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Le Carnet de France Notre Dame's bells toll again

By Martine P. Dulles
and Frederick H. Dulles

If you were around on November 22, 1963, you know where you were when President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. Today, most Americans remember where they were on September 11, 2001, during the terrorist attacks on New York and on the Pentagon. Well, in France, such a memorable date is the early evening of April 15, 2019, when the Cathedra of Notre Dame caught fire.

First, the spire burned down and fell on the roof of the cathedral. Everyone watching worried about how much of this magnificent building the fire would destroy, which took almost 200 years to build, from 1163 to 1345. The main concern was the front facade, which was fortunately saved thanks to the outstanding work and professionalism of more than 600 firemen who took many risks as they labored non-stop for 24 hours.

But a couple of miracles happened: Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), the architect tasked with restoring the cathedral in 1861, which had been very poorly maintained since the French revolution (1789-1793), installed 16 sculptures on the roof around the spire. They represented the 12 Apostles and the four Evangelists. Four days before the fire, these 16 sculptures were taken down to be restored (see the *Charleston Mercury* article dated October 2019) as part of a plan scheduled months before and were thus untouched by the fire. They are now in impeccable condition and will be put back on the roof of the Cathedral surrounding the new spire, which is a copy of the previous one.

At the same time, on top of the spire, there was a rooster, which is considered a symbol of France because of the historic name Gaul and the Latin word gallus meaning coq, or rooster. The rooster contained three relics: allegedly a small piece of the Crown of Thorns, a relic of St. Denis, and a relic of St. Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris. Everyone thought the rooster had been burned and melted with the heat, but a couple days later it was found in a garden near the cathedral — damaged but with the relics still inside! This original rooster has been restored, but it will not be placed back on the roof — it will be shown in the future muse-



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The facade of Notre-Dame de Paris.

um of the history of the cathedral. A new rooster made of copper covered by gold leaves containing other relics has now been placed at the top of the new spire.

Major damage occurred at the transept of the cathedral, where the roof and ceiling fell. Of course, as in any fire, there was a lot of ashes and damage from the hoses of the firemen. Most stained-glass windows and side chapels suffered little damage but were covered with ashes.

The 14th century sculpture of the Virgin Mary and Child called "La Vierge à l'Enfant" or "Notre-Dame de Paris" did not suffer. During the past five years, it stood in l'Eglise Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois de Paris, near the Louvre before a procession through Paris streets brought it back to its place near the altar in Notre-Dame a few days ago.

The eight bells which has been taken down in 2023 to be cleaned and restored in Normandy were rehung at the end of September. The organ, with its nearly 8,000 pipes, was totally disassembled, dusted and re-installed, ready for the numerous concerts to be held in the future. The French music composer Thierry Eschah is creating a special Te Deum, which will be heard for the first time on June 12, 2025.

The cathedral's 1,500 chairs were too dirty to be reused and have been replaced by new chairs made of oak wood sourced from



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Liturgical clothes designed by Jean-Charles de Castelbajac

the southwest of France. They were specially designed by Ionna Vautrin, who wanted to make them attractive, comfortable and lightweight enough to be easily moved, attached or stacked on top of one another.

The previous main altar, which stood in the middle of the transept under the spire, was totally destroyed. The new one was designed by Guillaume Bardet and is a single plain, huge piece of bronze. The top is flat, obviously, but the bottom is curved like the bottom of a boat. He also designed the bishop's chair, the cathedra and the baptistery. Designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac was assigned to create the chasubles and liturgical vestments, which will be worn by the 170 bishops, 700 priests and 700 deacons who will attend the opening ceremony. The background fabric is made of wool in an ecru tone with geometrical colorful pieces sewn on in colors symbolic of Christianity: red, blue and green. On the back is a large cross made in a gold fabric.

More than 1,000 people were involved in the restoration: carpenters, bricklayers, wrought-iron craftsmen, sculptors, painters, electricians, crane operators, helicopter pilots, drone pilots and countless more. A few days after the April 15 fire, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that he wanted Notre-Dame to reopen in 2024. Most people were skeptical and thought it would not be possible to

meet this target.

Well, December 7, 2024, is the official inauguration date and on December 8, Notre-Dame will be reopened to the public — in this context, Napoléon's famous words "Impossible n'est pas français," does apply. But it would not have been possible without the devotion of all involved and without the generosity of more than 340,000 donors from 150 countries who donated more than 843 million Euros.

If more than 10 million visitors came every year before the fire, an estimated 14 million are anticipated to return in the future. It is now highly recommended to reserve a visiting time so as not to wait in line for hours, unless you are going to attend a mass or listen to a concert. Should you wish to read more about this magnificent accomplishment, visit the website "Rebâtir Notre-Dame de Paris," which is bilingual (French/English) and provides a trove of dramatic and interesting information.

Joyeuses fêtes — happy holidays — happy New Year!

Martine and Frederick Dulles live in France. Martine was a docent at the MET in New York and a licensed tour guide in Charleston (mpd@dullesdeleu.com). Frederick is an international business lawyer and an adjunct professor of law in French business schools (fhd@dullesdeleu.com).