

# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday and Today

Looking Back to Effectively Move  
Forward

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# LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

c.1900 Hickory Street School, which later became The Baton Rouge Colored High School before becoming McKinley High School in 1927.

Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. It is intended to convey the need to make “benevolent use of the past” in order to make progress into the future. The literal translation of the word and symbol is “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” At the heart of the concept is the importance of a careful investigation of the past in order to understand the present and gain knowledge needed for the future. This work is rooted in the spirit of sankofa.

At MetroMorphosis, we firmly believe that any meaningful efforts to positively impact communities of color in Baton Rouge must be rooted in the knowledge of the communities arrived at the current state of affairs. Being unaware of the events, activities and decisions that have shaped what we see in the city’s Black neighborhoods renders one ill equipped to effectively contribute to real progress. It is imperative to acknowledge that what exists today is a product of who the people of this community have been and what the people of this community have done.

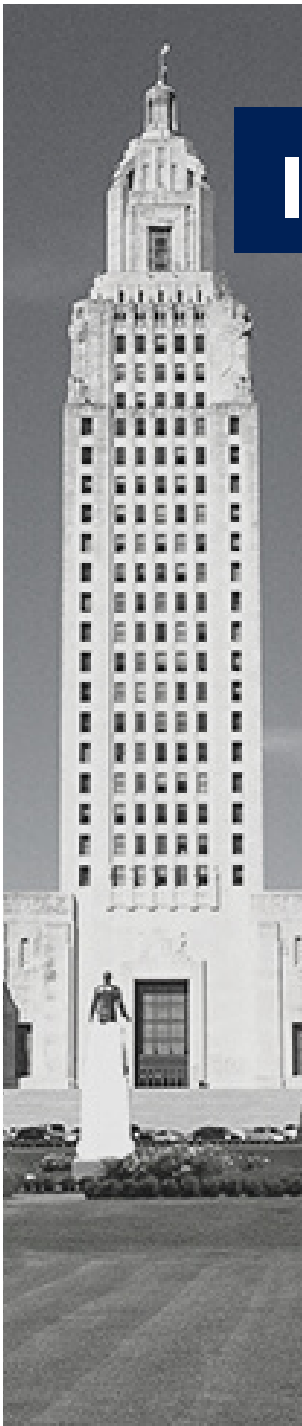
If this document is to fulfil its purpose, a few things are important to recognize. First, this is not designed to

be a complete and exhaustive retelling of the history of Black people in Baton Rouge. Rather, this effort is but a “broad slice” of the experiences of Baton Rouge’s Black citizens, their institutions, and the broader community context in which they existed.

**"It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind."**

from the Twi language of the Akan people in Ghana

It is also important to note that this is not a finished document. Our hope is that community members, history buffs, educational institutions, and other community based organizations will take this document and add to it and share with others. Finally, and most importantly, this document is not put forth to be simply read. While we hope the reader will find the content engaging, our sincere desire is that this document will serve as a conversation starter. We hope families, neighborhoods, churches, schools and other organizations will create real engagement with this writing and robust conversations about what it means to Baton Rouge’s future.



# INTRODUCTION

Louisiana's state capital is home to a rich history and dynamic community stretching back hundreds of years. Present day Baton Rouge has distinguished itself nationally and internationally through its ever-expanding economy and diverse culture. The Baton Rouge metropolitan area is comprised of nine parishes with a total population of over 850,000 per the U.S. Census's 2019 estimate, making metropolitan Baton Rouge the nation's 70th largest metropolitan statistical area. East Baton Rouge Parish, the regional anchor, contained over 440,000 residents as of the 2019 U.S. Census update estimate, making it the most populous parish in Louisiana.

East Baton Rouge Parish consists of residents living in the cities of Baton Rouge, Baker, Central, Zachary and in unincorporated East Baton Rouge Parish. The City of Baton Rouge and East Baton Rouge Parish are governed by a consolidated government structure that features a combined Mayor-President and Metropolitan Council, commonly referred to as City-Parish government. The cities of Baker, Central and Zachary have their own separate municipal governments while falling under the Mayor-President and the Metropolitan Council in their capacity as heads of East Baton Rouge Parish.

Present day Baton Rouge is home to the state's flagship university, Louisiana State University, one of the nation's largest historically Black colleges and universities, Southern University, and the Baton Rouge Community College. The Port of Greater Baton Rouge is the 10th-largest in the nation. Situated directly north of downtown on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River, ExxonMobil's Baton Rouge oil refinery is the fifth largest oil refinery in the nation and the thirteen largest in the world.

It is one of many petrochemical facilities located on the river and stretching from Baton Rouge south to New Orleans. Despite the dominance of the petrochemical industry, state government and Louisiana State University are the region's largest employers.

As of 2019, the city of Baton Rouge has an estimated population of 220,236 that is over 54% Black, and the city's Black community has a distinct social fabric and history of its own. The story of Black Baton Rouge in many ways tracks the story of Black communities throughout the nation. It is a story about the remarkable triumph over the horrors of slavery, the exploitation of Jim Crow segregation, the cumulative consequences of the historically racialized maldistribution of resources and the systematic exclusion of the city's Black residents from civic life and economic opportunity.



# BLACK BATON ROUGE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

Current-day Southern University near the Plank Road Corridor is said to be the site of the dividing line between the Houma Tribe and the Bayougoula Indian Tribe territories. The dividing line was marked by a red cypress stick, which influenced the name Baton Rouge.

Baton Rouge was founded in 1699 and was the site of many historic events and home to many people, including many of African ancestry. The city of Baton Rouge dates back over 200 years. From its incorporation in 1817 until the early part of the 20th century, Baton Rouge was a relatively small town bound by the present-day Spanish Town to the north, the Baton Rouge National Cemetery to the east, the Mississippi River to the west, and Beauregard Town to the south. During the era of slavery, many Black people were enslaved while some others were free. Regardless of their enslavement status, Black residents of Baton Rouge in the early 1800s and beyond were treated as chattel or as second-class citizens.

In 1709, the first enslaved Africans were brought to Louisiana. Their forced labor was employed to transform the region by removing the old growth forests and installing cotton and sugar cane plantations in the 18th and 19th centuries. As cotton and cane were extremely cyclical industries, Baton Rouge plantation owners concentrated on volume business in the peak periods. To accomplish this goal, plantation



c. 2011 The Red Stick Sculpture to commemorate the exchange that led to Baton Rouge getting its name. Located on the present-day campus of Southern University, the sculpture was designed by Alumni Frank Hayden

owners endeavored to construct a road to connect Baton Rouge to a train depot north of the city in Clinton, Louisiana. This led to the construction of Plank Road, named for its early construction of wooden planks.

Baton Rouge was home to many active plantations prior to the Civil War. Plantations in East Baton Rouge Parish included Scotland, Magnolia, and Longwood. Longwood Plantation, located in South Baton Rouge, a sugar cane plantation, was established around 1785. The first records of sugar production on the plantation are dated 1828. Over 300 hogsheads of sugar were produced that year (a hogshead was a standard unit of measurement of about 48 inches long and 30 inches in diameter). The property changed hands many times over the years. In 1845, Josiah Barker sold the plantation to his son, Thomas Hazard Barker, for the sum of \$150,000.

Thomas Barker sold the property two years later to Thomas Mille and Jacques Philippe Meffre Rouzan along with 93 slaves. Enslaved Africans were included in land deals. As a former site governed by plantation culture, Baton Rouge's roots of racial tension run deep beneath the city.

During the enslavement period, Louisiana was also home to free people of color. However, the brutality and inhumanity of the race-based chattel slave system were also far-reaching; slavery impacted the lives of even free people of color, who were in Louisiana as early as the 1720s. Prior to the Civil War, Louisiana had the largest population of free people of color in the nation. Irrespective of their status as free people, Black people in the state did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as members of the dominant racial group. Free Black residents during much of the 1700s were legally prohibited from cohabitating with slaves and from aiding fugitive slaves. In fact, it was not out of the ordinary for the whites to use free Black people to punish the enslaved.

The passing of the Louisiana colony from the hands of the French to the Spanish, along with manumissions that followed the American Revolution, contributed to the growth of the free Black population in the state. An article in the North Carolina Law Review comparing the enslavement systems of Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana describes the ability of slaves to win their freedom in Louisiana during the 1800s as exceptionable. "Compared to other states in the United States, the lingering influence of civil law in Louisiana allowed greater rights of manumission, including the right to sue for freedom without a next of kin or guardian ad litem. The Supreme

Court of Louisiana confirmed in an 1816 ruling that self-purchase was still enforceable in the state. A new law followed the U.S. southern trend of increasing restrictions on manumission in the nineteenth century, passing laws requiring freed slaves to leave the state and new regulations on free people of color, culminating in re-enslavement laws in the 1850s."

Although the system of slavery included many prohibitions against people of African descent having money and placed restrictions even on Black residents of free status, Black people were able to accumulate wealth and not only purchase the freedom of some of their relatives but also operate lucrative businesses. The forced separation of the races created opportunities over time for dollars to circulate within segregated Black communities. Many Black businesses thrived in Baton Rouge from the 1800s through the 1970s.

Sweet Olive Cemetery is one of the significant contributions by influential free people of color of South Baton Rouge. Established in 1850, Sweet Olive Cemetery was one of only two African American cemeteries in Baton Rouge until 1926, and it was the closest to the center of 19th-century Baton Rouge. First African Baptist Benevolent Society and Sons and Daughters of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church were the official incorporators. The cemetery is bordered by North Boulevard, Delphine and Baxter Streets, Louisiana Avenue, and South Twenty-Second Street. The cemetery was closed due to overcrowding, financial problems, and legal disputes. Appeals for state support were rejected on the basis that Black communities should fund their own cemeteries at the same time the state was funding Confederate cemeteries.



# FROM BLACK RECONSTRUCTION TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

c.1888 The Training School for Wives and Mothers , from the book *In Christ's Stead: Autobiographical Sketches*

## Civil War and Black Reconstruction

The Civil War had a tremendous impact on the city. Baton Rouge was under Union control by the spring of 1862.

With the end of the Civil War, the formerly enslaved began to migrate to Baton Rouge in large numbers from the surrounding areas. Between the years of 1860 and 1880, the Black population of Baton Rouge expanded from 33% to 60% of the population. The state capital was then moved to Opelousas and ultimately Shreveport prior to the Battle of Baton Rouge and returned in 1882 after the end of Reconstruction. Black soldiers fought during the Civil War in Baton Rouge, and the city was also a haven for slaves seeking freedom. From the years leading up to the Civil War through the years immediately following the conflict, the Black population in Baton Rouge almost doubled as the number of whites decreased during the same period. The Black residents endured the promises and failures of Reconstruction. For example, while Black males in Baton Rouge could vote after the adoption of the 15th Amendment and Black males held important elected positions, limitations were still placed on access to valued resources such as wealth, status, and power.

