Capitol Castle

Old State Capitol's unique architecture has undergone changes, renovations

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

Governor Long had little use for old buildings, especially the Old State Capitol. It had bad memories of impeachment proceedings brought against him there in 1929. He wanted to tear down the Old State Capitol and build a modern skyscraper Capitol, something he thought a progressive state like Louisiana deserved.

Long got his new Capitol, but there were two strong-willed women, Mrs. J.W. Tucker and Mrs. Eliza Dameron, who didn't want to see the Old State Capitol dismantled and torn down. For some 50 years, Mrs. Tucker and Mrs. Dameron sat on the steps of the Old State Capitol and vowed that their dead bodies will lie here if the building is razed.

New Orleans had originally been designated the capital of the state, but it offered many temptations for the Legislature. The Constitution of 1845 moved the capital to a location "no closer than 90 miles" from New Orleans but left the determination of site to the Legislature. It selected Baton Rouge.

In 1864, a committee of five, including Governor Robert S. Fielden, recommended that the Capitol be reconstructed on its original site. In 1866, the building was formally re-established.

The Old State Capitol served as Louisiana's state house from 1859 until Louisiana seceded from the Union in 1861. After the restoration, it again served as the Capitol from 1862 until the new Capitol was dedicated in 1932.

The Old State Capitol building was designed by architect William Ethington, who added the famous stained-glass dome during its two-year restoration begun in 1893, following a gale which accidentally destroyed it by Union troops in 1862.

LEFT: Joan Samuel, Ruth Wilkerson, Bob Courtnay, Mary Louise Prud'homme and Elise Rosenfeld, pictured from left to right, worked hard to preserve and restore the old building.

ABOVE: Architect William Ethington, who added the famous stained-glass dome during its two-year restoration in 1893, following a gale which accidentally destroyed it by Union troops in 1862, is pictured from left to right, worked hard to preserve and restore the old building.
Dakin recorded numerous problems with contractors over their use of inferior materials and lateness in delivery. He also complained of the interference of the three commissioners.

In his diary, Dakin wrote, "In consequence of the very bad quality of brick furnished by Messrs. McHatton and Pratt for the state capital this day and daily for the last month, Mr. Pratt and myself came to a personal conflict on the staging of the building. I had during the morning been employed in throwing from the staging a large quantity of soft and very bad bricks, and had also thrown over some portions of walls which had been built with said bad bricks. Mr. Pratt came suddenly up to me in a hostile attitude and at the same time using menacing words and expressions, at which I became enraged and struck Pratt. A general contest then commenced and blows were passed without much damage to either party."

The mayor ordered Dakin and Pratt into court to settle the fight. Dakin was fined $10 plus $3 costs since he struck the first blow. Pratt was fined $3.

Finally in December 1849, state officials accepted the completed building. Cost of construction had escalated to $386,000. On Jan. 21, 1850, the Legislature opened its regular session in the Gothic castle. Gov. Isaac Johnson became the first of 18 Louisiana chief executives to occupy the offices on the south end of the first floor.

In January 1861, members of a secession convention met in the House Chamber and voted to secede from the Union. Shortly after, Louisiana joined the Confederacy. Dakin was transferred to New Orleans. The Old State Capitol became a Federal barracks and, for a short time, a prison for Confederate captives. The seat of government was moved to Vicksburg and later to Shreveport.

Union soldiers accidentally started a fire in the southeast corner of the ground floor on Dec. 28, 1861. The fire quickly spread but was brought under control by local firemen and military personnel. Later in the night, however, the fire erupted again and totally gutted the building, leaving only the exterior walls.

"Because Dakin was a perfectionist demanding only the best bricks, the outer walls survived the fire," Rosenthal said.

After the Civil War, the capital again moved to New Orleans. The Old State Capitol stood as an abandoned, charred ruin.

"Throughout the years a gardener had been employed to care for the ruins of the state house up the river, and when prior to the constitutional convention of 1879 the people of Baton Rouge offered to donate their ruins for public use, Dakin was named to supervise the rebuilding.

Freret made changes to the exterior by adding a fourth floor and the center and east sides of the capital. The biggest change to the exterior was the addition of six cast-iron turrets.

Martin said, "But it's the dirtiest place I ever saw. Millions of bats and pigeons made their homes in the attic."

The building had burned during the Union Army's occupation of the city in 1862, and when prior to the constitutional convention of 1879 the people of Baton Rouge offered to donate the ruins of the old building to the state, Dakin was named to supervise the rebuilding.

"In Dakin's building, the roof was flat," Rosenthal said. "Freret thought that the umbrella-like dome would give a lot of light."

In May 1882, the Legislature again met in the restored building. From the beginning, the turrets were controversial. They led Samuel Clemens to make his famous statement, "Pithetic enough that a white-washed castle, with turrets and things, should ever have been built in an otherwise honorable place; but it is much more pathetic to see this architectural falsethinking and perpetuation in our day, when it should have been so easy to let dynamite finish what a charitable fire began ..."

At any rate, the extreme weight of the turrets led to their removal in 1915. The smaller turrets came down in the renovation of 1937-38.

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One of the final controversies debated in the House and Senate chambers was the impeachment of Gov. Huey Long in 1929. The House voted for the impeachment, but Long was not removed from office by the Senate.

Long had no love for the old building, and its leaking roof, but many members of the Legislature were unwilling to vote the money to build Long's new skyscraper capital.

