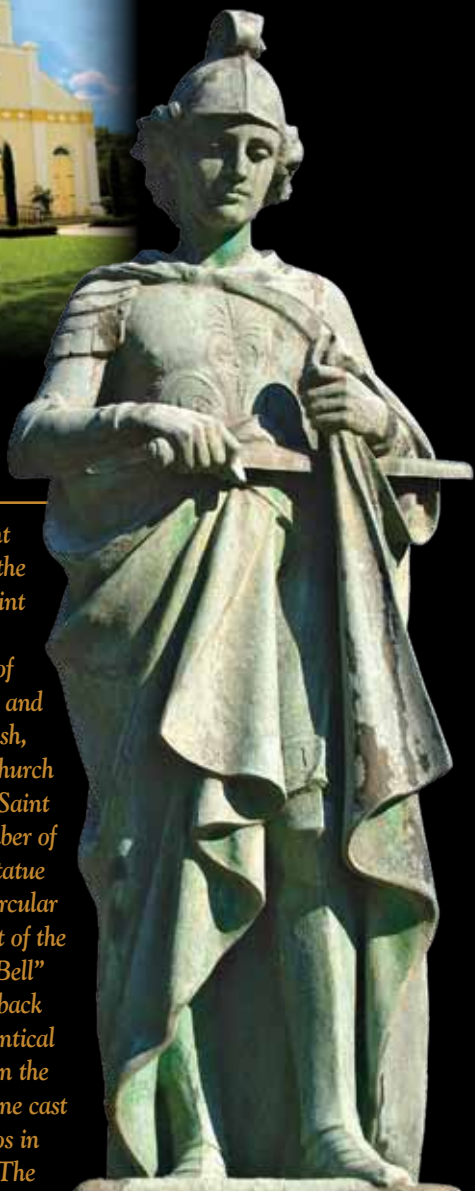
That night, Christ appeared to Martin in a vision wearing the beggar's half of the cloak. Martin converted to Catholicism and became a hermit organizing Gaul's first monastery. He was named Bishop of Tours in 371 and died in 397. His feast is celebrated each year on November 11th, and he is the patron saint of soldiers and police officers.



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*The statue of Saint Martin de Tours, the patron saint of Saint Martin de Tours Church, the City of Saint Martinville, and Saint Martin Parish, was a gift to the church in 1931 from the Saint Martinville Chamber of Commerce. The statue is located in the circular flower bed in front of the Presbytere. The “Bell” trademark on the back of the statue is identical to the one found on the statue of Evangeline cast by Daprato Studios in Chicago, Illinois. The statue was dedicated on November 20, 1932.*

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ST MARTIN DE TOURS

# Grotto of the Holy Mother

The replica of the Grotto of Lourdes was constructed in the late 1870's by Pierre Martinet of Saint Martinville. Martinet, a freed slave, never visited Lourdes but constructed the shrine after studying a holy card of the site. He used bousillage, mud from the Bayou Teche and moss, as well as plaster in the construction.



Prayers and messages of thanks spanning many decades have been posted on the grotto. The statue of Mary is similar to the one in Lourdes. The French words in the halo are those she spoke to Bernadette, "I am the Immaculate Conception".

# Statuary

Saint Martin de Tours Church displays a large collection of the old statues commemorating the saints. Saint Joan of Arc, patroness of France, and Saint Louis IX, King of France and patron saint of France, stand on either side of the vestibule (main entrance) and Saint Maria Goretti, patroness of virgins, Saint Augustine, doctor of the church, Saint Kateri, first native American saint, and Saint Therese of Lisieux, patroness of the missions, can be seen upon entering the nave.

Other statues in the church include those of Saint Jude, patron saint of hopeless cases, Saint Roch, patron saint of catastrophic diseases, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, apostles, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the oldest statue in the church, Saint Anthony of Padua, patron of the poor, Saint Michael, the Archangel, and the canopied statues of Mary with the child Jesus and Saint Ann with the child Mary.



# Baptismal Font



A fine baroque baptismal font in white marble is believed to be a gift of the King of France. The original marble lid was assumed broken when the ship carrying it from France wrecked. A flat metal lid replaced the broken one, then a wooden lid carved and trimmed with leather and painted to resemble marble was used. A wooden lid designed to be in harmony with the church's architectural style is now in use.



