When the newly organized Foundation for Historical Louisiana first got involved with preserving Magnolia Mound Plantation, its members nicknamed the plantation house the "desperate lady." The nearly 175-year-old building, so typical of Louisiana's early architecture, had been vacant for several years and was falling to the ground. Weeds and trees had grown up on the property blocking the view from Nicholson.

"I drove up and down Nicholson Drive. I couldn't find it," said Gwen Edwards, who later served for four years as education director and 13 years as director of Magnolia Mound. "It was so overgrown.

"That's what helped to protect it all those years," said Winnie Byrd, past board chair of Magnolia Mound. "People didn't know it was here."

Old-timers called the house the Prince Murat House because of a legend that Charles Louis Napoleon Achille Murat, the elder son of Joachim Murat and Caroline Murat, once lived there. Historians believe that the name Magnolia that the prince did live in the Mound area.

This 1928 photo of the rear of the plantation house shows its deteriorated condition. The unidentified people in the photo may have been living in the home at the time.

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"Leo Barrow did extensive research and never could find authentic documentation that Prince Murat ever lived at or owned Magnolia Mound," Byrd said.

"Someone else said Magnolia Mound attached to that property back to 1804," Edwards said.

By the mid-1960s, most Baton Rougeans had forgotten about the house, once a center of local society, until Al German, a developer from Midland, Texas, purchased the property for a high-end apartment building.

"That's when we fought the Battle of Nicholson Drive," said Elise Rosenthal, a member of the original board of Magnolia Mound. "It was quite a battle.

In order to build the apartments, German needed the zoning changed from residential to multipurpose. Concerned citizens and the fledgling Foundation for Historical Louisiana saved the home by convincing the City Council not to reuse the property. Leading preservationists, architects and author Harrett Kane were among those who worked to save the house.

"Bob Heck (LSU architecture professor) was so interested in the house," Rosenthal said. "He gave the talk to the City Council that convinced the powers that be that the Historical Foundation would do the restoration if the city bought the property.

Mayor Will Dame supported the local citizens in their preservation efforts. "They went to the mayor. He couldn't come up with the money," BRCC Superintendent Eugene Young said, "so he came to us (BRCC) to expropriate the property for a park." Funding was from the City's Parks and Recreation budget.

The parlor, with its original mantel, was once a center of social activity in Baton Rouge.
when BREC acquired Magnolia Mound, shown in this 1972 photo, the house was so overgrown that it could not be seen from Nicholson Drive.

ARCHIVAL PHOTO PROVIDED BY MAGNOLIA MOUND ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS, ONLY THE SECOND HISTORIC HOME IN LOUISIANA TO ACHIEVE THIS DISTINCTION.

In 1955, BREC purchased Magnolia Mound and began the process of restoring the house. It was designated a historic site by the National Register of Historic Places in 1995, and it has since been accredited by the American Association of Museums, the only other historic home in Louisiana to achieve this distinction.

Descendants of the early families who lived at Magnolia Mound have remained interested in the home. In 1995, 350 descendants from all over the United States gathered at Magnolia Mound for a reunion. One family member, Jean-Marc Duplessis, a graduate student at LSU, is a new descendant of the plantation.

Descendants have continued to follow the restoration of the plantation from their homes in Europe and America. Members of the Charles Page family of San Francisco, California, descendants, heard about the restoration and wrote a contribution in The Advocate. Descendants have brought with them the original letters describing wartime conditions at Magnolia Mound, a handful of glimpses Confederate soldiers and a well preserved Confederate band, dated in 1861 and used upon victory.

When BREC acquired Magnolia Mound, shown in this 1972 photo, the house was so overgrown that it could not be seen from Nicholson Drive.