Lafayette's Courthouse History Spans 130 Years

By Jim LaCaffinie
Advertiser Staff Writer

The heat and fury of the courtroom battle of more than a year ago has subsided in Lafayette as a cool, collected group of citizens head for the realization of a longtime need—face-lifting for the parish courthouse.

A grand jury committee recently recommended a renovation plan for the courthouse with the approval of a representative citizen group from the city and also won its adoption by the parish police jury.

Estimated in the plan is the sum of $425,000 to make the courthouse up to the standards of some of its sister parishes.

The dilapidated courthouse, looking over its dissipated for its 26 years, is an "ugly duckling" when stacked alongside the much newer Iberville courthouse in New Iberia, acclaimed one of the finest in the Southwest, and the three modern edifices drawn along lines of simplicity, one serving Acadia parish in Crowley, another Vermilion parish in Abbeville, and the third, St. Landry in Opelousas.

If plans to go through to uplift the present courthouse, it will mark the first major project of its kind for the parish government since its construction in 1928 and the first also in the parish's history of three courthouses.

Just in 1824

The first court house was built in 1824 on the site still occupied by the parish body politic. The site was donated by Jean Mouton, a pioneer settler of the area, when the parish seat moved from Pin Hook to Vermilionville, the city's previous name. Pin Hook in the earlier days of the city was the area around today's Pinhook Bridge.

The donor of the parish court house site had settled in Bayou Carencro around 1770. His father, Salvador Mouton, an Acadian, had settled in Pointe Coupee parish in 1737.

Judge A. Wilmot Dalferes who presides over sessions in the parish court house and who has many years of jurisprudence, said that "Pere" Mouton, as he was known, could not sign his name and used a mark to complete the legal transactions surrounding the donation.

The parish records shows that "Pere" Mouton transferred about 13 lots of land to the Vermilionville with the provision that the became the parish seat and that a courthouse be built on some of the donated lots.

Curiously enough, another parish citizen who lived in the Pin Hook area gave 10 acres of land to the parish with the provision that he be allowed for a parish seat. Parish officials wanting both donations decided to use the Mouton donation for a courthouse and the Pin Hook site for the parish jail.

However, some years later, heirs of the Pin Hook tax parcel because it failed to use the donation as stipulated in the gift transaction. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court with the heirs winning their suit and the land.

After Mouton's donation, the active set as the town of Vermilionville and also made the parish seat.

Dalferes, who began his law career in the second courthouse in 1925, cited a police jury record of Dec. 5, 1859, when the committee was appointed to have full power to have a courthouse and jail built in the manner they thought proper at the expense of the parish of Lafayette.

Serving on that committee were Francois Daigle, Joseph Richard, M. E. Girard, H. F. Voorhies, Willam E. Reid, Hazard Eastin and C. H. Eastin.

The jury at that meet also levied a $3,000 special tax on the parish for the courthouse, in addition, a $5,000 tax levied at the same meet was to cover expenses for the year.

Several months later, the jurors contracted with Benjamin F. Paton and Benjamin F. Templeton to build the courthouse for a cost of $8,900.

The terms of the payment were such that the parish paid $1,500 at the time of the contract signing, another $1,500 six months later and the balance was to be paid within 18 months from completion of the structure.

A well-known Frenchman in the town at the time, Antoine l'escot, put up a $3,500 bond for the contractors. Dalferes remarked that the records show that Lacombe, like Jean Mouton, had to use a mark to sign the legal papers.

The parish of Lafayette actually came into being about 1823 when St. Martin cut off a portion of land which now comprises Lafayette and Vermilion parishes. St. Martin relinquished the two-parish plan because it was mostly prairie land and considered useless.

Later in 1844, Lafayette severed a portion of land which now makes up Vermilion parish. Lafayette turned over, both plots of land have proved to be rich agriculturally and in Vermilion, a "gold mine" of oil wells have come into being.

Dalferes wondered whether St. Martin would have done what it did long ago had it known the real value of its cast-off land.

Visit free

About the same time that the parish was created, the General Marquis de Lafayette was making a visit to the United States and so the parish was named in his honor.

The town at that time could not be named Lafayette because Dalferes stated, another town already bore that name in the state. It was located between New Orleans and Carrubin.

Some years later, New Orleans absorbed this town and action was taken to change the name of Vermilionville to Lafayette.

The charter of the city of Vermilionville was officially amended in 1894 to change its name to Lafayette.

Meanwhile the city was growing and the parish courthouse was literally becoming too small for the expanding governmental activities in the parish.

By 1896, some fire-proof vaults were built at the courthouse site at a cost of $4,500 to preserve the parish records and shortly afterward, a brick jail costing a little more than $12,000 was added to the site.

All these structures served the parish until 1928 when the present courthouse was built.

As has been the case for the past several years, between 1913 and the time the present structure was built, the courthouse was not maintained for the benefit of citizens. When the millage proposal was made in 1933, groups of citizens privately and publicly wondered how much money was needed and why.

Now the issue of a more suitable courthouse building is in the forefront once again in Lafayette. Significant is the method of approaching the issue through a citizens group providing details of needs and estimates of costs. When the millage proposal was made in 1933, groups of citizens privately and publicly wondered how much money was needed and why.

In Lafayette, most people agree that the parish courthouse is an "eyesore" in present state of deterioration. Its walls are ugly and faded with peeling scraps of paint, grease and grime. The court room, jury stand and judges chambers are more than unseemly quarters for the carrying out of justice.

Action to clean up the courthouse ground in 1933. However, the issue is now a matter of controversy over the manner and method of presentation to the public. In May of 1935, the parish citizens went to the courthouse and disapproved a police jury request for a 2-mill maintenance and repair tax for the courthouse.

Now, the issue of a more suitable courthouse building is in the forefront once again in Lafayette. Significant is the method of approaching the issue through a citizens group providing details of needs and estimates of costs. When the millage proposal was made in 1933, groups of citizens privately and publicly wondered how much money was needed and why.