During Reconstruction, over 40 Black representatives occupied seats in the Louisiana State Senate in 1868. One of these representatives and a very influential person of this period is Pinckney Benton Stewart (P.B.S.) Pinchback. When P.B.S. Pinchback, a Black New Orleanian, was elected to the Louisiana State Senate in 1868, he joined a legislature that included forty-two Black representatives during Reconstruction. Pinchback would serve briefly as the state's first Black Governor and Congressman.



c. 1863 Famous "The Scourged Back" photo depicted Private Gordon who fled slavery to join union forces in Baton Rouge.

Jim Crow laws first appeared in Louisiana in 1868. Pinchback is credited with marshalling support for the establishment of Southern University, which was chartered in 1880 in New Orleans. In 1877, the Democratic Party – at the time violently committed to the re-establishment of

of white supremacy and the end of Reconstruction through the removal of federal troops – regained control of the state legislature. Most Black citizens were totally disenfranchised by the new state constitution of 1898 and were excluded from politics for decades.



Gov. Pinckney Benton Stewart (P.B.S.) Pinchback was the first Black governor of Louisiana. Elected during reconstruction, Pinchback served for one year, but was later elected to the U.S. Senate

After the federal troops were withdrawn from the South, Black Baton Rouge residents were again marginalized and disenfranchised. According to a report about the experiences of African-Americans after the Civil War in Louisiana, “Where cotton was king, tenancy and sharecropping prevailed. Sharecroppers were provided with the land, tools, and seed by the landowner with an expectation that they produce a certain amount of crop. The whole family—husband, wife, and children—worked the crop together. They would not actually get paid until that crop was harvested and sold. With no source of regular income, they had to purchase their own food and clothing, etc. on credit extended by the landowner at the plantation store. These stores featured exorbitant prices and high interest that made it nearly inevitable the crop would not cover the expenses the farmer accrued during the year and kept the sharecropper in a cycle of constant debt.”

Baton Rouge’s Black community bore witness to the promise and failures of Reconstruction.

They experienced the exploitative system of sharecropping and convict leasing – the latter the genesis of a system that has led to Louisiana’s record setting incarceration rates.

The criminalization of Black life through the Black Codes, Jim Crow and convict leasing established patterns in Black communities and in white society that normalized criminalization as the sole state response to the strivings and setbacks of Black people. The collateral consequences are cumulative, impacting family composition, labor participation and cultural expression.

### **South Baton Rouge’s T.T. Allain**

After the end of Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era began. During this period of legal segregation and discrimination, Black people from all economic backgrounds called South Baton Rouge their home. Many prominent and influential Black families and individuals lived in the area from before the Civil War until the 1960s. One such individual was Theophile T. Allain, also referred to as T.T. Allain. Born on a plantation on November 29, 1851, Allain was born a slave. His mother was a slave, and his father was a slave owner who treated him as a free person. He traveled with his father to Europe and was educated in the North. Theophile Allain went on to become a Black farmer, merchant, and politician. Allain was elected to the Louisiana State Legislature in 1870 but denied a seat due to balloting irregularities. He served as election supervisor in 1872, as a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives from 1872 through 1874, and in the Louisiana Senate from 1874 until 1880. He served in the Louisiana House again between 1881 and 1890. After his death on June 17, 1921, Allain was buried in the historic St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery in South Baton Rouge.



Theophile Allain was not only a successful business owner, farmer, and politician, he (along with Pinchback) also played an integral role in establishing Southern University in 1880. Southern University is a historically Black university in north Baton Rouge, and it was the only institution in the city for Blacks pursuing postsecondary degrees until the 1960s. The original site for Southern University was New Orleans until it relocated to Baton Rouge in 1914. The state's flagship school, Louisiana State University, is located in South Baton Rouge but prohibited Black youth from enrolling in classes or even stepping foot on campus. Many college-educated residents of South Baton Rouge are graduates of Southern University. Theophile Allain supported a state-supported Black institution even when some influential Black individuals believed the establishment of the institution of higher learning represented a concession to racial segregation. It was not uncommon for Black people to establish their own institutions when excluded from predominantly white institutions, including colleges and universities. There is an academic building at Southern University named for Theophile Allain to honor his contributions to the creation of this institution. T.T. Allain Hall houses the math and computer science departments.

### **The Black Church**

According to W.E.B. DuBois, a pioneer in sociology in North America, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and author of *The Souls of Black Folks*, churches historically played a far more important role than the family or even schools in the African American experience. The disruption of the biological family

resulted in the creation of kinship networks, for example. Laws prohibiting Black people from learning to read or write throughout many places in the United States, including in Louisiana for a time, limited the impact of education on the lives of far too many people of African ancestry, especially during the 1800s and the first half of the 20th century. There is no shortage of predominantly Black churches in South Louisiana, including in South Baton Rouge. Area Black churches include Bethel AME, Mount Zion Baptist, Shiloh Baptist, and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church. Church leaders were often also important community leaders.

Churches, the Black church in particular, played a particularly significant role in the lives of African Americans from the days of slavery to Reconstruction to the early part of the 20th century and beyond. The Black church, according to DuBois and others, was the center of social interaction in the Black experience. For much of the early history of people of African descent in the United States, the church was the hospital where African Americans who were wounded and hurting went to get well. The Black church was where people of African ancestry got information and amusement. The Black church was the place where African Americans pooled their resources and mobilized their collective efforts to identify and address the challenges facing their race. It is therefore not surprising that many of the early figures and places associated with civil rights movements in America have their origins in faith traditions.

Mount Zion Baptist was organized in 1858 by two pastors, one Black – Pastor Isaac Palmer and one White – Pastor John Brady.

Eight others participated in the organization including Henry Strong, Silas Green, and Martha Hinton. The church was originally located at 335 Maximillian Street in South Baton Rouge. It moved to its present location at 356 East Boulevard in 1954. The street the church is on was recently renamed in honor of a former pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, Rev. T.J. Jemison. Jemison not only led the church for many years, he also was an important leader in national Baptist and civil rights organizations. He was one of the leaders of the historic 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, which served as a model for the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. The latter boycott catapulted Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. onto the national stage in the fight for equal treatment for all Americans.



c. 1953 Black Baton Rougeans organized free carpools to allow those boycotting the bus system to still be able to meet daily responsibilities. This boycott served as a blueprint for the more well-known Bus Boycott in Alabama two years later.

Wesley Chapel Methodist Episcopal Negro Church, founded in 1866, was and remains an important social institution in South Baton Rouge. "The beginning of WESLEY was in the First Methodist Church (White) then located on the corner of Laurel and Fourth Street. When an attempt of segregation was made, a seed was planted in the minds of those who wanted something for themselves and for those who followed after them."

According to East Baton Rouge Public Library, "The Blundon School and Orphanage also had its beginning here." African Methodist churches still exist in Baton Rouge. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is located in South Baton Rouge and, in 2016, hosted the national unveiling of a U.S. postal stamp dedicated to one of the founders of the denomination, Richard Allen.

Black residents of South Baton Rouge have worshipped at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church since the church was organized in 1870. Two dozen residents of South Baton Rouge were members of the congregation in 1947. Located at 1743 Convention Street, the predominantly Black church remains an important fixture in the community. Rev. Charlie Green Jr. is the current pastor.

Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church is another pillar of the Black Baton Rouge community. It was organized in 1872 by Rev George Byrd. Reverend Byrd was succeeded by Rev. Jack Mitchell in 1906. Originally located on Boyd Street in the historical Spanish town area, Shiloh moved to its present sit on South 14th Street in 1932. Rev. Mitchell retired in 1944 after passing the leadership to Rev. Dudley T. Smith. Following in the footsteps of his father, Rev. Charles T Smith became the pastor of Shiloh after the death of Rev. Dudley T Smith in 1962. During the leadership of Rev. Charles T. Smith, the church purchased property on both 14th and 13th street (renamed Eddie Robinson Sr Drive). The current church and its first building used for education, located at 185 Eddie Robinson Sr. Drive, were constructed in the 1970s. Shiloh continues to provide a number of resources for the Black community including an early learning center, credit union, men's transitional housing

facility and a drug prevention program. Currently, the congregation of over 3,500 members is led by Pastor Fred Jeff Smith, who succeeded his father, Rev. Charles T Smith, in 2013.

Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church is the first church established in the historic Black neighborhood of Scotlandville. Organized in 1893, the first sanctuary was a wood-framed building on an acre of land on Scenic Highway purchased for \$50. Rev. Harden Jackson was the leader of the founding congregation. Many of the pastors thereafter had affiliations with Southern University. For example, the eighth pastor, Rev. Jesse B. Bilberry Jr., was part of Southern University's administration until he was seated in 1984. On the same original site, the Mount Pilgrim complex includes a large sanctuary, administrative offices, an educational center, and the Family Life Center. The current pastor is Rev. Ronnie O. Blake.

New Light Missionary Baptist Church is another pillar of the Scotlandville community. Founded by Rev. Tony Scott, the church was organized in 1895. Rev. Scott was also a sugar cane farmer. The first sanctuary originally located on a patch of land located near the Nicholas Wax Memorial Cemetery. This building was destroyed by a storm in 1910. The church was rebuilt in a new location on Crane Street. A charter was established for New Light in 1935 when the church was still a one-room structure. New Light is now located at 650 Blount Road since 1981 while under the direction of Dr. H.B. Williams. In 2002, the Community Outreach Center was added to help provide services to the Scotlandville community. Among these was a 2005 partnership with Pennington Biomedical research to conduct a study on diabetes. Rev. Gil Wright, the current pastor, succeeded Dr. Williams in 2005.

Progressive Baptist Church is a historic faith-based institution in the heart of the Black community of South Baton Rouge. Progressive Baptist Church was organized in 1916. When it was organized, there were over 300 members. The historic Black church, currently located at 998 Julia Street, remains actively engaged in its commitment to the spiritual needs of members and to the broader needs of the surrounding community and city. The church is among a coalition of community-based organizations working to improve the quality of life for residents throughout the city, including the Black community in South Baton Rouge. The current pastor, Rev. Melvin Rushing, is a participant in an initiative called "Together Baton Rouge."

Founded in 1916 by Jenkins Johnson, J.S. Jones, I.S. Powell, Jake Spears, and Wesley Gaines, Mount Carmel was established with services being held at Odd Fellows Hall. Rev. Netters officiated until Rev. Samuel Watkins was elected the first pastor. A member of the church, Ernest o'Connor, built the first sanctuary in 1920 after the congregation grew to about 30 members. It was located on Sora Street in Scotlandville. Mount Carmel continued to expand including a larger structure in 1939, an expansion in 1949, a larger sanctuary in 1961, and an annex in 1982. During this time of expansion, the church was renamed Greater Mount Carmel in 1951. Expansion temporarily displaced the membership in 1961 who then used Cook's Theatre on Scenic Highway while the larger sanctuary was under construction. Pastor Clee E. Lowe currently leads the Greater Mount Carmel congregation.



Many African Americans are Catholic in Louisiana, and there remains a substantial African American Catholic community in Baton Rouge today. Prior to the early 1900s, Black Catholics attended mass at either St. Joseph Cathedral or St. Agnes Catholic church. On Christmas Day in 1918, the first mass was celebrated at the first exclusively Black Catholic in Baton Rouge, St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. The brick sanctuary was built with the help of the parishioners. The predominantly Black parish not only provided for the spiritual needs of Black Catholics in the diocese, it provided schools for them as well.

For centuries, Black churches have served as places where Black congregants went to have their spiritual needs met. Black churches necessarily met other basic needs, especially during times where segregation, enforced by actual violence and the threat of violence or by unjust laws, excluded Blacks from participation in predominantly white social institutions. One example is the Blundon School and Orphanage also called the Blundon Home. The Blundon School and Orphanage started in 1889 in the basement of the Wesley Methodist Church in South Baton Rouge. Children received instruction during the day while adults were educated at night. Enrollment surpassed the allotted space leading to relocation to a building on North Boulevard, known as the Live Oak School. Most of the students were poor and could not afford to pay tuition. However, in lieu of money, many paid tuition with items like cornmeal, chickens, flour, and sweet potatoes. The Blundon Home founder, Mrs. Polluck Blundon later bought property on South Boulevard where several buildings were constructed beginning in the early 1890s including a home, a printing office, a five-room school

equipped for 200 students on South Boulevard, and an industrial school and boys' living quarters on what is now Louise St. Most of the construction was sponsored by financial and material contributors in the North, particularly New Yorkers. The Blundon Home served the Black community during a period when there were few public schools educating Black children in the South.

### **Black Schools**

Race was used to facilitate the unequal treatment of Black students for many years, including in Louisiana and other parts of the Deep South. During the 1800s, Louisiana had a law on the books that resulted in a one-year prison sentence for anyone found violating the ban on the education of free or enslaved Blacks. African Americans continued to face obstacles in their quest for a quality education even as American schools were used to assimilate white immigrants from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe who arrived en masse between the 1880s and early 1920s. These immigrants were considered less desirable than whites already in the country but were still preferable to Black workers and other people of the color in the nation at the time. Schools functioned not to prepare Black students for inclusion into the larger society but to prepare them for life at the bottom of the economic and social structure. Compulsory school attendance was connected to the different approaches to education for Blacks and whites.

Black people in Baton Rouge have a long history of creating their own educational opportunities when laws and social norms placed formal and informal restrictions on their access to predominantly white educational institutions.

For instance, The Fourth District Baptist Association ran Baton Rouge Academy beginning in 1906. A suggestion was made in the early 1890s for the association to buy a tract of land for a denominational school. The Fourth District Baptist Association purchased land referred to as the O'Connor Tract on Perkins Road. The doors opened on September 23, 1893, to educate Black boys and girls. Prof. J.L. Croosiey was the school's first principal. Another school that served Black students was the Rosenwald School. It was one of more than 5,000 schools throughout the South funded in part by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. The foundation's aim was to improve the quality of public education for Blacks in the early part of the 20th century in the South.

In 1907, Dr. J.M. Frazier, Sr. started the Hickory Street School to educate the children of Black sharecroppers and others both in the region and from as far away as Mississippi. He outgrew his initial location and opened the Baton Rouge Colored High School in 1913 near the corner of Perkins Road and Bynum Street. The first class graduated four students in 1916. The school grew even more and on September 19, 1927 the original McKinley Senior High School opened on Texas Street, currently Thomas H. Delpit Drive. For several decades McKinley was the only high school for Black students in the city and for much of south Louisiana. McKinley High School was also home to a number of sports teams in 1941 including basketball, football, baseball, volleyball, and indo ball. The school has contributed to the success of many athletes and coaches, including Eddie Robinson, Don Chaney, Tommy Green, Calvin Nicholas, and Carl Stewart.

St. Francis Xavier Catholic School is a fixture in South Baton Rouge. It is the only African American Catholic school



1987. Students at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School in Baton Rouge, the only African- American Catholic School in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. Photo from the The Catholic Commentator

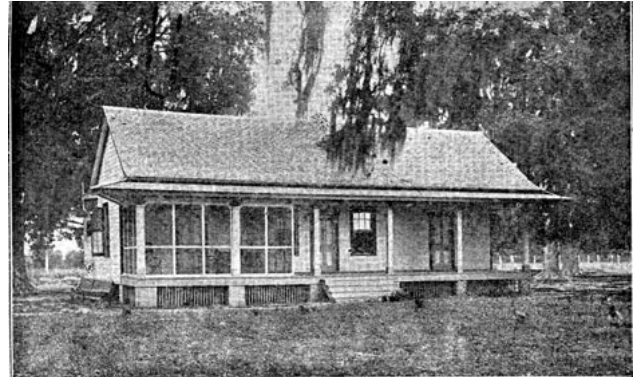
in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. The school, which opened its doors in 1920, educates students from pre-kindergarten to the eighth grade. According to the school's website, Holy Family Academy, the first Catholic school for Black worshippers in Baton Rouge, was sold and the money received was loaned to the parish to build St. Francis Xavier Catholic School, the first parochial school in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. The school draws students from the immediate neighborhood and from areas such as Zachary and Gonzales, Louisiana. St. Francis High School opened in 1955 but was torn down in 1961 to make way for the interstate system. "That same year the old elementary school, which had also served as the convent, was moved to the site of the present Saint Francis Xavier Church. A new school was constructed on the property, and opened its doors in 1963. The church provided educational opportunities for Black children when they were excluded from predominantly white institutions and suffered when the predominantly Black community was literally divided by the construction of the interstate system with little regard for the immediate and long-term effects of the decision on the historic Black neighborhoods and their residents and institutions.

Southern University Laboratory School, often referred to as Southern Lab, was established in 1922 to provide teachers' training for Southern University education majors. Dr. Clark, the president of Southern University, believed that a training school was necessary to equip students who planned to become educators. Originally, the school was named the Southern University Model Training School. It changed to Southern University Demonstration School in the 1930s; then was renamed the Southern University Laboratory School a few years later. Southern Lab became accredited in 1936. In 2022, the school, that educates children from pre-Kindergarten through high school, will be 100 years old and will have graduated thousands of Black students and prepared thousands of Black teachers.

Despite laws forcing the separation of Black and white students across the United States and informal and formal efforts to restrict Black access to education, schools for Black children predated the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Baton Rouge African American male and female students were being educated by African American male and female adults who served as teachers or in some other supportive role. Blacks created their own educational opportunities when laws and social norms placed formal and informal restrictions on their access to predominantly white educational institutions.

Louisiana State University was off-limits for Black residents in Baton Rouge making Southern University the choice for many dating back to the 1800s. Southern University has conferred degrees to students from Baton Rouge schools for generations.

Southern University was established in New Orleans in 1880 with just 12 students, five faculty, and a total budget of \$10,000. The university relocated to Baton Rouge in 1914.



1914. When Southern University moved from New Orleans to Scotlandville, this was the only inhabitable building on the campus. It currently serves as the Archives and Information Center. Photo from Facebook

### **Black Businesses**

Schools, churches, and cemeteries were not the only places where racial groups were separated by law or by the racial norms of a given time period. Blacks were not permitted to attend the same theaters as whites during the Jim Crow era. Blacks in Baton Rouge did not miss out on entertainment opportunities simply because whites refused them admission to facilities designated for whites only.

The Cook Theatre located in Scotlandville was the first Black owned theater in Louisiana. Originally opened in the 1930s at 8254 Scenic Highway, the theater was a wooden structure that may have previously served as the Cook family blacksmith's shop. 35 millimeter film was very flammable and the theater was completely destroyed by fire in 1944 - partly because white firefighters refused to assist a Black owned business. The owner, James Cook Sr, rebuilt on the same site in 1945 a cinder block structure that operated as a movie theater for Black audiences for over 30 years.



James Cook Sr. was a graduate of Southern University Laboratory school and Southern University with a degree in mathematics. After being unable to secure a job as an engineer, he worked as a laborer at Standard Oil to support his family until the movie theater became successful.

Black visitors and residents throughout the city stayed at Hotel Lincoln and took in shows at the historic Lincoln Theater. The theater, located on the corner of Eddie Robinson Sr. and Myrtle Drives, opened in 1949. It was one of three major Black theaters in Baton Rouge at the time. Movies were 75¢ then. The building also housed several Black-owned businesses, including insurance companies, a laundromat, and a barbershop. Efforts to restore the theater are continuing.



Opening in the mid 1930s, Cook's Theatre was the first Black owned theater in the city. The original structure was destroyed by fire in 1944 but was later rebuilt and served Black theatergoers for over 30 years

The upstairs rooms in the Lincoln Theater were used during the civil rights struggles in the 1950s. One longtime resident of South Baton Rouge reflected on the significance of the theater to the Black community. The resident recalled that the theater “had been our place, this was our salvation right here.” With the end of legal segregation in the city, “soon, one-by-one, things started to vanish, and so did the essence of the Lincoln. It was once



The Lincoln Theater was an important fixture in Black Baton Rouge. Remembered as one of the only places Black people could take in a movie, it also served as meeting space for Civil Rights groups. Residents continue efforts to preserve the history of and to restore the building. Shown here in 2018, murals adorn the exterior seemingly as a tribute to the artistry the building represents.

called a fortress of refuge for thousands, and now it needs to be saved.” The Lincoln Theater Center Foundation Board is working to restore the building by trying to turn the Lincoln into the Black History Hall of Fame.

The Grand Theatre was located on Twelfth Street at North Boulevard in South Baton Rouge. According to Cinema Treasures, Grand Theatre “was built in the late-1890’s as an opera house and dance hall which was patronized by African Americans. The building was later converted into a movie theatre. The Grand Theatre is listed in the 1945 Film Daily Yearbook as closed with 475 seats. In the 1950’s the theatre was converted into a nightclub.” Another famous place to enjoy a movie was the Temple Theater. The Grand United Order of the Odd Fellows began construction of the building that would house the theater in 1924. The Roof Garden—housed in the same building as Temple Theater—featured local and national bands, including Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington among others.

The Scotlandville neighborhood, surrounding Southern University, was a major hub of Black businesses in Baton Rouge. Centered on the intersection of Scenic Highway and Scotland Avenue, Scotlandville was basically a self-sufficient haven for Black residents in Baton Rouge during Jim Crow. The primarily Black middle-class residents of Scotlandville and Black residents from other areas of Baton Rouge had access to consumer goods and services from Black owned businesses like grocery stores, clothing stores, funeral homes, pharmacies, automotive sales and repairs, and realty services. Started in 1919, Kelly's Blue Line was the first bus company in Scotlandville and it was Black owned. Arteal Kelly and his wife Amanda, who started the bus line, were also the first Black grocers in the area when they opened their store that same year. The bus line was used to help accommodate the travel needs of Black residents within the Scotlandville area and in the broader Baton Rouge area.

Webb's Barber Shop and the Chicken Shack are among the longstanding Black businesses still in existence today in South Baton Rouge. Webb Barber Shop, founded by Henry Webb,

was established around 1916 and is still considered the go-to place for haircuts. Soon after, Thomas Delpit moved to Baton Rouge from New Orleans in his early twenties and opened the Suburban Ice Cream Shop in 1935 with 34¢. Two years later, it became Chicken Shack. According to Joseph Delpit, son of Thomas who took over the business, The Chicken Shack was a community place, "like a cafeteria for the neighborhood Black kids." Thomas Delpit bought them school uniforms, fed them, and helped get them jobs. The restaurant also played host to meetings of the civil rights movement.

### **Development of Black Baton Rouge**

In the decades after the Civil War, Baton Rouge never exceeded its pre-war population of roughly 5000. All of that changed when Standard Oil (now Exxon) arrived in Baton Rouge and opened its oil refinery in April of 1909. In January 1919, The Lamp – Standard Oil's nationally circulated trade publication- wrote glowingly about the refinery as a replacement to the area's cotton fields and primitive slave economy. It declared the refinery "an agent of Post-Reconstruction reconciliation" uniting northern



c. 1960 Barbers at Webb's Barber Shop located in South Baton Rouge. Webb's opened in the early 1900s and continues to provide services today. Photo courtesy of the East Baton Rouge Library Digital Archives

expertise and southern natural resources. The company's arrival dramatically altered the city's economy and development trajectory. The small town boomed and grew exponentially. Standard Oil, along with Southern University and Leland College, contributed to the growth of the Black working class. This in turn contributed to class divisions with the Black community more broadly as some – albeit a relatively small number – became decidedly middle-class. Some argue that these class dynamics and the relatively stable working and middle class employment available to Black residents in Baton Rouge hampered the community's activism during the height of the civil rights movement.

Standard Oil employed or did business with Blacks residents, including Baton Rouge businessman Horatio Thompson, the first Black man in the South to operate an Esso service-station franchise. A resident of South Baton Rouge, Thompson became the Capital City's first Black millionaire. He played an important role in the history of Blacks in Baton Rouge, including during the historic bus boycott. Despite the stable employment these opportunities provided for some, more than a third of Black adults were unemployed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Most of those with jobs earned low wages as domestic or unskilled laborers. The exploitation of Black labor significantly undercut wealth creation in the Black community. Rigid residential segregation meant that while Black neighborhoods contained relative class diversity, the city's worst poverty could be tracked along race and geography.

After Southern University relocated from New Orleans to Scotlandville, Louisiana in 1914, a small community developed immediately north of Baton Rouge and the new Standard Oil plant.

Southern University faculty and staff quickly populated Scotlandville and the University sponsored the area's first professional offices and financial institutions. In segregated Baton Rouge, Black settlement was limited to Scotlandville, South Baton Rouge, and the Eden Park area. These areas grew into hubs for Black political, social, economic, and cultural activity in the early decades of the twentieth century.

### **Influential Black Figures in Baton Rouge**

Despite limited opportunities to achieve a working class or middle class lifestyle, civic engagement grew among the small city's Black community. In 1932, Gus Young was one of only three Blacks in East Baton Rouge Parish allowed to register to vote. He was a member of the board of directors for the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter and the city's Bi-Racial Committee. In 1938 he founded the First Ward Voters League, which politically organized what is now the Eden Park neighborhood. One of the major thoroughfares of the Eden Park community was renamed to honor the contributions of Gus young.



Gus Young was one of three Black people allowed to vote in East Baton Rouge Parish. Photo courtesy of Mary Jetson

Eddie Robinson Sr. is one of the most recognizable names in college sports. Robinson was the son of parents who never earned high school diplomas. Nevertheless, his parents encouraged him to pursue his desire to get a college education. After graduating from McKinley High School, Robinson attended Leland College located in Baker, Louisiana, where he excelled as



quarterback. Robinson wanted to coach after his college career, but coaching opportunities were few and far between. Robinson found a job working in a feed mill in Baton Rouge. He soon became aware of an opening for a football coach at Louisiana NegroNormal and Industrial Institute, which later became Grambling University. Robinson's coaching career began in 1941 and the rest is history. The McKinley High School graduate coached more than 200 players who went on to play in the NFL. Doug Williams, a Super Bowl champion, is just one of the professional players Robinson coached over the course of his career. By October 7, 1995, he became the first college football coach to break the 400- win barrier.



Coach Eddie Robinson, Sr. broke barriers to become one of the winningest coaches in college football history. His legacy reached beyond the football field; he now has a street named after him, a museum celebrating his achievements and countless players and fans with loving stories to share.

According to the Eddie G. Robinson Museum website: "It didn't take Coach Rob, as he is affectionately known, long to prove his worth. Following his initial season, Coach Robinson took command and dismissed some players who he felt were not living up to expectations. The results came soon thereafter, as the next season Coach Robinson's team posted a perfect 9-0 season with the team going undefeated, untied, and unscored upon. Grambling was only the second collegiate team to have shut out every opponent, a feat which has not been repeated since."

At the time of Coach Robinson's death, tributes poured in from all over the globe.

Samuel Freedman of the New York Times wrote about opening day for a museum in the coach's honor and reflected on Robinson's experiences growing up in South Baton Rouge. Freedman observed that the only way a Black person in love with the game of football could attend a game at the state university was to show up at 5:00 a.m. on Saturdays to clean the stadium. Three years after Robinson's death at the age of 88, Louisiana appropriated \$3.3 million for the museum. Over the entrance to the museum on Grambling's campus is a replica of the Temple Theater's marquee, which is a landmark in South Baton Rouge and the place where Robinson played basketball and watched Westerns as a young person. In addition to the museum memorializing his accomplishments, the predominantly Black South Baton Rouge neighborhood surrounding the high school Eddie Robinson Sr. graduated from now has a street named in his honor.



Horatio Thompson, a businessman who became the city's first Black millionaire, played an important role in the Baton Rouge Civil Rights Movement. He was also the first Black man to operate an Esso Service Station. Esso would later become known as Exxon.

# THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

At the beginning of every year since the early 1980s, the nation pauses to remember and to reflect on the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A few weeks later, many Americans turn their attention to the contributions of people of African ancestry in America as part of Black History Month. Atlanta, Montgomery, and Selma are among the cities that come to mind when one thinks about Black history in America. Baton Rouge was the site of many significant events in the fight for social justice during the 20th century, including a bus boycott that inspired and motivated participants in the broader civil rights movement throughout the Deep South and beyond.

While Black people sought social justice, hate groups pushed back to maintain the status quo. Hate groups dot the political landscape in America. Louisiana is home to a number of hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan. Just as Black residents of Baton Rouge were fighting for equal treatment, members of the KKK were not only organizing but protesting publicly to maintain a separation between the races in all areas of life. Members of the Klan could be seen on the steps of the state capitol in the 1960s. State troopers and National Guard formed barricades between the KKK and Black demonstrators for civil rights.

Baton Rouge Black residents experienced unequal treatment for centuries but maintained the belief that change was possible.



1960s. Approximately 2000 citizens marched through downtown Baton Rouge to protest the arrest of 23 Southern University students who staged sit-ins to protest lunch counters who refused to serve African-Americans. Photo courtesy of the EBR Parish Library

In this section, we discuss the continued development of Baton Rouge and its influence of the Black community and its institutions. We examine the fight for social justice in Baton Rouge that in many ways mirrors the fight for social justice in other parts of the Deep South and the nation. Among the most notable examples of fights for equal treatment are the establishment of Brooks Park, the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, the Kress sit-ins, and efforts to desegregate schools.



1960s. Protests to end racial discrimination at downtown lunch counters brought together over 2000 citizens. Shown here on the corner of Florida and Third St. passing Liggett's Drugstore.

## **Construction of the Interstates**

The interstate development greatly impacted development patterns in Baton Rouge and, as was the case in virtually every other metropolitan area, set the stage for suburban sprawl. The passage of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 led to the creation of over 41,000 miles of highways and marked a new chapter in the nation's urban development. Baton Rouge was connected to the state's network of highways with U.S. 190, Airline Highway, which linked the city with southwestern Louisiana and New Orleans. U.S. 190 entered the city across the Huey P. Long-Oscar Allen Bridge, which opened in 1940. By the mid-1950s plans were underway for another bridge that would connect Baton Rouge with a new national highway system.

The northern route of Baton Rouge's interstate system began downtown with an independent freeway known as the Baton Rouge Expressway that opened in 1957. The first section extended roughly one mile between Spanish Town Road and Plank Road and comprised what is known today as Interstate 110. Interstates 10 and 12 were planned in the 1950's and added to the national highway system in 1957. Construction of the expanded interstate system began in the 1960's and the Horace Wilkinson Bridge opened in 1968, bringing I-10 across the river just south of downtown. Interstate construction continued until the mid-1970s, by which time the city had stretched out along I-12 and was beginning to grow along I-10 towards New Orleans.

The interstate development greatly impacted development patterns in Baton Rouge and, as was the case in virtually every other metropolitan area, set the stage for suburban sprawl. Interstate construction cut

almost exclusively through the city's Black neighborhoods, literally splitting the Old South and Valley Park neighborhoods down the middle. Across the nation interstate development targeted Black neighborhoods as a way to effect "slum clearance" and remove Black residents from valuable land in and near downtowns. The highway systems also offered White suburban residents easy access to employment and commerce downtown and the new bedroom communities developing on the edge of town. "White flight," as it was termed, characterized a new phase of residential racial segregation subsidized and facilitated by an unprecedented level of federal spending and national policy. In the decades that followed the impact of these policies reshaped the shape of American metropolitan regions, and Baton Rouge was no exception.

## **Southern University Growth and Challenges**

By the middle of the 20th century, Southern University was a major institution and source of pride for Black Baton Rouge residents. Black residents studied in a number of fields at Southern University and maintained community ties. Nutrition programs were popular at HBCUs throughout the country for generations. Southern University's nutrition program attracted Black students from South Baton Rouge and beyond. The nutrition program is still popular today. The mission of the program is to advance the health and wellness of individuals through the education of professionals, provision of research-based programs, and generation and dissemination of knowledge. The program prepares graduates to enter dietetic internships, assume careers in food and nutrition and related areas, and engage in graduate study. The vision of the program is to offer an



educational environment that embraces excellence in instruction, research, and outreach.

Graduates of Southern University remain active in the community and in political positions throughout the Capital City. For example, Dr. Clyde Johnson was a biology professor in the 1960s. A former student at Southern University, he continued to be involved in the off-campus community by seeking a position on the city council.

Alumni created Southern University Alumni Federation to support their beloved university. According to the official web page, the federation's mission is to support the goals and objectives of the university through recruitment, financial support, public relations, community outreach, talent loyalty, dedication, and commitment to the highest standards. Consisting of more than 100,000 graduates, the Southern University Alumni is actively engaged throughout the United States and the globe. Led by a history of dynamic, dedicated, and capable leaders, the federation strives to keep graduates connected and exposed to opportunities, recognize alumni accomplishments, bring awareness to issues that affect the university, and above all continue the fight to preserve the university and its mission.

Black residents have enjoyed taking in and participating in many of the activities that make Southern University a special place for alumni and for the surrounding community. Southern University Drum Corps and Dancing Dolls are just two examples. Both groups are pictured here in performances from 1965. The Dancing Dolls have the privilege of dancing to the music of the world-renowned Southern University band, of which the drum corps is an important part, known the world over as the "Human Jukebox." Students must audition and perform tap, jazz, modern dance, and

ballet and meet academic requirements.

Southern University's legendary Drum Corps and Dancing Dolls are fixtures at home and away games, especially for the football program. The university's program boasts a long list of student athletes who proudly wore the Jaguar uniform and later played professionally in the NFL. Players from the 1960s and the 1970s include Pete Barnes, Al Beauchamp, Donnie Davis, Alvin Haymond, Frank Pitts, and Clyde Williams. Mel Blount, another prestigious alumnus of the football program, was inducted into the National Football Hall of Fame in 1989. He played for many years with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Southern University has played an important role in the lives of Black Baton Rouge residents seeking an education at virtually every stage of life. Notable graduates of Southern University include American Idol judge Randy Jackson. Jackson attended Robert E. Lee High School in South Baton Rouge when the school's mascot was a confederate general and Black students were given confederate flags as souvenirs during commencement ceremonies.

The administration came under fire from many Black residents in Baton Rouge during the 1960s because the university was at the center of the civil rights struggle. Students enrolled at Southern University regularly supported and led efforts to integrate places of public accommodation. The university was not always supportive of the student protests. Threats of expulsion were made and realized in some cases, including in sit-ins staged at local lunch counters. The sit-ins were inspired by similar acts of civil disobedience throughout the South, including in Greensboro, North

Carolina. Protestors were welcomed into Black churches in South Baton Rouge to share their stories and receive encouragement. Despite the racial turmoil and tensions facing the city of Baton Rouge and the nation in the 1960s and the controversies over Southern University's official response to student protests, students at the historic university continued to find opportunities to learn and grow personally and intellectually.

### **Brooks Park**

In the three-mile neighborhood of "old" South Baton Rouge, Black residents endured exclusion from public places, including City Park, a municipal pool near the predominantly Black neighborhood in South Baton Rouge that was off-limits to Black residents for many years. Although Black tax dollars were collected for the maintenance of the pool, as were white tax dollars, fears about the mixing of the races in social settings kept Blacks and whites from equal access to the facilities. Without a safe place to swim, Black youths sought relief from the hot summer months wherever they could find water. Sadly, several drowned. In an interview with *Around the Bar* magazine, longtime South Baton Rouge resident Judge Trudy White described her grandfather's role on the board of United Negro Recreational Association (UNRA). Other members of the board included Thelma Lois Cary Tacneau. Rev. Willie K. Brooks was the board president. The board led efforts to raise money to purchase a safe place for Black children to swim and play.

Brooks Park which opened in 1949 across from City Park's whites-only pool. Judge White, a graduate of McKinley High School, observed that Brooks Park was later donated to BREC, the agency responsible for the operation of parks in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Elvin "Tampoo" Dalcourt, also a longtime resident of South Baton Rouge and a youngster in the 1940s, was a first person in the new swimming pool in Brooks Park and a legendary swimmer in his neighborhood.



City Park was off-limits to Black citizens and without access, Black people had no safe pools in which to swim. Many children drowned which led to the demand for safe places for Black kids to swim and play. Brooks Park opened in 1949. Pictured here are kids swimming in 1953. Photo courtesy of EBR Parish Library

The approach of building a Black only pool was unpopular with some who refused to donate money because they believed the community should organize to integrate the pools its tax dollars were going to support. Activists attempted to integrate City Park pool in 1963. In a move that was indicative of the white community's staunch commitment to racial segregation, the whites-only pool was closed and subsequently filled in.

### **Baton Rouge Bus Boycott**

Long-simmering resentment over the city's rigid segregation and Jim Crow order manifested itself in the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott of 1953. Residents of Baton Rouge fought to end discrimination in many areas of public life, including on city buses. In 1950, the city banned Blacks from owning bus lines and soon thereafter raised the bus fare for the majority Black ridership. Fed up with standing when seats in the city buses separating white and Black riders remained empty, the Black community lobbied for Ordinance 222, a municipal order

which relaxed Jim Crow segregation on the buses. The ordinance called for seating on a first come, first serve basis. The residents were successful in securing Ordinance 222. The ordinance stated Blacks were required to sit from the rear to the front, while whites had to sit from the front to the rear.



In 1953, two years before the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Baton Rouge called for fair treatment while riding the city bus in the first bus boycott. Photo from 64parishes.org

The bus drivers, all white, refused to comply with the ordinance. Black community leaders decided to protest segregation on the public buses. B.J. Stanley, the head of the local NAACP, and Reverend T.J. Jemison, pastor of Mt. Zion First Baptist Church, wrote and distributed a flier advising Black riders of their rights: "If the driver tells you, you can't sit in the front of the bus, quote the law to him and don't move. If he calls the police and the police tell you to move, quote the law to him. If he insists, don't resist arrest, but get his name or number so that he can be referred to the proper authorities." The bus drivers went on strike and gained the support of the state attorney general who said the ordinance was in conflict with the segregation laws of the state and therefore illegal. Black residents in Baton Rouge refused to ride the bus once the drivers returned to work after the attorney general's ruling. The residents instead established a free-ride system, a method that was used during the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama in 1955.

Beginning on Monday, June 15, 1953 the Black community refused to ride the buses several days, relying instead on a free ride system. The collective protest movement had a forceful financial impact. The boycott lasted about two weeks before a compromise was reached between the leadership of the boycott and those in decision-making positions that allowed for Black riders to sit anywhere on the bus except the first two seats, which were reserved for whites. While the community leaders decided not to carry the protest effort any further, what became known as the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott served as a model for the historic Montgomery Bus Boycott, which led to the emergence of a young leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **Black College Student Protests**

Baton Rouge's civil rights history did not end with the bus boycott. Black college students in Baton Rouge participated in Louisiana's first sit-ins. Instead of applauding the students for their bravery, the university punished them. The students found refuge and comfort in the Black community of Baton Rouge, where they were welcomed into area churches to receive support and financial assistance with their legal defense. The response exposed the timid nature of the city's Black leadership, the grip state leadership had on Black institutions like Southern University and the class dynamics undermining collective action in the city.

Specifically, the city's relatively stable Black middle class – facilitated by employers like Southern and Exxon – was ambivalent about its role in the broader civil rights struggle unfolding across the nation.

In 1960, Southern University students wanted to show support for the



1960s. Calls for racial equality led to demonstrations and protests in downtown Baton Rouge. Photo from the EBR Parish Library Digital Archives

February 1st student sit-in protests organized by Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Concerned that the Greensboro events might spark similar actions in Louisiana, on March 15, 1960 the State Board of Education ordered all college presidents to take disciplinary action to thwart protest activity.

Southern's president, Felton G. Clark, convened the student body to announce that he would expel any students taking part in demonstrations and demand the resignation of collaborating faculty members. In spite of the warnings, Southern student activists went to downtown Baton Rouge's Kress department store and took seats at the whites-only counter. They were promptly arrested.

The students were expelled and it was only after substantial student body protests that President Clark worked a deal out with the protest leaders for them to transfer to other schools or resign from the University. The Black Baton Rouge community were again forced to support protesting Black students. On December 15, 1961, about 2,000 people marched without incident through Baton Rouge to protest the arrest of almost two dozen Southern University students the

previous day for picketing businesses that refused to serve Blacks. One of these businesses was Liggett's Drug Store, which was located on the corner of Third and Florida Streets in downtown Baton Rouge.

In 1972, students at Southern University organized demonstrations to demand changes on their campus. They wanted more input on the curriculum and improvement of the physical spaces on campus. They were also frustrated about the disparity in funding between the historically white university Louisiana State University and Southern University. The state board allocated half the amount per Southern University student that was allotted for the state flagship university. One protest interrupted a football game at the packed stadium to bring attention to their concerns. This movement of nonviolent protest came to a deadly end November 16, 1972 when a heavily armed law enforcement presence arrived to remove students from an administrative building. The students were there to demand that the current university president, Leon Netterville, drop the charges on a group of student protesters who were arrested the night before. Officers clad in riot gear started to inundate the students with tear gas. During this



attempt to disperse the students, a shotgun blast was fired into the crowd hitting two students. Leonard Brown died at the scene. Denver Smith died shortly after arriving at the hospital. The officer who fired the shot was never identified. The Southern University student union was renamed the Smith-Brown Memorial Union to honor the students who lost their lives on that day.



Students promote civic engagement in 2019 outside the Smith-Brown Memorial Union on the campus of Southern University. The student union was renamed for the two students who lost their lives during student protests on the campus.

### **Black Power Movement**

Baton Rouge was not only a significant city in the civil rights movement but also in the Black Power movement. On August 20, 1967, a large rally was held in Baton Rouge at the climax of the historic 11-day, 105-mile civil rights march from Bogalusa to Baton Rouge. Rallying cries of "Black Power" could be heard. Billy Brooks, director of the Louisiana Black People Advancement Association, led the group chants on the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol. Many young Black residents were eager to join the fight for social justice of the 1960s.

Baton Rouge was home to and hosted many Black Muslims, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the most notorious and deadliest protests in the city's history involved Black

Muslims and took place near historic Temple Theater. According to an article published in the January 11, 1972, Times-Picayune, two sheriff's deputies and two Black males were killed in South Baton Rouge in what was described as "a street shootout between law enforcement officers and a group identified by city officials as Black Muslims." According to the article, shots were fired around noon after Black youths blocked a city street in South Baton Rouge. The cars reportedly belonged to out-of-state residents. Although all was quiet by nightfall, "Louisiana National Guardsmen were posted at gun stores in the city and about 100 Guardsmen were on duty in front of the city hall." The article also stated almost 30 people went to area hospitals for treatment of injuries related to the conflict. The injured included Black residents of Baton Rouge, police officers, and journalists. Twenty Black men were arrested in the deaths of the sheriff's deputies, eight of whom were charged with murder. Officials claimed Black Muslims from Chicago arrived in the city weeks earlier with plans of taking over the city and "they were able to get some militants, like any other community has, to side with them." The official account of the so-called "racial battle" was not the same as accounts from Black residents in South Baton Rouge who were eyewitnesses to the event.

### **School Desegregation in Baton Rouge**

Just days before the June 15, 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott, the United States Supreme Court had ordered five cases challenging racial segregation in public schools to be re-argued, after the initial hearings ended with a deadlocked Court. The cases were reargued at the end of 1953 and on May 17, 1954 a unanimous Supreme Court issued its historic decision in

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. The decision declared school segregation inherently unequal and a violation of the U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause. The decision was the beginning of the end of Jim Crow and legal segregation. It was a watershed event in the nation's history, felt from coast to coast, throughout the South and, indeed, in Baton Rouge. However, it likely didn't occur to the city's residents that just as the 1953 bus boycott had earned it historic distinction, so too would its response to the Brown decision and school desegregation.

In 1956, Black parents sued the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board in *Davis et al. v. East Baton Rouge Parish School Board*. The school board answered the suit by adopting a "freedom of choice" approach to integrating schools. This resulted in little change. While the suit was ongoing, parents continually sought to integrate Baton Rouge Schools.

In 1962, efforts to integrate Baton Rouge Junior High School were made by Rev. Arthur Jelks, former president of the local chapter of the NAACP. He escorted a group of African American girls, including his daughter Patricia to enroll in the school. Although the decision to end school segregation occurred eight years earlier, Principal R.L. Smith turned them away. The following year, thirteen students desegregated Baton Rouge High School when the 1963-1964 school-year began on September 3rd. They were selected from McKinley High School and Southern University Laboratory School and their actions were profiled in the national news. The NAACP and local church leaders had trained the Black students for what they might expect, and those thirteen students and the ones who followed in the initial years of

integration faced constant physical, emotional and psychological attacks. Their brave actions placed them on the frontlines of the nation's growing school integration movement.



Though Louisiana State University is within minutes of the Black community in South Baton Rouge, it was not accessible to many of the residents of that community. Maxine Crump, creator of Dialogue on Race Louisiana, has the distinction of being the first Black female student to live in a campus dorm when she did so in the 1960s. Photo from LinkedIn

Louisiana State University's flagship campus is within a stone's throw of Black residents in South Baton Rouge. Unfortunately, the campus has not always been accessible to local Black residents. The first Black female student to live in a dorm on campus was Maxine Crump, founder of Dialogue on Race Louisiana, in the 1960s. Not only were Black residents in South Baton Rouge excluded from attending games in Tiger Stadium, the home of the university's football team, but Blacks were also prohibited from attending the school or playing on any of its athletic teams until the 1970s.



Collis B. Temple, Jr. (middle), pictured here with his sons, was the first player to integrate LSU's men's basketball team in 1971. Photo from Sports Illustrated

1972. Kerry Pourciau was the first Black LSU student Government president. Photo from lsu.edu



1991. Renee Boutte Meyer as the first African- American crowned LSU Homecoming Queen. Photo from lsu.edu



2008. Frist Black Dean of the E.J. Ourso College of Business at LSU. Photo from lsu.edu



## Social Justice Leaders and Politicians

Efforts to desegregate schools, ban discrimination in areas of public accommodation, and gain full voting rights were met with much resistance. Sit-ins at Kress and efforts to integrate local schools and universities left their tolls on the city, especially busing and one of the longest desegregation cases in the nation. Out of the continued struggle for social justice across the city emerged great civic and political leaders.

Many men and women played active roles during the civil rights era in Baton Rouge. Alexander Pierre "A.P." Tureaud was the local attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. For about two decades beginning in the 1940s, Tureaud handled most of the desegregation cases in Louisiana. He was also involved in efforts throughout the state, including in Baton Rouge, to desegregate city buses. Tureaud was also instrumental in the desegregation of Louisiana State University, the Medical Center, and the LSU Law School. His son, A.P. Tureaud, Jr., became the first African American student to enroll at LSU. Alexander Pierre Tureaud Sr sued the state for his son to attend the University. However, because the lawsuit ended in a mistrial, Tureaud Jr was not allowed to finish the first semester. Today, A.P. Tureaud Hall sits on the Louisiana State University campus in honor of his social justice work across Louisiana.

Another attorney important to the civil rights movement in Baton Rouge is Johnnie Jones Sr. He played an important role in many events demanding social justice in Baton Rouge. Jones became the first Black lawyer to become a member of the Baton Rouge Bar association. He was involved in the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, the Brooks Park case, and is the attorney of record on the 1956 Clifford Eugene Davis Jr. et al v. The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board et al. desegregation case. Attorney Jones was also involved in activism outside of the courtroom. He was deeply involved in activism at Southern University, including working to establish a campus NAACP chapter. He also helped organize a voter's school to counteract misinformation among Black citizens about their voter's rights.



In 1964, Dr. Freya Anderson Rivers was the first Black woman to attend LSU. Pictured here in 2013, Dr. Rivers shares excerpts from her memoir, *Swallowed Tears*. Picture from Facebook



In 1953, A.P. Tureaud, Jr. was the first African-American to enroll at LSU after his father, Civil Rights lawyer, AP Tureaud, Sr. sued the state. Pictured here in 2015, Tureaud, Jr. discusses the turmoil he experienced during his 55 days as an undergraduate. Picture from lsureveille.com



In 1943, Johnnie Jones, Sr. joined the military and served in World War II. Upon returning to Baton Rouge, he became a lawyer and has been instrumental in several Civil Rights cases including the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott and the Kress lunch counter sit-in. Photo from The Advocate



Dr. Butler dedicated much of his time to the Blundon Home, an orphanage in South Baton Rouge, and was a founder of the First Savings and Loan Association in October 1956. The Dr. Leo S Butler Community Center located at 950 E. Washington St in South Baton Rouge was named in his honor and continues his commitment to the community. Centrally located for the persons of this community, the center offers a number of services to the residents of South Baton Rouge including a medical clinic, after school tutoring and a senior employment program.

Dr. Louis James was one of the giants in the history of civil rights from South Baton Rouge. Dr. James graduated from McKinley High School. He earned a medical degree from Howard University after receiving a degree from Southern University. He served in the US Army and was a member of Mount Zion First Baptist Church. He was the first African American on the Executive Board of Baton Rouge General Hospital, among other firsts for Blacks with ties to South Baton Rouge. Dr. Louis James participated in the bus boycott and Kress lunch counter protests during the 1950s and 1960s. Another longtime civil rights activist was Dr. Curtis Gilliam. He was the first Black optometrist in Baton Rouge and a president of the Baton Rouge chapter of the NAACP. He also has the distinction of being the first Black person from Louisiana to join the US Marine Corps serving in World War II. Dr. Gilliam was an active participant in the bus boycott and efforts to desegregate the local school board. Dr. Gilliam was one of many Black World War II veterans who began to lead social and political organizing efforts upon returning home from war.

Alex Pitcher Jr., and Leo S. Butler are two more examples of activists pursuing social justice in Baton Rouge. Pitcher was a lawyer for the NAACP. He worked on the 1956 Clifford Eugene Davis Jr. et al v. The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board et al. desegregation case along with Johnny Jones Sr. Leo S. Butler was the first male to graduate from the Baton Rouge Colored School in 1918 (the school became McKinley High School).



Acie Belton was an engaged Scotlandville resident, a veteran of World War II, and employee of Exxon (formerly Standard Oil). Along with Nicholas Harrison Sr., Raymond P Scott, O.M. Amacher, A.A. Lenoir, T.J. Jordan, Arthur Franklin, Henry Franklin, G.B. Robinson, Bonnie V. Moore, Simon Lewis, and Vaughn Parris, Belton founded and was the president of the Second Ward Voters League in 1946. He and his colleagues mounted a successful campaign to register voters increasing the number of Scotlandville African American voters from 137 to over 2000 by 1949. Belton also helped create an organization to help Black people obtain jobs in public government agencies called FOCUS (Federated Organization for the Cause of Unlimited Self-Development). Belton held a number of political positions representing the Scotlandville residents. He was elected to the school board in 1970, appointed to the state parole board by Governor David Treen in 1980, and elected to the Metro Council in 1988. The Baton Rouge annual award for lifetime achievement is named in Belton's honor.

Pearl George was very influential in the struggle for social justice in Baton Rouge. She participated in the lunch counter sit-ins. She was arrested many times for her participation in demonstrations for access to accommodations, including for trying to integrate the City Park pool. During this period, George became the president of the NAACP youth council. In 1976, she became the first Black woman elected to the Metro Council serving until 1988. George was also an advocate for the Eden Park neighborhood. She participated in establishing a library in the area and founded the Eden Park Community Center. She also established the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank in 1982.



Pearl George was instrumental in Civil Rights efforts in Baton Rouge. She also served as the city's first Black female city council member when she was elected in 1976.



Joe Delpit, owner of the longest-run business in Baton Rouge, was the city's first Black elected official.

Joseph A. Delpit paved the way, becoming the first Black elected official to the city council in the 1960s. He attended several predominantly Black schools in South Baton Rouge, including St. Francis Xavier for elementary school and McKinley Senior High School. Since 1959, Delpit has owned and operated the Chicken Shack, a restaurant started by his father in 1935 with only 34¢ in capital. Joseph A. Delpit remains active in Baton Rouge. Delpit remains an important figure in South Baton Rouge and throughout the entire city. He is the first Black councilman to serve the city. He also served briefly as mayor pro tempore. He was re-elected to a second term on the council with a first primary victory. While on the council, he was elected chairman of the executive committee and was appointed by the governor to the Greater Baton Rouge Port Commission. In November 1975, Delpit was elected state representative of District 67 in the first primary and served on the municipal and parochial affairs committee, the agriculture committee, and the appropriations committee.



2016. The city's younger generation prepare to usher in change in Baton Rouge

After the end of the Civil Rights Movement, Black communities in Baton Rouge grew and experienced progress, even though racial tensions remained. From that moment until this, Black Baton Rouge continues to feel the effects of the past. In this section, we continue to examine school desegregation that shaped the development of the city and the surrounding areas. Next, notable Black figures of Baton Rouge and world politics are presented along with their impact on the Black community. Lastly, we provide a brief glimpse at the status of present-day Black Baton Rouge.

### **School Desegregation Continues**

School integration would prove to be much more transformative for Baton Rouge than could have been understood on September 3, 1963 when the first Black students entered Baton Rouge High School. The 1956 school desegregation case of *Davis et al. v. East Baton Rouge Parish School Board* laid dormant until Federal District Court Judge John Parker inherited the case in 1981. He decided that the school board had been running a dual school system in violation of *Brown*. He ordered immediate desegregation through a plan that closed fifteen schools and

implemented forced busing in order to achieve racial balances similar to those of the district's demographics.

In the first year of court-ordered busing alone, the school system lost 7,000 white students. Private schools had been growing in Baton Rouge since the 1960s – without question a reaction to desegregation. The 1981 decision accelerated white flight from public schools. While not unique to Baton Rouge, this white flight had profound impacts not only on the school system, but residential and commercial development throughout the parish and in the surrounding parishes. White residents not only left the school system, they departed entire neighborhoods – many of which were also integrating as factors such as the 1970's oil boom, the end of legal segregation and the emergence of affirmative action in employment expanded opportunities for the region's Black population to enter the middle class, and, accordingly, spaces legally reserved for whites only.

In the decades following Judge Parker's decision, whites went from being a majority of public school students to a small and rapidly diminishing minority.

In the latter quarter of the twentieth century neighborhoods such as Glen Oaks, Broadmoor, Melrose Place and Istrouma transformed from being either majority white or racially balanced to being majority Black, predominantly low income. Few white families choose to remain. Property values in these neighborhoods stagnated or fell as the disproportionate wealth and wealth-creating capacity of the city's white community fled neighborhoods now stigmatized as Black and thereby devalued economically and socially.

The school desegregation battle and its impact on the racial composition of neighborhoods led to a spatial remaking of the city most exemplified in the shifting definitions and terminology used to describe the city's neighborhoods and sub-regions. When Judge Parker handed down his 1981 ruling, Baton Rouge's southern edge was largely defined by the I-10/I-12 split. The College Drive and the Jefferson Highway corridors were the southern-most commercial centers in the parish. Neighborhoods like Sherwood Forest and Shenandoah constituted the southeastern portion of the parish, with most 1970's-1980's real estate development stretching eastward on I-12 to Livingston Parish as opposed to southward towards Ascension Parish.

