Highlights of a trip to Baton Rouge

Editor's Note — This is the second in a six-part series, outlining the facilities operated in various parts of the state by the Louisiana Office of State Parks. The series will be presented weekly by areas, continuing this week with the facilities in and around Baton Rouge.

The Civil War sites, the one-time center of state government, a Revolutionary War Garrison and a colonial plantation are among the highlights of any trip to Baton Rouge. These five facilities are all State Commemorative Areas operated by the Louisiana Office of State Parks and in and around the Capitol City.

LIKE A MEDIEVAL CASTLE—Resembling a huge Gothic fortress on top of a hill, the Old State Capitol State Commemorative Area preserves one of the state's most significant contributions to American architecture. The four and a half acre site includes the building and the surrounding grounds that slope to the levee at the edge of the Mississippi River.

Located in downtown Baton Rouge, the state house was first used by the Louisiana Legislature on January 21, 1850. For seven years, it was lighted by candles before the installation of gas fixtures. Union forces occupied the city in 1861 and the Old State Capitol was used as a prison and later as troop quarters. That same year, a cooking fire spread out of control and destroyed most of the inside of the structure.

In 1881, the Capitol was rebuilt recreating the original Gothic design. A fourth floor was added to the central portion of the building, as well as a spiral staircase and a stained glass dome. The dome is supported by a single cast-iron column that reaches to the basement floor.

The building served as the Louisiana State Capitol until the 1980's when Huey Long's new capitol building about one mile north was completed. Currently the home of the Baton Rouge Visitor Information Centre and several state offices, the structure will soon undergo another renovation.

MORE THAN

AN ARSENAL—Amid the formal gardens on the grounds east of the new State Capitol is the Old Arsenal State Commemorative Area, one of the oldest colonial structures in the state.

Dating back to the early 17th century, the Spanish style building was originally used as a storehouse for arms.

It is believed that the half-acre Arsenal site was part of a very important battle during the American Revolution and the only military encounters fought outside the 13 original colonies. The battle took place in 1779 when Don Bernardo de Galvez, the Spanish Governor of Louisiana, led a small fleet and army up the Mississippi River to attack the British garrison.

After serving as an arsenal, the building was used by the Spanish as a hospital. It was later converted into a prison during the Civil War.

Now restored, the Old Arsenal is a historical museum with the theme "Louisiana Under Ten Flags." It contains relics and exhibits which depict various phases of Louisiana's rich and colorful history.

CIVIL WAR—Heading north out of Baton Rouge on U.S. 61, the next stop is Port Hudson State Commemorative Area, about 20 miles away. The 60-acre site was once a thriving river town and the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the War Between the States.

Six thousand Confederate troops, fighting behind breastworks in the trenches and caves, held off an army of more than 30,000 men against whom they inflicted heavy casualties. For eight weeks in the summer of 1863, the Rebel soldiers defended the area in the face of bombardment, repeated attack and finally siege.

Early in July came the word that Vicksburg, the other bastion on the Mississippi River, had fallen, Port Hudson surrendered too. With those surrenders went the Confederates' last hopes of controlling the river.

Remains of the earthen fortifications, both Confederate and Union, are the most visible reminders of the battle. These are preserved in their natural state and are accessible only by seven miles of foot trails. The most famous breastwork is known as Fort Desperate because of the desperate fighting which took place there.

Among the facilities at Port Hudson are three viewing towers, eight picnic shelters, 14 picnic sites, two restrooms, buildings, new roads and parking areas, the foot trails and interpretive signs. A museum is in the planning stages.

SPLENDID COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE—Back on U.S. 61, the visitor heads toward La. 995 and Audubon State Commemorative Area located near St. Francisville.

The 100-acre wooded setting is the site of Oakley Plantation House built in 1799. It was here that artist-naturalist John James Audubon created many of his famous bird paintings.

Audubon was not only a painter at the time, but he was hired to teach drawing to Miss Eliza Pirrie, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Pirrie, owners of Oakley. He spent half of his time roaming the woods to work on his paintings and half of the time teaching.

The house, which now is a museum, contains Audubon memorabilia and is furnished as it was when Audubon lived there. Other facilities at the park include a picnic shelter, a picnic area and nature trails.

PROVINCIAL CEMETERY SITE—Not far from Audubon is a cemetery of importance to Louisiana history. Buried in Locust Grove Cemetery is Sarah Knox Taylor, daughter of President Zachary Taylor and the first wife of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy.

REBEL TRAINING FACILITY—Heading east on La. 10, the visitor's last stop is Camp Moore State Commemorative Area, which is located one mile north of the Village of Tangipahoa on U.S. 51.