Situated between the State Capitol and the Mississippi River is the Pentagon Barracks, built beginning in 1819, only 16 years after the Louisiana Purchase and seven years after Louisiana became a state. The complex of four brick structures was built as a U.S. Army post to protect the southwestern part of the young nation from foreign invasion. "This was the westernmost part of the United States, the Far West," said Diana Keith, director of the Pentagon Barracks Museum and Shop. "This is where the troops were sent. All supply lines ended here."

"The Barracks guarded us from "down in Mexico," said Celine Geary, who lived at the Pentagon as an LSU coed from 1930 to 1932.

Local residents have argued for decades as to why the complex contains only four buildings when the term "pentagon" describes a five-sided figure. Was there ever a fifth building and if so, what happened to it?

Using copies of maps and documents in the LSU and Louisiana State libraries and archives, historians concluded that a fifth building formed the river side of the Pentagon. This fifth building, located on the banks of the river, was actually two identical buildings connected by a common wall at the upper story. These buildings completed the pentagon but were razed within two years because of their poor workmanship and inferior materials.

Dr. B.F. Hamel, who served as surgeon at the Pentagon and witnessed the construction of the buildings, wrote in 1840, "They were originally of pentagonal form but the building forming the side parallel to the river and intended for Quartermaster and Commissary Departments being of bad material and worse workmanship has been removed."

U.S. Army Capt. James Gadsden, an engineer, designed the Pentagon, which was completed sometime between 1822 and 1825. The upper floors of four of the buildings were built to be used as barracks for a regiment of troops and living quarters for officers of the post. On the ground floors were kitchens, mess halls, store rooms, offices and a guardhouse.

Using garrison records, the late Col. David French Boyd, a former president of LSU, compiled a list of famous people who were quartered or visited at the Barracks. Among them were Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, President William H. Taft, President Warren G. Harding, Gen. George B. McClellan, Gen. Stonewall Jackson, Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard, Gen. George Custer and Gen. Robert E. Lee. Zachary Taylor, who commanded the post three times, was stationed at the Barracks when he was elected president in 1848.

The four two-story buildings which remain are built of brick with front and back galleries supported by 10 Tuscan columns. Outdoor stairways connect wide brick front porches to the upper galleries. At the center of the complex is a parade ground originally entered through two sally ports, passageways wide enough for wagons to pass through.

The Pentagon Barracks, photographed from the top of the State Capitol, was built as a U.S. Army post to protect the southwestern part of the country from foreign invasion in the early 19th century.
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through.

In 1861, during the Civil War, the Barracks was seized by the state of Louisiana and later that year turned over to the Confederate States of America. The Union occupied Baton Rouge in 1862 and set up headquarters at the Pentagon, which served as an important Federal station during the Battle of Baton Rouge.

On June 6, 1879, U.S. troops were withdrawn from the Pentagon, and Baton Rouge ceased to be a military post. In 1886, the Committee on Public Lands authorized the Secretary of War to transfer the Pentagon to Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College. The property, valued at $150,000, was to be used for educational purposes. The university leased the property from the federal government. By act of Congress in 1902, LSU was given full title to the buildings, which were used as barracks for the cadets of the Ole Miss War Skule.

LSU began a gradual move to its present campus in 1925. When the cadets left the Barracks, coeds attending the university were moved there, where they were housed until 1932. Geary was one of the coeds who lived at the Barracks. "Rooms were divided into blocks of four with a bath for each block," Geary said. Four coeds were crowded into each room, and at one point even five coeds were housed in a room. "I had to climb over beds to get to my bed," she said.

When the women's dorm, Smith Hall, now Pleasant Hall, was completed on the new campus, the coeds moved from the Pentagons. "It was the world's most beautiful spot after H in 1886," Geary said.

LSU divided the Barracks into apartments and rented them to local people. "You did not have to be political to move here when we did," said Tyke Olinde, who moved with her family from New Orleans to the Pentagon in 1931 when her father, the late A.R. Johnson Jr., took a position at City National Bank. "They were just filling apartments," said Olinde. Her father was later a founder of American Bank.

Local attorney Emile C. Rolfs III was born in 1943 when his parents were living at the Pentagon. His maternal grandfather, the sheriff of Lincoln Parish and a member of the police jury, got Rolfs' mother, not yet married, a job with the highway department and an apartment with the Pentagon. The Rolfses stayed in her apartment after their marriage in 1940.

Emile Rolfs was about 7 years old when he and friend Richard Gill decided to build a fire in a playhouse built on the grounds for the Johnson children. "Richard and I had been spanked once for playing with matches," Rolfs said, "but it was a cold day, and the playhouse had a little imitation fireplace.

In a short time, the playhouse was in full blaze. The little boys knew they were in serious trouble when the fire truck came racing through the sally port. The playhouse burned to the ground, and Gill confessed on behalf of the two boys.

Rolfs said that his father was in the process of handing him a big spanking when Johnson intervened on his behalf. The Johnsons were building a home on the lakes. "Mr. Johnson told my father, 'Rolfs, don't whip the boy. I didn't want to move the damned playhouse anyway,'" Emile Rolfs said.

