

Louisiana's Historic Courthouses: A Look at the Past and the Present

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Editor's Note: These articles provide information on historic Louisiana courthouses. In this issue, the courthouses in 15 parishes are discussed. The Louisiana Bar Journal will provide more courthouse articles over the coming anniversary year.

United States Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. said it best, “[F]or much of our history, the courtroom has served not just as a local center of the law and government, but as a meeting ground, cultural hub and social gathering place.”¹ As attorneys, many of us are in courtrooms every day but few of us may take the time to truly appreciate the architectural detail and historical value these public buildings offer.

Louisiana’s courthouses are among the states most valuable resources and possessions that often go unappreciated. The many different and distinct architectural styles of these courthouses are deeply rooted in Louisiana’s rich history. Some courthouses dating back to the 1800s are still being used today. These courthouses, noteworthy for the places they hold in Louisiana’s history, are time capsules.

As this issue of the *Louisiana Bar Journal* begins the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Louisiana State Bar Association, it is only fitting to dedicate a small portion of this publication to courthouses throughout this state.

Ascension Parish

► The Ascension Parish Courthouse, located at 300 Houmas St. in Donaldsonville, was established in 1889 and designed by James Feret. A courthouse built in 1810 served the parish until 1846 when it was destroyed by fire. The building housing the next courthouse was destroyed by a federal



Avoyelles Parish Courthouse. Photo by John Deacon. Used with permission.

bombardment of Donaldsonville. The parish eventually outgrew the new courthouse built in 1862. The present-day Ascension Parish Courthouse in Donaldsonville was built in 1889, with additions made in 1974.² Despite these additions, the original structure is almost unchanged and still in use today.

► The Ascension Parish Courthouse, located at 820 S. Irma Blvd. in Gonzales, was established in 1975 and designed by August Perez and Associates. Ascension Parish is one of the parishes with two functioning courthouses. In 1974, the Ascension Parish Courthouse East was completed. This courthouse is considered an annex and not a separate entity.

Avoyelles Parish

The Avoyelles Parish Courthouse is located in the parish seat of Marksville. The red-brick structure was completed in 1927 at a cost of \$250,000. It was designed in the neoclassical revival style by architect Herman Duncan and constructed by the Caldwell Brothers. The red-brick-and-concrete structure consists of two floors and a basement, with the top floor being used as a courthouse until the late 1970s. The building also houses the Avoyelles Parish Clerk’s Office. Still in use today, the courthouse was renovated in the 1970s.



A postcard view of the Caddo Parish Courthouse.

Caddo Parish

The Caddo Parish Courthouse sits on a commanding site of approximately 2.5 acres on Texas Street, a major thoroughfare in downtown Shreveport. Two prior courthouses stood where the current courthouse stands today. The current courthouse was constructed in 1926 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Caddo Parish Courthouse was designed by Edward F. Neild, a Shreveport architect. Once, upon a tour of Shreveport, President Harry S. Truman was so impressed with the design of the courthouse that he approached Neild to design the courthouse in President Truman's home county of Jackson County, Missouri. Subsequently, Truman enlisted the services of Neild as a consulting architect for the rehabilitation of the White House during Truman's term as president. He also enlisted Neild as the lead architect of the Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri.

The courthouse itself is surrounded by grass and stately oak trees donated by Judge Thomas Fletcher Bell in the late 1800s.³ The courthouse grounds are dotted with indigenous shrubs and seasonal plants. Benches are available for the enjoyment of the public. On the Texas Street side of the courthouse, a Confederate Veterans Reunion Monument honors those who died fighting for the Confederacy. Unbeknownst to many, this small tract of land within the perimeter of the courthouse

property is actually private property owned by the Daughters of the Confederacy and not to the Parish.

The design and décor of the inside of the courthouse is a fitting tribute to the people of Caddo Parish. The walls are made of Rosatta marble and have bronze torches lighting the way. The floors incorporate pink and gray Tennessee marble with a border of Belgian black marble, and opposite of these marble floors are bronze lamps hanging from the ceiling.

The inside has many stories to tell, including a history of Caddo Parish in a first-floor display of historical items. While the first-floor display manifests images of growth and prosperity, there is a darker side to the courthouse that has entertained thrill seekers and frightened courthouse employees. The 7th floor of the courthouse was the site of the old jail and contains old cells that are no longer in use but maintain their unnerving appearance as a place for the condemned. The 8th floor presents even more frightening displays as this floor was where convicted criminals were hanged.⁴ As recent as 2014, a latch is still visible where the floor would drop to execute the execution.

