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PARIS AT THE TIME OF THE FOUNDER (2/5)

3. The "University"

The Université or Latin Quarter was still, at the beginning of Louis's reign, within Philip Augustus's crumbling walls. It had virtually the same aspect as in the fourteenth century, a packed area with its sixty colleges («but they in nothing approach ours in Oxford for state and order», writes John Evelyn), abbeys and churches, many of outstanding size and architecture, set in narrow streets. Richelieu's rebuilt Sorbonne chapel was resplendent in its limestone and huge dome. Apart from the necessary tradesmsen and craftsmen, a few private houses and the printing houses and bookshops along the Rue Saint-Jacques, the area was given over to studies. The Latin Quarter today, although still tightly built on, has little to remind us of how the Founder saw it. To reach the Sorbonne from the seminary of Saint Sulpice when he was a student there, he would have entered the Latin Quarter through St Michael's Gate (Porte Saint-Michel) in the walls, at a point on the present Boulevard Saint-Michel some way south of the Rue de Cujas. Of the buildings he knew then, the Revolution destroyed some and disaffected others that became the prey of demolishers and road-wideners throughout the 19th century and who have left practically nothing of the religious, architectural and artistic treasures of the area. The Jacobin, i.e. Dominican house where St Thomas wrote for some years, has gone as well as Franciscan, Carmelite, Augustinian and Bernardine houses. A lycée stands on the site of St Genevieve's abbey, rebuilt in 12th century, although its tower remains. The massive Pathéon – as it later became – was built on the orders of Louis XV as a more fitting church of St Genevieve, patron of Paris, in the abbey garden, and was unknown to La Salle. But the beautiful chuch nearby of St Etienne du Mont, so rich in history, is practically as he knew it, for it was rebuilt in the 16th century and consecrated in 1626. Several colleges have disappeared as well as eight churches. St Victor's abbey, outside the walls on the east side, where Abelard, St Bernard and St Thomas of Canterbury studied, was levelled in 1811.

There were about 30,000 students in the University which formed a religious guild of masters and students; its rector had the same rank as princes of the blood and took precedence over bishops, for the University depended only on the Pope. The Jesuits, on the Rue Saint Jacques behind the Sorbonne, excelled by their courses which drew sons of the aristocracy and even of royal blood, and attracted students away from other colleges; theirs numbered 3000. The king attended the inauguration of new extensions and allowed the name of the college to be changed from College de Clermont to College Louis-le-Grand. It was the richest college of all but never formed part of the University. The Jesuits proclaimed that «the College of Louis-le-Grand is full of boarders of the first quality, who leave only to take up the first dignities in the state, the Church, the nobility and the magistracy.» To give them the required boldness and assurance for public speaking they trained them to act in plays and ballets. Their prize-giving ceremonies were spectacular. Their success created jealousy and imitation by the other colleges.

Life in the Latin Quarter was now fairly quiet, thanks to the firm hand of the lieutenant general of police, but there were fights between colleges and the rare duel. Gates were supposed to be closed by nine o'clock, and students were not to go out without a supervisor, but day students felt free enough of regulations to frequent the many taverns around the Rue de la Harpe.

SUBURBS ON THE LEFT BANK.

