Historic Baton Rouge

Louisiana’s capital bears the distinctive imprint of a culturally diverse beginning.

By Mary Ann Sternberg

Perhaps if, in 1699, the Mississippi River explorers had been English, they would have chosen a more decorous name than Red Stick for the Indian settlement of Istrouma. But the French expedition of Pierre LeMoyne, sieur d'Iberville, made history first. LeMoyne’s men discovered the tall cypress tree, stripped of branches and reddened with the blood of sacrificial animals, that marked the boundary between the Bayagoulas and Houmas Indians, and they recorded the marker in the trip log as “le baton rouge.” Despite subsequent settlement by the English, who called their tiny fortification New Richmond, and the Spanish, who called it Fort San Carlos, the French name held.

But if the name of Louisiana’s capital city is French, its character and landscape still bear the influence of the many diverse contributors to its rich history—the Indians, the Africans, the English, the French, the Spanish, and the Confederates. And if debate still rages over where the actual red stick was located, no argument arises as to the significance of the area now identified as downtown Baton Rouge. This sizeable historic center stretches east approximately ten blocks from the mile-wide Mississippi River and reaches south from a venerated site—boasting a prehistoric Indian mound, remnants of an early-nineteenth-century federal military post, and Huey Long’s monolithic Art Deco state capitol—to the European-style community that Elias Beauregard laid out in 1806. Here and elsewhere, sufficient examples of buildings and landscapes remain to shape a truly fascinating pastiche of American history.

“A real concentration of treasures” is how Carolyn Bennett, executive director of the nonprofit Foundation for Historical Louisiana, the local historic preservation organization, describes the downtown area. Although wars, fires, politicians, and misguided efforts in the name of progress have all taken their toll through the centuries, nevertheless, smiles Bennett, “We have some absolutely monumental landmarks left in a relatively small area. Downtown is remarkable!”

Before the Foundation for Historical Louisiana was formally organized in 1963, much had been lost or irreparably altered. Many buildings in Spanish Town—the first settlement laid out in 1805—fell to fires, 1862 Civil War skirmishes, or contemporary developers. The Beauregard Town neighborhood had been similarly affected. In the early 1930s Governor Huey Long razed numerous historic buildings in order to erect his state capitol and lay out its expansive grounds. Among his architectural victims were three early-nineteenth-century powder arsenals, all of the 1886 Louisiana State University campus, and the late-nineteenth-century Governor’s Mansion, which he replaced with a “super palace of splendor.” Fortunately, by the time his mansion was slated for replacement in 1962—as a funeral parlor, a night club, or a restaurant—preservationists were hard at work. Subsequently the Louisiana Arts and Science Center Museum claimed Huey’s palace for their exhibits and restored it as a historic house museum.