"This used to be a jumpin' little neighborhood," the Rev. Ted Hayes remembers fondly of an area that used to be the city's southside.

"Freetown" was mostly bordered by Johnston Street, Jefferson (Oak Avenue, it was called in earlier days), Garfield and Lamar.

Half of that area is now part of the official "central business district."

In the late 19th Century, however, it was the other side of town, a town then called "Vermilionville."

The name of the town has changed.

And, few know of the area called Freetown anymore.

But, many of its landmarks - old and newer - still stand.

Many of its early 20th Century residents still live there.

Many of those residents' children still live there too.

Hayes is among them. He was born in Freetown 49 years ago and left Lafayette for California, Houston and other locations for school, returning just before 1973 to finish his education at USL.

He's pastor now of Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

He remembers well the past half century or so of Freetown, growing up with his brother, both sons of Herman Sr. and Ruth Bernhard Hayes.

In a walking tour recently, he shared some of the area's history.

Good Hope Hall.

The building that stands now is the hat shop that opened in 1915. Hayes says today was a boarding house.

When the hall was also being used as a church on Sundays, Hayes says those responsible for cleaning it up one Sunday morning before mass didn't do it.

"They were turning the pews over, throwing the bottles out the windows so the priest wouldn't see them," he said, laughing.

Martin Hat Shop.

Near the hall, on Stewart Street, is the hat shop that opened in 1915. It's still in business, operated by the Marlin family.

"It's one of the few places on the planet where you can get a hat cleaned and blocked with steam," Hayes says, emphasizing "steam."

"Good old-fashioned steam." Petre's.

At the corner of Lamar and Stewart was Petro's grocery store, one of several in Freetown.

The building that stands now is mostly made up of the old building, except the creaky, wooden floors have been exchanged for a concrete slab, Hayes said.

The Saloom family sold clothing a couple of blocks away. The Hanin's sold dry goods. Other shops sold meat, produce and other goods.

"This was a very close-knit community. It was self-sustaining," Hayes says.

On Jefferson Street, a huge home near Borden's that still stands today was a boarding house for railroad workers.

Part of the big Butler home at the corner of Gordon and Jackson is gone now, but much of it still stands and is slated for renovation soon by its new owner.

"It was a shoeplace, full of imported furniture and chandeliers," Hayes says.

Along many of the streets were homes of teachers, insurance salesmen, doctors, railroad workers.

The shotgun houses that now stand along some streets are remnants of the 1960s and earlier.

"A recent phenomenon. Landlords," is all Hayes says about those, nodding his head left to right.

Good Hope Chapel.

The chapel at the corner of Gordon and Convent was built by the Freetown community members themselves.

St. John Cathedral was only a dozen or so blocks away. But, travel was difficult on rainy days. And, the neighborhood needed its own church.

"The priest used to come to say mass in the hall," Hayes says. Then the chancel was built. The altar is to the right of the door rather than in the back of the building.

When a ramp for the handicapped was being built in front of the building, workers discovered remnants of those community members' work when building the chapel.

"In the mortar, between every brick, is a religious memento of some sort ... St. Christopher, Immaculate Heart of Mary ...," Hayes says.

St. Ann Infirmary.

On Jefferson, near Gordon, is the infirmary. It was built following World War II by the Saloom family: the family's patriarch, Richard Hayes, would build it if her sons were returned safely home from the war.

They did and the infirmary is testament to that. It's operated now by Dr. Richard G. Saloom.

The Saloom's began business in Freetown when the family's patriarch came to Louisiana on a buying expedition from New York. The couple often fell through and he set up in Vermilionville, buying some land, now including the infirmary and winning it.

"This speaks to the tenacity of the people," Hayes says of the developed Freetown area. "They bought the land, they worked the land. Many still live in this neighborhood. That says a lot for our neighborhood."
Freetown got its name in the mid-1800s by the “free men of color” who settled there just before the Civil War although many white families lived there too.

The area was a pre-designed subdivision, called the “Mouton Addition,” and was part of the Gov. Alexandre Mouton plantation, which stretched from the Vermilion River to downtown.

Following the Civil War, many “freed men” settled there too.

And, came the Klu Klux Klan.

To defend themselves against the hooded riders, the free men and the freed men and their families formed the True Friends Society.

That society formed an intelligence-gathering network that was usually able to find out before a KKK strike which family would be targeted and when. When KKK members would strike, the society’s members would congregate at the targeted home and thwart much of the KKK’s plans.

Their network across Acadiana resulted in limited KKK activity here. The KKK’s popularity dwindled too when area members learned the KKK hated Catholics as well as black people.

By the 1880s, the society’s purpose changed because of the dwindling support of the KKK. Wives and daughters of members changed its mission from public defense to public welfare, attending to the sick and orchestrating community celebrations and its social agenda.

The Good Hope Society formed too and built a hall in its name as its meeting place.

The two groups were the leaders of the black community well into the 20th Century.

The hall became home to wedding receptions and church activities. It ultimately became a Catholic church.

Through the society and the hall, the community’s needs were taken care of by the community’s members at a time before federal and state welfare.

In the 20s, the hall became a jazz hall too, with performances by Louis Armstrong and Fats Pichon, McKinney’s Cotton Pickers from Detroit, the Banner Band of New Iberia, and the Dawn Albert Orchestra of Charenton.

Only black people were permitted inside the hall. White people gathered on the streets to hear the music.

In double-headed sessions (where two bands played the same tune on either end of the hall), spectators swore the building rocked.

Jazz recitals ended at Good Hope Hall at the start of World War II and the building was unused for years until the Catholic church began using it again for mass, calling it St. Paul’s Catholic Church.

In the 1950s, the community

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built a chapel behind Good Hope Hall, and church activities were moved there.

The hall became an area for wedding receptions and meetings of the society again.

In the 1960s and later, it became home of the USL Community Theater, the Good Hope Printing Company (now U.S. T-shirts), and the Good Hope Cabinet and Carpentry Co. In 1977, a local businessman bought it, hoping to turn it into a theater again, but failed. Local attorneys Gary Steckler and Glenn Armentor bought it, making it their law offices.

It's now home to the Glenn Armentor Law Corp., which has grown to 10,000 square feet of offices and has restored much of Good Hope Hall's previous grandeur of inlaid brick walkways and wrought-iron fences and manicured grounds.

Future corporation plans are to triple the grounds' size, build fountains and a 37-foot monument to Freetown by 1995.