"He waited until a rainstorm and put all of the people voting against the new building under the leaks," Rosenthal said.

The new capitols were dedicated May 15, 1932, but Huey Long, who had been elected U.S. senator, was unable to leave Washington for the ceremonies.

The old building fell into disrepair but underwent a $30,000 WPA renovation in 1937-38. A Morning Advocate article on Jan. 13, 1957, recalled an interview with William C. Martin, who oversaw the WPA renovation:

"Prettiest building in the South,"

When the Centroplex was under construction, part of the plan was to move the historic fence in order to incorporate the new construction. "That's when Aunt Virgie (Mrs. J.W. Tucker) got so mad," said Ruth Wilkinson. "She said, 'I want you to meet with Puffy (Mrs. Irving Dameron) and me to get it (the Old State Capitol) on the National Register."

Wilkinson met with the two ladies who had been so instrumental in saving the building in the 1930s. Ernest Gueymard, former managing editor of the Times-Advertiser, "dug up files and pictures," Wilkinson said.

In three days we were on the National Register. I never worked so hard in all my life," she said. The building was designated a National Landmark. The fence could not be moved.

One year later, in 1976, the late

Archival Illustration provided by the Old State Capitol

This sketch of the building as originally designed and built by James Harrison Dakin appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated in 1862.

The Old State Capitol was a burned-out shell when this photograph was taken, probably in the late 1860s. The building burned in December 1862 during the Union Army's occupation of the city.
Katie Johnson and Rosenthal called Joan Samuel and Wilkinson together to see if they could restore the governor’s room in the building as a period room from 1882 to about 1900. They met with Lester LeBlanc, curator/director of the Old State Capitol, who agreed to set aside the room as an exhibit area. Samuel was chosen chairman of the Committee to Restore the Governor’s Office.

"We all felt that mementos, portraits and photographs of governors, even those serving after 1900, could possibly be included in a tasteful exhibit," Wilkinson said.

The committee researched the governors who served in the building through 1916. "Mary Elizabeth Sanders produced a picture of the governor’s office with furnishings when her grandfather, J.Y. Sanders, was governor," Wilkinson said.

In 1978, the Old State Capitol was named a state commemorative area under the Department of Parks. The original committee was disbanded, and the Old State Capitol Advisory Committee was created.

In 1982, the responsibility for the building was transferred to the Louisiana State Museum, and the Legislature appropriated funds to begin a restoration under E. Eean McNaughton and Associates, Architects.

The State Museum staff presented a plan under which the building would become the state Center for Louisiana Folklife. The governor’s suite would be restored to reflect the history of the building, but the major use would be exhibits on folk-life and a resident artist program.

Local preservationists expressed a general disagreement with this use of the building. "We felt that the Old State Capitol was built as a statehouse and should be shown in that light," Wilkinson said.

In 1990, Mary Louise Prudhomme was hired by the Old State Capitol Associates to put on the opening of the Legislative session in the old building. "Brian Kendrick said that he and Elise (Rosenthal) wanted to bring awareness to the building," Prudhomme said.

"In the past, when we would invite legislators to see it, they would send their secretaries," Wilkinson said.

In April 1990, the Legislature opened in the historic building. Fire trucks were parked outside in case of an emergency. "We could only bring 50 people upstairs at a time," Prudhomme said. "The beams were falling down."

Later during the session, at the urging of Commissioner of Administration Brian Kendrick, Rep. Raymond Jetson introduced a bill to allow the building to be used as the Louisiana Center for Political and Governmental History under the control of the Secretary of State. Kendrick saw to it that the Legislature appropriated $6 1/2 million for a restoration.

Bob Courtney, then first assistant to Secretary of State Fox McKeithen, recalled that when the transfer was made, McKeithen turned to him and said, "You've got it. Now what are you going to do with it."

"The first time I came into the building, it was scary," said Courtney. "Rainwater was eating it away from the top and termites were eating it from the bottom up."

"But, the building was structurally very safe," said Samuel.

Actual construction began on the building in 1992. "Over the years a lot of abominable things had been done," Courtney said. "We wanted to restore the original dignity that Dakin had envisioned and Freret had continued."

Every pane of stained glass in the dome was removed. The broken ones were sent to Europe to be replaced. "Every fixture was replaced with an exact replica of what was here in 1882," Rosenthal said. "We were lucky they had Freret's plans."

The ladies, along with the late Lois Bannon, who had worked so hard to save the building, stayed involved through the restoration and establishment of a museum program.

The building was reopened in 1994 at a gala black-tie reception attended by Govs. John McKeithen, Dave Treen and Buddy Roemer. Fox McKeithen, Gov. McKeithen's son, received a standing ovation for the work his office had done to restore the building.

Prudhomme stayed on to become director of the Old State Capitol, which last year was visited by 89,000 people. It now houses exhibits of historic importance to the state including a Louisiana Purchase exhibit, exhibits on Louisiana's governors, a Huey Long exhibit and a collection of news reports from the late Brooks Read, one of the city's first television reporters. On the grounds is the boxcar known as the Merci Train, a gift to the people of Louisiana from France in 1949.

Still the work continues. "The 1992-94 restoration was the interior only. It's time to address the outside now," Prudhomme said.

Even though Courtney oversaw the restoration project, he said the ladies saved the building. "The building had been transferred from one agency to another, but through it all were the ladies. The real constant thread was those ladies."