



US Army Corps  
of Engineers  
New Orleans District

# DOWN BY THE RIVER

## *A History of the Baton Rouge Riverfront*

By Ralph Draughon, Jr.  
R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc.

Preserving Louisiana's Heritage ❖ One

1998





**US Army Corps  
of Engineers**  
New Orleans District

## *Serving Louisiana*

**T**he U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' involvement in Louisiana dates back to 1803 when an Army engineer was sent to the newly acquired city of New Orleans to study its defenses. The Corps' early work in the area was of a military nature, but soon expanded to include navigation and flood control. Today, New Orleans District builds upon these longstanding responsibilities with its commitment to environmental engineering.

New Orleans District's jurisdiction covers 30,000 square miles of south central and coastal Louisiana. The district plans, designs, constructs and operates navigation, flood control, hurricane protection, and coastal restoration projects. It maintains more than 2,800 miles of navigable waterways and operates twelve navigation locks, helping to make the ports of south Louisiana number one in the nation in total tonnage (number one in grain exports.) The Corps has built 950 miles of levees and floodwalls, and six major flood control structures to make it possible to live and work along the lower Mississippi River.

The Corps cares for the environment by regulating dredge and fill in all navigable waters and wetlands, and by designing projects to reduce the rate of coastal land loss. Besides constructing major Mississippi River freshwater diversion structures, the District regularly creates new wetlands and restore barrier islands with material dredged from navigation channels. The District also chairs the multi-agency Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force, which is planning and constructing a variety of projects to restore and protect the state's coastal marshes. In addition, the District manages the clean up of hazardous waste sites for the Environmental Protection Agency.

One important aspect of the New Orleans District program is its historic preservation and cultural resources management program. The Corps protects a great variety of prehistoric and historic sites to meet the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act. The New Orleans District recognizes its responsibilities to communicate the results of its numerous studies to the public, and this booklet inaugurates our series of popular publications. The booklet was prepared in connection with the District's 45-foot-deep, Baton Rouge-to-the-Gulf, Deep Draft Navigation Channel Project.



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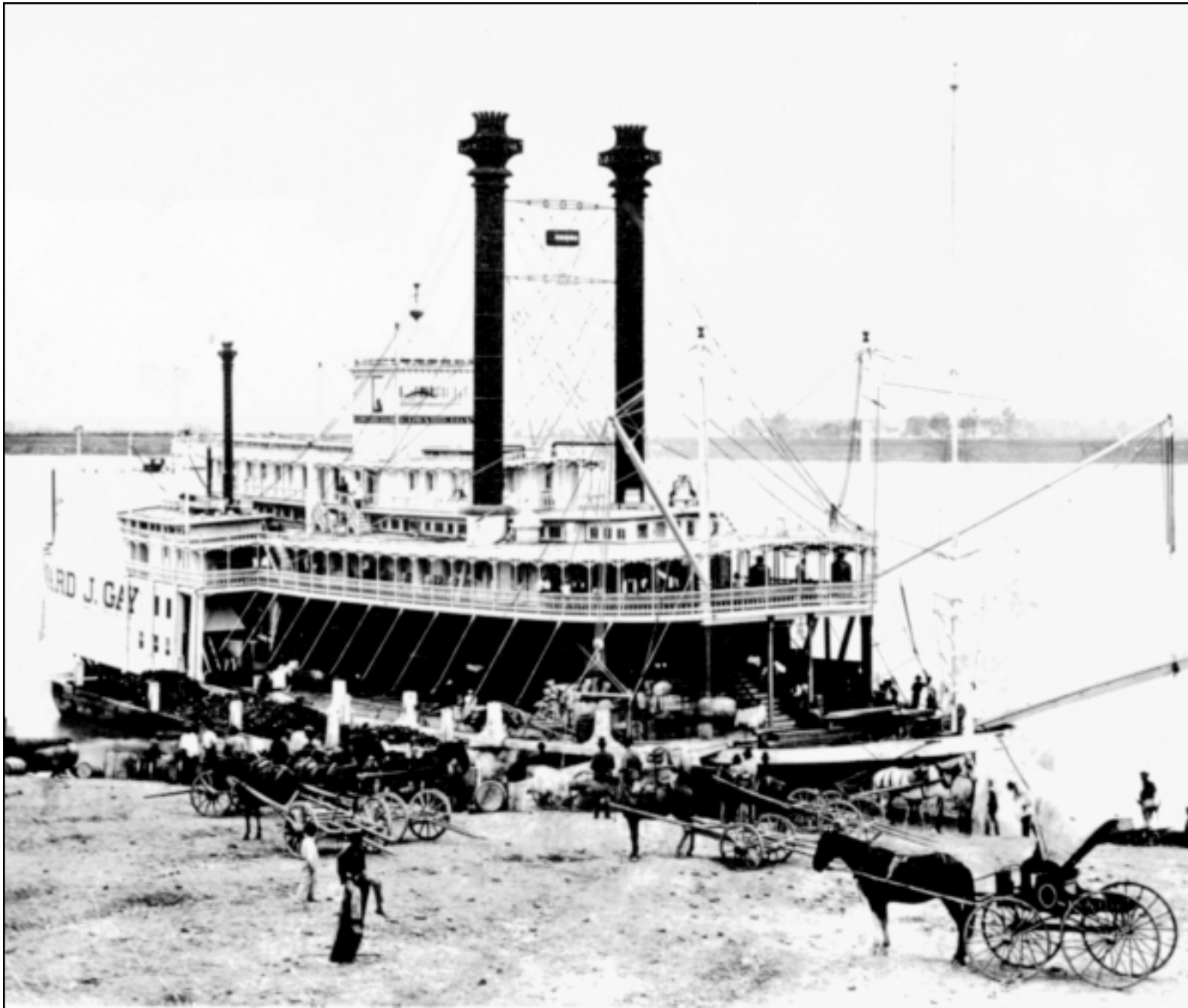
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*Busy scene in a photograph of the Edward J. Gay lying at berth in Baton Rouge, ca. 1895*

## THE RED MAYPOLE

Most Americans recognize March 17 as St. Patrick's Day. But, for the city of Baton Rouge, the date has greater significance. On March 17, 1699, the founder of the French colony of Louisiana, the Sieur d' Iberville, first beheld an object, 30 feet tall, that he described as "... a maypole with no limbs, painted red, several fish heads and bear bones being tied to it as a sacrifice." The "maypole" thereafter provided a landmark for Frenchmen travelling upriver; early map makers noted that the bluffs on the east bank of the Mississippi began at "le Bâton [stick] Rouge[red]."

