

entertainment
LIVING

NOLA.COM | SUNDAY, JULY 9, 2023 1D



Danny Heitman
AT RANDOM

In a summer office, I find myself a crew of one

Our family will head north later this summer, threading our way up the Eastern Seaboard to see what there is to see. In the meantime, we've been staying home as others travel far and wide. Friends and loved ones have been to England and Scotland, France and Botswana, on Alaskan cruises and trips to the beach. Meanwhile, the longest trip I've recently taken was a 20-minute drive to get seafood beyond the city limits.

For those of us left behind in midsummer, life does its work with a skeleton crew. I arrived at my two-story office a few Fridays ago and realized I'd be alone for my shift. In the next eight hours, the only soul I saw was the postal worker who brought our mail. Eating lunch in a silent break room, I felt like the captain of a ghost ship. Back at my desk, the place was so quiet that I could hear a clock ticking down the hall.

Somewhere in the depths of the hushed afternoon, my mind wandered back decades, returning to my days editing the high school newspaper. Production chores meant that sometimes, I had to visit campus over vacation months. It was strange back then to see all the classrooms empty, the gym desolate, the cafeteria as solemn as a church. The scene made me think of those post-nuclear dramas where bombs erase every human from the landscape but one unlikely survivor.

These days, solitude seldom seems quite so eerie to me. Maybe age has made quiet more companionable, though life after the lockdowns has probably played a role, too. With hybrid schedules, whether we're working remotely or at the office, a divided staff means that more of us are tackling assignments in a room by ourselves. Aloneness is a new norm.

That's not all good, as U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy noted in sounding his recent alarm about an epidemic of American loneliness.

I'm lucky to live days graced by friends and family, so occasional hours alone are more of a pleasure than a penance. Those quiet spaces are most welcome in summer, a season that's supposed to offer a pause from the urgencies of the moment.

Respite seems more elusive this summer, with turmoil in Russia, heat waves and storms, the usual harried politics everywhere. Even so, if I wake early and catch the day before its fever rises, mornings sometimes

► See **AT RANDOM**, page 7D

JUSTICE ON THE MOVE



PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

The former Livingston Parish Courthouse in Springfield, built in 1835

How historic courthouses were left behind as parish boundaries shifted

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA | Contributing writer

Tucked among the parking lots of the Chimes Restaurant on Covington's Bogue Falaya River is a remarkable relic: a 200-year-old building in the French Creole style, with a double-pitched hipped roof, widow's walk, broad double gallery and outdoor staircase. It's the former St. Tammany Courthouse, which served as the parish seat of justice from 1819 to 1837.

Twenty-five miles to the west, in the little town of Springfield on the Natalbany River, is another striking historical edifice, this one built in 1835 in a rare mix of Federal and Creole designs. It's the former Livingston Parish Courthouse, which served from 1843 to 1872.

Fifty miles to the northwest, in the town of Jackson on Thompson Creek, stands a stout little cottage also with a mix of American and Louisiana architectural influences. Built in 1816, it served as the Feliciana Parish Courthouse from 1820 to 1824.



► See **GEOGRAPHIES**, page 6D

Where does the English term for 'French Quarter' come from?

Tourists walk past historic buildings in the French Quarter on May 18.



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

BY DOUG MacCASH
Staff writer

Mary Anne O'Neil lives in Walla Walla, Washington, which is roughly 2,300 miles from where she grew up, on Versailles Boulevard in Broadmoor. She went to Ecole Classique High School on Napoleon Avenue, then left town to pursue an education and teaching career.

O'Neil is 78. She is professor emerita of French at Whitman



College in Walla Walla, but you can tell, after all these years, she keeps one foot planted in the Crescent City.

In 2022, she wrote the book "Three Centuries of Girls' Education: Regulations of the Ursuline Nuns of the Congregation of Paris."

Yep, those Ursuline nuns, the ones who brought a measure of godliness to the French Quarter way back in the 1700s. Or tried to, anyway.

Which brings us to O'Neil's deceptively simple question: Where does the English term "French Quarter" come from? And when was it first used?

