

Reverend Chase Comes to New Orleans

The sermon delivered at a recent church service, held Wednesday, September 22nd, 2021, at Bruton Parish Church in Colonial Williamsburg, was in honor of an Episcopal saint named Philander Chase who spent a number of years in New Orleans. It was his feast day. Bruton Parish Church is a very old church, with its congregation dating back to 1674. The existing church building has been in continuous use since 1715. Back when they were members of the Virginia House of Burgesses (held at the other end of the Duke of Gloucester Street), brave men who would lead the fight for America's independence and for creating a new government worshiped at Bruton. These patriots included Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Patrick Henry, who attended when the legislature was in session.



Bruton Parish Church, Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia

The Most Reverend Philander Church was an Episcopal Church bishop, educator and founder of Kenyon College, as well as pioneer of the United States western frontier, especially in Ohio and Illinois, but what connection does he have with the City of New Orleans?




*The Most Reverend Philander Chase
(December 14, 1775 – September 20, 1852)*

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the predominantly Roman Catholic French and Spanish population of New Orleans was rapidly adding some American Protestants, who soon decided they needed a church of their own. An appeal appeared in the *Louisiana Gazette* of April 30, 1805, which called for a group "to convene, and determine the means of providing a church and a Clergyman of approved character, talents, and piety" and hoped that "the present hint may give more circulation to the idea, and inspire the consideration of those whose duty to God, and their fellow men, call them to promote the execution of so pious a duty."

In June of that same year, 53 Protestants responded to the call and gathered together to found the city's first Protestant church and the first non-Roman Catholic congregation in the entire Louisiana Purchase territory, Christ Church in New Orleans.

Funds were raised for the building of the church, but first they had to decide which Protestant denomination it was to be. After putting the matter to a vote, the ballot results were as follows: Episcopalian, 45 votes; Presbyterian, 7 votes; and Methodist, 1 vote. Therefore, the Episcopal denomination was the winner, and the Episcopal congregation of Christ Church was established.

This is where Philander Chase entered the picture. After determining that it was to be an Episcopal church, a call was sent out to various churches and colleges in the East seeking an acceptable clergyman. Philander Chase, a young minister from Poughkeepsie, New York, answered the call. He arrived in New Orleans on November 16, 1805, with a letter of introduction from Bishop Benjamin Moore of New York. The church's founders approved young Chase as the new rector, and at eleven o'clock the following morning, Reverend Chase preached his first sermon at the Cabildo on the *Place d'Armes* (present-day Jackson Square).



IN rapturous strains we hail the day,
When pious CHASE drew near:....
He comes to guide us in the way
Of life we ought to steer :....

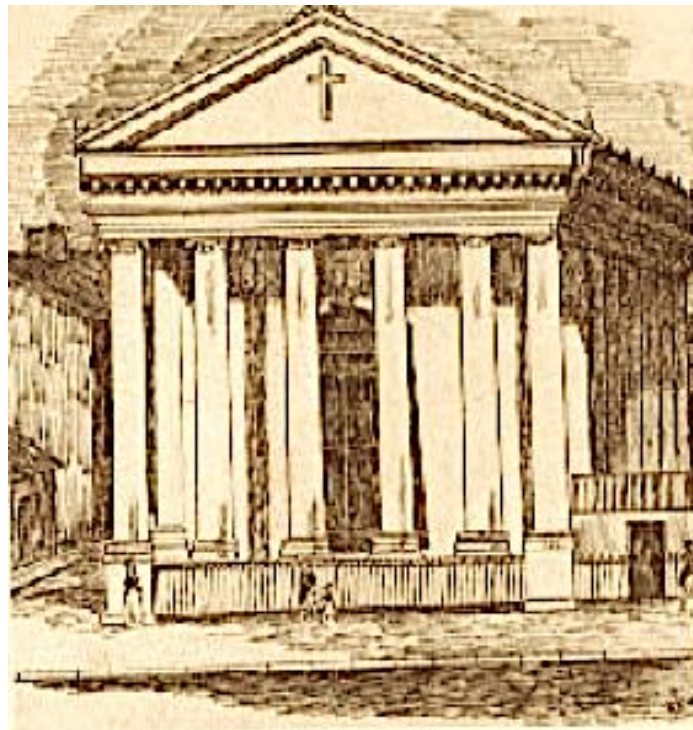
He comes to preach the Gospel news,
To sinners freely giv'n ;
To raise their low and grov'ling views
From earth to highest Heav'n :....