For thousands of years before Iberville discovered the red stick, Native Americans had lived at the site of the present city of Baton Rouge. Mounds for burial and ceremonial purposes provide the most visible surviving evidence of the early inhabitants of the waterfront. Many archeologists now are persuaded that the mounds date from a much earlier period than previously supposed. Overlooking the eastern edge of the Mississippi River floodplain, two burial mounds lie on the campus of Louisiana State University. Recent archeological investigations estimate the age of the LSU mounds at 5,000 years. Although other mounds within the

city were destroyed by the white settlers, a ceremonial platform mound also survives on the grounds of the Louisiana State Capitol.

## FIVE FLAGS

Despite Iberville's declaration that the location was "extremely fine," early French settlement proved sporadic and impermanent. Continuous occupation of the locale by Europeans dates from 1763-1779, when the British ruled Baton Rouge.

From 1763 to 1812, not quite half a century, no less than five flags flew over Baton Rouge. The site passed from France to Britain in 1763, from Britain to Spain in 1779, and from Spain to the West Florida Republic in September 1810. After 74 days, the United States annexed the West Florida Republic in December 1810.

In 1779, during the American Revolution, the British built on the bluff at Baton Rouge a dirt stronghold named Fort New Richmond. They surrounded it with three acres of sharp pointed cypress stakes, called *cheval de frise* or palisades, to deter attacks. Overlooking the waterfront, the earthen fort stood just south of the present day Pentagon

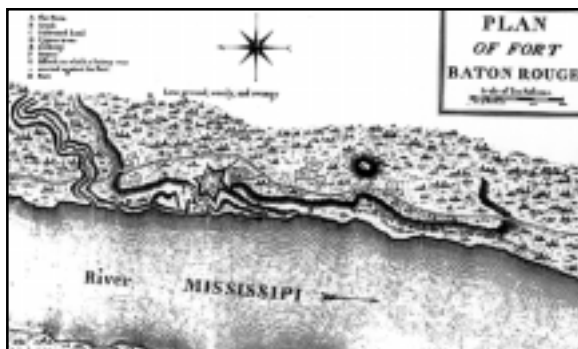


*The Mounds on the LSU Campus*

Barracks, about where Boyd Avenue or Spanish Town Road intersects Lafayette Street.

Soon after the construction of the fort, a Spanish army from New Orleans besieged it. Led by Don Bernardo de Gálvez, the Spaniards advanced towards the British stronghold along the slope between the bluff and the river. Gálvez placed six cannon on an Indian mound about one thousand yards south of the fort, near the present intersection of North Boulevard and Lafayette Street. After the Spanish bombarded the fort for three hours on September 22, 1779, the British surrendered.

The treaty that concluded the war in 1783 confirmed Spain's title to Baton Rouge and its fortification. Governing the multi-ethnic citizenry of Baton Rouge, particularly new emigrants from the United States, proved to be a challenge for the Spanish. By 1788, the popula-



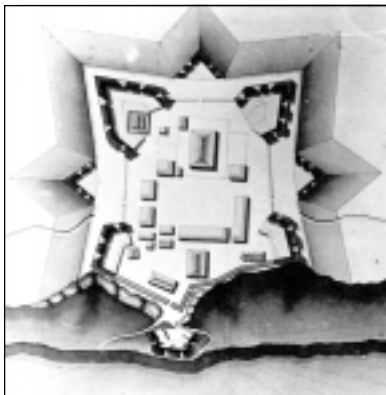
*Sketch ca. 1796 by General Victor Collot  
of the Spanish attack on the Fort at Baton Rouge*

tion of Baton Rouge numbered 682; the village contained an uneasy mixture of Americans, English, Scots, Irish, German, Spanish, French, Acadians, Native Americans, and both free and enslaved Africans. The population expanded further under Spanish rule. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Baton Rouge included doctors, lawyers, an interpreter, merchants, surveyors, tailors, carpenters, masons, tanners, butchers, blacksmiths, bakers, gunsmiths, and a lone priest. Public worship by non-Catholics was forbidden. Teachers had a particularly difficult time in the village; one schoolmaster had his property seized when he didn't pay his board bill. Another teacher was murdered by an irate parent who then fled to the United States to escape prosecution.

Although the United States

acquired New Orleans and vast territory west of the Mississippi River by the Louisiana Purchase (1803), Baton Rouge remained in Spanish hands. Nevertheless, as barge traffic increased on the river, more Americans began visiting the town. One such visitor from the United States, Fortescue Cuming, described Baton Rouge in 1809. Although a few frame structures of “tolerable” construction stood on the bluff, he observed “a dirty little town of 60 cabins crowded [sic] together in a narrow street on the river bank, penned in between the Mississippi and a low steep hill....” Cuming complimented the food that he got at his Baton Rouge *auberge* or boarding house, but he complained about the difficulty of eating a dish called gumbo. The gumbo contained boiled okra:

*so ropy and slimy as to make it difficult with either knife, spoon or fork, to carry it to the mouth, without the plate and mouth being connected by a*



*Fort San Carlos, ca. 1784*

*long string, so that it is a most awkward dish to a stranger. ....[I]t is a standing dish among the French Creol(es)*  
(Cuming 1904:340).

Cuming's French landlady provided him with a bed on her front gallery or piazza, where she claimed he would be more cool and comfortable. Nevertheless, mosquitoes annoyed him so much that he rejoiced to rise at dawn and put on his clothes.

