A President Lived at Baton Rouge

(Editors note: History buff George Avery, a retired civil engineer, is a longtime resident of Grant Parish who lives at Rt. I, Dry Prong. His specialty is the early history of Louisiana, from the period of French rule through the Civil War.)

By George Avery

The following is an excerpt from "Louisiana Guide", the valuable WPA Writers' Program project published in 1941:

On the new Louisiana State Capitol grounds is a marker commemorating the Site of the Home of General Zachary Taylor, 727 Lafayette Street is the actual site, commandant of the U.S. Army Barracks at the time of his election in 1848 to the Presidency of the United States.

Zachary Taylor, 1784-1850, had long been a Louisiana citizen when he left his plantation near Baton Rouge for the White House. He came to New Orleans in 1808, at the age of 24, as first lieutenant in the 7th Infantry, under General James Wilkinson.

Between 1808 and 1822 he established Forts Selden and Jesup near Natchitoches and purchased a cotton plantation near Bayou Sara.

In Raids

He participated in several Indian wars and in 1840 retired to civilian life on his plantation and emigrated from the Mexican War a National hero.

It was on his Baton Rouge plantation that he received news of his nomination and election to the Presidency in 1848.

West of the Capitol on Third Street are the Pentagon Buildings, constructed in 1819-29 to house United States troops, and used as a garrison until 1877. There are four almost identical buildings, A, B, C, and D, in the Pentagon group.

They are gray painted brick structures, characterized by a strict simplicity of detail. Doric columns support long galleries, which run the full length of each building, both in front and back, and are topped by a hipped roof.

The buildings enclose an area open on the river side — forming a pentagon. The name has inspired a popular belief that there was a fifth structure which caved into the river; but the sunken brick walls which still stand along the southwest border are remnants of the landing wharf, washrooms, and cetera, used by the garrison.

Held by Rebs

For one year the buildings were held by the Confederates, 1861-62. A tablet at the southeast corner of the nearby Old Louisiana State University campus commemorates the secession of Louisiana from the Union and the surrender of "these United States barracks" to the State.

Many famous soldiers have been quartered in the Pentagon; their names read like a roll of honor: Generals Wade Hampton, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Braxton Bragg, Jefferson Davis, Philip Sheridan, John A. LeJeune, and many others.

At the southwest end of Building D is a marble slab which reads, "On this site stood the Spanish Fort captured by the forces of the Republic of West Florida, September 23, 1810." The "royal construction" of the Spanish Fort San Carlos had been concluded in June 1799, but the fort was not formidable merely a group of wooden buildings within a stockade.

Services There

In contrast to these warlike memories it is interesting to note that the first services of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Baton Rouge were held in the Pentagon.

Just before the War Between the States the barracks were abandoned by the U.S. Army, except for a corporal's guard, and were picked as the site for the Louisiana State Agricultural and Mechanical Fair, which had been planned as an annual event — a plan shuttered by the outbreak of the war in the year following the first fair.

Another event of a social nature took place in 1825 when General Lafayette stopped for the day at Baton Rouge and visited the barracks.

In 1866 the barracks and sheds were lent to the State of Louisiana to be used as the site of Louisiana State University. The loan was converted into a gift from the U.S. government by an Act of Congress in 1902.

Used as Barracks

The buildings were used as barracks and later as dormitories, until the removal of the university to its present new location south of Baton Rouge. The Pentagon remains the property of the university and has been converted into apartments in 1941.

When the U.S. government constructed its military post at Baton Rouge, an extensive cistern system was put in — great rectangular or cylindrical tanks, some underground and some partially exposed. Most of them were connected by drains, and this has given rise to the legend that a tunnel ran from the Arsenal to the barracks.

East of the new Capitol, in the gardens bordering on University Lake, stands the old Arsenal, erected by the U.S. government as a powder magazine, and now (1941) used as barracks for the State Police Training School.

It is a picturesque, vine-colored brick building, with walls and ceilings five feet thick, and surrounded by a ten foot wall. Between the Arsenal and University Lake is a high circular mound, from which an excellent view of the gardens and the lake is obtained.

Whether this mound is of Indian origin or is a part of the original fortifications has never been definitely established. A second mound, leveled in the middle of the nineteenth century, contained bones and remnants of pottery. The remaining mound was at one time the burial ground for deceased officers and their families; and Judge Carrigan wrote in old DeBow's Review that some "30 or 40 people are buried in the Indian mound."

The peaceful University Lake once bore a name as martial as its surroundings — Garrison Bayou. It was also called Garcia Bayou and Grassay Bayou; but whatever its name it was that "small river which resembled a lake" where Iberville landed the afternoon of March 17, 1699, and on its banks was the "reddened maypole" which separated the hunting grounds of the Houma and Bayogoula Indian tribes.