

A tour of Protestantism in the city of Nantes

1. The present-day church at Place Edouard-Normand

The church situated at Place Edouard-Normand was built between 1956 and 1958 to replace an earlier building destroyed during the WWII. The previous church couldn't be rebuilt at its original location (Place de l'Édit de Nantes) because Rue de Gigant was scheduled for boundary realignment. The first stone was laid on 30 September 1956 and the project was designed by a woman architect, Victoire Durand-Gasselín, born in Nantes into a Protestant family. The new church building was consecrated in 1958 by the pastor Louis Matiffa.

This is the present-day church. The photo on the right, in the background, and on the front cover page shows the original church built at Place de l'Édit de Nantes, before it was destroyed in an air raid on 23 September 1943.

2. Rue Paul Bellamy

A staunch Protestant, Paul Bellamy (1866-1930) entered the Town Council in 1908. Two years later, he was elected Mayor of Nantes and would remain in office for 18 years. He founded the Association of French Mayors in 1920 and was its inaugural chairman. As deputy for Loire-Inférieure from 1924 to 1928, he was the author of private bills on raising the birth rate and eliminating slum dwellings.

3. The Erdre River

At Port Communeau in the 17th century, the Protestants in Nantes boarded barges to sail down to Sucé, where there was a Protestant church. The Edict of Nantes prohibited them from having a Protestant church in Nantes, since it was the seat of a bishopric. They sang psalms on the way, prompting complaints from the local residents. (Nowhere does the Edict of Nantes stipulate that it is forbidden to sing psalms on the water...)

In the 18th century, Swiss Protestants from Neuchâtel built large workshops along the Erdre River to weave Indian cotton prints, known simply as "Indians". The name stems from the early patterns, which imitated the Indian designs imported into Europe by the Compagnie des Indes. Most were floral patterns in a range of colours. Later, more varied patterns were produced in monochrome shades. There were nine workshops, which produced three-quarters of the "Indians" sold in Nantes. The largest workshop was the one held by the Petit Pierre brothers. All were subsidiaries of the Oberkampf workshop, originally from Bavaria, located in Jouy-en-Josas, south-west of Paris.

4. Rue des Carmélites

The Cinématographe cinema (situated at number 12b) is housed in a former Carmelite chapel, which was the first church assigned to the Protestants at the time of the Concordat of 1801. Services were held there from 1805 to 1854.

5. Château des Ducs de Bretagne

On 15 April 1598, most likely at the Château des Ducs de Bretagne, Henri IV signed the famous “Perpetual and irrevocable Edict of Tolerance” granting Protestants freedom of religion. A plaque on the wall surrounding the Château commemorates the event.

6. Petite-Hollande

The name “Petite-Hollande” harks back to the time when Dutch merchants, the majority of whom were Protestant, established a community here, along an arm of the Loire river. They contributed to the prosperity of the port of Nantes in the 16th and 17th centuries. Most of them were originally from Rotterdam. When the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685, many either fled or helped the Protestants in the region flee to safe-haven countries such as the Channel Islands or the Netherlands.

7. Passage Pommeraye

The Passage Pommeraye takes its name from the notary who formed a shareholders’ society to finance its construction. It was built between 1840 and 1843 by two architects, Jean-Baptiste Buron and Hippolyte Durand-Gasselín, both Protestants.

The statues, which were crafted by Jean Debay, represent the spirits of the Fine Arts, the Sciences, Industry, Commerce, Agriculture, the Marine and the Four Seasons.

The medallions by Guillaume Grootaers represent Du Guesclin, Olivier de Clisson, Général Dumoustier, Cassard, Abélard, Rabelais, Du Couedic and Rousseau de St-Aignan.

8. Cours Cambronne

General Cambronne was born in 1770 and grew up in Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire. He enlisted in the army in 1792, fought in all the Napoleonic Wars and accompanied the Emperor to the Island of Elba. After returning with him in 1815, he commanded the guard at Waterloo on 18 June 1815. He was married to an English Protestant, Mary Osburn, and retired in Nantes. He was very popular with the people of Nantes and Saint-Sébastien, where he owned a property known as La Baugerie. He died in Nantes in his apartment at No. 3, rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1842. He was buried in the Miséricorde cemetery. His wife’s grave is in the Protestant section of the cemetery.

9. Dobrée district

The Dobrée family was Protestant and sought refuge on the island of Guernsey after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. On the family’s return to France in the late 18th century, it settled in Nantes. In the 19th century, Thomas Dobrée (1781-1828) engaged in foreign trade, developed whaling and built up the Forges de Basse-Indre metalworks. His son, Thomas II (1810-1895), inherited a huge fortune, which he devoted to buying works of art (paintings, drawings, sculptures, enamelware, engravings, manuscripts and rare books). To house his collections, he bought the Manoir de la Touche, where the Duke of Brittany Jean V had died. He had a neo-Roman-style manor built. On his death, his entire estate was bequeathed to the Loire-Inférieure department, along with 100,000 francs.

He named Hippolyte Durand-Gasselín, the Protestant architect who built the Passage Pommeraye, as his sole legatee.

10. Place de l'Edit-de-Nantes

In the Edict of Nantes (1598), Henri IV granted Protestants freedom of worship, with a few restrictions, and around 80 strongholds (including La Rochelle, Beauvoir sur Mer and Montaigu, among others), which Cardinal Richelieu withdrew from them in the early 17th century to prevent them being "a State within the State".

They managed to retain their freedom of worship until it was revoked by Louis XIV (on 17 October 1685). On the site of the current garden stood the church built in 1855 by Driollet, until it was destroyed in an air raid on 23 September 1943.

11. Rue Harouys

Harouys was the name of the mayor of Nantes in 1572 when, on St. Bartholomew's Day (24 August), the municipal council refused to obey the Guises' orders to kill Protestants, as in Paris, by *running a sword through those who proclaimed "the so-called Reformed Religion"*. Nantes is accordingly one of the handful of cities that did not join in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Harouys, who was of Spanish origin, was a storekeeper on the port and it was not in his interests to kill those with whom he did business.