## Memorial Markers in church floor

The early parishioners practiced the old French tradition of burying their pastors in the floor of the church. The tombs of the Rev. Marcel Borella, Rev. Bartheleney Langois and Rev. A. M. Jan are marked by marble slabs on the floor of the sanctuary. A memorial slab was placed over the tomb of the Rev. Auguste Thebault which is located in front of the Grotto. A matching slab was placed over the grave of Rev. Moran. The practice was discontinued when the wooden floor was cemented.





## Bells

The eight bells of Saint Martin de Tours were named and christened as in the old tradition.

The first and oldest bell, cast by the Buckeye Bell Foundry of Cincinnati, Ohio, was acquired and christened Marie Agatha in 1850.

Three bells were christened in 1904. The largest at 2,100 pounds was named Marie Angeli. The other two bells were named Marie Augustine and Marie Stephania. In 1977, three more bells were added. These bells were manufactured by the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, Maryland. The bells were named Marie Editha, Marie Lena, and Marie Aline.

An eighth bell, called the Sanctus bell, is located in the small tower above the sanctuary. It also bears a date of 1850.

The oldest and most beautiful bell, Marie Agatha, was not returned to the tower in the 2012-2013 restoration because a newer bell rings the same tone. It is hoped that one day Marie Agatha, which is adorned with bas-relief angels, will be proudly displayed on the grounds of the church for all to see.



## Sanctuary Lamp

The elaborate sanctuary lamp of gold and silver, which burns perpetually, is believed to have been shipped from France as a gift to the church. The lamp reminds tourists that this is a sacred and holy place. It signals that the Blessed Sacrament is housed in the gold Tabernacle on the reredos behind the main altar. The lamp reminds us that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God is present. Reverence and proper decorum should be maintained at all times while visiting this holy site.



## *Ambo* *(raised pulpit)*

*Cardinal Gerald Cyprien  
Lacroix, Archbishop of the  
Diocese of Quebec, Canada  
delivering the homily on  
November 11, 2015, the  
250th Anniversary of Saint  
Martin de Tours Catholic  
Church*

The old raised pulpit called the Ambo was necessary for the priest's voice to carry and be heard by everyone in the church during the time before electricity and public address systems. The decorative pulpit is still used for Sunday masses and for all major celebrations and special occasions.



## *Pews*

The colonial box pews, which are closed at one end with a door at the other, were rented by families in the congregation providing the early church with another source of income. Each pew was identified with a nameplate. Saint Martin de Tours is one of only a few churches with cypress colonial box pews.

The pews, constructed mostly with red cypress, were completely restored in the 2012-2013 restoration.

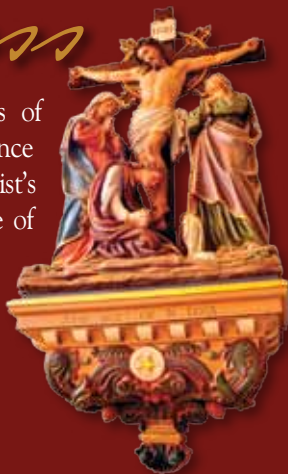
# Church Windows

The tall, semi-circular windows on each side of the church nave are reproductions of the originals and were installed in 1987. Double hung sashes were divided into small lights and filled with colored glass to form a cross in each window. The center panes depicting various apostles and saints were added to the new windows.



# Stations of the Cross

The unusually large 14 stations of the cross were ordered from France around 1904. The scenes of Christ's sorrowful journey from the house of Pilate to Calvary are designed in intricate detail and color. The stations were slightly touched up in 1973.



# Stained Glass



The two stained glass windows on either side of the main altar in the sanctuary depict Saint John the Evangelist, on the left, and Saint Bartholomew on the right. They were produced by G. C. Riordan and Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio.

# Reliquary

Near the baptismal font, there is an altar upon which rests the relics of Saint Flavia, Saint Martin de Tours and others, and a relic of the True Cross. Relics are venerated in the Church as agents of God's love. Also in the same area, against the wall, one will find an ambry for blessed oils used in sacramental rituals in the Catholic Church.



# Memorial Markers

The marble stones found on the north side of the church building commemorate the religious service of the two priests who served as pastors of St. Martin de Tours Church. Rev. Msgr. Joseph Peeters, born in 1860, was pastor from 1917 until his death in 1941. Rev. Msgr. Henri Hamel, a French-Canadian priest born in Quebec in 1903, served as pastor from 1933 until 1971. Rev. Kenneth R. Morvant, pastor from 1971 to 1980, was the first American pastor and also the first pastor of Acadian descent. He began the difficult work of restoring the historic church buildings. His appointment marks the beginning of a period of native born pastors of Acadian descent including Rev. Keith J. DeRouen (1989-1998), Rev. J. Austin Leger (1998-2008), Rev. Msgr. J. Douglas Courville (2008-2011) and Rev. Rusty P. Richard (2011-present). These native born pastors have continued the difficult work of restoring the historic buildings of Saint Martin de Tours Church.