According to Tulane professor Richard Campanella's book

► See **CURIOUS**, page 7D

GEOGRAPHIES

Continued from page 1D

What these former courthouses reveal is an interesting phenomenon in the historical geography of our state. As authorities created new civic parishes, a process that began in 1807 with 19 units and ended in 1912 with the 64 parishes we have today, they continually shrunk the larger, earlier jurisdictions to carve out new smaller units.

This in turn forced a change of the parishes' seats of justice — that is, their courthouses and government offices.

Being designated a seat of justice meant a lot to a rural locale. It gave it prestige, an iconic edifice, a governing body with political clout and, perhaps most importantly, a stable source of employment.

Among the jobs were a justice of the peace and clerk of court, record-keepers and administrators, a sheriff, jailkeepers and workers in various departments — not to mention law practices and other offices, shops and services catering to the courthouse crowd. Becoming a seat of justice effectively guaranteed an “industry,” almost literally, it put a community on the map.

Like county seats elsewhere in the nation, parish seats in Louisiana were designated by the state Legislature with an eye toward being maximally convenient to all residents, so that travel times to the courthouse would be more or less equalized throughout the jurisdiction.

The ‘middle of nowhere’

That left a lot of wiggle room, since population distributions were often skewed, as were transportation routes and the suitability of the terrain. Nevertheless, most courthouses ended up roughly at the geographical center of their respective parishes. Rural landholders would often donate land for the courthouse, hoping to enhance the real estate value of the proverbial middle of nowhere.

Conversely, losing a courthouse could be devastating, because parish seats rarely had natural geographical advantages. One sure way to lose designation as parish seat was to get decentralized within a reconfigured parish.

The so-called Florida Parishes across Lake Pontchartrain illustrate how parish reconfigurations affected seat-of-justice designation. Spanning from the Pearl River to the Mississippi and first



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD

The Carrollton, a new retirement community in the former Ben Franklin High School and Old Carrollton Courthouse in the Riverbend on South Carrollton.

created in 1807, they were St. Tammany, St. Helena, Feliciana and East Baton Rouge parishes.

Because St. Tammany initially included all of what is now Washington Parish, its original parish seat was placed in the middle of the vast expanse just west of today's Enon. Marked on maps simply as “St. Tammany Court House,” the remote seat developed into a crossroads and ferry landing on the Bogue Chitto River.

But as populations increased sufficiently for the state Legislature to carve out Washington Parish in 1819, the little courthouse town suddenly became inconvenient to residents of both parishes. No wonder it has since completely disappeared.

Washington eventually created its own seat, at what became Franklinton by 1826, while the new St. Tammany Parish seat went to a town site named Claiborne, which had been laid out in 1819 across the Bogue Falaya River from Covington.

For the next two decades, St. Tammany residents conducted their parish business at that majestic French Creole building still standing by the Chimes Restaurant.

Covington prospers

But all the while, the town of Claiborne failed to gain traction, while Covington prospered across the Bogue Falaya River. In 1837, court proceedings were moved to downtown Covington, and in time, Claiborne would get subsumed as today's Claiborne Hill section of the modern city of Covington.

St. Tammany Parish courts remain in downtown Covington today, but in 2000, the rest of the parish government moved to a site along Interstate 12 — once again, to be more convenient to all parish residents.

Like the original St. Tammany Parish, St. Helena Parish initially spanned a huge area, from the Mississippi state line all the way to Lake Maurepas. Montpelier became its seat of justice, being roughly at the center, and along with a courthouse, it got the federal Land Office, for the titling and distribution of public lands, as well as a post office in 1814 and the Montpelier Academy in 1833.

But by then, populations had increased sufficiently for the state to carve Livingston Parish out of St. Helena, and just as had happened in St. Tammany, Montpelier found itself decentralized. It lost its seat of justice, though it managed to survive, thanks to being on the semi-navigable Tickfaw River.