Although still manned by Spanish soldiers, the town's fort, like the Spanish empire it represented, had fallen into decay. Recognizing the weakness of the Spanish defenses, American-born rebels within the province schemed to seize Baton Rouge for the United States. Before dawn on September 23, 1810, approximately 75 American conspirators approached the fort

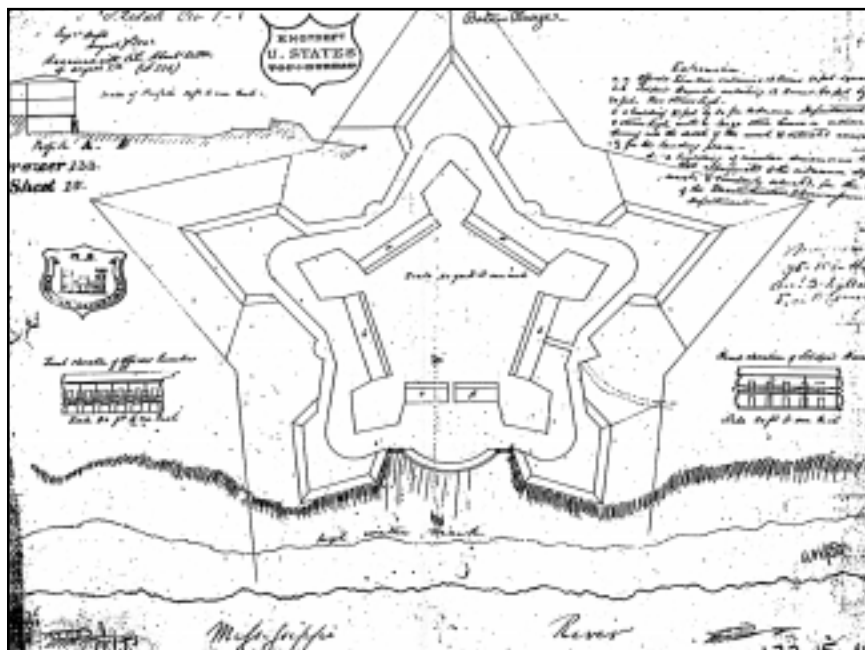
on horseback from the river; in dense fog they rode single file up a cow path through a gap in the cypress palisades. The cow path leading up from the river can be seen in a Spanish plan of the fort. Only a herd of milk cows guarded the stronghold. At daybreak, the horsemen slipped into the fort undetected, assembled in military formation on the parade ground, and surprised the Spaniards. When a few Spanish guards fired at the Americans from the blockhouse, the invaders struck the building with a fusillade of musket fire. A Spanish lieutenant and a private were killed; four other Spaniards were wounded. The Americans seized the fort with no casualties to themselves. They then lowered the Spanish banner and replaced it with the fourth flag to fly over Baton Rouge, a single white star on a field of blue.

Calling themselves the West Florida Republic, the rebels promptly asked for annexation to the United States. The American government quickly passed enabling legislation, and on December 7, 1810, the insurgents raised the Stars and Stripes, the fifth banner over Baton Rouge.

## THE WATERFRONT IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The village of Baton Rouge nevertheless remained near the location of armed conflict. In 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain. Situated on the largely unprotected southwestern frontier, citizens of Baton Rouge were suspicious of each other and concerned about slave uprisings, attacks by hostile Native American tribes, and invasion by European powers. The town escaped unharmed, but the war indicated the need for a strong American military presence in Louisiana.

At the conclusion of the conflict, in 1816, Congress established a U.S. Army post and arsenal at Baton Rouge. Dirt from the ramparts of the abandoned fort of 1779 served as fill for the ravines on the newly established military grounds. Construction of the five-sided Pentagon Barracks, one of the city's most important surviving landmarks, began in 1819. Only four buildings remain. The poorly constructed fifth structure partially collapsed in 1821 and was demolished in 1828. The military complex included a federal arsenal. Most of the arsenal buildings have been razed, but a former powder magazine, built in 1838, today serves as the



*James Gadsden's plan for the pentagonal barracks at Baton Rouge, 1819*



Arsenal Museum. The army levelled one Native American mound on the arsenal grounds and used the surviving mound as an officers' cemetery.

The state legislature incorporated the town of Baton Rouge in 1817. By April 1820, a ferry had begun operations across the Mississippi. Called the *Flying Bridge*, it utilized a long chain attached in the middle of the river to a buoy. Perhaps because of the clumsy mechanism, the ferry operated for only two years. Tolls for the ferry included: \$1.25 for a man on horseback; \$3.00 for a two-wheel carriage, horse, and driver; \$0.25 for a pedestrian (or two pigs); and \$0.75 for a horse or a cow.

The crowded and frequently flooded waterfront provided the town's initial livelihood. The first steamboat to stop in Baton Rouge, the *Orleans*, had chugged into port in 1812. Ten years later, during 1822, 83 steamboats, 174 barges, and 441 flatboats docked at local wharves.

The Marquis de Lafayette, the French nobleman who had fought for the American cause during the Revolution, returned to the United States almost half a century later for a tour. On April 16, 1825, the steamboat *Natchez* (one of many



*Zachary Taylor, his beloved horse Whitey, and the old Spanish Commandant's quarters in Baton Rouge*

vessels by that name) docked at the foot of Laurel Street, and the aging "Hero of Two Worlds" disembarked at Baton Rouge for the day. His visit helped strengthen the sometimes uneasy relationship between French-speaking Louisianans and the United States in the early period of American rule. Lafayette's former aide-de-camp, Joseph Duplantier, lived in Baton Rouge. During Lafayette's brief visit, his crowded schedule included numerous speeches, a review of troops at the Pentagon, an inspection of the garrison, a visit to a Masonic lodge, a banquet, and a ball, in which the probably weary hero danced with Duplantier's six-year-old granddaughter. To commemorate his visit, the city fathers changed the name of Second Street to Lafayette.

Beginning in 1821, Zachary Taylor was stationed at Baton Rouge intermittently during his long career in the American army. His early duties included supervising construction of the Pentagon Barracks. For his own quarters on the military base, his wife chose a dilapidated eighteenth century frame building known as the Spanish Commandant's House, built by the British at Fort New Richmond and subsequently occupied by the Spanish governor, Don Bernardo de Gálvez. Shaded by porches on all sides, the house formerly stood at 727 Lafayette Street. Margaret "Peggy" Taylor lived there while her husband won military glory for his generalship in the Mexican War. On his return in late 1847, he conducted his successful campaign for the Presidency from the four-room structure that overlooked the waterfront. On January 23, 1849, as the townspeople gathered at his cottage, he bade farewell to his neighbors in a

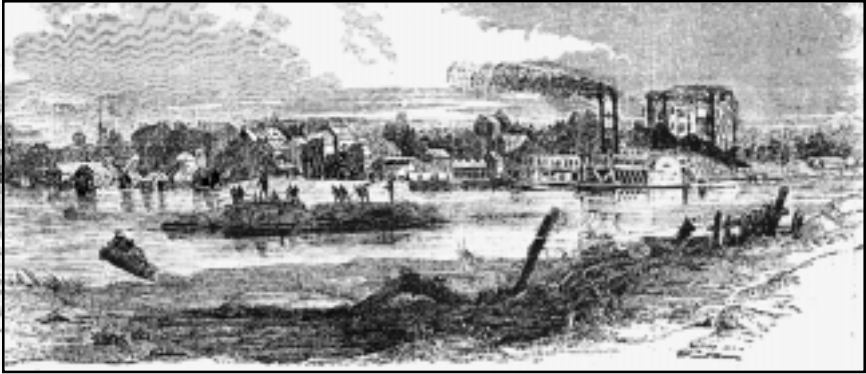
simple, heartfelt speech and boarded a steamboat that carried him away to assume his duties as chief executive of the United States. He died in office the following year. Taylor's quarters in Baton Rouge, the Spanish Commandant's House, was damaged by a storm and demolished in 1858. During the Civil War, a racetrack operated at the site.

