Baton Rouge’s Third Street, circa 1900, shows the advertising, via street banner, of the water company that would be named Baton Rouge Water Works Co. in 1910. While the company started out in 1887 drawing water from the Mississippi River, it soon turned to deep wells — and could boast about its pure water.

Doing well

By ELLYN COUVILLION
Special to The Advocate

W
gen two partners won a
contract with Baton Rouge in
1887 to supply the city with
water, they were drawing it
from the Mississippi and fil-
tering it for their customers.

At the time, many people collected rain
water with cisterns, so they didn’t have
much use for the river water.

But a decision by partners E. Smedley and
John Wood to draw soft water from a well,
about 100 feet deep in 1889, appears to have
been a turning point that gave new life to a
water system that changed hands in 1910
and became Baton Rouge Water Works Co.

“The water that comes out of the tap fell as
rainwater around Vicksburg, Miss., about
the time of Christ,” said Hays Owen, the water
company’s vice president of administration
and secretary of the corporation, which still
operates as a private, investor-owned utility.

The water trickles through sand and rock
formations to deep aquifers, where it is
extracted and requires only minimal treat-
ment, in the form of chlorination.

The company began its chlorination pro-
gram in the early 1950s, years before it
became mandated by the state in 1977 and
federal government in the mid-1990s.

Today, Baton Rouge Water Co. and its sub-

Field operations foremen for the Baton Rouge Water Company posed for this picture in 1962 at the company headquarters, which had moved just the year before from Lafayette Street to Government Street. From left are D.E. Deaton, James Cooper, Donald Brumfield, Sandy Rappolo, Tommy Reese, William Reed, Bob Dickerson, Darrell Emerson and Val Rodriguez.

One of the Baton Rouge Water Company's new wells, the LeBlanc Well on Harrell's Ferry Road, was drilled in September 1955. Two water company employees watch the work in progress.

100+ years in BUSINESS

The company has 85 wells, ranging from
600 feet to 2,800 feet deep, with a combined
capacity to deliver 113 million gallons of
water per day. However, average daily de-
mand is only about half that capacity, with
33.5 million gallons delivered through more
than 2,100 miles of distribution lines, Owen
said.

“We have a large capital budget that we
reinvest in the company every year to pre-
pare for future growth,” Owen said.

The water company also plays an instru-
mental role in Baton Rouge maintaining a
Class I fire rating, a designation the city was
the first in the United States to achieve in
1920. The fire rating, which gives the city
some of the lowest fire insurance rates in the
country, is also derived from the capabilities
of the Fire Department.

In addition to its system of wells, Baton
Rouge Water Co. has eight elevated storage
tanks with a total 7 million-gallon capacity,
and two underground storage tanks with a
total of another 5.75 million gallons.

That’s approximately 13 million gallons of
water-storage capacity.

The tanks are filled nightly and drawn on,
practically serving the purpose of addi-
tional wells — during periods of peak
demand, says Owen.

The company’s original sandpipe, built in
1889, still exists downtown on Lafayette
Street and was placed on the National
Register of Historic Places in 1973. The com-
pany’s offices have moved from Natches
Street (now Front Street) to Lafayette
Street in 1920; to Government Street in 1961; and to
the present location on Goodwood Boulevard
in 1965.

Baton Rouge Water Co. serves customers
within the city limits. Its subsidiary, Parish
Water Co., serves customers in the rest of
East Baton Rouge Parish, with the exception of
Baker and Zachary.

Parish Water Co. has a subsidiary of its
own, Ascension Water Co., which serves
the northern part of Ascension Parish. In July,
the subsidiary reached an agreement to buy
Capital Utilities, which serves 4,000 cus-
tomers in Ascension Parish and 1,000 in Liv-
ingston Parish.