Black-owned businesses face ups, downs

By Peter Shinkle

The first black-owned businesses sprang to life in Baton Rouge under conditions that are both hard to imagine and unlike those of today.

The Civil War left former slaves in Baton Rouge struggling to earn a living and achieve their political rights. Even so, black workers in many ways remained the backbone of the local economy, doing such work as harvesting sugar cane and cotton.

Segregated from white society, black people soon turned to owning and operating their own businesses—first in the black business district or near black neighborhoods in south Baton Rouge and then in the city itself. By the late 19th century, some black-owned businesses also reached out to serve white people as well as black patrons.

Perhaps the oldest known black-owned business was the Gilbert Funeral Home, which opened in the 1880s at 210 North Boulevard, next to the Old State Capitol. It operated there until it was torn down nearly 30 years ago to make way for a public library.

In 1969, Joe Ridley opened a tailor and cleaners cleaning shop on Main Street. As his business grew, he constructed a brick building at 605 St. Ferdinand St. By 1942, the building had 11 employees, providing them with $4,000 a month in salary. In the 1950s, The Negro in Louisiana reported.

While many black-owned businesses served both white and black customers, some of the most prominent and revered early businesses in the black community were those of doctors, who served primarily the city’s black residents. Dr. V.Y. Barron Jr., for example, graduated from Meharry Medical School in Tennessee in 1926 and was a noted internist who had his office at 501 South. He also was a district manager for the Peoples Industrial Life Insurance Co.

His brother, Dr. Raymond Barron, was a physician at Southern University in 1914, shortly after it was moved to Baton Rouge.

Aside from being businessmen, the Barron brothers were active in numerous civic organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909. In fact, numerous other black businessmen were NAACP members.

That pattern was followed by Dr. John Champion and Dr. Leo Butler, as well as Dr. C.J. Gilliam, an ophthalmologist, and later, Deputy Anderson, a dentist.

Dr. Butler’s brother, Dr. George Butler, opened a one-room drug store in 1929. His business was so successful that in 1935 he built a two-story building for his drug store as well as a restaurant, a barber shop and a dance pavilion on top, according to The Negro in Louisiana.

By 1930, the entire business employed 50 people and had an annual income of $50,000, the publication reported.

Other black-owned businesses included newspapers, such as the Baton Rouge Post, which operated in the 1930s under its general manager, Willis Reid. Reid went on to publish various papers in Baton Rouge for the next six decades. In 1963, he received the name of the Baton Rouge Post, giving it to a paper he publishes to this day.

A loan company, the Douglas Loan & Investment Co. at 391 Government St., was run by John Perkins, but it failed during the Depression, said his son, Richard Perkins, who retired two years ago as executive assistant to the mayor of Baton Rouge.

That loan business was in the black section of town located today on the 1200 block of Government Street and North Boulevard. At the time, in the 1920s, the area was a business district of the city.

Within just a few blocks, there was an array of thriving black-owned businesses: the Temple Theater, which became the hottest musical attraction in town, Bernard’s Chicken Leg House, the Eagle Drug Store, V.B. White’s office and Too Tall’s Barber Shop.

The Negro in Louisiana, published in 1885 Government St.

Across the area, a young man named Leonard Brown, a student at Southern University, began a loan service to take students from downtown Baton Rouge to the area. In 1903, the Brown family opened a bar in the area, which Brown ran that service from 1940 until the city finally bought the property of black bus drivers about 1970.

Among those bought out were a group of about 10 drivers who ran their “blue buses” from Southern University to the business district of Baton Rouge. J.C. Wilson, one of the bus operators, said the city refused for 30 years to give the businesses permanent permits, a fact that made it hard for the businesses to grow.

Despite many success stories, Baton Rouge had fewer black-owned businesses than other Louisiana cities in the middle of the century.

