



Baton Rouge Becomes Capital

In a most unlikely place, a modest Southern town near the Gulf of Mexico, a Gothic castle calmly reigns over the meanderings of the Mississippi River. The unusual structure, completed in 1850, was built in Baton Rouge as the State House of Louisiana. The dignified exterior of the building gives no hint of the colorful and sometimes explosive Louisiana politics played out within its walls. But the road to Baton Rouge began far away almost one hundred and fifty years earlier.

Before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, French explorers sailed down the Mississippi River and claimed for France the river and all the territory drained by it. The ill-defined, unexplored area was passed between France and Spain as political strategy and monetary matters dictated. The goal of those two loosely allied countries was to keep the territory out of British hands, even at the ultimate cost of selling it to the new nation, the United States.

New Orleans was colonized by the French in 1718 and became the largest city in the territory. Its location between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain allowed France to protect its territory by controlling the mouth of the river. Other locations on higher ground were certainly better suited for a habitable colony, but the strategic location overrode the need for comfort. The colonized land was generally marshy and below sea level. Conditions were harsh. Mosquitoes, reptiles, heat, and humidity made living conditions less than ideal; yet in spite of all the negatives, the colony grew, and later, under Spanish rule, it even flourished. But New Orleans, as well as the entire Louisiana territory, was not a profitable venture for either France or Spain and proved to be a financial drain on those countries in constant need of funds for their war chests.

Threatened with shipping and trade problems at the mouth of the river, Pres. Thomas Jefferson authorized Robert Livingston, American minister to France, and James Monroe, a former minister to France (1794-1796), to negotiate for the purchase of the Isle of Orleans, the area around New Orleans and the mouth of the river.¹ French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte presented them with an offer too incredible to refuse. For approximately fifteen million dollars in cash and assumption of debt, the United States agreed to purchase over 800,000 square miles, giving the United States absolute control over the entire Mississippi River. After the territory became part of the United States, Americans rushed to New Orleans, making it a wonderful mixture of nationalities and races.

In 1812, Louisiana became the first state admitted from the Louisiana Territory, and the seat of government was established at New Orleans. It was not long, however, before legislators were pressured to remove themselves from the big city and its attractions. Rural planters elected to the legislature were reportedly spending their days taking care of their own personal business—selling and shipping crops. At night, they were taking advantage of the pleasures of the city, which, even today, make New Orleans a world-famous tourist destination. The performance of elected civil servants fell short of the electorate's expectations, and a movement to get the legislators away from the city's temptations was born.²

In 1825, the legislature voted to move the state capital to Donaldsonville. A commission was appointed to prepare and furnish legislative chambers, and provisions were made to move the state archives.³ A capitol building was erected in Donaldsonville, and the legislature held its first session away from New Orleans in 1830. The legislators of 1831 convened in the new capital, but, missing the amenities of the big city, they immediately voted to return the seat of government to New Orleans.⁴ After only one year and one week in Donaldsonville, the legislature returned to the former capital city.

The legislature of 1843 moved the seat of government from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.⁵ The vote received almost no journalistic

notice, and the move was never made. It is possible the legislature anticipated a constitutional convention and saw no need to move until the matter was settled by a vote of the people.

In 1845, a new constitution was proposed which required the legislature to

designate and fix the seat of government at some place not less than sixty miles from the city of New Orleans by the nearest traveling route, and if on the Mississippi River, by the meanders of the same, and, when so fixed, it shall not be removed without the consent of four-fifths of the members of both houses of the general assembly.⁶

A four-fifths majority was an almost insurmountable obstacle and meant the capital would not return to New Orleans without overwhelming support for such a move. In the 1840s, sixty miles was approximately a fifteen-hour trip⁷, more than one could expect to travel in a day. Legislators would be unable to get to New Orleans for an evening of dinner and theater, then return (or fail to return) to the capital for the next day's business. They could not be wined, dined, and influenced by lobbyists and pressure groups, but would be forced to take care of business for lack of anything more entertaining to do. A Baton Rouge newspaper, the *Democratic Advocate*, reported that it felt the new constitution would be overwhelmingly approved "to the utter dismay and confusion of all aristocrats."⁸ The constitution was approved, and in 1846, the legislature named Baton Rouge the capital city of Louisiana.⁹