Lafayette's Skyline Losing 'Last Mile' To Progress

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In the old Lafayette Parish Courthouse, now being demolished for a new building, there is a "last mile" which has never been walked.

It is located at the very top of the building, in a room roofed by the skylight and visible from the outside of the building.

It consists of 13 steps that have never been climbed by a condemned man, leading to a scaffold.

Above the scaffold is a large treestring, through which a hangman's noose has never been pulled.

Toward the side is a lever, never released by a hangman, which operates a trap door in the floor.

Last Walk — These 13 steps lead to a scaffold for hanging criminals located at the top of the old Lafayette Parish courthouse, built in 1927. Above are the open trap doors of the scaffold. It has never been used for an execution, since hanging was outlawed in Louisiana shortly after the courthouse was built. The last criminal to hang in Lafayette was Sam Woodard, in 1926. (Advertiser Staff Photo)

The old courthouse, along with the gallows, was built in 1907. But the last hanging in Lafayette Parish occurred in 1926. In June of that year, Sam Woodard, a Texan, was hanged on the site of the courthouse, while it was being built.

Woodard had stabbed a man in Texas, and in escaping the law, had stowed away in an empty railroad car. The train pulled into Lafayette late one night, and two railroad employees made a routine check of the cars.

Woodard saw them coming from his hiding place, and took out his .38-cal. pistol. When they reached his car, he shot both of them. He climbed out of the car, and stepped into a large pool of water near the railroad tracks, with only his head sticking above the water.

When the sun came up the next morning, another railroad employee spotted the man in the water. He was apprehended after a short gun battle with sheriff's deputies. J. Dassas Trahan, now a businessman in New Iberia, was sheriff at the time.

Woodard was tried, convicted of murder, and sentenced to be hanged.

Since there were no facilities for hanging criminals at the time, because the courthouse was under construction, a temporary scaffold was erected.

Woodard's execution marked the last hanging in Lafayette, and one of the last in the state.

And so, the room in which the old scaffold is located, has never been used for anything more than a storage place. When the building is demolished, the unused apparatus of death will be only a memory of a system of punishment which has long been outlawed in Louisiana, replaced by electrocution at Angola.