In more recent years, Shreveport has gained the reputation as "Hollywood South" as film producers and movie stars migrated to the city. In 2009, the Caddo Parish Courthouse was the setting for "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt" starring Michael Douglas and Jesse Metcalfe.⁵ While

the movie was a dud with critics, the courthouse looked great!

The Caddo Parish Courthouse has survived the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights era, the Cold War and a few booms and busts in the oil and gas industry, but even still appears to be fully prepared to take on the 21st century.

East Baton Rouge Parish

► The East Baton Rouge Courthouse, located at 300 North Blvd. in Baton Rouge, was established in 2007. The first courthouse that served the Baton Rouge area was a structure built in 1807 during the days of the Louisiana Territory until it was converted into a public school. A second courthouse was built and later leveled in 1922 to make way for a new courthouse to serve the parish. The third parish courthouse opened in 1923 and an addition was constructed in 1957 to install central air conditioning. It is now the location of the Baton Rouge City Court. In 1977, a new parish government and judicial complex served the parish until a new courthouse was built in 2007.⁶

► The Russell B. Long Federal Building and United States Courthouse, located at 777 Florida St. in Baton Rouge, was established in 1972. The U.S. Post Office, circa 1897, was the location of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana until 1933. The U.S. Circuit Court of the Eastern District also met here until the court was abolished in 1912. This building is now the location of the City Club of Baton Rouge. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana met at the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse built in 1933 until the creation of the Middle District in 1972. This building is still in use by the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Middle District of Louisiana.⁷

East Feliciana Parish

The East Feliciana Parish Courthouse, located at 12305 St. Helena St. in Clinton, was established in 1840 and designed by J.S. Savage in 19th century American and Greek-Roman Classical Revival style. Today, only four courthouses built in Louisiana before the Civil War are still used for parish proceedings. The oldest and still functioning courthouse in Louisiana, the East Feliciana Parish Courthouse was built in 1840 after a fire destroyed the first courthouse in 1839.



The present-day Natchitoches Parish Courthouse. Photo by John Deacon. Used with permission.



The Natchitoches Parish "Old Courthouse." Photo by John Deacon. Used with permission.

But after years of deterioration, the local community banded together to raise almost \$3 million to update the National Historic Landmark for modern use. Thanks to its dedicated community, original specifications confirm that the East Feliciana Courthouse stands today as it did in 1840.⁸

Iberville Parish

The Iberville Parish Courthouse, located at 59705 Bayou Rd. in Plaquemine, was established in 1906 and designed by A.J. Bryan. In 1848, land was purchased and construction began on a courthouse which later became the City Hall. The present courthouse, built in 1906, had a top turret faced with clocks facing north, south, east and west. The original turret was destroyed by fire in the 1940s and not replaced. The present courthouse was remodeled to conform to that part of the structure that had been lost through the fire. The former Iberville Parish Courthouse built in 1848 now houses the Iberville Parish Museum which has been open since 2000.⁹

Livingston Parish

The Livingston Parish Courthouse, located at 20300 Government Blvd. in Livingston, was established in 2014. Livingston Parish may hold the record for having the most locations of parish courthouses in Louisiana. The first courthouse in the parish is generally considered to have been established in Van Buren on the east bank of the Tickfaw River.¹⁰ In 1835, the first Livingston Parish courthouse was built in Springfield. In 1871, the courthouse

was moved to Port Vincent. During the 1872 legislative session, the ruling body changed the parish seat to Port Vincent. In October 1875, the Port Vincent courthouse was burned down in the middle of the night, destroying all of the records inside. After much controversy, a settlement was reached that the parish seat would be in a central location between the two towns on Highway 42. The little settlement was called Springville and later renamed to Centerville in the spirit of the compromise that had been placed there. The Livingston Parish Courthouse in Centerville remained the parish seat until 1941 when a courthouse was built in what is now the Town of Livingston. At the end of 2014, the construction of the new Livingston Parish Courthouse was completed. The old Livingston Parish Courthouse in Port Vincent is on the National Register of Historic Places.¹¹

Natchitoches Parish

► The present-day Natchitoches Parish Courthouse was erected in 1940. Located on Church and Second Streets in Natchitoches, it was designed by architect J.W. Smith & Associates and constructed by T.M. Reed Construction. The building includes three stories and is a mixture of neutral-colored brick and concrete. An annex to the original structure was completed in 1959.