Saint Germain

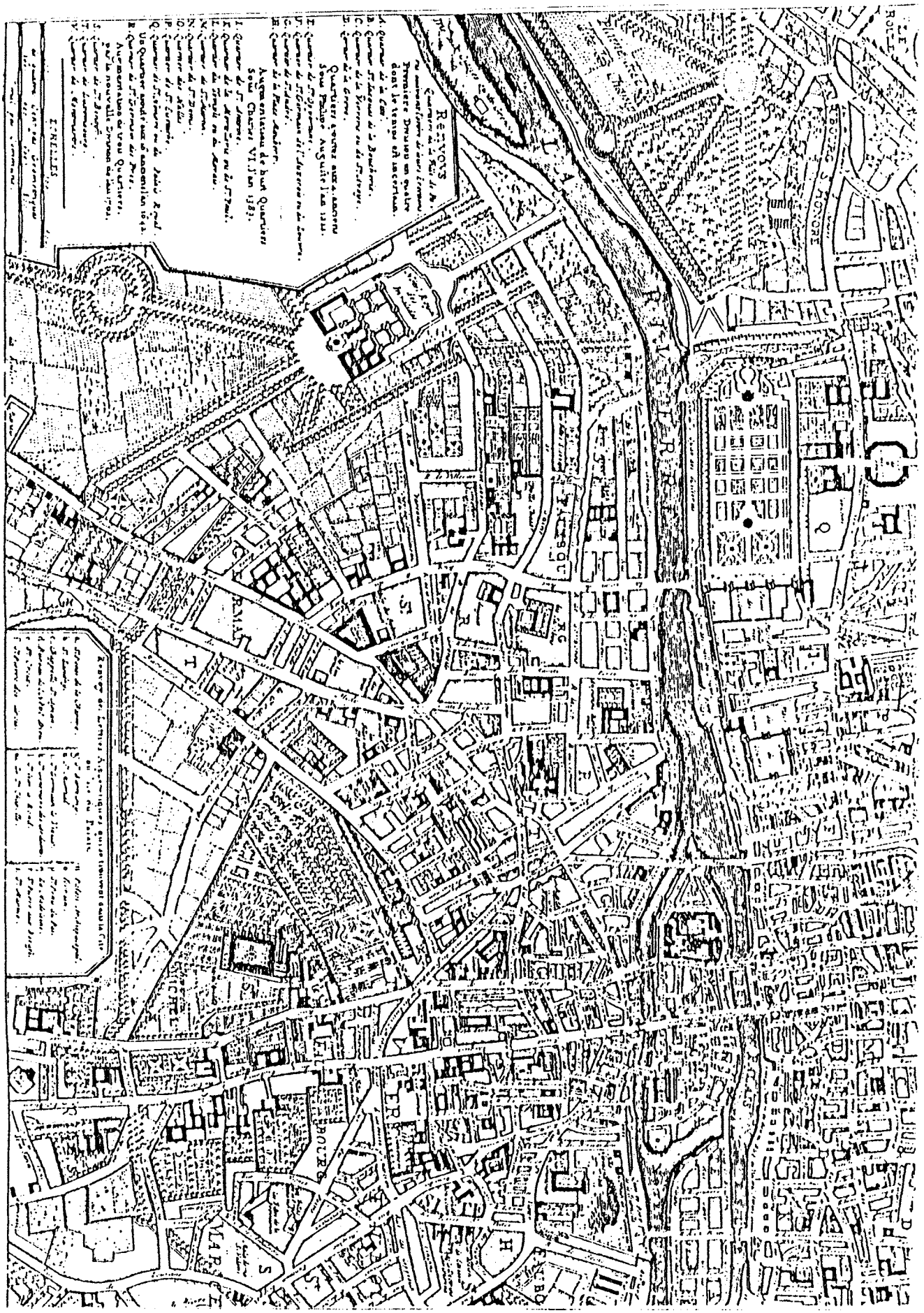
The oldest by far and the most important of these was that of Saint Germain, and which interests us specially because its sole parish church was that of Saint Sulpice.

The Abbey

When La Salle and two Brothers settled in the Rue Princesse, close to the church, they were only three minutes' walk away from the great monastery of Saint Germain, of which only the great church and some abbey buildings remain. It was founded in the 6th century in open country outside Paris by Childebert, son of Clovis, king of the Franks, and became the burial place of the early Merovingian kings, which explains why it was donated with widespread gifts of land. It was destroyed by the Normans in 886 and was rebuilt throughout the Middle Ages to become one of the finest Benedictine abbeys.

It declined during the Wars of Religion, but after the council of Trent it reformed and became the centre of the new Benedictine congregation of St Maur and became the home of many scholars whose names are commemorated in streets of this quarter. Even some of the roads leading out of it have a Benedictine origin. Thus, the Rue de Vaugirard, which figures in our story, led to a village and lands owned by the monastery and named Val Girard after a twelfth century abbot; the village came to be called Vaugirard. The Rue de Sèvres, in which there is now a Lasallian Centre, ran to the village of Sèvres also owned by the abbey; along it, not far from the Brothers' house, you will meet streets named after St Romanus (Romain); the Rue de l'Abbé Gregoire, which used to be called after St Maur; and Rue St Placide.

Bro. Alfred Calcutt



A part of the plan of Paris in 1705, drawn up by Nicolas de Fer, geographer to His Majesty the King.