Emile Rolfs' mother was an avid gardener who planted Louisiana iris and camellias at the Pentagon. She was also active in local garden clubs. She died of cancer when Rolfs was very young.

"After she died, the ladies who belonged to her garden club would come and check on me every week," Rolfs said. "Daddy gave her camellias to Mr. Johnson for their new house."

W. Evans "Blackie" Howell moved with his family from Thibodaux to the Pentagon when his father became ill. He had been the campaign manager for Gov. Sam Jones. "Since Sam Jones won, he gave us an apartment," Howell said.

Former resident Matsu McRoy recalled that the children who lived at the Pentagon had their own newspaper, a publication dubbed "The Scoop," which they printed on a toy press that belonged to the Johnson children.

McRoy's daughter, Mary Frances HopKins remembers playing football every weekend. "We would have any number from two to 20 on a side," she said. If the football got stuck on one of the roofs, Howell would climb on top of the buildings to retrieve it.

Olinde remembers games of cowboys and Indians. "We would jump off the second floor onto garages below," she said. "Mr. Broussard, the caretaker, was continually distracted that the children were damaging the garage roofs."

Broussard maintained a beautiful garden in an area that dropped off about 30 feet behind the former location of the Pentagon.

One of the Pentagon children, Ned Davis, ordered a baby alligator from a magazine. One day, the alligator disappeared under a pile of leaves. "For months, we wouldn't walk there," Olinde said.

The children skated on the wide porches of the buildings right in front of all the apartments. "I don't know how the others put up with us," HopKins said. When the walkways were put in at the Capitol, the skaters moved across the street. McRoy made HopKins remove her skates whenever she crossed the street to the Capitol. "Not but one car ever passed by us here," HopKins said, "but she was afraid I'd get run over.

Once Howell found a pirogue tied to a tree near a bare landing in front of the Pentagon. He watched the pirogue for a month or so, and when no one appeared to own it, he decided to claim it. He chased a snake out of the boat, and a man on a barge at the landing helped him push the boat with tar.

A short time later, Howell was enlisted to entertain Jerry Covert for a few hours while a member of Covert's family was across the street on state business. "I asked Jerry if he had ever been in a pirogue," Howell said. Covert assured Howell that he knew how to get in.

"I got in real easy," Howell said. Then Covert jumped in the boat, and the boat overturned. The boys drifted all the way to the ferry boat landing where they were retrieved. Howell said that after that he tied the boat back where he found it.

Howell's father knocked a hole in the wall and installed a window in his apartment. Howell said even today he can still see a slight difference in the brick where the window was patched.

Local artist Kate Matheson shared an apartment with Nora Neill Power, longtime dean of women at LSU. Matheson painted in her apartment as well as on the grounds of the complex. She also has a picture painted by Matheson of the remaining sally port.

The apartments were of varying sizes and shapes. All had white plaster walls. Buildings were heated with steam heat. The exterior of the buildings was painted white with green trim. Most of the porches had wicker or wooden chairs also painted green.

"They were wonderfully cool," HopKins said. "No one had keys to the doors. At night, we kept our front door open and the screen door closed. We would sleep all night that way and not think a thing about it," she said.

Rentals included water and gas. The McKoys paid $42 per month. The Johnsons paid $75 per month for two connecting apartments.

The National Guard drilled on the parade ground, and Capt. Holiday, the commander, had an apartment in the complex.

One of the Pentagon legends is that underneath the buildings are tunnels connecting other buildings. "We were sure there were tunnels under the buildings," HopKins said. "There was supposed to be a labyrinth down there," In 1957, a system of cisterns was located under the buildings.

In 1950, the Legislature voted to transfer ownership of the Pentagon from LSU to the state for use as state offices and apartments. For a few years, some of the residents continued to live in the buildings, but the majority of the property was used for state offices.

In 1965, William J. Hughes Jr. and Associates drew up plans to remove the historic buildings. Work was completed in 1967 at a cost of $911,000. The buildings are now used as state offices and apartments for state officials.

The site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on July 26, 1973.

A portion of one of the buildings is now the Pentagon Barracks Museum and Shop, overseen by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana. More than 15,000 visitors a year from all over the world view the exhibits, which showcase the area from prehistoric times to the present.

Barnes Goss Economou, who served for many years as museum hostess, has witnessed much of the history of the area for nearly eight decades. She recalled the funeral of Gov. Huey P. Long in 1935 and the huge crowds that passed in front of the Pentagon on the way to the Capitol where the body lay in state. "Our family attended it, and it took us nine hours to get to view his body," she said.

At present, the Pentagon buildings are once again being restored, this time as closely as possible to the way they looked in 1836, a little more than a decade after their completion. "They are trying to be as accurate as possible," Keith said, "even to the patterns of brick."

"It was wonderful to live here," Olinde said. "We were like a family." Every afternoon, McRoy recalled, some of the neighbors got together for coffee. "Sometimes we had 20 people in for coffee," she said.

"There was always something going on here," HopKins added.