# Pipe Organ

The old pipe organ in the loft of the church was manufactured by the Pilcher Organ Company of Saint Louis, Missouri around 1890 for Saint Bernard Catholic Church in Breaux Bridge. It was given to the Holy Rosary Institute in Lafayette in 1934 and used there until 1955. After sitting idle for 20 years in Holy Rosary Chapel, the organ was sold to Saint Martin de Tours in 1977 for \$600. Rev. Morvant had the organ restored and reassembled and put to use. The seven ranks of 393 pipes range in size from two inches to eight feet and produce seven families of sound.





# *Evangeline*

In a small graveyard at the side of the church is a bronze seated statue of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's heroine Evangeline. The statue was donated by the movie actress Delores del Rio who played the part in the picture "Evangeline" filmed in the area in 1929.

Evangeline longing for her lost Gabriel is immortalized in the poem "Evangeline" by Longfellow.

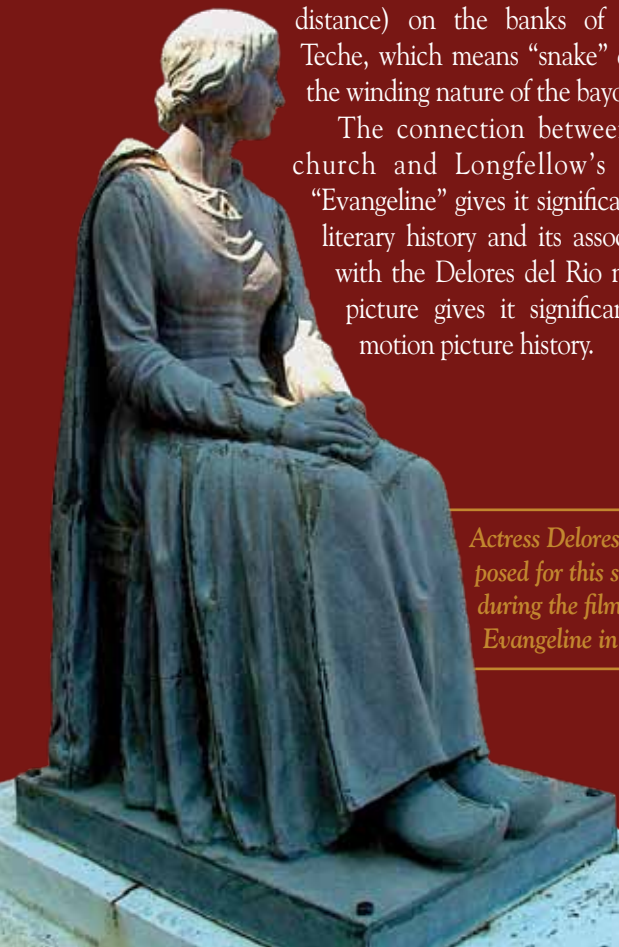
The Evangeline Oak, under which Evangeline would wait for her Gabriel, can be found near the church (walking distance) on the banks of Bayou Teche, which means "snake" due to the winding nature of the bayou.

The connection between this church and Longfellow's poem "Evangeline" gives it significance in literary history and its association with the Delores del Rio motion picture gives it significance in motion picture history.

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*Actress Delores del Rio posed for this statue during the filming of Evangeline in 1929.*

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# *Presbytere*

The two-story rectory was designed and built by Robert B. Benson in 1856. The Antebellum style veranda and fluted columns are a later addition. Some believe the structure was so magnificently built for the possibility that Saint Martinville would become the seat of a new diocese and it would become l'Évêché, the Bishop's house. However, the Diocese

of Lafayette was established in 1918. The five flags which fly from the second floor of the rectory represent the five countries that ruled the area since the establishment of the church. The building currently holds the pastor's living quarters.





## SAINT MARTIN DE TOURS CHURCH

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Established 1765 • [www.saintmartindetours.org](http://www.saintmartindetours.org)

Our Church is open for self-directed touring throughout the week but not during weekend masses or weddings.

Please respect those who may be praying or meditating inside our Church by keeping voices lowered and turning off all cell phones.

