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Celebrating 25 years of a French-U.S. alliance

PARIS

It is a long way from the humble, if historic, houses of New Orleans to the grandeur of France's 17th-century chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte. Yet the French Heritage Society has made that leap.

The organization that embraces French-American friendship, which survived intact through the era of "freedom fries," celebrated last week a quarter of a century, with visits to some of the most grandiose and glamorous of French sites.

But the 25th anniversary of the nonprofit charitable organization marked not only the preservation and restoration of 400 chateaux, churches and monuments. It also recorded projects great and small, such as the work done in the United States after the devastations of hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"We don't care only about the past but also damages like the Mississippi River flooding in 1993 and the storms in France in 1999," said Marie-Sol de la Tour d'Auvergne, the president of the French Heritage Society. "We protect the past, but also react to the present and that includes the very simple homes in the heart of New Orleans."

While projects can be small, even intimate, overall the society has raised \$10 million over the years, allowing the funds to be invested in educational programs, as well as construction and restoration. Student and architect exchange programs, seminars for curators or private collectors and book publishing are all part of the axis of friendship.

Planting an oak tree, symbolic of the United States, in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris is an example of the cultural links and deep friendships forged by the society that dedicated this year's celebrations to "The Enduring Vision of Four Great Men: Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and Lafayette."

In George Washington's honor, a bronze statue was erected on the Ile de Ré, on the French Atlantic coast, where Washington's Huguenot ancestor Nicolas Martiau was born



French Heritage Society (above); Yann Arthus-Bertrand (below)



The French Heritage Society feted 25 years last week. Part of its festivities included visits to some of the most grandiose French sites, including the Chateau de Champlâtreux, above, and the Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte, at left, both in the Paris region.

in 1591, setting sail for the New World in 1620, six months before the "Mayflower."

Other anniversary donations were less dramatic: \$25,000 to rebuild crumbling historic stables; or \$20,000 to repair the roof of a chateau in the Charente-Maritime area, so that it could be transformed into a teaching space for French children to learn about their patrimoine, or national heritage.

This being a visit to France, the anniversary festivities also included a sampling of fine wines and cuisine, with a visit to Chateau d'Yquem and a gala dinner on Saturday at Vaux-le-Vicomte, where the chef Guy Martin was brought in from the haute Paris restaurant Le Grand Véfour to serve the great and the good from both sides of the pond.

Under the auspices of both Craig Roberts Stapleton, the U.S. ambassador to France, and Jean-David Levitte, the French ambassador to the United States, this really was an opportunity to revive the "entente cordiale," in the wake of the enthusiasm for the United States shown by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France.

But, as the 25-year history shows, the French Heritage society never faltered in its mission, regardless of the political gales and storms

— Suzy Menkes