

THE CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF NEUBOURG (1133–1790)

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ESTABLISHMENT

Neubourg Abbey was established in 1133 by Count Renaud (Reinhold) of Lutzelbourg, who was the son of Pierre de Lutzelbourg, along with Frederick II of Hohenstaufen—known as 'the One-Eyed'—Duke of Swabia and Alsace and father of Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa.

Twelve Cistercian monks, guided by the monk Ulrich—a relative of Count Renaud of Lutzelbourg, who was born Count of Burgundy and Neufchâtel in Switzerland and appointed to serve as monk of the future monastery—departed from Lucelle to settle at the edge of the Haguenau Forest. This location offered them the opportunity to clear the land according to their needs and dedicate themselves to contemplative prayer. In recognition of monk Ulrich, the newly established abbey was given the Latin name *Novum Castrum*.

Count Renaud de Lutzelbourg gave a third of the Haguenau Forest to the abbey, with the southern and western parts coming from Emperor Conrad III's brother and the northern and eastern belonging to Duke Frederick the 'One-Eyed'. The Abbey of Neubourg quickly became prosperous due to the dedicated efforts of its early monks.

THE GROWTH AND SPLENDOR OF NEUBOURG ABBEY

Pope Eugene III, himself a member of the Cistercian Order, along with Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, formally ratified the establishment. The abbey church was consecrated in the year 1158 by Burgard, Bishop of Strasbourg, with Henry of Carinthia, Bishop of Troyes, in attendance. Within a few years of its founding, Neubourg Abbey had acquired several rural properties, known as "Grangiae." Each property served multiple roles, functioning as a religious center with a chapel, an agricultural site for farming activities, and an economic hub through the presence of a mill.

Beginning in the year 1138, Neubourg Abbey undertook a significant phase of expansion that extended its influence both regionally and beyond. The abbey played a foundational role in the establishment of several important monastic communities and contributed meaningfully to the development of the surrounding economy.

Neubourg Abbey sent a group of twelve monks to Swabia, where they established the renowned Maulbronn Abbey in what is now Baden-Württemberg. This marked the beginning of Neubourg's tradition of fostering new monastic settlements.

Ten years after the founding of Maulbronn, Neubourg established another colony, which led to the creation of Herrenalb Convent, also located in Baden-Württemberg. That same year, a third convent was founded in Baumgarten near Andlau, in the Bas-Rhin department of Alsace. In addition to these direct foundations, Neubourg Abbey adopted two other communities: Koenigsbrück, near Soufflenheim in Bas-Rhin, Alsace, and Lichtenthal, near Baden-Baden, the latter being founded in the year 1245.

During this period, Neubourg Abbey became a central figure in the local economy. The monks organized new farms, opened additional land for cultivation, and contributed to the advancement of viticulture and livestock farming in the region. These agricultural activities not only supported the abbey's subsistence but also enhanced the economic vibrancy of the surrounding area.

DISAPPOINTMENTS AND DECLINE

The vicissitudes of history, wars and natural disasters repeatedly brought the great abbey to its knees. Each time, it rose from the ashes. At the beginning of the 18th century, a new boom was expected: the church was restored, the library enriched, and the arts and letters experienced a renaissance. It is worth mentioning Abbé Gacier d'Auvilliers, a native of Villefranche in the Beaujolais region, who was abbot from 1715 to 1759. A doctor of the Sorbonne, this man of knowledge and taste was the main restorer of the abbey, keen to restore it to its former glory with the new fashions and styles of the time. A man of influence, he sat on the Sovereign Council of Alsace and was respected and befriended by personalities such as King Stanislas, father of Maria Leczinska, future Queen of France, with whom he maintained a correspondence and who was perhaps not uninvolved in certain largesse he was able to obtain for the benefit of his abbey. Abbot Gacier d'Auvilliers thus restored the Abbey of Neubourg from top to bottom. It is largely thanks to him that we still have what remains of the abbey today: the woodwork in the choir of Saint-Nicolas Church in Haguenau, the pulpit, statues and organ in the same church, the first part of the entrance portal, the mill, etc.

RESILIENCE AND RESTORATION OF NEUBOURG ABBEY IN THE 18TH CENT.

The Abbey of Neubourg faced countless hardships throughout its history. Wars, natural disasters, and other adversities repeatedly threatened its existence, often bringing the once-great abbey to the brink of ruin. Despite these challenges, Neubourg demonstrated remarkable resilience, managing to recover and rebuild after each setback.

At the dawn of the 18th century, the abbey entered a new period of revitalization. Restoration efforts were undertaken to repair the church, enrich the library, and revive the arts and letters, marking a renaissance within the monastic community. This period of renewal was closely linked to the leadership of Jacques Gacier d'Auvilliers, a native of Villefranche in the Beaujolais region, who served as abbot from 1715 to 1759. Jacques Gacier d'Auvilliers, a doctor of the Sorbonne, was renowned for his knowledge, refined tastes, and commitment to restoring Neubourg Abbey to its former grandeur. Embracing the architectural and artistic styles of his time, he spearheaded a comprehensive restoration of the abbey. His influence extended beyond the abbey itself; he was a respected member of the « Conseil Souverain d'Alsace » and maintained friendships with prominent figures, including King Stanislas, father of Maria Leczinska, the future Queen of France. It is believed that this connection may have contributed to the generosity and resources he secured for the abbey's benefit.