Once reconfigured, St. Helena Parish's new geographical center gave rise to Greensburg as its seat of justice, while newly created Livingston Parish's seat went to the roughly centralized town of Springfield, founded decades earlier along the Natalbany River.

New parish, new seat

Springfield's historic courthouse still stands; it's that circa-1835 Federal/Creole edifice mentioned earlier, now on Mulberry Street just off Main Street. But it's no longer the parish seat, because in 1869, the state created Tangipahoa Parish at the expense

of its three neighbors, primarily Livingston Parish.

Livingston's parish seat got relocated to Port Vincent, then to the aptly named Centerville (a.k.a. Springville) and finally to the Town of Livingston.

As for Greensburg, the current structure hosting the St. Helena Parish Courthouse dates to 1938, but right in front of it is a much older Greek Revival-style building known as the Greensburg Land Office — that same federal land office that had originally been in Montpelier.

Now let's take a look at Feliciana Parish, where in 1815 the state legislature called for a survey to determine a centralized location for a parish seat. The result was a bluff near Thompson Creek, where landholders eagerly donated land to build a courthouse. Thus was born Jackson, Louisiana, named for the hero of the recent battle of New Orleans.

Alas, Jackson's centrality lasted for all of four years. In 1824, Feliciana Parish was divided into West and East sections, with Thompson Creek serving as the boundary. Overnight, Jackson went from centralized to peripheral. The new seats of justice went to St. Francisville for West Feliciana Parish and to Clinton for East Feliciana Parish, and remain there today.

But if you go to the corner of High and College Street in downtown Jackson, there still stands the stout 200-year-old cottage that once housed the Feliciana Parish Courthouse.

The parishes of greater New Orleans south of Lake Pontchartrain also offer examples of how parish geography affected courthouse siting, though here it was population distribution as much as land mass that drove courthouse locations.

Of Orleans and Jefferson

The Algiers Courthouse is a still-active vestige of the era when Algiers was inside Orleans Parish, but outside the city of New Orleans, and therefore needed a place for its own police jury and governing apparatus.

Jefferson Parish, carved out of Orleans Parish in 1825, had a litany of courthouses, and while none were centralized in terms of land mass, all were positioned conveniently to the distribution of population.

One former courthouse still stands on Rousseau Street in the Irish Channel, when that area was within the Jefferson Parish City of Lafayette — until New Orleans annexed it in 1852.

Another courthouse operated in

Carrollton, until New Orleans annexed that Jefferson Parish city in 1874, at which point the parish seat moved to Harvey and finally to Gretna, where it sits today. The circa-1855 courthouse still stands in Carrollton, and now serves as a senior living facility,

St. Bernard's courthouse was once located east of Poydras, at a time when half the parish's population lived in the eastern marshes and worked as trappers and fishermen. But as urbanization from New Orleans spread into Arabi and continued downriver, more and more parish residents complained of the inconvenience, and in 1939 the courthouse was moved to its present location in Chalmette. The prior courthouse still stands at 1201 Bayou Road in St. Bernard Village.

A trip across the river

Similarly, Pointe à la Hache became a seat of justice at a time when residents were evenly distributed up and down Plaquemines Parish, for whom this east-bank settlement provided maximum convenience.

But once again, as metro New Orleans expanded, more and more residents settled in Belle Chasse, and for them, a trip across the river to Pointe à la Hache was highly inconvenient. When a bizarre arson fire destroyed the historic courthouse in 2002, most parish offices set up in Belle Chasse and remain there today, while judicial proceedings have resumed in a new courthouse still at Pointe à la Hache.

Being designated parish seat was a prize for a community, giving it an important administrative role and a stable if limited source of employment. But like any economic sector, it was not something on which to over-depend, because administrative roles are easily relocated and rarely permanent.

Witness the original St. Tammany Courthouse near Enon, of which nothing remains but a historic plaque, or any of those historic structures in Covington, Springfield, or Jackson, none of which still hold court.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Draining New Orleans;” “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans;” “Bienville's Dilemma;” and “Bourbon Street: A History.” Campanella may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter. Special thanks to Lou Ritten for joining on field exploration.