In 1942, Southern University’s Business Education Department reported there were 38 “Negro businesses” in Baton Rouge, the fourth highest number in the state behind New Orleans, Shreveport and Alexandria. In the wake of World War II, Southern University President Felix Clark took a new approach to spur economic opportunities for black people. In 1953, he joined with other community leaders to start a savings and loan association to increase home ownership among black Baton Rougeans.

The institution, the First Federal Savings & Loan Association, opened Nov. 1, 1956, on Scenic Highway near Southern.

Among the first clients the bank helped were those who bought property and built homes in Southern Heights, a subdivision of Hurling Boulevard developed by Horatio Thompson and other black businessmen.

Meanwhile, Dr. Champion took another step that resonated with the black community’s desire for economic advancement. In 1955, Champion completed construction of the Lincoln Hotel at 401 S. 13th St., in the hub of the black business community between Government Street and North Boulevard.

Black people travelling to Baton Rouge could not stay in white-owned hotels because of segregation, said Joe Delph, a black political leader in the city.

“We were all so very proud of having that hotel,” he said.

Visiting entertainers stayed there in style, and it was common for families to go for a Sunday lunch in the hotel after church, he said.

Within a decade though, the hotel would fall victim to the troubled times. In 1965, a bomb exploded on the hotel’s marquee while civil rights workers were staying there.

Eventually, as civil rights laws forced the desegregation of hotels, black clients could go to any hotel they wanted, and the Lincoln shut down at some point after 1966.

“Integration certainly hurt the Lincoln Hotel,” Delph said.

Indeed, while desegregation was sought by black civic leaders for decades, it finally came, it would have a devastating effect on many black businesses.

The black business district in south Baton Rouge is now a shell. head.

The Temple Theater, Eagle Drugstore and the Lincoln Hotel, all are now merely echoes of a thriving past.

In some cases, the impact of integration was linked with other events that helped topple a business. In the mid-1980s, James Cook founded a 200-seat movie theater on Scenic Highway. It provided movies to black audiences who didn’t have a seat in the back, as required at white theaters under segregation.

In about 1945, the theater, next to one of Horatio Thompson’s Exxon stations, burned down. A Southern University graduate with a degree in math, Cook had wanted to be an engineer, but he could only find work as a laborer at the Standard Oil refinery, a job that paid him too little to make it possible to rebuild the theater quickly.

“It was a great monumental task for him to rebuild it. He was working as a laborer,” said James Cook Jr., the proprietor’s son and now a doctor in North Carolina.

But Louisiana National Bank gave him a loan to help rebuild it, and his father took time off to finish the job.

The theater eventually ran until the late 1960s, when desegregation made it possible for black movie-goers to patronize more luxurious white theaters, sit where they wanted, Cook said.

“Integration had robbed him of a lot of his business,” he said.

While the post-desegregation era brought the demise of black business districts, some of the old black businesses — such as the Chicken Shack, which Joe Delph inherited from his father — continue to thrive.

Since the desegregation era, black Baton Rougeans have increasingly entered professions and taken executive positions in businesses that earlier were almost exclusively the domain of white people.

For example, while there were almost no black lawyers in Baton Rouge in the mid-1950s, there are now about 230 black lawyers who work here today, including some who work in the city’s most prestigious firms, according to the Louis A. Martinet Legal Society, a black legal association.

Meanwhile, some individual black entrepreneurs have achieved remarkable successes.

Last year, Citywide Communications Inc. president Peter Moncrieffe sold his company, which owned nine radio stations, to an Arizona-based company for $34 million.

And Percy Miller, the rap singer and entertainer known as Master P, had reported income of $45.6 million, according to Forbes Magazine. Miller, who was born in New Orleans, has a home in the Country Club of Louisiana. He has construction pending on a $10 million recording studio off Airline Highway.

The Temple Building, 1335 North Blvd., was a business and social center for African-Americans in Baton Rouge for many years. Its features included a theater and the Temple of Garden, a place for dancing and other social gatherings.