Thanks to the efforts of Abbot Gacier d'Auvilliers, many of the abbey's treasures have survived to the present day. His restoration work is evident in significant elements such as the woodwork in the choir of Saint-Nicolas Church in Haguenau, the pulpit, statues, and organ in the same church, as well as the first section of the entrance portal and the abbey's mill.

His successor, Dom Joseph Specht, originally from Kientzheim, was noted for his patience and gentleness during his tenure. He completed the abbey portal by adding the triangular pediment and was also responsible for installing the sundial now located at Mont Sainte-Odile, as well as the notable 'fontaine aux abeilles (bee fountain)' on the forecourt of Saint-Georges Church in Haguenau. As passionate by physics, he likely commissioned the small sundial recently installed on the forecourt of Neubourg Church.

Upon Abbot Specht's death in 1779, François-Xavier Dreux, Doctor of the Sorbonne and Secretary to the Superior General of Cîteaux, succeeded him. Dreux was also a member of the « Conseil Souverain d'Alsace ». However, his presence in Neubourg was limited, as he preferred residing at the abbey's mansion located Rue des Juifs in Strasbourg. Under his leadership, the monks enjoyed considerable autonomy, which resulted in many neglecting church duties in favor of hunting and other secular activities. This trend culminated in the spring of 1789, following a severe winter and poor harvest in 1788, when local peasants confronted the monks at the abbey portal.

In the year 1790, the French Revolution marked the end of the famous house. After experiencing conflict, upheaval, and demonstrations, the abbey's monks were forced to leave. Frédéric Augst from Pfaffenhoffen purchased the buildings and started dismantling them to sell the materials. He later sold what remained to Frédéric Wolf, a property dealer from northern Alsace, who finished the demolition begun by Augst. By 1845, only a small, elegant Gothic chapel stood among the cemetery grounds. This chapel, called the 'Lanterne des Morts' (Lantern of the Dead) or 'Heidenkirchlein' (Little Heathen Church), featured an oil lamp that was kept burning as a tribute to those who had passed away. Interestingly, the spire's top stone survived and now serves as a baptismal font in Neubourg's parish church—so, a stone once honoring the dead is currently used to welcome the living through baptism.

COLUMN BASES AND PARTS OF SHAFTS

After the abbey church in Neubourg was demolished, its materials were reused to build Louis-Charles-Emmanuel Chastellux's cotton mill, which stood where the Saint-François clinic in Haguenau is now located. During construction work for the clinic during the year 1964, two rows of column bases and several sandstone parts of the column shafts were discovered. These remains had served as part of the foundation for the building that housed the factory's steam engine. Three of these bases and a section of a column shaft were for many years present on the grounds of the clinic. Their large dimensions reflect the impressive scale of the former abbey church. In the year 2013, the executive management of the Saint-François clinic suggested the relocation of these items on the forecourt of Neubourg Church.

THE SUNDIAL ON ITS COLUMN

During the Age of Enlightenment, the monks of Neubourg demonstrated a keen interest in the applied sciences, especially in the fields of astronomy and gnomonic. As was customary for prominent abbeys of the period, Neubourg Abbey maintained a 'physics cabinet.' The abbey was notably equipped with a minimum of three sundials, one of which is currently exhibited on the forecourt of Neubourg Church atop its fluted column characteristic of the late 18th century. Mr Jean Jaeger, proprietor of the Griesbach mill where the sundial had graced the garden for many years, generously donated it to the municipality of Dauendorf-Neubourg.

Plan nomenclature

- 1 - Church
- 2 - Convent building
- 3 - Cellars
- 4 - Bakery
- 4a - Wood store
- 4b - Servants' quarters
- 5 - Fountain
- 6 - Portal
- 7 - Lower gardens
- 7a - Cemetery
- 7b - Ice house in the flower garden
- 7c - Vegetable garden with sundial
- 8 - Upper garden
- 8a - Orangery
- 9 - Large cellar
- 9a - Laundry room and wood store

- 10 - Portal keeper's house
- 11 - Wine press
- 12 - Farmyard shed
- 13 - Bridge
- 14 - Carriage house
- 15 - Abbey barn
- 16 - Large stables
- 17 - Cowherds' and swineherds' house
- 18 - Pigsties
- 19 - Farmyard
- 20 to 22 - Land outside the enclosure (not shown on the map)
- 23 - Mill
- 23a - Sawmill/hemp fulling mill
- 23b - Madder drying shed (previously the tile or brick works with the postern gate marked by an arrow)
- 23c - Wood store
- 23d - Mill barn
- 23e - Mill pigsties
- 24 - Lantern of the dead