A series of verses proclaimed Reverend Chase's arrival in New Orleans.

Reverend Chase accepted the invitation to the Crescent City in the hope that the warmer climate would help mitigate the impact of his wife Mary's consumption (tuberculosis). Her health, however, did not improve and the Chases missed their children, whom they had left with relatives in Vermont. Therefore, in 1811, Chase returned to New England to become the rector of Christ Church in Hartford, Connecticut.

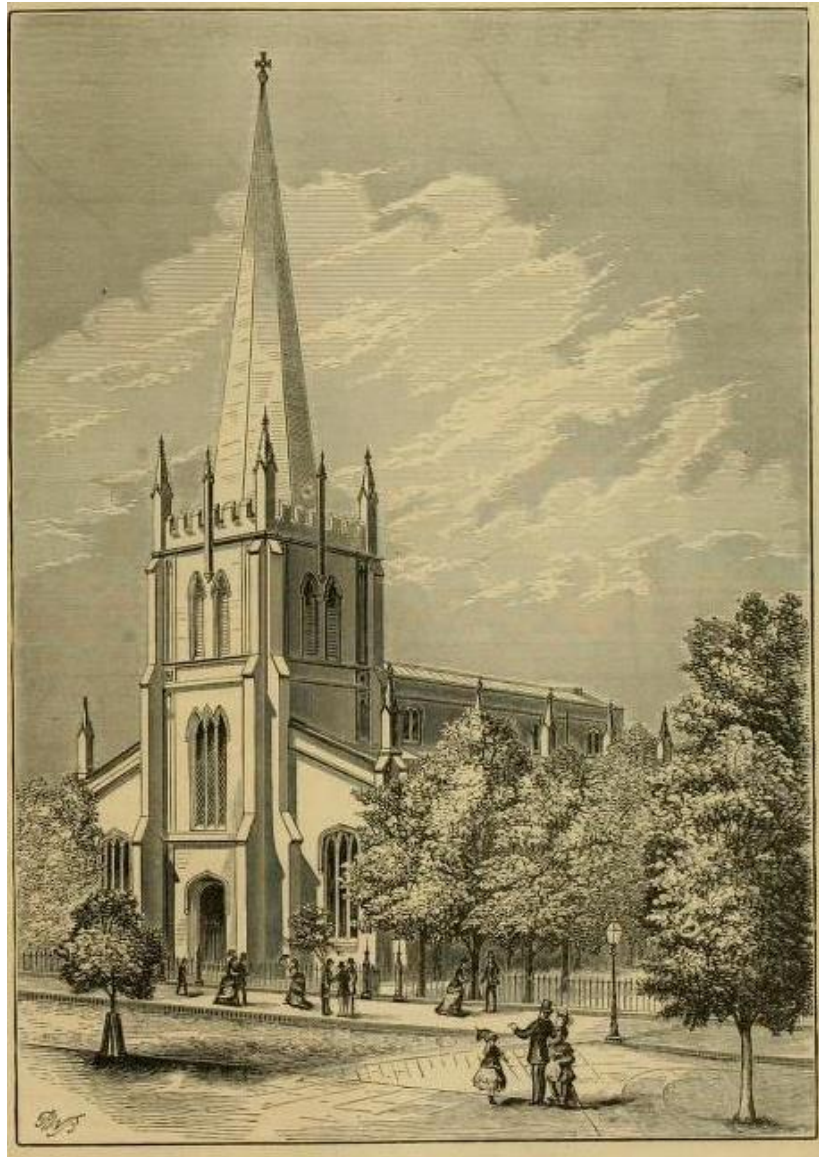
Reverend Chase departed New Orleans before Christ Church had secured a permanent location, with services being held in various public buildings until 1816. The first church, designed by Henry Sellon Boneval Latrobe (1793 – 1817), son of the renowned British-American neoclassical architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764 – 1820), was a brick structure octagonal in shape, 60' in diameter with a domed roof surmounted by a cupola. Sadly, no drawing exists of the first Christ Church, erected at the riverside corner of Canal and Bourbon streets.

