

LEONIDAS POLK

Born in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1806, Polk attended the University of North Carolina before receiving an appointment to West Point, from which he graduated in 1827. He soon resigned his commission, however, was ordained as an Episcopal priest, and in 1832 moved to a farm near Columbia, Tennessee. He combined farming with pastoral work with a colored congregation until 1838, when he was appointed missionary bishop of the Old Southwest—the vast area comprising present-day Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Indian Territory. In that capacity, Polk resettled his family to Bayou Lafourche and resided on “Leighton Place” Plantation a few miles upstream from the town of Thibodaux.

Among Polk’s first accomplishments here was the founding of St. John’s Episcopal Church. Built in the style of a Greek temple, in 1843-1844, the church faced the Terrebonne Road (Jackson Street) on Ridgefield Plantation land donated by Polk’s friend and ardent supporter George S. Guion.

Bishop Polk and his wife, Frances Devereaux, schooled their slaves, provided religious services for them, and established a lay nursery for servants’ children. A cholera epidemic in 1849 killed many workers on the plantation. That disaster was followed by a tornado in 1850 which destroyed the sugar mill, many other structures, and the sugar cane crop. The plantation subsequently failed, and Polk moved in 1854 to New Orleans, where he became rector of Trinity Church on Jackson Avenue. He later helped establish The University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee.

In 1861, Leonidas Polk returned to service as a soldier, achieving a rank of Lieutenant General in the Army of the Confederacy. He was killed by a cannonball at the Battle of Pine Mountain, Georgia, June 14, 1864, and his remains later were interred in Christ Church Cathedral, New Orleans.