► The Old Natchitoches Parish Courthouse was built in 1896 at a cost of \$20,555. Portions of the "Old Courthouse" were damaged by fire in 1933. It has since been

restored several times, most recently in the late 1970s. The Old Courthouse currently houses the Old Courthouse Museum, a branch of the Louisiana State Museum. This structure was actually the second courthouse. The first Natchitoches Parish Courthouse was completed in 1828.

Pointe Coupee Parish

The Pointe Coupee Parish Courthouse, located at 201 E. Main St. in New Roads, was established in 1902 and designed by A.J. Company in Romanesque Revival Style. When Pointe Coupee was made one of the 12 parishes of Orleans, the chosen officials continued to use as a courthouse the same building that had served as such through French and Spanish possessions of the area. This building burned in 1846 and, two years later, the seat of government was moved to New Roads. On Sept. 1, 1847, a tract of land was purchased for \$1,600 from Baptiste LeJune for the courthouse, still located there today. The original section of the courthouse was built in 1902 in Romanesque Revival style. By the 1930s, this courthouse no longer fulfilled the needs of the growing parish. Instead of destroying the original structure, Pointe Coupee Parish built an annex at the rear of the existing structure. The annex was added in 1940 and, except for minor repairs, the courthouse has remained relatively untouched. This building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹²

Orleans Parish

► During portions of the Spanish and

French administrations, the Cabildo served as the seat of the government. Completed in 1799, the Cabildo was designed by Don Gilberto Guillemard. Located at 711 Chartres St., the building's main hall, the Sala Capitular (Meeting Room), was used as a courtroom. The Cabildo served as the home of the Louisiana Supreme Court from 1853-1910. Landmark decisions in the Slaughterhouse cases and *Plessy v. Ferguson* were handed down there.

► The Presbytere was designed in 1791 by Don Gilberto Guillemard to mirror the Cabildo, which is positioned on the other side of St. Louis Cathedral. Built on the site formerly used a residence for the Capuchin monks, construction of the Presbytere was completed in 1813. The structure, located at 751 Chartres St., was originally rented for commercial use by private citizens. The Presbytere became a courthouse in 1834. Between the years of 1822 and 1853, the Presbytere was used to house the Louisiana Supreme Court, district courts, officers and clerks of courts, and other judicial offices. After the eventual move of the Louisiana Supreme Court to the Cabildo in 1853, the Presbytere continued to serve as a courthouse until 1911.

► The Carrollton Courthouse served as the seat of government for Jefferson Parish until the City of Carrollton was annexed by New Orleans in 1874. Title of the building was eventually transferred to the City of New Orleans in 1888 and has served as the site of several New Orleans public schools. The Carrollton Courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2015.

► The Louisiana Supreme Court's current home is at 400 Royal St. Construction of the building, designed by Frederick and Ten Eyck Brown, began in 1908 and was completed in 1909. The courthouse was officially opened in October 1910. The structure originally housed the Louisiana Supreme Court, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal, New Orleans Civil District Court, City Courts and other city and state agencies. After a temporary relocation to Duncan Plaza Civic Complex, the Louisiana Supreme Court and the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal returned to Royal Street in 2004 after the building underwent extensive renovations.



Rapides Parish Courthouse. Photo by John Deacon. Used with permission.

► Housed at 400 Royal St. since 1910, the Civil District Court relocated to its current building at the corner of Perdido Street and Loyola Avenue. Sitting adjacent to New Orleans City Hall, the structure was completed in 1959.

► The Algiers Courthouse, originally housed in the Duverje Plantation home, was built after the original site was destroyed during the Great Algiers Fire of 1895. Located at 225 Morgan St. in Algiers, the courthouse is home to 2nd City Court, the registrar of voters and other essential city government offices. Designed by Linus Brown and Alonzo Bell, the Algiers Courthouse is the third-oldest courthouse in continuous use in Louisiana.

► Built in 1929, the Criminal District Court was designed by Diboll & Owens in a combination of Roman Classic and modern Art Deco styles. Located at the corner of Tulane Avenue and Broad Street, the courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places on Jan. 12, 1984.