By the early 1830s, having outgrown the first church building, a new Greek temple design by architects Gallier and Dakin, fronted by six Ionic columns, was consecrated on March 26, 1837.



Second Christ Church building, consecrated on March 26, 1837

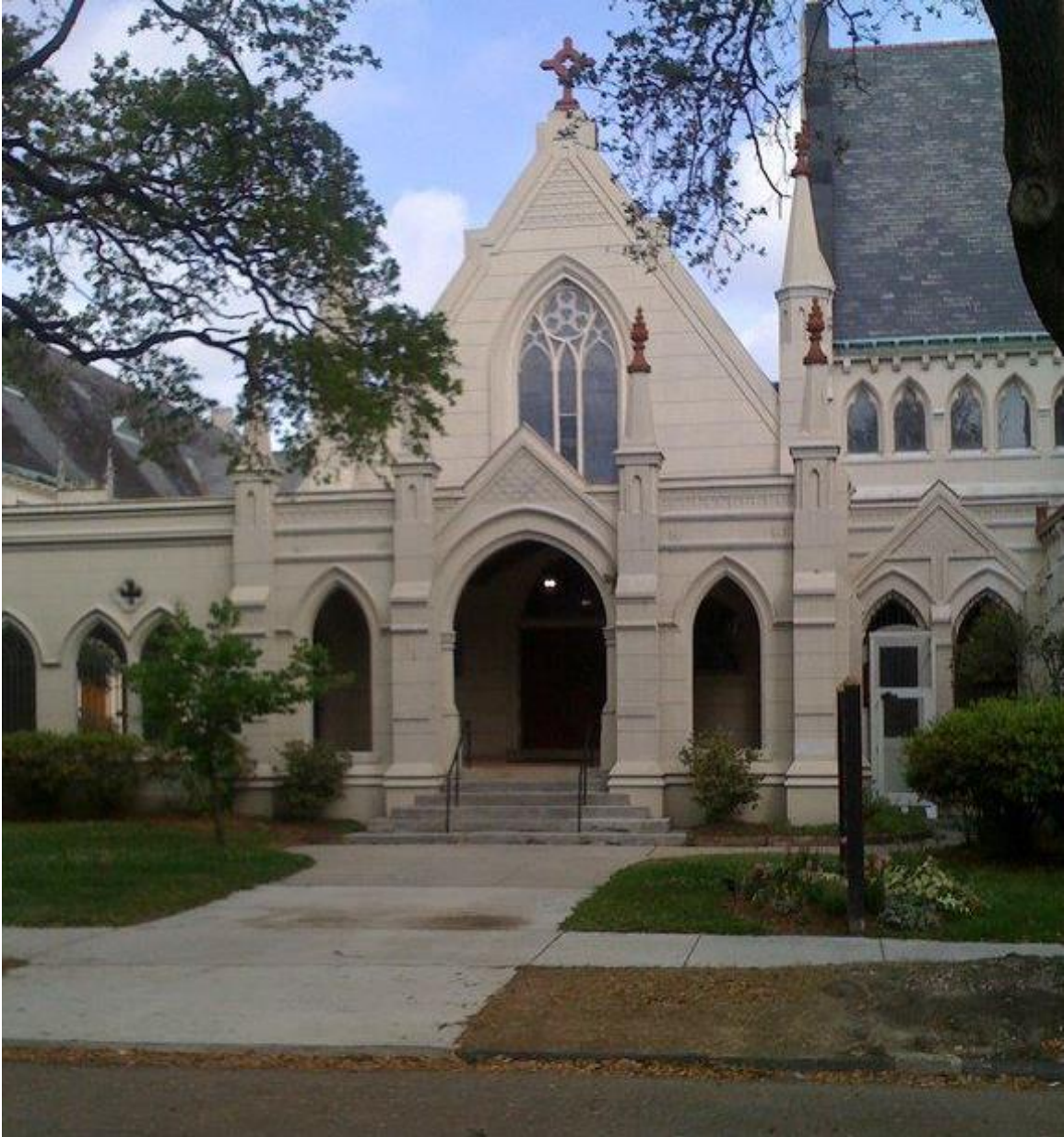
In 1845 Francis Lister Hawks became rector of Christ Church and he submitted plans for a third Christ Church, which was erected on the downtown lake corner of Canal Street and Dauphine, later the site of the Maison Blanche Department Store (and today the Ritz-Carlton Hotel). The impressive Gothic style church was constructed in 1847, vacated in 1884 and demolished in 1885.



