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Does it really make a difference?

For our first bishop, the difference is 100,000 square miles

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Bishop Louis DuBourg was the first bishop *in* St. Louis, not the first bishop *of* St. Louis. The preposition is important.

Bishop DuBourg directed the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas, which covered a measly 885,000 square miles. Though technically not the first bishop of St. Louis, Bishop DuBourg deserves most of the credit for the foundation of the Catholic Church in what was then a small river town of 4,000.

In 1793, then-Father DuBourg, a Sulpician priest, escaped the Reign of Terror ravaging France by fleeing to Baltimore, where he showed prowess as an administrator. In 1812, he was proposed as the bishop of new lands included in the Louisiana Purchase, but his ordination as a bishop was delayed because of some difficulties back in Europe: Napoelon Bonaparte was busy trying to conquer the world and arresting Pope Pius VII.

Meanwhile, folks in New Orleans challenged his authority, since he wasn't a bishop, just an apostolic administrator. Perhaps that was an important distinction to his enemies. The longstanding rector of the diocese even plotted to overthrow DuBourg. Not an easy time for a priest.

In 1815, after Napoleon finally gave up his dream of world domination, Father DuBourg traveled to Europe and was consecrated as bishop.

Meanwhile, DuBourg's good pal Bishop Benedict Flaget of Bardstown, Ky., had visited St. Louis, only to find the parish non-existent. The church and rectory had no doors, floors, windows or furniture. It was reported that Catholics in the area had "calloused hearts" and "extreme indifferentism." Perhaps this came as no surprise, considering there had been no resident pastor for 40 years. Bishop Flaget suggested to DuBourg that relocating to St. Louis might be a good place to lay low from his enemies while ministering to a suffering flock. So DuBourg became the first bishop *in* St. Louis.



Portrait of Bishop Louis Guillaume Valentin DuBourg (1766-1833); School of Jacques Louis David, circa 1815; oil on canvas. Courtesy Saint Louis University Museum of Art.

DuBourg arrived on Jan. 5, 1818, where a procession of 2,000 residents led him to the ramshackle church close to where now stands the Gateway Arch. A priest at the first Mass wrote that Bishop DuBourg's sermon that day "dissipated in a great measure every prejudice, and captivated all hearts." Just two days after his arrival, Bishop DuBourg met with parishioners and received pledges to build a new church – the first capital campaign in St. Louis. DuBourg also started plans for a seminary, to open schools and to send missionaries to Native Americans. His ability to dream big was described by one historian this way, "The bishop's optimism was equaled only by his imagination, which always bypassed the difficulties involved in the arrangement he proposed."

Constantly on the move throughout the expansive diocese, Bishop DuBourg's last extended stay in St. Louis was in 1822, when he celebrated the feast of St. Louis, king of France – the namesake and a patron of our city. He resigned as bishop of the diocese in 1826, a move that surprised many, even his auxiliary bishop, Joseph Rosati.

The territory was then split into the New Orleans and St. Louis dioceses. Bishop Rosati served as administrator for both, until he was named the first bishop *of* St. Louis Diocese in 1826.

Despite the nuances of a pesky preposition, we celebrate Bishop DuBourg as our first bishop.

>> This is the first in a 6-part series marking the 250th anniversary of the founding of St. Louis. Each part will examine an interesting aspect of the history of the archdiocese.