The legislature established a penitentiary on the outskirts of Baton Rouge in 1834. The first state facility located in the village, the prison remained in operation until 1917. Only one building, the Warden's House (ca. 1835-1840), at 703 Laurel Street, survives.

A convict lease system developed in Baton Rouge whereby both black and white prisoners from the penitentiary worked in nearby fields and factories. White mechanics, free persons of color, and owners of slaves for hire



*Riverfront view of Baton Rouge in the Civil War era*



“View of Baton Rouge, Louisiana” *from*  
Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, 1855

resented the competition, but the lease of convicts remained in effect until Federal troops freed the prisoners during the Civil War.

## BATON ROUGE BECOMES THE CAPITAL

Although the population of Baton Rouge stood at only 2,269 persons in 1840, the legislature in 1846 selected the town as the new capital of Louisiana. The architect of the new capitol building, James H. Dakin, convinced a legislative committee to build in “the Castellated Gothic Style” rather than the repetitive and unoriginal “Grecian or Roman” design favored by other states. Dakin promoted his design on the basis of its economy; he convincingly argued that a brick and cement

structure with cast iron details would cost considerably less than a marble edifice. On completion of the new capitol in 1850, Baton Rouge officially became the seat of government.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, an American classic, Mark Twain derided the capitol as “a sham castle” inspired by his pet peeve, Sir Walter Scott. Twain claimed Sir Walter had “run the [southern] people mad” with his novels of chivalry and caused the American Civil War. Despite Twain’s ridicule, the old capitol remains a treasured landmark; through many crises, including a serious interior fire during the Civil War, it still stands watch above the waterfront of Baton Rouge.

New Orleanians made fun of the new capital of Louisiana; Crescent City critics insisted that the

penitentiary provided the best accommodations in Baton Rouge. Nevertheless, the Harney House hotel was constructed in the late 1840s at the corner of Lafayette and Main streets. It survived bombardment by Federal warships in the Civil War and continued operation well into the twentieth century. Several coffee houses opened on Front Street in the 1850s. The architecturally significant building that housed the former Florence Coffee House, ca. 1850, still survives at 132 Main Street. After Baton Rouge officially became the seat of government in 1850, the Florida Street Wharf served as the chief landing of the community. Rather than a conventional pier, the city utilized a dismantled steamboat as a floating dock. Known locally as the “wharf-boat,” the vessel’s mooring could be adjusted to the level of the river. In 1859, the “wharf-boat” served as a temporary hospital after the steamboat *Princess* exploded downriver from

Baton Rouge. During the Civil War, several photographs depict the “wharf-boat,” yet another vessel named the *Natchez*, during the Federal occupation of Baton Rouge.

During the late antebellum period, the waterfront was crowded with commercial activities. The Gill map of Baton Rouge in 1855 depicts the Baton Rouge Foundry of John Hill, a leading planter and citizen, on the northeast corner of North and Front streets on the waterfront. Providing further evidence that slaves performed many diverse tasks in the antebellum economy, Hill was utilizing 19 bondsmen in his foundry on the eve of the Civil War.

Cohen’s Directory of 1856 listed an extensive operation that Samuel M. Hart, another affluent citizen, conducted at Laurel on the corner of Front. The Hart firm served as cotton



*The Louisiana Institute for the Deaf and Dumb*

factors, commission and forwarding merchants, grocers, and specialists in western produce. The Missouri Mill, between Europe and Asia Streets, was the largest economic enterprise recorded on the lower waterfront, which was subject to annual flooding in the antebellum era.

In 1858, the state of Louisiana sponsored another building in “the Castellated Gothic” style, the Louisiana Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, which formerly stood adjacent to South Boulevard several blocks from the river. Reputed to be the largest building in Louisiana, it served as a Federal hospital in the Civil War.

## TOWARD CIVIL WAR

In 1860, on the eve of the national conflict, Baton Rouge had a population of 3,693 free whites, 488 free people of color, and 1,247 slaves. The bondsmen comprised 23 percent of the 5,428 total inhabitants. According to the Census of 1860, about a third of the heads of households in Baton Rouge owned slaves. Since the Louisiana legislature forbade emancipation after 1857, a few free persons of color purchased members of their own family and were in-

cluded of necessity in the slaveholder’s ranks. Harsh laws regulated the activities of slaves in Baton Rouge, but these severe measures were enforced inconsistently. In spite of curfews and laws forbidding sale of alcohol to slaves, the bondsmen often got whisky and stayed out past 9 p.m. The city permitted some social activities. Slaves were allowed to have dances or “frolics” provided a responsible white person applied for the permit. Beginning in 1857, slaves were allowed to have their own church with a Methodist free person of color as their preacher.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency in 1860, an ill-assorted collection of state troops forced the surrender, on January 10, 1861, of the Federal Arsenal at Baton Rouge. The arsenal yielded a vast supply of arms for the budding rebels. On January 26, 1861, Louisiana’s Secession Convention met in the old State Capitol; the delegates voted 113 to 17 to declare Louisiana an independent power. In spite of the cold, bleak day, a cheering procession of politicians and townspeople then raised a new emblem, a white Pelican flag with one red star, on the flagpole before the riverfront of the Capitol. After the seceded states

organized a provisional government for the Confederacy in early February, yet another national emblem, the Stars and Bars, fluttered over Baton Rouge.