*Third Christ Church Cathedral, corner of Canal and Dauphine streets,
later the site of the Maison Blanche Department Store*

The cornerstone for the present (fourth) Christ Church was laid on June 10, 1886. Located today at 2919 St. Charles Avenue, Christ Church was also constructed in the Gothic style, as was the third

church. It was designed by New York architect Lawrence B. Valk. Three years later, New Orleans architect Thomas Sully's chapel of matching design was added, thanks to the generosity of a devoted benefactor. Under Bishop David Sessums' sponsorship, Christ Church became a cathedral in 1891, and is headed today by its current Dean and Rector, the Very Reverend David Allard duPlantier and is the seat of the eleventh Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana, the Right Reverend Morris K. Thompson, Jr.



Christ Church Cathedral on St. Charles Avenue, corner Sixth Street

According to the sermon given at the Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, it was learned that the young Philander Chase, before coming to New Orleans, had aspirations of becoming a farmer, but was dissuaded by his father and enrolled in Dartmouth College in 1791. It was there that he became quite moved by the 1789 Book of Common Prayer, which motivated him to leave behind his Congregationalist upbringing and seek ordination as a priest in the fledgling Episcopal Church in the United States. Having severed its ties from the Church of England during the American Revolution, the Church was still in its infancy, when Chase graduated in 1795.

Chase then traveled to Albany, New York, to study under the Reverend Thomas Ellison, where he married Mary Fay of Stockbridge, Vermont, and their first son, George, was born. Chase's ordination as a deacon took place in 1798, and he spent the next year traveling in western New York organizing parishes. Upon becoming a priest in 1799, Chase was placed in charge of Christ Church in Poughkeepsie, New York.



Bishop Philander Chase and his second wife, Sophia May Ingraham

After having served congregations in Poughkeepsie, New Orleans and Hartford, Reverend Chase felt the calling to preach on the frontier and so headed west in 1817. He became first bishop of Ohio (where he

founded Kenyon College, raising the necessary funds in England) and the first bishop of Illinois in 1835 (a position he served until his death). He also served as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church from February 15, 1843, until September 20, 1852.

At the time Philander Chase was bishop of Ohio, his 12-year-old nephew, Salmon P. Chase became his ward (upon the death of his father). His illustrious nephew was the quintessential public servant, serving in all three branches of the federal government. He served as Chief Justice of the United States and represented Ohio as its 23rd governor and in the United States Senate. As United States Secretary of the Treasury, Chase was instrumental in placing the phrase "In God We Trust" on U.S. coinage in 1864. The Chase National Bank (later the Chase Manhattan Bank and today JPMorgan Chase) was named in his honor, though he had no affiliation with the bank, financial or otherwise.

For "heroic faith, love, goodness of life, joyousness, service to others for Christ's sake, and devotion," Chase is venerated as an Episcopal saint and is remembered annually on September 22nd in the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church. And here in New Orleans he will be remembered as the first rector of the city's first Protestant Church.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
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