► The John Minor Wisdom U.S. Court of Appeals Building, originally serving as the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, houses the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. Styled in Italian Renaissance Revival, the structure was constructed between 1909-15. After vacating the premises in 1963, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals returned to the building after it had undergone extensive renovation in 1971-72. In

1994, the building was renamed in honor of John Minor Wisdom, one of the "5th Circuit Four" and a respected judge who served on the 5th Circuit from 1957-99. The building, located at 600 Camp St., was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

Rapides Parish

The present-day Rapides Parish Courthouse, completed in 1939, is located in downtown Alexandria on Murray St. It was designed by architects Edward F. Neild, D.A. Somdal and Edward F. Neild, Jr. and constructed by contractor James T. Taylor. The seven-story building was designed in the Art Deco Modern style and features a limestone exterior with rectangular windows. The building also houses the Rapides Parish Clerk's Office and the Rapides Parish Detention Center. Previous courthouses were completed in 1859 and 1873. The 1859 courthouse was located on Second Street with a view of the Red River. This courthouse was destroyed by fire on May 13, 1864, during the Union Army's Red River Campaign. A replacement was later erected in 1873. The 1903 courthouse was designed by J. Rely Gordon and constructed by the F.B. Hull Construction Company of Jackson, Mississippi. This courthouse was in service for just 36 years before being replaced by the current courthouse.

St. Helena Parish

The current St. Helena Parish Courthouse, located at 369 Sitman St. in Greensburg, was established in 1938. The first courthouse in the parish was located at Mount Peiler in the extreme southern part of the parish and was probably built about 1804. The building was constructed of brick and was later sold and used as Mount Peiler Academy, one of the parish's first schools. The second courthouse was built in 1832 of the log-cabin type of construction, but this structure burned to the ground at an unknown date. In 1938, the present courthouse was completed which housed a jail on the third floor.¹³

St. Tammany Parish

The St. Tammany Parish Justice Center, unlike any courthouse in Louisiana, is a 312,000-square-foot structure containing 22,000 cubic yards of concrete and 25,000 St. Joe bricks and housing 12 courtrooms. It was built at an extraordinary cost of \$64 million. The opening of the Justice Center was such an epic event that the June 26, 2003, edition of the local newspaper—*The St. Tammany Farmer*—included a 45-page insert dedicated to the Justice Center that included well wishes from businesses, law firms and city officials. Though plans to construct this massive structure began in 2000, the Justice Center's history dates back much farther. The history began two centuries ago with the election of Louisiana's first governor, William Charles Cole Claiborne, who served as governor from 1812-16. About one year after his election, Gov. Claiborne signed legislation in March 1813 authorizing a commission consisting of Thomas Spell, Robert Badon, Benjamin Havard, Joseph Hertraise and Benjamin Bickham to locate a courthouse within three miles of the center of St. Tammany Parish, which at that time consisted of Washington Parish, St. Tammany Parish and the portion of Tangipahoa Parish east of the Tangipahoa River. To meet the Governor's charge, the commission established St. Tammany Parish's first courthouse along the Bogue Chitto River near Enon on property owned by Judge Thomas C. Warner — St. Tammany Parish's first parish judge. Four years after establishing the court near Enon, commissioners David



The St. Tammany Parish Justice Center opened in 2003. Photo by Kimberly R. Silas.

B. Morgan, Jesse R. Jones, John Wright, James Tate and Daniel Edwards were named to move the parish seat.

Some time before the parish seat was moved, the Claiborne Company had purchased a portion of the Kleinschmidt Spanish land grant in 1813. In exchange for the commission naming the Town of Claiborne as the parish seat, the Claiborne Company offered some of its land and agreed to build a courthouse and jail for the parish, free of charge. This resulted in the second St. Tammany Parish courthouse being built in the Town of Claiborne, which is believed to be named after Gov. Claiborne. Though construction of the second courthouse was completed in 1818, it is routinely referred to as the "1819 Courthouse" and is believed to have cost the Claiborne Company \$20,000 to erect. Within 10 years of the erection of the 1819 Courthouse, the Police Jury determined that the courthouse should be moved to Covington, previously known as the Town of Wharton and presumably named after John Wharton Collins who founded Covington in 1813.

On June 5, 1837, the Police Jury purchased Lots 12-15 on the corner of Boston and New Hampshire Streets in Covington as a courthouse site. The area between New Hampshire, Columbia, Boston and Gibson Streets in Covington is referred to "The Courthouse Square" on some of

Covington's older maps. The 1819 Courthouse was eventually sold and used as a private residence and Catholic seminary. In the late 1800s, a hotel known as the Claiborne Cottages was built next to the former 1819 Courthouse. Those cottages perished in a fire in the early 1900s.