Tradition says that a new tavern opened on the corner of Third and Main streets in Baton Rouge the day after the Civil War began. Known as the Fort Sumter Saloon (for the first military engagement of the war), it eventually moved to Third and Laurel, where it remained a popular local institution until National Prohibition (of alcoholic beverages) began in 1918. An historic cannon, supposedly a relic from the old Spanish fort, was buried in front of the tavern; according to one account, the City Fathers placed the cannon there to keep vehicles off one of the few adequate sidewalks in the town. In 1969, street repairs required the

reburying of the cannon, muzzle down, at the same corner.

When New Orleans fell to the Union in April 1862, Baton Rouge prepared for Federal invasion. The state government evacuated the city. To prevent capture of cotton and liquor, cotton bales along the waterfront were drenched with alcohol and set afire with blazing pine knots. With mixed emotions, local planters and bartenders watched their commodities go up in smoke along the levee.

A detachment from the Federal fleet arrived on May 7; on May 9, 1862 a Federal landing party seized control of the arsenal and the barracks. The Confederates offered no resistance. To add to local troubles, on May 18, 1862, a crevasse or serious break in the levee occurred two miles downstream from Baton Rouge. Just as panicky refugees discovered all the



*Federal officers at ease in their Baton Rouge encampment*



*Sketch of the Battle of Baton Rouge by a participant, Private James J. Kelly,  
Company F, 6th Michigan Regiment*

southbound roads from town were flooded, Admiral David Farragut and the main Federal fleet, with troop transports carrying 1500 soldiers, dropped anchor off the waterfront.

On May 28, 1862 several Federal sailors set out in a rowboat to make contact with a washwoman to clean their dirty laundry. When some zealous Confederate guerrillas fired buckshot from a group of shanties along the wharves, injuring three sailors, Admiral Farragut was incensed. He raked the waterfront with a devastating cannon barrage that resulted in the

death of a few women who were fleeing through the streets. The cannon fire damaged the Capitol, the Harney House Hotel, and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, the town's largest house of worship. Further strife was averted when several prominent local citizens rowed out to the Admiral's flagship and convinced him to end the shelling.

The next day, May 29, the city of Baton Rouge formally surrendered to the Admiral. Sarah Morgan's diary, a classic of Civil War literature, depicts the Federal occupation of the town. An attractive and talented young girl,

she lived on the east side of Church Street (now Fourth Street) between Florida and Laurel streets. Young Federal soldiers attempted to flirt with her unsuccessfully; she remained an intensely loyal Confederate.

## THE BATTLE OF BATON ROUGE

A Confederate effort to recapture the city kindled the Battle of Baton Rouge, which began at dawn on August 5, 1862. Even though the battle took place on the eastern outskirts of town and at some distance from the river, the waterfront had considerable significance in the fighting. Confederate success ultimately depended on eliminating the gunboats that protected the Federal position with their firepower. The Confederates hoped to entrap Federal forces with a two-pronged attack; Rebel troops would advance on the city from the east, while the almost impregnable ram *Arkansas* would come down from Vicksburg and assault the Federal fleet that lay along the Baton Rouge waterfront.

Although decimated by illness, Confederate soldiers,

a third of them barefoot, forced the Federals to relinquish most of the city and retreat to the river, where the fleet protected them. A signalman in the tower of the state capitol directed the fire of the ships' guns, which raked the Confederate lines. Unfortunately for the Confederates, the ram *Arkansas* developed engine trouble four miles above Baton Rouge and had to be scuttled by its crew. Without naval support, the Confederates had to abandon Baton Rouge and retreat eastward out of range of the Federal gunboats.

The Battle of Baton Rouge ended by 10 a.m. In the battle and its aftermath, however, a third of the town was burned or torn down. The gunboats proved particularly destructive of property. Preparing for another attack, Federal troops razed houses, other structures, and groves of trees so that gunboats could sweep the community with fire. In the meantime, most of the city's civilian population had fled southward down the flooded roads.





*African-American squatters along the riverfront in the later years of the Civil War*

## WAR AND DEVASTATION

After their withdrawal, the Confederates moved to occupy Port Hudson, a more important strategic position on the Mississippi River. Since Baton Rouge had political but not strategic importance, the Federals also evacuated the city on August 21, 1862. Because the community contained asylums for orphans and the handicapped, the Federals countermanded their original order to burn the city to the ground. Instead, they sacked the community before their departure. Sarah Morgan's diary gives a detailed description of the wholesale destruction visited on her family's house. Portraits were slashed, bureaus and desks were rifled, furniture overturned, dishes shattered, and smaller objects were looted.

The Federals re-took Baton Rouge with 8,000 troops on December 17, 1862. On the night of December 28, U.S. soldiers quartered in the state capitol carelessly but unintentionally set the building on fire. As the "sham castle" burned, its flames illuminated the Baton Rouge waterfront. In the morning, the blackened walls of the proud structure were still standing, but the interior had been gutted.

Federal troops occupied Baton Rouge throughout the remainder of the conflict. African-American troops served proudly in the forces of the United States and participated in the occupation of the city.

Begun with cheering and the hoisting of the Pelican flag, the Civil War ended in Baton Rouge with the

Stars and Stripes flying before a blackened capitol. The conflict devastated the community. A local newspaper estimated Baton Rouge's total damage during the Civil War at \$10,600,000.00, an immense sum for that era. The cost included 100 burned buildings, 20,000 cotton bales burned or stolen, considerable property looted or destroyed, and the loss to slaveholders of their substantial investment in human bondage.

While many Confederate refugees stayed away from Baton Rouge until the war's end, the town filled up with so-called "contrabands," former slaves freed by advancing Union armies. In 1860, blacks made up less than a fourth of the population; by 1865, they outnumbered whites. Housing these black refugees presented a problem. They built shantys along the waterfront and lived beside the river during the latter years of the Civil War. African-



*A view of the Old State Capital soon after its reconstruction*

Americans remained in the majority in Baton Rouge until 1920.

## RECONSTRUCTION

Baton Rouge did not serve as seat of state government during Reconstruction. Of immense significance for the future, however, in 1869 the Louisiana Seminary of Learning relocated to Baton Rouge from Pineville, where its main building had burned. In the following year the legislature appropriated \$60,000 for the seminary and renamed it the Louisiana State University; the Reconstruction legislature thereafter refused to fund the college adequately because it forbade blacks to enroll. At the end of Reconstruction, in 1877, financing for the college was enhanced, when L.S.U. absorbed the State Agricultural and Mechanical College, then located in New Orleans. Nevertheless, Louisiana's Constitution of 1879 limited L.S.U.'s annual appropriations to no more than \$10,000.00.

