Once home to Dillard forebear and later to first accredited high school for African Americans

Two remarkable African-American schools and the site they shared on St. Charles Avenue

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The 5300 block of St. Charles Avenue in Uptown New Orleans, now home to De La Salle High School, has a legacy of learning and a history of distinctive architecture.

New Orleans University, which later merged with Straight College to form Dillard University was officially chartered in March 1873. Three hundred and eighty-three students enrolled at the original campus on Coliseum Square (Camp and Race streets), which operated under the direction of the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Educational Society.

In 1884 the school purchased a site in the 5300 block of St. Charles Avenue. Part of the property contained the Samuel Gould mansion (demolished 1950), a two- and-a-half story raised cottage with dormer windows, galleries on three sides, a two- story kitchen, and outbuildings set back from the Avenue near to Vannorn Street. The West Indies style home served, at least during part of the school's tenure on this site, as the official residence of the university president.

The new New Orleans University, built to accommodate 500 African-American male and female students, including 150 boarders, was dedicated on June 7, 1889. Present were the founding fathers of the institution, local Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop W. F. Mallarie and Rev. Dr. Joseph Hartwell, the corresponding secretary of the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Educational Society who had operated the school on Coliseum Square.

1889: GOTHIC REVIVAL SCHOOL ERECTED WHERE DE LA SALLE NOW STANDS

The new university occupied a full square bounded by Vannorn, Leonnette and Bondoucoute (now Atlanta) streets, as well as two lots on Leonnette Street in an adjacent square. The powerful Gothic Revival brick steam-heated edifice was five stories high, with a frontage of 150 feet and an ell in the rear housing the dining hall and kitchen on the first floor and the chapel, a gift of Joel Low of Pennsylvania, on the second. The construction had cost almost $100,000, with ten percent of that contributed by the 143 Negro Methodist Episcopal churches in Louisiana.

At the time of the dedication, Bishop Mallarie proposed adding a medical college, which would make New Orleans

The earliest known building on the present site of De La Salle High School was the West Indies style Samuel Gould mansion, which later served as the residence for the New Orleans University president. Demolished, 1950

Gilbert Academy graduates

ANDREW YOUNG
U.N. ambassador
ATLANTA MAYOR
THOMAS DENT, writer
ELLIS MARASLIS, pianist
MICKEY PATTERSON
Olympic medalist
JOHN LOUIS WILSON
ARCHITECT
MARGARET WALKER
NOVELIST

New Orleans University, which later merged with Straight College to form Dillard University, erected its Infirmary Gothic Revival main building in 1889. One hundred and forty-five African-American Methodist Episcopal churches in Louisiana contributed to the construction cost. Demolished, 1949

President Atkinson purchased thirteen lots for $2,400. Two other lots, acquired in 1887, already belonged to the school, which now owned the whole square except for the corner of Leonnette and Atlanta streets and two private homes at 1502 and 1514 Vannorn. A dormitory, the "Peck Memorial Home," was opened in the 1890s and a pharmacy school followed in 1898, but the medical college closed in 1911.

1911: NEW ORLEANS UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S DORM BUILT

On October 18, 1910, the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Educational Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (who

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chartered and controlled New Orleans University) sold for $10 and other considerations their lots in Square 397 to the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to erect a dormitory. In April 1911, the women's society acquired the corner lot on Loyac Street for $1,109 and built a yellow brick dormitory and basement building with stone sills, a broad roof overhang and exposed rafters to accommodate thirty girls as boarding students at New Orleans University. The women's society, which operated the facility, named the dormitory Peck Hall, as it replaced Peck Memorial Home. It still stands on the original site at 5323 Piot Street. The archdiocese that now controls the property recently withdrew their request to demolish the dormitory to make room for green space.

1853: ORIGINS OF GILBERT ACADEMY, SECOND SCHOOL ON ST. CHARLES AVENUE SITE

Jump back to 1853 for a moment and the founding of another African-American institution, whose legacy will eventually intertwine with New Orleans University.

Shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation, the Freedmen's Bureau established a Colored Orphans' Home for the children of Union soldiers who had died in the Civil War. In 1867 the home was moved to a plantation on Bayou Teche in Baldwin, Louisiana, where eight years later a college preparatory school for African Americans, La Teche Seminary, was opened on the same site. The school changed its name to Gilbert Academy and Industrial College in the 1880s after Connecticut farmer and businesswoman, William Lev Gilbair donated $50,000 plus an endowment of $40,000 to the seminary. In 1919 New Orleans University and Gilbert Academy were combined administratively, although the academy remained in Baldwin, Louisiana. Then in 1935 New Orleans University joined with Straight College to form Dillard University and moved to the new Dillard campus on Gentilly Boulevard. At that point, Gilbert Academy left Baldwin and took over the campus space on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans vacated by New Orleans Dillard University.

The first standards for high school for African Americans accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, Gilbert required students to accomplish sixteen units (the State of Louisiana required only twelve and one-half units) in English, mathematics, social science, science, foreign language (two years), and elective courses. Students were encouraged to work for four more elective units. Tuition was $50 per year, and room and board in Peck Hall was $15 per month with a laundry fee of $2 a semester and a requirement of one hour a day of "duty work." Teachers could apply for residency in the hall if space allowed.

Among the graduates of Gilbert Academy were politician Andrew Young, writer Thomas Dent, pianist Ellis Marsalis, Olympic medalist Mickey Patterson, architect John Lewis Wilson, and novelist Margaret Walker.

1949: ARCHDIOCESE BuYS GILBERT ACADEMY LAND AND BUILDINGS

Perhaps it was financial trouble or possibly the increased awareness of integration after WWII but on October 26, 1943, the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church transferred to the Woman's Division of Christian Service of the Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, the lots in Square 397, along with Peck Hall. On March 28, 1949, this group transferred the property to the Board of Education for Negroes of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The next day Edward D. Rapier, apparently acting for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, bought all the property housing Gilbert Academy for $312,000.

The sale of Gilbert Academy's facility meant the discontinuation of the high school unless $250,000 could be raised for a new building on a new site. The Methodist Church agreed to supply the site if the building funds could be obtained. However, even if the church board had agreed to use the $312,000 from the sale as an endowment for the school, there would still be a need for more money to run the institution.

Officials publicly deployed the loss of Gilbert as "facilities for Negro education in the South and New Orleans are still inadequate, although improvements have been made," according to reports in the Times Picayune.

On April 26, 1949, Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel announced the transfer, under the Youth Progress Program, of the Gilbert Academy property to the archdiocese. The site would be used for a new Catholic high school for boys (De La Salle) under the direction of the Christian Brothers, the first Brothers' school in New Orleans. Possession would not take place until the end of the school year, at which time an inspection would occur to decide whether the buildings could be remodeled.

1949 & 1950: ARCHDIOCESE DEMOLISHES EXISTING SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Within months, the monumental Gothic Revival school building on St. Charles Avenue was demolished. For a while, at least, there was a clear view from the avenue to the stately Gould mansion (and former residence of the New Orleans University president) on the back of the property. Under pressure from neighbors and the nascent preservation movement in December 1949, the archdiocese agreed to offer the Gould mansion free to any non-profit public entity that would move it and keep it in public use. Writer Harriet Kane, a charter member of the Louisiana Landmarks Foundation, appealed to the clericry of New Orleans to take advantage of the offer and prevent the destruction of the magnificent mansion, with its "pillared galleries that cover most of three sides, the raised brick basement, sweeping roof and dormer windows."

By the middle of March 1950, however, the struggle to save the Gould mansion was lost, a particularly disturbing event given that there were private interests willing to buy the house and move it but at no public or even quasi-public costs, as the archdiocese required. Approximately $60,000 could have been raised by supporters for the move had a buyer and site been provided.

Kane and her co-chair, Mrs. S. Walter Stern, Sr., spoke prophetically to the Times Picayune in 1950. "This experiment," they concluded, "demonstrates more than ever the need of a strongly organized, vigilant, active body to preserve the irreplaceable heritage from our past. The French Quarter is not the only part of our city which should be protected from destruction."

Thank you to Eleanor Burke of the Historic District Landmarks Commission for her insights and research on these important buildings.