In 1884, the Police Jury voted to demolish the courthouse located at The Courthouse Square. During the demolition and rebuilding period, Covington Town Hall was used as a courtroom. The new courthouse opened two years later in 1886 and was used for 73 years. As the population of Covington, Slidell and Mandeville flourished, however, demands were made to relocate the parish government yet again. In response, the Police Jury met secretly, erected a building, and then voted to move the parish offices to Mandeville on Koop Drive sometime around 1936. Once Covington's leaders discovered the Police Jury's plan, the city attorney, Peter Garcia, filed a lawsuit against the Police Jury to prevent the relocation of the courts. The City prevailed in its lawsuit, and the court issued a judgment ordering the courts to remain in the parish seat of Covington. This victory did not end the dispute, however. The battle regarding the location of the parish seat continued to wage between the City of Covington and St. Tammany Parish. The parties ultimately



resolved to let Covington remain the parish seat. Despite reaching this resolution, however, the existing courthouse could not keep up with the growing population of St. Tammany Parish. Also, the completion of the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway in 1956 magnified the need for a larger facility to conduct the parish's business. In 1959, the parish decided to build a new courthouse, completed in 1960. Within the year it took to complete the new courthouse, court was held in the basement gymnasium of the Jefferson Avenue grammar school. The 1960 courthouse was used until the St. Tammany Justice Center opened in 2003, which brought together many of the parish's offices that were scattered throughout the city.

West Baton Rouge Parish Courthouse

The West Baton Rouge Parish Courthouse, located at 850 Eighth St. in Port Allen, was established in 1957. Little is known about the structure of the first courthouse in the parish, but it was located in a town known as West Baton Rouge, now Port Allen. The second courthouse was sold for a debt of the Police Jury in 1870 but was later rented by the Police Jury until 1882 when a new courthouse was erected. The third courthouse served the parish for 74 years. Official use of the building was eventually discontinued but it has become a landmark and has been renovated to accommodate the West Baton Rouge Museum. The fourth courthouse is the current one.¹⁴

West Feliciana Parish Courthouse

The West Feliciana Parish Courthouse, located at 4789 Prosperity St. in St. Francisville, was established in 1903 and designed by A.J. Bryan. When Feliciana Parish divided, West Feliciana Parish chose St. Francisville as the location of its courthouse. Between 1824-29, the first parish courthouse was housed in a rented two-story building. The second courthouse was established in the Old St. Francisville Hotel. The third courthouse was built in 1852 at the present site in St. Francisville. In March 1903, a new courthouse was built, still in use today.¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., 1972-87. Lewis F. Powell, Jr., Forward to Virginia Historic Courthouses (John O. and Margaret T. Peters, authors), University of Virginia Press.

2. *The Courthouses of Louisiana* (Glenn R. Conrad, Carl A. Brasseaux and Warren Robison), Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, La., pages 34-35.

3. Caddo.org.

4. www.ktbs.com, "The Haunted Side of The Caddo Parish Courthouse," Oct. 30, 2014, Devon Patton.

5. Film Trail Map, www.shreveport-bossierfilm.com/2014-NW_LA_Film_Trail.pdf.

6. *The Courthouses of Louisiana* (Glenn R. Conrad, Carl A. Brasseaux and Warren Robison), Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, La., pages 47-49.

7. Federal Judicial Center, www.fjc.gov, History of the Federal Judiciary, Historic Federal Courthouses.

8. National Trust for Historic Preservation, East Feliciana Parish Courthouse, www.preservation.org.

9. *The Louisiana Parish Courthouses* (Betty L. Morrison), Her Publishing Co. (1975) Gretna, La., pages 66-68.

10. "History of Livingston Parish," mimeograph script courtesy of Livingston Parish Library.

11. *The Courthouses of Louisiana* (Glenn R. Conrad, Carl A. Brasseaux and Warren Robison), Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, La., pages 90-93.

12. *The Louisiana Parish Courthouses* (Betty L. Morrison), Her Publishing Co. (1975) Gretna, La., pages 115-116.

13. *The Louisiana Parish Courthouses* (Betty L. Morrison), Her Publishing Co. (1975) Gretna, La., pages 131-134.

14. *The Louisiana Parish Courthouses* (Betty L. Morrison), Her Publishing Co. (1975) Gretna, La., pages 176-177.

15. *The Louisiana Parish Courthouses* (Betty L. Morrison), Her Publishing Co. (1975) Gretna, La., pages 180-181.

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