In spite of the enfranchisement of large numbers of black voters and the disfranchisement of some former Confederates, Baton Rouge remained in the hands of traditional white leadership after the Civil War. Native whites did not hesitate to use force to insure their control; after the



*The steamboat Baton Rouge, ca. 1885*

national and state elections of 1870, a small riot occurred in Baton Rouge. Two blacks were killed, and Federal authorities arrested 40 prominent white citizens.

With the withdrawal of Federal troops at the end of Reconstruction, native white control of the community was assured. When the U.S. Army departed, it closed its military installations in Baton Rouge. Consequently, the state in 1886 obtained a lease on the old U.S. Arsenal and the surrounding 52 acres as a new home for L.S.U. Thereafter, college cadets replaced U.S. soldiers in the Pentagon Barracks. In the negotiations for the property, the college obtained the help of an unlikely ally, General William Tecumseh Sherman. He had served as military superintendent of the old Louisiana Seminary in Pineville before the Civil War, and held special affection for the institution.

## A CAPITAL AGAIN

The Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1879 determined to relocate the state capital from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. In spite of Mark Twain's suggestion that the state should "let dynamite finish what a charitable fire began..." the state decided to repair the burned capitol. New embellishments to the structure included an additional story and ornate cast-iron turrets on the roof. Baton Rouge rejoiced to be the seat of state government again. According to a nineteenth century local account, the town "languished without hope or enterprise" until the state offices returned in 1882.

Steamboats remained vital to the local economy in the postbellum era. In 1881, the Anchor Lines launched a trim, gleaming-white, wooden hull steamboat, *The City of Baton Rouge*,

that plied the river between St. Louis and New Orleans. The ship was built in Indiana — a commentary on the state of southern industry at the time. A special favorite of local citizens, the steamboat made regular stops at the Baton Rouge waterfront. Mark Twain travelled as a passenger on the vessel while writing *Life on the Mississippi*. After almost a decade in service, the steamboat sank downriver in December 1890.

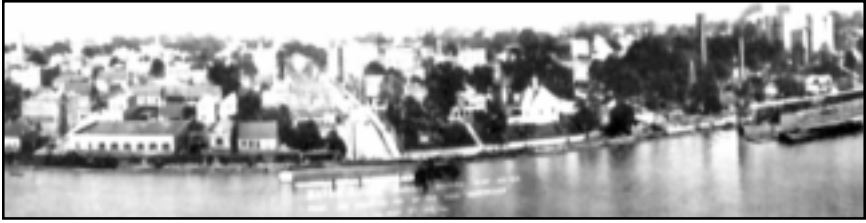
The railroad heralded the arrival of a new chapter in economic development at Baton Rouge. The city did not establish direct rail connections with any other municipality until December 15, 1883, when the first train of the New Orleans & Mississippi Valley Railroad arrived in the capital on newly laid tracks from the Crescent City. After innumerable name

changes, the line today is known as the Illinois Central Gulf. The arrival of the railroad on the waterfront in the 1880s had a profound influence on the industrial and commercial development of Baton Rouge. In laying the tracks, construction crews added a landfill along the waterfront. Railroad construction and development altered the waterfront in other ways. The passenger station, built in 1925 and now the Louisiana Arts and Science Center Riverside Museum, is situated on the site targeted by Admiral Farragut when his ships fired on the waterfront in 1862.

Industry developed particularly along the lower waterfront. Beginning in May 1885, a group of prominent citizens organized the Burton Lumber Company, one of the pioneer manufacturing concerns of the city. By 1898, the Burton operation extended from France



*Industrial development along the lower waterfront in the mid-nineteenth century*



*A panoramic view of Baton Rouge, near flood stage, photographed from the U.S.S. Nebraska by Jasper G. Ewing, 1912*

Street downstream to South Boulevard. The lumber company provided wood products to numerous urban centers of the United States and to Germany. In the nineteenth century, the lumbering operation on the waterfront was flooded annually, but the high water only facilitated removal of logs from the river.

By 1890, Baton Rouge could boast of two banks; a waterworks that stood adjacent to the river on Front Street; an electric light system; an ice factory, also on Front Street; the state penitentiary; the Deaf and Dumb and Blind Asylum; and the state university combined with its agricultural and mechanical college. Several commercial enterprises flourished on Natchez Street. The Baton Rouge Brick Yard shipped bricks by barge to planters along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Nearby, at 932 Natchez Street, stood the Capital City Oil Mill, which local promoters hoped would bring measureless prosperity to the city. Their forecast proved overly optimistic. The mill processed cottonseed oil rather than petroleum-related products. A

promotional pamphlet for Baton Rouge commercial enterprises boasted:

*What has been accomplished in the development of our resources has been done without outside aid..., but has been the legitimate use of the meagre capital left among us after an exhausting war and the no less exhausting processes of reconstruction.*

During the last half of the nineteenth century, at least five outbreaks of yellow fever caused deaths in Baton Rouge. The last such threat occurred in 1905, when a quarantine was put into effect. Anyone entering the city was required to have a health certificate, signed by a physician. Epidemics underscored the need for municipal public health requirements. At the turn of the century, sewage lines were being laid below the streets along the waterfront, and public health officials finally convinced Baton Rouge to enforce hygienic regulation of milk, meat, bread, markets, and laundries.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY BATON ROUGE

The decision of Standard Oil of New Jersey to construct an oil refinery in the city has been called by historian Mark Carleton, “The most historically significant event that occurred in Baton Rouge during the early twentieth century — perhaps ever....” Legal attacks on Standard Oil in Texas had raised the possibility of John D. Rockefeller’s company being evicted from the Lone Star State. As a result, Standard Oil sought a central location to process the immense crude production of the middle of the continent and the Mississippi Valley. After prolonged study, the company decided to locate a major refinery at Baton Rouge; Standard Oil received a charter from East Baton Rouge Parish in 1909.

