A Natural Setting for Audubon

"The rich magnolias covered with fragrant blossoms, the holly, the beech, the tall yellow poplar, the hilly ground and even the red clay, all excited my admiration. Such an entire change in the fall of nature in so short a time seems almost supernatural, and surrounded once more by numberless warblers and thrushes, I enjoyed the scene."

So reads the journal of John James Audubon as he recorded his arrival in 1821 at Oakley Plantation.

This lush natural setting, with a variety of birds singing throughout the 100-acre forest, still inspires visitors. In these peaceful environs, it is easy to imagine the artist filling his sketch pad with notes and drawings for his famous series of bird illustrations.

Audubon came upriver from New Orleans to do more than paint pictures. He had been hired to teach drawing to Miss Eliza Pirrie, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Pirrie, owners of Oakley. He was paid $60 a month, with room and board provided for him and his 13-year-old pupil/assistant, Joseph Mason. He was allowed to spend half of his time roaming the woods to work on his paintings. Audubon would collect and prepare his bird specimens, make his drawings, paint the bird, and then instruct young Mason on the proper background vegetation to add to each bird painting. The other half of his time was devoted to tutoring Eliza.

His teacher-artist arrangement was short-lived due to a misunderstanding with Mrs. Pirrie. Only four months after his arrival, Audubon returned to New Orleans. Although there is no record of his success in teaching Miss Pirrie to draw, in his personal endeavors he completed or began 32 bird paintings while at Oakley.
State Commemorative Area

The tall, airy house where John James Audubon stayed is a splendid example of colonial architecture adapted to its climate. Built circa 1806, Oakley predates the relatively heavy details of classic revival in Southern plantation homes and claims distinction for its beautiful simplicity. A West Indies influence can be seen in the jalousied galleries which allow cool breezes to drift through the rooms while keeping out rain and the glare of the sun.

Adam mantels, delicate decoration of the exterior gallery stairs and a simple cornice frieze are Oakley's only ornaments. Simple and dignified by its unusual height, the building seems a suitable part of its beautiful forest setting. In 1973, Oakley House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, an honorary designation for significant historic sites.

The rooms of Oakley have been restored in the style of the late Federal Period (1790-1830), reflecting their appearance when Audubon stayed there. Assisted by historical societies, the Office of State Parks worked with private resources to re-create authentic settings throughout the historic house.

The large, detached plantation kitchen, typical of the period, was reconstructed on the old foundations, around the original chimney. The kitchen building also contains a weaving room and an ironing/wash room.

Adjacent to the house is a plantation barn which displays numerous horse-drawn implements and vehicles.

Two slave cabins, located a short distance from the rear of the house, give a glimpse into the laborers' way of life on the plantation.

Restored formal and kitchen gardens adjacent to the house demonstrate the early Louisiana plantation
Nearby Attractions:

Centenary State Commemorative Area
(East College and Pine Street in Jackson)—This is the former site of Centenary College. Visitors may tour the old West Wing dormitory or a professor's cottage and learn about the history of education in Louisiana. A Confederate cemetery is located on the grounds.

Locust Grove State Commemorative Area
(4 miles northeast of St. Francisville on LA 10)—Visit the gravesites of Sarah Knox Taylor, wife of Jefferson Davis, and General Eleazar Ripley, distinguished soldier in the War of 1812.

Port Hudson State Commemorative Area
(US 61, 30 minutes north of Baton Rouge)—This 909-acre site encompasses part of the Port Hudson Battlefield Civil War Site. Featured are six miles of hiking trails, 11/2 miles of trenches, a museum and interpretive programs. Fort Desperate, a primary Confederate position, is accessible by a concrete walkway and elevated wooden boardwalks.

Tunica Hills Wildlife Management Area
(14 miles northwest of St. Francisville on LA 66)—Day-hiking, wildlife viewing, birding and hunting (in season) are featured across 3,366 acres of rugged hills, bluffs and ravines.

Historic Town of St. Francisville
(North of Baton Rouge on US 61)—The Historic District includes 140 structures encompassing churches, antebellum homes, townhomes, cemeteries, and dozens of antique and gift shops.

Historic Town of Jackson
(North of St. Francisville on LA 10)—The Historic District covers two-thirds of the town and features more than 120 structures including banks, shops, homes, churches and warehouses.

Historic Town of Clinton
(North of Baton Rouge via LA 67)—The town is known for its historic architecture, including Lawyers Row, the East Feliciana Parish Courthouse, and charming Victorian and antebellum homes.

LA Scenic Bayou Byway
The Byway in this area takes you through some of the historic "Florida" parishes in English Louisiana known for the British influence in their architecture and cultural traditions. Follow US 61 and historic LA 10 (once known as the Choctaw Trail) to quaint historic towns, charming bed and breakfasts, country drives, profuse native wildflowers in season, excellent birding, cycling and interesting antique shops.
Audubon State
Commemorative Area
(P.O. Box 546, St. Francisville, LA 70775
504-633-3739 or 1-888-677-2838)

Located in West Feliciana Parish, near St. Francisville, the 100-acre woodland site is Oakley House, where John James Audubon lived for a short time. Other facilities include formal gardens, a separate kitchen and weaving room, plantation barn, two slave cabins, a picnic area with a shelter and a nature trail through the 60 acres of magnolia and poplar trees.

From Baton Rouge, drive on LA 965. Turn right after passing through the town of Plaquemine. From West Feliciana Parish, near St. Francisville, drive on LA 965. From Baton Rouge, it is just 30 minutes away. Follow US 61 to LA 965, then turn right and follow the signs. The main feature of the site is the 100-acre woodland site is Oakley House, where John James Audubon lived for a short time. Other facilities include formal gardens, a separate kitchen and weaving room, plantation barn, two slave cabins, a picnic area with a shelter and a nature trail through the 60 acres of magnolia and poplar trees.