Discovering the rich history behind downtown Lafayette

In many cities, downtown often is dissected by a main waterway. This seems a natural place for the center of commerce and the city, as you think about the history of transporting goods and people.

But in Lafayette, as we all know, this isn’t the case. Why not? Well, it all goes back to one man in the 1820's who shaped our loved Lafayette through a little friendly competition.

The Preservation Alliance of Lafayette hosted a history walk this month providing attendees with a thorough history of downtown. As I read the information, the story of how downtown ended up in its location jumped out as one of the most fascinating in Lafayette's history. I condensed that story here with help from the Preservation Alliance as May is National Historic Preservation Month.

In 1815, a traveling geographer-biographer named William Darby described Lafayette — at that time called the Attakapas county — as two vast prairies on either side of the Vermilion River inhabited by Atakapa-Ishak Tribes and the competing Choctaw Tribes.

It was a period when fewer than two people per square mile lived here.

The population of Attakapas quickly grew, surpassing 12,000 people in only five years. Among the area's affluent families was that of Jean Mouton.

He arrived in Attakapas as a young man around 1760, and settled north of Pinhook Bridge on the banks of the Vermilion.

In 1783, he married Marie Marthe Bordat. They had 12 children, and he worked as a cotton planter. Because of the uncontrollable flooding that often occurred on south Louisiana waterways, the land adjacent to the river (river bottoms) was the most agriculturally productive.

Mouton donated a portion of his land away from the river for the

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building of a permanent Catholic church. It was 2.5 miles north of the Pinhook settlement and became the site of Saint John Cathedral.

The establishment of a permanent church was a sign of prosperity and increasing confidence in the future success of the area. The church was not only a place of worship but also served as the social center for the growing rural community. Government notices and other items of public interest were displayed there since it was the only place where all inhabitants frequented.

Around 1820, Mouton found an increasing demand for space in the developing settlement. He carved out a development adjacent to the church and designed it to be centered with a courthouse square on his property. The development consisted of 156 lots, each measuring 96 x 140 feet with streets aligned in a north-south grid and named for U.S. presidents.

The Louisiana Legislature would carve Lafayette Parish from the western portion of Saint Martin Parish a few years later, making a courthouse and other parish seat buildings necessary.

John and William Reeves, who owned land adjacent to the outpost, donated land on the river for the purpose of erecting a courthouse and other buildings by the Pinhook settlement jail.

But Mouton convinced the Legislature to direct parish citizens to hold an election that would choose a place for the court house building, resulting in a contest between the Reeves and Mouton plots.

Mouton won the election. On Sept. 20, 1824, he donated the land where the Lafayette Parish Courthouse sits. The parish maintained the jail at the river until 1827 when it was moved to the Main Street property.

Vermilionville (the village that preceded the city of Lafayette) grew around Saint John Catholic Church and the Lafayette Parish Courthouse. The Pinhook settlement outlived its limited usefulness, since all commercial traffic was bound to the river.

Heavy commerce was only feasible along the deeper and more accommodating Teche River with landings in New Iberia and Breaux Bridge. Still, Vermilionville with its strong and stable core created by the close proximity of the church and parish seat began a slow and steady growth into a thriving urban development. So how did downtown grow around the church and courthouse? Find out next week!

Kate Durio always can be found downtown where she lives, works and loves celebrating Acadiana Culture (which she thinks is the best in the world). She also can be found producing Downtown Alive!, ArtWalk, Movies in the Park and many community improvement shenanigans while sending snail mail and going to the public library.