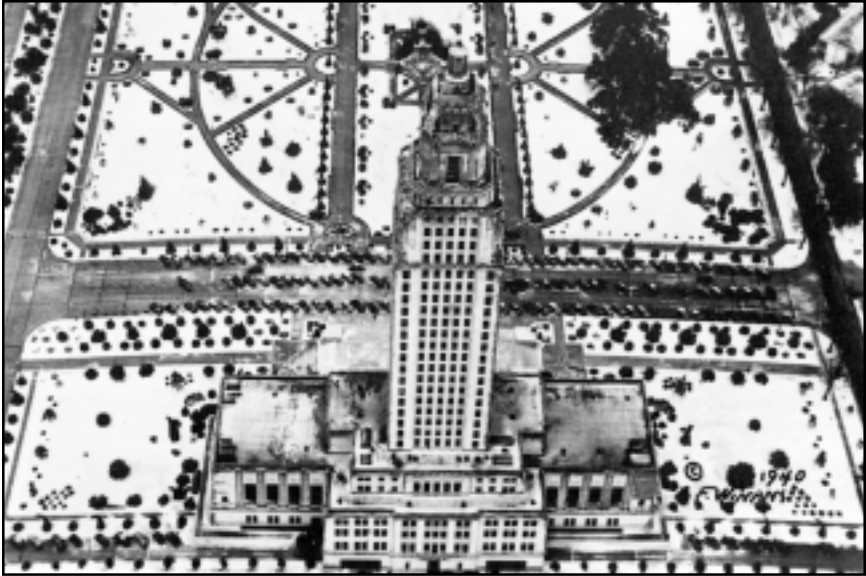
With its own docking facilities to handle ocean-going vessels, the new refinery had a profound effect on the shipping industry along the river. In 1910, the United States Congress enacted legislation to make Baton Rouge a port of entry for foreign commerce with the needed customs officers and other officials. Together, the refinery and the port transformed Baton Rouge into an industrial center and promoted the wealth that had

eluded the community since the Civil War.

## THE HUEY LONG ERA

The city patriotically took part in the First World War, and welcomed the Armistice with a celebration that continued for two nights and included bunny-hopping up Third Street to the tune of Toot Johnson’s Jazz Band. At the war’s end, Huey Long arrived in the state capital. As the newly elected member of the state railroad commission (later the public utilities commission), he soon left his mark on the community and on an entire era in Louisiana politics. He quickly established his reputation as the inveterate enemy of certain interests that the business community of Baton Rouge held dear: the utilities companies, the railroads, and, above all, Standard Oil.

Long’s election as Governor in 1928 altered the landscape of Baton Rouge. He constructed not only a new governor’s mansion but also a new state capitol, a skyscraper in the Art Deco tradition. The tallest building in the south at the time, the new capitol dominated an historic site once occupied by prehistoric Native Americans, antebellum and Civil



*The new state capitol and its grounds under snow, 1940*

War soldiers, and students of Louisiana State University, who recently had moved to a new campus beside the Mississippi River below the city.

Huey Long exercised a strong and not altogether benign influence on many local institutions. His affection for L.S.U. and its athletic program resulted in the addition of numerous buildings to the campus, including the Huey P. Long Field House and its adjacent swimming pool. When Long found out “the swimming hole” wouldn’t be the largest in the country, he insisted on adding another ten feet to its length. Long’s influence touched many areas of Baton Rouge life, sometimes in

unexpected ways. For example, one morning in 1932 the Governor grew angry when he had to wait 30 minutes for the ferry across the river. By threatening to install a free ferry, he forced the owners of the franchise (the Baton Rouge Transportation Company) to agree to more frequent trips.

Various ferries had operated sporadically and usually unprofitably during the antebellum era and the Civil War. Not until 1870 did a ferry prove lucrative. From at least 1881, the ferry landing was situated on the bature at the foot of Main Street. In 1915, a hurricane struck the waterfront and sunk one ferrying vessel and severely damaged the other. In the following year a new

vessel, *The City of Baton Rouge*, began ferrying passengers across the river. A sister ship, the *Louisiana*, joined the operation in 1924. She originally had a capacity of 1,000 people and 70 automobiles, but the larger vehicles of later years reduced the number of cars that the ferry could carry.

By 1926, the city of Baton Rouge had built a municipal dock that operated at the lower city limits. The facility handled traffic from ocean going vessels, as well as the river trade. Nevertheless, the economic depression of 1929 affected trade at the municipal facility adversely; in 1936, the city leased the dock to Federal Barge Lines for 12 years. Eventually, shallow water at the site hampered operations; in 1948, even the barge line gave up the facility.

In spite of levees along Front Street, in 1897 the river flooded the first block of Main Street. In 1912, the levees had to be strengthened along the waterfront to withstand the high water. In the 1920s, a local newspaper insisted that the ferry and steamboat landings were easily protected when the river reached its highest level. And according to the Chamber of Commerce, during the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, "...Baton Rouge was entirely safe and no danger was in any way experienced." In August 1932, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the Baton

Rouge [United States Senator Edward James] Gay Levee Enlargement for the area just below the Municipal Pier. Two years later, the Corps had finished an even more far-reaching Baton Rouge Levee Enlargement project, which extended from the area of the Municipal Pier up to North Street.

Beginning in 1929, Baton Rouge was engulfed in an international economic depression that continued for a decade. Nevertheless, the presence of the Standard Oil refinery, the state bureaucracy, and the Louisiana State University helped the community weather the crisis. Oil production in the vicinity aided the city's economy, particularly in the late 1930s.

Perhaps the most visible of the numerous New Deal measures and programs that affected the waterfront was a combined railroad and highway bridge across the Mississippi just above Baton Rouge. The bridge was named for Huey Long, who was assassinated in the state capitol and buried on its grounds in 1935. Funding for the bridge was provided by a grant from the Public Works Administration (a New Deal agency) and a state bond issue. Eight men died during the bridge-building, which began in 1937 and was completed in 1940, just as world war swept through Europe.





*Ships anchored off the modern port of  
Baton Rouge*

The first vehicles to cross the bridge carried National Guard troops en route to the U.S. Army's Louisiana maneuvers of 1940, a large-scale training measure designed to prepare American troops for world conflict.

## **WORLD WAR II AND ITS AFTERMATH**

When the United States entered the war in 1941, the people of Baton Rouge joined wholeheartedly in the struggle. American participation in the war strongly bolstered the local economy. Within one year, the Baton Rouge refinery was producing 76 percent of the nation's output of aviation fuel, a crucial commodity. Furthermore, the city's petrochemical industry was born; it created substitutes for unobtainable materials vital to the war effort. To replace supplies of rubber from Southeast Asia, for example, a plant in Baton Rouge pioneered in the production of synthetic rubber from petroleum. The infant petrochemical industry grew into a giant after 1945. Its

facilities towered over the vicinity and transformed Baton Rouge into the leading petrochemical center of the United States.

