Felicianiana Parishes
From King Cotton to Baton Rouge Bedroom

By JAMES MINTON
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When cotton was king, the Felicianiana Parishes, along with East Baton Rouge Parish, dominated the economic and political life of the area southeast of Louisiana known as the Florida Parishes.

With their political clout somewhat diminished, the Felicianians today are bedroom parishes for the Baton Rouge industrial, business and governmental community but they retain a vestige of the once-dominant agricultural economy.

East and West Feliciania parishes also are home to several major state institutions that provide local payroll and purchasing power, two large industrial plants, thriving clusters of small businesses, a few small industrial manufacturers and service companies and historical attractions that make the parish a tourist destination.

In his book "Potosi and Politics," historian Samuel C. Hyde Jr. wrote that the increase in cotton prices in the 1830s and the development of a railroad between Clinton and Port Hudson on the Mississippi River pushed the plantation culture further west from the river to East Feliciania Parish.

Soon, Clinton and Jackson in East Feliciania Parish were established as bedroom and commercial centers. By 1870, Bayou Sara in West Feliciania was the largest port on the Mississippi between New Orleans and Memphis.

The Felicianian planters and merchants derived their wealth and power, however, from the exploitation of slaves, an economic underpinning for the area included in the Civil War.

The financial losses resulting from the war were severe, but agriculture and the development of railroads led to a new economic base to the area, a base to which East and West Feliciania parishes have adhered until well into the 20th century.

Then a period of slow decline set in, as the demand for cotton from the cotton fields and the Great Depression resulted in an army of unemployed workers.

Feliciania's population dropped from 16,994 in 1930 to 11,786 in the same 70-year span.

The Felicianians became more closely linked to East Baton Rouge Parish as World War II and the post-war booms offered Felicianians the opportunity to seek high-paying jobs in the petrochemical plants going up around the capital city.

Sonny McCutcheon, a 75-year-old Clinton resident, said the Depression devastated the economy in his hometown.

"There weren't any jobs. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) was the largest employer around here. They put people to work building sidewalks and repaving the courthouse," McCutcheon recalled.

McCutcheon said job opportunities began to pick up after World War II began with the Army Air Corps base in Baton Rouge and Camp Door, Man, a few miles north of Clinton, offering civilian employment.

At the same time, highway improvements allowed East and West Feliciania residents to work in Baton Rouge but remain living in the small towns or rural areas of the Feliciania.

By the 1990 census, East Feliciania had grown by almost 2,000 residents to 17,211. The estimated population on July 1, 1998, was 20,837, a gain of 4.46 percent in eight years.

West Feliciania's 1990 population was at 12,185, but the headcount had grown to an estimated 13,600 on July 1, 1998, ranking the parish 58th among the state's 64 parishes in population.

Despite their relatively small populations, the Felicianian support two banks between them. There were chartered not long after the turn of the century, while two opened in the 1970s.

The stateprosper in the Feliciania economy began before the Civil War, when the Legislature in 1847 decided to build a hospital in Jackson for the mentally ill. Construction began the next year, and in 1853, workers linked two wings of the hospital with the magnificent Greek Revival center building that is the centerpiece of the Jackson facility.

East Louisiana State Hospital was opened in 1857, and the facility has been expanded and renovated many times during the years, with many less years but gradually grew to become one of the largest mental hospitals in the country.

The introduction of pharmaceutical drugs resulted in a gradual reduction in patients, but the state built other institutions to make up for the loss of jobs at the mental hospital.

Now known as the Eastern Louisiana Mental Health System, the hospital is the administrative center for two related institutions, Feliciania Forensic Service for the criminally insane in Jackson and the former tuberculosis hospital at Greenwell Springs in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Other East Feliciania Parish state facilities include the Mississippi Correctional Institution, which took over part of the mental hospital in the 1970s and now has a 300-bed population. Feliciania Medical Complex, the Feliciania Campus of Louisiana Technical College, the Feliciania State Penitentiary, the Feliciania State Job Training Center and the Feliciania State Police Academy.

Feliciania has two state hospital facilities, representing a potential payroll of $24.2 million.

West Feliciania Parish had 1,880 authorized state job slots, representing a potential payroll of $24.2 million.

During the fiscal year that ended June 30, the total value of state contracts and purchase orders for East Feliciania vendors was $143,000, according to the state Division of Administration. West Feliciania's total for the same period was $161,600.

The Crown Vantage paper mill and the River Bend nuclear power plant, both in West Feliciania Parish, are the area's largest private industries.

The power plant, which has a staff of 723 employees backed by 242 contract workers, is the most important taxpayer in West Feliciania Parish.

Feliciania's government tax base is heavily dependent on the mill and nuclear plant, a Community Development Foundation has been exploring ways to diversify the local economy without missing the rural ambience that sets the parish apart from other areas of the Florida Parishes.

The foundation also plans to begin a coordinated effort to promote the parish's tourist attractions, which include the dozens of antebellum homes remaining from the area's glory days.

Rebounding from the renewed interest in the reminders of Feliciania's past, Anne Byler wrote that "its recent history has been a boon after all, requiring as they did the preservation of historic structures rather than too costly modern rebuilding in the name of progress."

Clinton, Jackson, St. Francisville and Bayou Sara were major business centers for the agriculture economies of East and West Feliciania parishes during the 19th and 20th centuries. This photo from a 1914 post card shows the business district in Clinton.

Photos courtesy of Isle McKnight, Clinton