The Old Arsenal Museum

NORTH AND WEST VIEW OF OLD ARSENAL

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INSIDE VIEW OF OLD ARSENAL MUSEUM

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East of Louisiana's sky-scaper Capitol, the Old Arsenal stands in sharp contrast to the formal gardens and slim lines of the new building. One of the oldest, most historic buildings in the Pelican state, its precise origin is unknown. Whether it was built by the French, Spanish or United States has never been established, although it definitely reflects Spanish architecture.

It overlooks placid Capitol Lake, once known as 'Bayou Grasse' in honor of one of the earliest, wealthiest Spanish settlers of Baton Rouge. This bayou was originally an inlet of the Mississippi River, which history records as that in which Iberville and Bienville moored their boats in 1699 when they first sited the 'Red Stick' on the bluff. The structure is surrounded by a ten-foot brick wall. It is a rectangular building built of brick overlaid with plaster. Its walls are 54 inches thick, and its roof four feet thick. The contention that the building was originally used as an arsenal is borne out by the lack of gun holes and by the air vents which are so constructed that no stray bullets could possibly have entered the interior.

At either end there are narrow windows, heavily barred. The single entrance is through a heavy timber door, barred with iron. A series of wide columns form perfect arches inside.

With an original appropriation of $40,000.00, the state of Louisiana converted the Arsenal into a historic museum and the theme "Under Ten Flags" appropriately selected since more flags have flown over Baton Rouge than any city in America. This amount was supplemented by the municipal government, local industries, patriotic organizations and interested citizens.

Each display cabinet depicts a phase of Louisiana history. Most contain life sized mannequins in authentic costumes of the era. Recently added is one containing a feminine figure—a lovely Casket girl in colorful attire with her famed 'trousseau box' near by. Another recent addition is the Indian cabinet in which a Houma brave stands guard over a slain deer. One may also see Hernando De Soto, discoverer of the Father of Waters which flows near by; also the French explorer, La Salle. The Spanish Governor of Louisiana, Don Bernardo de Galvez occupies a cabinet and tourists are reminded that he had led a small fleet up the river to attack the Garrison in 1779 and end British rule in Louisiana. Visitors are attracted by a handsome card table and rich candlesticks, once the property of General Philemon Thomas, Baton Rouge resident, who led a small band and captured the Garrison in 1810, putting an end to Spanish domination. Also a favorite is the cabinet showing the signing of the Louisiana Purchase (1803).

The Civil War cabinet encloses a Confederate officer in full uniform, seated at a desk the style of which was popular a century ago. World War I is also represented, with many relics and pamphlets of 1914-17 as well as a figure in an original khaki army uniform.

Other interesting items on display include a lock of Jefferson Davis' hair, photographs of illustrious figures of history and numerous miscellaneous articles many of which are gifts from families who have treasured them.

There is no admission fee. The Arsenal is open to the public daily, with the exception of Mondays. Since it opened in 1962, more than 350,000 visitors, including every state in the union and 52 foreign countries, have passed through the doors. A competent, gracious host and hostess give guided tours to all.

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"Here is a wedge of that heritage we call Louisiana History, protected and preserved from the ravages of time for the benefit of students. We hope that in the Old Arsenal we can present to our visitors and our citizens some of the feeling of continuity with our past which is so essential to the building of a successful future. In the very shadow of our Capitol, as we conduct the business of the day and walk confidently into the future, let us take time to pause and look back over the road we have traveled these many centuries, most of which is now exhibited and presented to us by the Arsenal."

John J. McKeithen, Governor
State of Louisiana