Meanwhile, the port of Baton Rouge languished until 1952, when the state legislature created the Greater Baton Rouge Port Commission. In 1954, construction began on the first general cargo dock and a grain elevator. The molasses terminal was completed in 1956, and the barge terminal opened in 1959.

The completion of the new bridge across the Mississippi in 1968 had a significant effect on the waterfront. Although officially named for Horace Wilkinson, a developer of Baton Rouge, the span has taken the name "the I-10 Bridge" in popular usage. The new bridge made the old ferry unnecessary.

Changes on the waterfront include recreational activities such as cruises on the river provided by the *Samuel Clemens*, a replica steamboat that first docked on the waterfront in 1981. If he were still around, Mr. Clemens, better known by his pen name of Mark Twain, might supply pithy comments about the architecture of the new state capitol and the present Baton

Rouge skyline. In 1982, the *U.S.S. Kidd*, a destroyer built during the Second World, joined the *Clemens* on the waterfront. The destroyer rests in a unique cradle that allows the ship to sit in dry dock most of the year, but to float in the spring when the Mississippi rises.

The port of Baton Rouge expanded rapidly with the expansion of the petrochemical industry. In the 1980s, however, declining profits in the oil industry affected the port's commerce. In 1996, forest products comprised the chief commodity shipped through Baton Rouge.

At present, the Port of Greater Baton Rouge can boast of general cargo facilities; grain facilities; liquid bulk terminals; a barge terminal on the Mississippi river; and, to be completed early in 1997, an inland rivers terminal near the junction of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway with the river.

In 1994, according to figures supplied by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baton Rouge ranked fourth among ports in the United States in terms of tonnage handled. Furthermore, the capital city outranked seventh-place New Orleans,



*Ice on the Mississippi with the new state capitol in the background, 1940*

which had dominated oceangoing commerce in the Mississippi Valley since the eighteenth century.

When Iberville discovered the red stick in 1699, he could not have envisioned a deep water port 230 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Nevertheless, the port of Baton Rouge today provides the healthy, safe, centrally located shipping point for international commerce that Iberville and the founders of Louisiana were seeking. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of the arch.

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**Riverfront view of Baton Rouge** in the Civil War era. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

**"View of Baton Rouge, Louisiana,"** p. 304, from *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, May 12 1855.

**The Louisiana Institute for the Deaf and Dumb**. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.



**Federal officers at ease in their Baton Rouge encampment.** Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

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**The steamboat *Baton Rouge*, ca. 1885.** Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

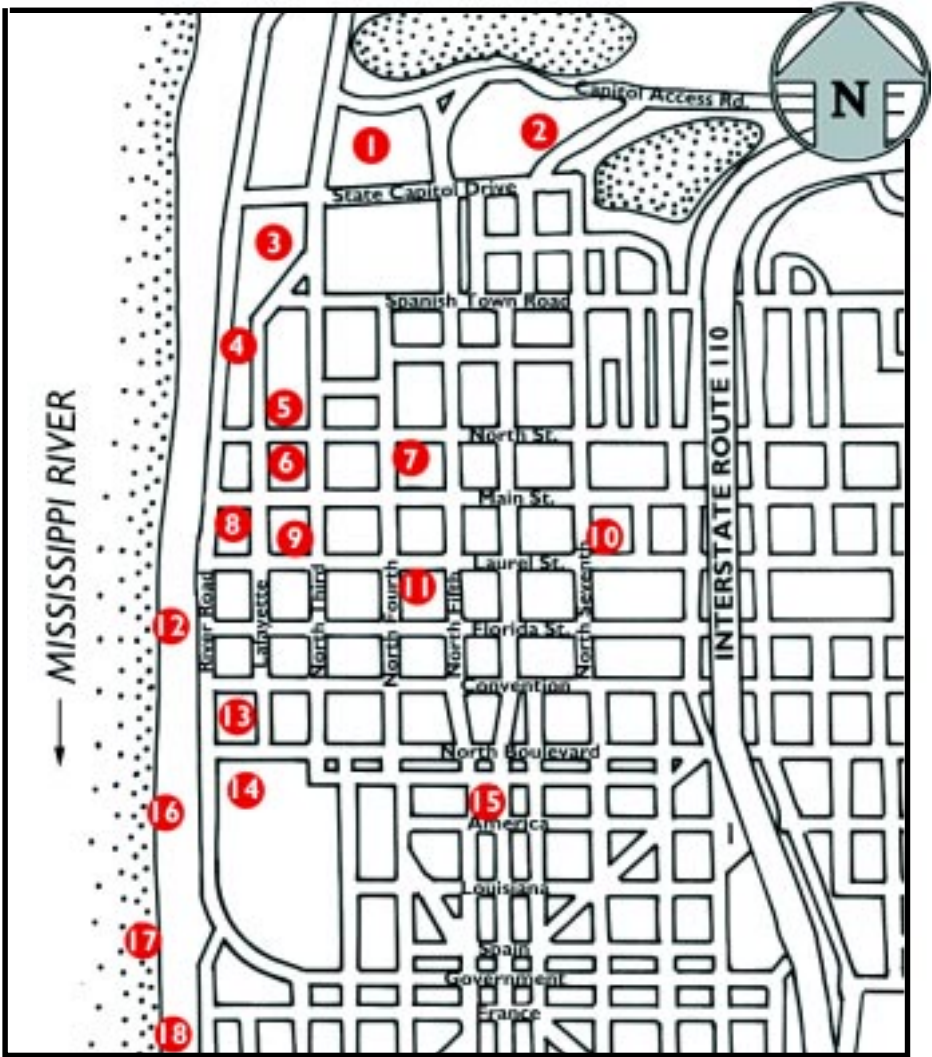
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**A panoramic view of Baton Rouge, near flood stage,** photographed from the U.S.S. *Nebraska* by Jasper G. Ewing, 1912. Aerial Photographic Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

**The new state capitol and its grounds under snow.** Aerial photograph by Fonville Winans, 1940. Richard W. Leche Papers, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

**Ice on the Mississippi River with the new state capital in the background.** Fonville Winans image, 1940, Richard W. Leche Papers, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

**Ships anchored off the modern port of Baton Rouge,** Courtesy, Port of Greater Baton Rouge and Entergy Corporation. Image provided by Hal Leonard, Gulf States Utilities.



## ***Places of Interest***

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Prepared by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc.