

THE STATE MUSEUM UNVEILS ITS NEW CAPITAL FACILITY AND A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION BY PAUL F. STAHL JR. - an excerpt from *LOUISIANA LIFE*, SPRING 2006

How many times have you attempted to describe the singularity of Louisiana, the forces and resources that have shaped the place, and the characters and customs that it in turn has shaped? What stories would you tell of Louisiana, and what wonders would you assemble in that magical space to be the visual support for your oratory?

It's been done.

Facing Fourth Street at Spanish Town Road, the new Louisiana State Museum-Baton Rouge is the story of Louisiana. It is an introduction for the uninitiated, and for us, it's a giant dose of nostalgia.

The Louisiana State Museum, a division of the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, turns 100 in 2006, and its yearlong calendar of special events began in February. In Baton Rouge, museum staff and dignitaries and the public celebrated the old and the new: the nine historic structures that provide the museum's exhibit space, and, in birthday-party parlance, "one to grow on": a new museum facility in Baton Rouge that faces the Louisiana State Library in the heart of Capitol Park.

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An incredibly high-ceilinged entrance crosses the entire front of the State Museum's newest facility, and here the "collection" begins with Huey's Capitol.

Inside, the scheme of the place presents on the first floor, a "Grounds for Greatness" section that measures Louisiana's role in terms of its national significance: Poverty Point and other evidence of its prehistoric importance, the impact of the Louisiana Purchase in shaping the nation, then Louisiana's role in war, commerce, civil rights and other aspects of modern history. With that context established, even a Louisiana novice can move on, with a bit of essential insight, to the third floor's tribute to the peoples and cultures of the state, called "The Louisiana Experience."

The process of conceiving a Louisiana overview in such detail, with such thoroughness in the overlaying of historic storytelling with elements of art, politics, commerce, folkways and natural phenomena (not to mention selecting existing or newly designed display items to support each aspect of it) could only have been done in one way: "The hard way," Director of Museum Collections Greg Lambousy says. "[Through] years of staff meetings and brain-storming with members of the collections staff, along with our museum historians, territorial support staff, and Science and Technology Department. It's benefited the entire museum, really, because it's allowed us to do things we've long dreamed of, like expanding the museum's great jazz collection to encompass Louisiana music in all its forms."

Through the center of the first floor's "Louisiana and the Nation" exhibits runs the single most vital aspect of Louisiana's identity and history, the Mississippi River, including its attributes, commerce, Capt. Shreve and the evolution of the steamboat, ferries and bridges, modern barge traffic, and, finally, innovations such as the levee system and Shreve's snagboats.

Elsewhere around the giant room are sections devoted to the Louisiana Purchase, "Louisiana at War," "Louisiana Giants" (Huey Long and Louis Armstrong), Sportsman's Paradise and "Natural Abundance." Interactive stations provide vintage filmstrips and audio bites, and the display items range from small (such as the shaving mug of Capt. "Old Push" Leathers of the steamboat *Natchez* or the felt sombrero Zachary Taylor wore during the Mexican War) to the gigantic (a shrimp boat from Bayou Lafourche, a massive two-row cane harvester, a vintage cotton gin from the Biedenharn collection in Monroe, and the Civil War *Pioneer* submarine).

It's "Louisiana at War" that will most consume visitors, from the surprise of meeting a Choctaw brigadier general via oil portrait at the Battle of New Orleans to the surprise of finding "Laffite" actually spelled as Jean spelled it; from the barrister's wig of CSA Secretary of War/Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin to a timber from the Union fleet's "Bailey's Dam" at Alexandria. The World War II display contains bits of history including the Louisiana Maneuvers and Louisiana POW camps and the uniform of "Flying Tiger" Claire Chennault.

On the third floor, inspired by the blacktopped state roads of an earlier day, a broad black "highway" leads through the "Louisiana Experience," complete with vintage gas pumps and direction signs. Along the highway our traditions of food, architecture, religion, festivals and recreation are presented geographically, with regions introduced by old highway billboards - "Welcome to North Louisiana" and "Greetings from Acadiana," for example. And you'll pass other "sure signs" of where you are: an LSU tailgating setup, a Lucky Dog cart, a Christmas bonfire atop a levee, the African House complete with Clementine Hunter gallery inside, a photo-and-electric montage of Cane River Christmas lights, the Evangeline Oak ... you get the picture.

Two major attractions along the "Louisiana Experience" highway are the special music and Carnival sections, the latter depicted by films, costumes and ephemera of the Cajun *courir de Mardi Gras*, the Mardi Gras Indians and the traditional parade-and-ball celebrations of many towns and cities.

The music section is also divided by region: Cajun and zydeco films played in a tiny dance hall, New Orleans/Lake Charles/Ville Platte recording sessions in a typical independent studio of the '50s, country stars at the "Louisiana Hayride," jazz greats of New Orleans, the lintel stone of the French Opera House, and tributes to composers Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Edmond Dede. And scattered among them are displays of Clifton Chenier's crown, the bugle from Louis Armstrong's waifs-home days, Michael Doucet's fiddle, Webb Pierce's cowboy outfit, a replica of a bamboula drum, the gear and guitars of famous bluesmen, plus film stations with push-button selections of any Louisiana singer or musician you can think of.