Covington retains its charm

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Advance staff writer

Covington "is a pleasant non-place," resident Walker Percy once wrote.

The words may appear disparaging, but Percy was praising his adopted hometown—he bought a house in Covington the week after first visiting.

The same features of Covington that attracted the award-winning author—Covington's small-town feel, easy going manner and simplicity—are cited by long-time residents as the city's crowning virtues, and qualities that they hope to maintain in spite of the explosive growth around them.

This week, residents are taking time out to celebrate Covington's 200-year history with seminars, reminiscences, parades, a documentary premier and gala and other events, all commemorating the city's founding on July 4, 1813.

Throughout the past two centuries, Covington has been economically dependent on moving goods and people between itself and New Orleans: first by boat, then by train and now by auto.

Through it all, however, its residents have worked to maintain Covington's small-town feel.

Covington was founded by John Wharton Collins, who laid out the town's grid pattern on land he bought.

Collins named the town Wharton after relatives, but it was soon changed to Covington. The reason for the change is unclear.

From the start, Covington acted as a trading post on the Bogue Falaya River, sending boats loaded with cargo from nearby plantations down the river to Lake Pontchartrain and across to New Orleans.

That method of trade persisted for much of the city's first century, and its remnants remain in the city today, most notably in the Columbia Street shop, H.J. Smiths and Sons.

Today, the shop is being run by three of H.J. Smith's great-grandsons.

"The store was founded on July 4, 1876," Larry Smith said.

In the store's early days, Larry Smith's grandfather, John Lewis Smith, would buy cotton from farmers as far away as Monticello, Miss.

Then he held it until the price in New Orleans was right, Larry Smith said.

"He would load it on schooners at the Columbia Street landing and send it down the Bogue Falaya to the Tchefuncte to Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans," Smith said.

Smith's grandfather moved as much as 50,000 bales of cotton every year, Larry Smith said.

By the early decades of the 20th century, however, the mode of transit between New Orleans and Covington had changed.

"We used to have a passenger train that came into Covington," lifetime resident Ralph Menetre Jr. said.

Menetre was born in 1928 and with the exception of his time at LSU, has lived in Covington his entire life. He recalled the train fondly.

"We caught it at the trailhead and it took a couple of hours to get there," he said.

Trips to New Orleans were infrequent.

"Just as general practice, there was no reason to go to New Orleans unless for a special type thing. Maybe some years, we didn't go at all," he said.

Despite the economic tough times, Menetre—whose uncle Emile was one of the town's mayors—recalled the Covington of his youth as a good place to live.

"It was just a different time," he said. "We knew everybody, all of our stores and businesses were run by local people—you could get what you wanted and visit with the people there."

Menetre also recalled the city's 150th anniversary celebration, held in 1963.

By then the first span of the Causeway had opened—the second would open in 1969—and the town was already starting to feel the effects.