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BREAUX BRIDGE — A historic bridge over Bayou Teche is moving back to Breaux Bridge.

Historians believe the single-lane bridge on La. 351 at Ruth, between Parks and Breaux Bridge, was built sometime before 1855, and some of its original parts remain.

Erected first in Breaux Bridge, it was replaced and moved down the bayou to Ruth around the turn of the century. It was in use there until dismantled in March.

The bridge is awaiting reconstruction as a historical monument — to be located, not across the Teche, but along side it in a park area behind the St. Bernard Church.

Bill Fontenot, design, water resources and development engineer for the eight-parish local district of the state Department of Transportation and Development, said the bridge is being replaced with 80 percent federal funds and 20 percent state money. The new two-lane bridge in Ruth — next to where the single-lane bridge had been — will be finished in a year, weather permitting, he said.

The only original section of the structure that remains is the steel swing portion now being painted at the St. Martin Parish Sheriff Department's substation in Breaux Bridge. Plans are under way to reconstruct the bridge with as much authenticity as possible, organizers said.

According to local architect and city resident Glenn Angelle, the bridge has a 105-foot swing span which operated over a concrete and wooden turntable. It was supported by wooden beams and had a wooden deck. It opened by way of a geared mechanism operated by four or five men, he said.

"We're trying to restore the bridge to a condition as original as possible," he said.

The bridge will be reconstructed parallel to and right next to Bayou Teche, providing recreation for sightseers, fishermen and stargazers, said Ray Pellerin, a member of the local Kiwanis Club. A park also is being planned for the site, to exhibit the history of the area's bridges, he said.

Had the group not stepped in, Pellerin believes, the bridge would have been lost.

But it will be more than a year from now when people can again walk the bridge as many Cajuns did in the course of their daily lives.

During the Civil War, retreating Confederate soldiers set its wooden deck on fire to halt following Union troops, historians say. But the Union troops saved the bridge from destruction.

Frequent repairs kept the structure in operation until the turn of the century, Pellerin said, when the Police Jury had it replaced. The bridge was moved to Ruth, a plantation named after the daughter of landowner Robert Martin.

"I think it's a great thing they're doing with the bridge," said 19th Judicial District Judge Robert Fleming, a son of the famed Ruth Martin.

As so often happens in St. Martin and St. Mary parishes, all that is remembered of a plantation is the name that still holds onto the area identified. All that is remembered of an old bridge is dying, and it's a great thing that they're bringing this bridge back," Fleming said.

Kenneth Delcambre, president of the Breaux Bridge Historical Society, sent a memorandum to the Police Jury recently, outlining the bridge's history and pleading for its reconstruction.