Old State Capitol to receive support

By ANNABELLE ARMSTRONG
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Buildings, no matter how important they are, need the support of people, and the Old State Capitol is getting some needed support.

"It's the oldest remaining gothic state building in the country," said Robert R. MacDonald, director of the Louisiana State Museum.

MacDonald and Gov. Dave Treen will tell plans for the 1849 building at an Old State Capitol Associates reception from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday in the Old Capitol's Senate Chambers. At that time new members and financial donors will hear plans for the structure.

Getting the building placed under Louisiana State Museum auspices, an act of the 1982 Legislature, was welcomed by the building's longtime supporters.

On Jan. 13, 1982, Morning Advocate article written by Graham Lesturgeon, the Old State Capitol was described this way. "It's been burned, vandalized, beleaguered by pigeons, weeded as a hospital, prison and barracks, called a nightmare, the site of an strike out of an oak tree in a bucket, perked by sightseers, shock of cash since birth and treated as a stepchild." At that time, the State Capitol had been granted $30,000 for renovations and repairs — enough money to open its doors again.

This latest shot-in-the-arm for the building, designed in 1847 by James H. Dabin of New Orleans and finished in 1849, marks a new beginning designed to get the structure on a museum level. Initial phase of restoration is $25.2 million, already appropriated, and this phase will be undertaken by the Louisiana State Museum.

Perhaps the most famous comment surrounding the building was that made by Mark Twain in his book, "Life on the Mississippi." "I was at the Oxford, Miss., building of the sorts of the kind," Twain said. "It would be better to let fate finish it."

This was after he and his wife, who had been building a house as they traveled around the country, built a boat and hopped the boat on the Mississippi River. "That is a little sham," he said. "Many people have disagreed with Mark Twain since he said that," Mrs. P. Chauvin Armstrong, member of the Associates' board of directors, said, not without humor.


TheSamuel's daughters, Mrs. Charles H. Braud Jr., and Mrs. William L. Travis, are assisting Mrs. Weldon McIlhagh, chairman of the Board of Directors, for the reception. Mrs. Wilkin had been working on the Old State Capitol for many years. Mrs. Bolton will introduce dignitaries.

In a phone interview from New Orleans, MacDonald talked about his work and about the volunteers/supporters. He said there are 18 buildings under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana State Museum. Eight of these are in New Orleans. The French Quarter: Cabildo, Presbytère, Lower Pontalba Buildings, Madame John's Legacy, the U.S. Mint, the Jackson House, the Creole House and the Arsenal. The other 10 are the Old State Capitol and the State Exhibit Museum in Shreveport.

"Our buildings range from 1788 (Madame John's Legacy, one of the oldest structures in the state) to 1849 (Old State Capitol). And the buildings range from closed for structural repairs (old) to 1937 (old State Capitol) closed in Shreveport. He describes the site as "one of the best examples of art moderne architecture in the state of Louisiana. It's a little past art deco, very solid construction and very linear, with use of the latest material, such as aluminum in the doors and window screens.

The Old State Capitol he described as "the most important architectural document of its type in the South, which is gothic architecture, recognized as being of great significance."

Where does the state museum come into the picture? We are undertaking the initial $25.2 million phase of the restoration. The total project is approximately $50 million," MacDonald said.

While the country is "so young that we have not yet begun to appreciate at the level we should the history or our memory as a people," Mr. MacDonald feels the state of Louisiana has a lead in historic preservation.

"Over the past 10 years, including money already expended and money on the go, we have spent $2 billion. And we are spending close to $12 million. Our state's good example for municipalities and corporations for what they should be doing." One of the thrills of my job," he said, is meeting people in communities throughout the state, private citizens willing to spend their talent, energy and time in serving the community.

"Wherever we've traveled abroad, foreign colleagues in China, France or England are always amazed at the way the private citizen gets involved in their community. This is an American characteristic. It's been an American trait since the beginning of our country, noted by people throughout our history. Foreigners coming here are absolutely amazed at voluntarism — those willing to volunteer themselves to the good of the community."

Mrs. Johnson, secretary of Associates, has been an active supporter of the Old State Capitol since 1976. She worked four and a half years with the Convention Visitors Bureau.

"The main thing that bothered me," she said, "was the deterioration of the structure and the fact that visitors to the Old State Capitol had nothing to see except that magnificent staircase and the paintings in the Jay Broussard Memorial Gallery.

I got together an ad hoc group of people across the state — active preservationists — just to try to restore two rooms, the Governor's Reception Room and the Governor's Private Office. It grew from that.

"Sandra Thompson became interested and placed it under the Department of State Parks as a commemorative site, and enough money was granted from the Legislature for an architectural study by David-McMurren and Berkus. That firm made proposals for its use, which were accepted, but that still left a vast amount of money to be granted from the Legislature. That was just a preliminary step.

"Last year we were granted $2.5 million, and the architectural selection board chose the architect, E. E. McNaughton. That will also include studies for use of the space."

Gradually, she said, more people became interested. Mrs. Byrd calls the building an "architectural gem," and Mrs. Wilkinson is proud that the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but a Landmark is a higher designation.

"There are a limited few structures in the entire country that are "Landmarks," she said.

"The next step is a Monument, and that takes an Act of Congress to designate."

Mrs. Turner calls the building "a tribute to the late Virgie Tucker and Ethel Claiborne Dameron, who worked with Mrs. Wilkinson to get the building listed on the National Register." This is the best opportunity the building has had," Mrs. Turner said.

She, Mrs. Bolton, Mrs. Samuel and Mrs. Weldon McIlhagh serve on the board of the Louisiana State Museum, and she considers this a developmental change. "There's the possibility of receiving exhibits from collections of the State Museum," she said.

Mrs. Bannon, another longtime worker for the structure, echoed these sentiments.

"As an art historian I know we can plan our future from what's happened in the past."

"Friends of Cast Iron Architecture, a national organization, recognized the historical and architectural significance and they, along with other groups wrote our state government. I feel sure that their input bore a lot of weight with the legislators."

"When I first moved to Baton Rouge 30 years ago, there was talk of tearing it all down for a parking lot." Other past memories are brought to bear. "I remember that my Aunt Virgie, who was Mrs. John Arthur Tucker, and Ethel Claiborne Dameron were just enraged when there was talk of tearing down the back wall," Mrs. Wilkinson said.

The fence, itself, has come in for some history-making, Mrs. Wilkinson said. "It is bolted on the bottom only, bolted together, and supported by its own weight."

"In the words of Mrs. Johnson, secretary, if the building is ready in the future, we will be raising funds to buy the historically accurate furnishings and appointments."

"Paintings and any items helpful in interpreting the structure — things like drawings, documents, reminiscences, photographs."

"Since our invitations to membership went out, we've received a chair that had been in the building."

"It was common practice at one time to sell furniture from the Old State Capitol and this lady's mother bought the chair."

"We hope that as the building nears completion of restoration and security is well established, that many items will be donated, since we will then be operating as a museum."

Mrs. Bert S. Turner, Mrs. Stuart Johnson, Mrs. P. Chauvin Wilkinson, John Bass/Morning Advocate