When the school desegregation case was finally settled in 2003, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System served a majority Black and poor population. Significant growth and development occurred in Livingston and Ascension parishes. Population growth in neighboring parishes and in the growing East Baton Rouge Parish cities of Zachary and Central reflected both the long backlash to school desegregation in Baton Rouge public

schools and the emerging metropolitan character of the Baton Rouge region. Both Zachary and Central withdrew from the East Baton Rouge School System creating their own school districts, which are predominately white.



From left to right, Elaine Boyle Patin, Dr. Velma Jackson, and Dr. Freya Anderson Rivers in 2018 recalling their experiences integrating Baton Rouge Magnet High School and Lee High School in 1963. Photo from wbrz.com

### **Southern University in the 2000s**

According to the university's official web page, enrollment at Southern University system still enjoyed good enrollment numbers. "Targeted recruitment campaigns, an innovative alumni enrollment initiative, and creative recruitment strategies helped boost Fall 2015 enrollment for the Southern University System. Overall enrollment for the SU System increased by 490 students (12,884), nearly four percent. Enrollment numbers show the overall enrollment for the SU System flagship campus in Baton Rouge increased by more than 200 students over the previous year. The freshman class enrollment increased by 31 percent. A breakdown of the Southern University Baton Rouge (SUBR) enrollment data indicates 6,389 students with 1,210 new freshmen. Recently, the Baton Rouge campus began a recruiting campaign, 'Pathway to Prominence,' that directly correlated to an influx of applications for admission. Campaign tour stops in Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and Texas allowed students to hear from University administrators and student government leaders, as well as hear and see the SU Jaguar Marching Band and cheerleaders perform."

Black students and a white teacher arrive to McKinley High School in 1970 under a court-ordered desegregation plan. Photo by Charles Gerald



### **Notable Black Baton Rouge Politicians and President Obama's Visit**

In 2005, Baton Rouge elected its first Black mayor, Melvin "Kip" Holden, who served until term limits ended his tenure in 2016. Growing up in Scotlandville, Mayor Holden earned his bachelor's degree at the state flagship school in 1974, Louisiana State University and his master's degree at Southern University in 1982 – both in journalism. He also earned a law degree from Southern University in 1985. Mayor Holden was a fixture in Baton Rouge politics since his first elected position in 1984, as a member of Baton Rouge Metro Council. He held a position in the Louisiana House of Representatives from 1988 until he was elected to the Louisiana Senate in 2002, then vacated that post to occupy the office of Mayor-President. The ascension of a Black man to the office of mayor signaled racial progress in a city dogged by a troubled racial history and ever-widening racial disparities. But the state of Black Baton Rouge today reflects several enduring tensions and contradictions that frustrate the city's growth ambitions, cultural aspirations and image.

The current leader of Baton Rouge and East Baton Rouge Parish, Mayor Sharon Weston Broome, became the first woman, first Black woman, and second Black Mayor-President of Baton Rouge in 2017. She received her bachelor's degree in Mass Communications from the

University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse, followed by a master's degree in the same area from Regent University. Mayor Broome moved to Baton Rouge at 22 with her parents from her birthplace, Chicago. Before starting her political career, Mayor Broome worked for local television station, WBRZ, as a reporter. She left journalism in the 1980s when she was elected to the Baton Rouge Metro Council, becoming a fixture of local and state government. Mayor Broome's political career is full of firsts. She was the first African American female elected to the Louisiana State House of Representatives to represent East and West Baton Rouge Parishes from 1992 to 2005. During her time as representative, she became the first female elected as Speaker Pro Tempore. Mayor Broome was elected to the Louisiana State Senate in 2004, again becoming the first Black woman to occupy her seat. She also became the first woman President Pro Tempore of this house of the Louisiana Legislature. Mayor Broome has been passionate about civil rights since childhood. She talked about racial divisions and voiced concerns about police interactions with the Black community as her 2016 campaign unfolded during a summer of protests following the fatal shooting in July of Alton Sterling by a Baton Rouge police officer. Alongside her political career, the mayor has served as an adjunct instructor at theanship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge Community College and Southern University.

The Black Baton Rouge community has a long legacy of political leaders who have fought for social change in their city and state. In addition to the historical significance of their contributions, a monumental





In 2016, then President Barack Obama held a town-hall meeting at McKinley High School that included students, parents, teachers, elected officials and community members.

presidential visit adds another layer of pride to Black residents of Baton Rouge. South Baton Rouge hosted the nation's first Black president in January 2016. Of all the places in the world the president could have chosen, he chose to meet the predominantly Black residents of South Baton Rouge in one of the first places Blacks could receive a high school education in all of Southern Louisiana. He chose to visit the site of the nation's first bus boycott. A place many residents of the region only drive through on their way from home in the suburbs to work and back was chosen by the president for a town hall meeting during his last year in office. Louisiana has hosted many presidents and presidential hopefuls. Area residents from across Baton Rouge braved cold temperatures waiting in long lines at McKinley High School Alumni Center for a limited number of free tickets to hear President Obama speak in the gymnasium of the current McKinley Senior High School.

Edward Pratt, columnist for the Advocate and former president of the McKinley High School Alumni Association, penned a wonderful piece highlighting the significance of President Obama's visit in a section of the city regarded today by some as a distressed community. Pratt described how he felt watching the president of the United States walking into the gymnasium in the middle of a cheering audience. He remarked how

many of the audience members never thought they would drive through "the Bottom" on purpose, park their cars on unfamiliar streets, and set foot on McKinley's campus. For Pratt and others, it was simply incredible.

Pratt added that the president's visit was not just about politics. The visit was also about seeing a man who could have bought two-for-a-penny butter cookies from the corner store near Pratt's house. He could have been with Pratt and his friends at the Chicken Shack listening to music, talking stuff while gorging two-piece orders with two sides. The visit was also about Pratt's late grandmother, Annie Rose, and how he wished she could have been in the crowd to see the president. Pratt lamented that, after explaining to her that this was really "the Obama," the Black president everyone was talking about, she probably would have wept tears drawn from a lifetime of pain and racism.



## BLACK BATON ROUGE TODAY: GOING FORWARD

2020. Youth activists host a rally downtown in response to officer-involved shootings that resulted in the deaths of several women around the country. Photo by Sherreta R. Harrison

Baton Rouge celebrated its 200th anniversary in 2017 and today is the center of the nation's 70th largest metropolitan area. In the last two decades, the city's identity has morphed from that of a mid-sized, insular capital city to a metropolitan, regional economy boasting over 850,000 residents and stretching across nine parishes. Like many cities since the 1990s, Baton Rouge has embarked on a relatively successful campaign to remake its downtown and revamp its image as a sleepy bedroom community into a more cosmopolitan destination. In the midst of this activity, however, the southward shift of economic investment and social activity effectively isolated north Baton Rouge. Spatial factors impact social phenomena, and it is impossible to comprehend the issues within north Baton Rouge without acknowledging its relative isolation from the mainstream of the city's social and economic life.

The early decades of the 21st century saw a "new" South Baton Rouge with an affluent identity reflected in an explosion of luxury home development along Highland Road and in neighborhoods like Santa Maria, University Club, Willow Grove, and Bocage Lakes. The Perkins corridor

continued to densify as developments like Perkins Rowe added a new experiential and decidedly upscale dimension to the city's shopping. During the same period the neighborhoods of North Baton Rouge experienced rapid disinvestment, a trend that had been taking place since school desegregation and intensified after the turn of the century.

If the big-box shopping centers of Siegen Lane were emblematic of South Baton Rouge's commercial boom, the vacant and blighted storefronts of Plank Road were emblematic of North Baton Rouge's rapid demise. In 2013, Earl K. Long hospital closed its Airline Highway location, a staple in the area since the early 1960's and the only emergency room for miles. The closure became a rallying cry for community activists across the city who worried about continued disinvestment and a neglected North Baton Rouge. Across town, a petition drive to form a new city out of the southern, unincorporated areas of East Baton Rouge Parish began in 2015. The initial effort fell short but a second effort in 2019 was successful and voters in the area proposed for incorporation approved the petition to create the new city of St. George. Like the exodus

from Baton Rouge schools in the 1960s, issues of schools and who attends them underlie the motivations for the new proposed city. The matter is currently in litigation.

The north-south divide and its racial implications were magnified in the July 2016 shooting of Alton Sterling, which was followed by the ambush and murder of three Baton Rouge police officers. The internationally-covered event gave rise to discussions about the impact of racial and spatial stratification not only on the bonds of community, but on the city's economic development competitiveness. A month later and as these conversations were growing, Baton Rouge was hit with record flooding that impacted over 70,000 structures in the metropolitan region. The back to back tragedies placed an international spotlight on the city and elevated the community's focus on resilience. Flood recovery continues and conversations about the perils of racial and spatial stratification for the city's identity, economic fortunes and general appeal are ongoing.

North Baton Rouge, a major widening of I-10, and an overhaul of the City-Park/LSU Lakes underscore the ever-evolving nature of the city's built environment. New voices are advancing conversations about racial equity, transit-oriented development, and climate change. These conversations are already shaping new urban development pursuits and will undoubtedly influence the shape of the city in the years ahead.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways Baton Rouge is a great place to live, but its true potential will ultimately be determined by its ability to effectively manage ongoing and emerging challenges. The challenges are not in spite of the city's history, but a direct result of it. All of the city's residents want the same basic things: a safe, prosperous community within

which they can raise a family and pursue their vision of the good life. Throughout history, this has been the rallying cry of Black Baton Rouge. Calls for justice and equity persisted in 2020 as the nation grappled with ongoing displays of systemic injustice. and a global pandemic. Understanding how we arrived at the present state of the city is an important step in devising solutions to squarely address our challenges. What now lies before us is the opportunity to draw from our past and design a future where all Baton Rouge citizens can thrive.

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*Prepared by Maretta McDonald with contributions from Christopher Tyson, Lori Latrice Martin, Raymond A. Jetson, and Sherreta R. Harrison*



# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *The Bus Boycott of 1953 & Social Justice Leadership* Section Summary

Historically, Black communities of Baton Rouge have fought to thrive beyond the limitations placed upon them. These limitations, such as segregation and racial discrimination, have been challenged by many men and women, especially during the civil rights era. Black resentment towards segregation and Jim Crow social order boiled into intense efforts to end discrimination in many areas of public life, such as public transportation and education. As a result, activists and social justice leaders took a stand to improve life for the Black residents of Baton Rouge.

After much frustration with the segregated seating on buses, increased bus fares, and inability to own their own bus lines, Black residents lobbied for Ordinance 222, a municipal order that relaxed segregation rules on the bus. The ordinance passed and established seating to operate on a first come first serve basis, allowing Black people to have access to seating previously reserved for whites only. In response, white bus drivers went on strike until the ordinance was made illegal. Black leaders such as B. J. Stanley, the head of the local NAACP, and Rev. T.J. Jemison, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, advised Black riders of their rights. "If the driver tells you you can't sit in the front of the bus, quote the law to him and don't move. If he calls the police and the police tell you to move, quote the law to him. If he insists, don't resist arrest, but get his name or number so that he can be referred to the proper authorities." The strike gained bus drivers the support of the state attorney general, who declared the ordinance was in conflict with segregation laws, and thus illegal. Once white drivers returned to work, the Black community refused to ride the buses, establishing a free ride system. The outcome of a collective protest proved effective after two weeks of boycotting. Black folks were granted the choice of sitting anywhere on the bus except the first two seats, which were reserved for white folks. This collective action served as a model for the Montgomery, AL bus boycott in 1955.

In addition to the bus boycott of 1953, Black Baton Rouge social justice leaders were involved in efforts to desegregate schools and gaining full voting rights. Black men and women filled integral roles during the civil rights era in Baton Rouge. Alexander "A.P. Tureaud was the local attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. He handled the majority of desegregation cases for 20 years starting in the 1940s and is recognized as a key player in the desegregation of Louisiana State University, the Medical Center, and LSU Law. Johnny Jones Sr. is the first Black lawyer of the Baton Rouge Bar Association and was involved in the Baton Rouge bus boycott, the Brooks Park case, and organized a voter's school to educate Black citizens about voting rights. Alex Pitcher was a lawyer for the NAACP and worked on the *Clifford Eugene Davis et al v. EBR Parish School Board et al* desegregation case with Johnny Jones Sr. Another leader, Leo S. Butler, was the first male to graduate from the Baton Rouge Colored High School (later McKinley High) in 1918. Butler founded the First Savings and Loan Association in 1956 and dedicated much of his time to the Blundon Home, an orphanage and school in South Baton Rouge. Dr. Louis James also graduated from McKinley High School, going on to earn degrees from Southern University and Howard University. Dr. James was the first Black person on the Executive Board of Baton Rouge General Hospital, a participant in the bus boycott and Kress sit-ins, and the first Black person to join the U.S. Marine Corps during WWII. Pearl George was an activist and participant in the Kress sit-ins as well. George was arrested many times for her protest demonstrations, including trying to integrate the City Park pool. She was the president of NAACP Youth Council, the first Black woman elected to the Metro Council in 1976, founder of the Eden Park Community Center, and also established the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank in 1982. Joseph A. Delpit was the first Black elected official to the city council in the 1960s and was elected state representative of District 67 in 1975.





# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *Black Schools in Baton Rouge* Section Summary

Black residents of Baton Rouge created educational opportunities for themselves when laws and policies restricted their access to white educational institutions. In the 1800s, anyone who provided education to free or enslaved Black people violated Louisiana law, facing one year of imprisonment. Despite this, Black men and women were determined to endure any challenges in pursuit of quality education, especially for their children. Unlike white immigrants, Black people were not educated to be included in society following emancipation. Instead, schools that were accessible to Black folks focused on jobs positioned at the bottom of economic and social structures. Therefore, Black schools dedicated to a higher standard of learning were established by Black people themselves.

In 1907, Dr. J.M. Frazier, Sr. established the Hickory Street School, educating the children of Black sharecroppers from as far as Mississippi.

Because the school grew rapidly outgrew its original location, Fraizer opened the Baton Rouge Colored High School located at the corner of Perkins Road and Bynum Street in 1913. Four students were the first to graduate from high school in 1916. With continued growth, Fraizer opened a third location for the school, known today as McKinley Senior High School. The initial location of Mckinley High was Texas Street, now known as Thomas H. Delpit Drive. McKinley Senior High remained the only high school that Black students could attend for several decades. By 1941, McKinley housed several sports teams including basketball, football, baseball, volleyball, and indo ball. The school is also recognized for the success of prominent athletes and coaches like Eddie Robinson, Don Chaney, Tommy Green, Calvin Nicholas, and Carl Stewart.

The first and only Catholic school in the Diocese of Baton Rouge for Black students was opened in 1920. St. Francis Xavier Catholic School educates young students ranging from pre-kindergarten to eighth

grade. A high school component, St. Francis High school, opened in 1955 and was torn down in 1961 to be replaced by the new interstate system. Also in 1961, the initial location of the elementary school was moved to the present site of St. Francis Xavier Church. By 1963, a new building for the school was constructed on the site and opened to serve Black children. St. Francis served many Black students who were excluded from predominantly white institutions and suffered tremendously when the construction of the new interstate divided the Black community, causing long-term effects negatively impacting the quality of life for Black residents and institutions in South Baton Rouge. Southern University Laboratory School, also known as Southern Lab, opened in 1922 to provide teachers' training for education majors attending Southern University. Originally, the school was named the Southern University Model Training School, then changed to Southern University Demonstration School in the 1930s. Southern University's president, Dr. Clark, believed providing specific training for future educators was imperative. The school became accredited in 1936. Southern Lab as we know it today educates students in grades K-12. Next year (2022), the school will be 100 years old, leading a legacy of producing thousands of Black graduates.

These Black schools along with many others are essential to the fabric of the Black Baton Rouge community. Black students were taught by Black educators when laws and social norms prohibited access to predominately white institutions. In creating their own educational opportunities, Black Baton Rouge residents secured their own path to success.



# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *Black Churches in Baton Rouge* Section Summary

One important source of sustenance for Black communities was the church. Black churches established throughout the city have and continue to serve as critical pillars of the community, providing spaces for social interaction, spiritual healing, education, and efforts to create social change. Many of the early leaders and locations associated with the civil rights movements in America are rooted in Black church traditions.

In 1858, Pastor Isaac Palmer and Pastor John Brady organized Mount Zion Baptist. The original location of the church at 335 Maximillian Street in South Baton Rouge. In 1954, Mount Zion Baptist was moved to its present location at 356 East Boulevard. The street was later renamed after Rev. T.J. Jemison, a prominent leader of the church who played important roles in local and national civil rights initiatives, such as the Baton Rouge bus boycott in 1953.

Another important social institution in South Baton Rouge is Wesley Chapel Methodist Episcopal Negro Church, founded in 1866. Wesley Chapel started at the First Methodist Church (a white church), located on the corner of Lauren and 4th street at the time. Born from the minds of people who wanted something for themselves, Wesley Chapel became its own entity following segregation. The church is the original home of the Blundon School and Orphanage, founded by Ada Polluck Blundon in 1889. Housed in the basement of the church, the Blundon Home provided education to Black children during the day and adults at night.

Shiloh Missionary Baptist another pillar of the Black Baton Rouge community, was organized in 1872 by Rev. George Byrd on Boyd Street in the historical Spanish town area. The church was moved to its present location on 14th Street (renamed Eddie Robinson Sr. Drive) in 1932. Shiloh Missionary's legacy of leaders includes Rev. Jack Mitchell (1906-1944), Rev. Dudley T. Smith (1944-1962), Rev. Charles T. Smith (1962-2013), and Pastor Fred Jeff Smith (2013 – present).

Under the leadership of Rev. Charles T. Smith, the church purchased additional property on 13th and 14th street to expand the church in the 1970s. Since this new expansion, Shiloh has and continues to provide several resources for the Black community such as an early learning center, credit union, men's transitional housing, and a drug prevention program. Today, Pastor Fred Jeff Smith leads a congregation of 3500 members.

In 1893, starting from a wood-framed building on an acre of land, Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church was established in Scotlandville under the leadership of Rev. Harden Jackson. Still located at its original location on Scenic Highway, the church houses a large sanctuary, administrative offices, an educational center, and a Family Life Center. Mount Pilgrim is currently led by Rev. Ronnie O. Blake.

New Light Missionary Baptist is also a significant resource in the Scotlandville community. The church was founded in 1895 by Rev. Tony Scott, a sugar cane farmer. Its original location was on a patch of land near the Nicholas Wax Memorial Cemetery; however, a storm destroyed the building in 1910. The second building was built on Crane Street, then moved to its present location at 650 Blount Road in 1981. Dr. H.B. Williams was the leader of New Light during this move. The church's Community Outreach Center was opened to provide services to the Scotlandville community. For example, in 2005 the New Light partnered with Pennington Biomedical to conduct a study on diabetes. Today, New Light is under the direction of Rev. Gil Wright.

These historic Black churches along with many others in the Baton Rouge area have served the basic and spiritual needs of Black people for many generations, especially during the Jim Crow era when segregation was enforced through strict laws, threats, and violence. Thus, we can understand why the Black church plays an integral role in the story of Black Baton Rouge.



# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *Community Organizations Engagement Guide*

Suggested Tips for Engaging with this document

### **AS AN ORGANIZATION**

- Post a copy of the document on your community's website
- Share a link to the document through social media
- Mention the importance of knowing our local history when the organization gathers
- Engage program staff to design discussion opportunities
- Use the document to support your Black History month observations
- Update or create your organization's history document

### **ENGAGING WITH THE DOCUMENT**

- Identify parts of the document that most relate to the focus of your organization
- Give special attention to any geographical connections
- Create discussion opportunities with the below as a starting point:
  - How would you describe the role of organizations in the history of Baton Rouge?
  - What stands out to you about the organizations mentioned in the history of Baton Rouge?
  - What is similar or different about the role of Black organizations historically as compared to the present?
  - How can being familiar with the history of organizations in Black Baton Rouge history impact the future of organizations and communities?
  - What did you learn about the history of Baton Rouge from the document?
- Share the document and the engagement guide with other organizations



# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *Faith Communities Engagement Guide*

Suggested Tips for Engaging with this document

### **AS A COMMUNITY**

- Post a copy of the document on your community's website
- Share a link to the document through social media
- Consider mentioning the importance of knowing our local history during times the community gathers
- Engage your teaching and youth ministries to design discussion opportunities
- Use the document to support your Black History month observations
- Update or create your church's history document

### **ENGAGING WITH THE DOCUMENT**

- Give special attention to the section on Black churches in the document
- Give special attention to any geographical connections
- Create discussion opportunities with the below as a starting point:
  - How would you describe the role of Black churches in the history of Baton Rouge?
  - What stands out to you about black churches in the history of Baton Rouge?
  - What is similar or different about the role of Black churches historically as compared to the present?
  - How can being familiar with the history of Black churches in Baton Rouge impact the future of churches and communities?
  - What did you learn about the history of Baton Rouge from the document?
- Intentionally support children in becoming familiar with the history of their community
- Share the document and the engagement guide with other organizations





# Black Baton Rouge Yesterday & Today

LOOKING BACK TO EFFECTIVELY MOVE FORWARD

## *Individuals Engagement Guide*

Suggested Tips for Engaging with this document

### **ENGAGE FAMILY, FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, COWORKERS, AND COLLEAGUES**

- Share a link to the document and the engagement guide with those in your network of relationships
- Mention the document to all of the organizations or groups with which you are associated
- Use the document to design your own Black History month observations
- Be intentional in starting conversations among the children
- Document your family's history with writings, photographs, video or voice recordings

### **ENGAGING WITH THE DOCUMENT**

- Give special attention to the sections of the document that interest you most.
- Give special attention to familiar communities in the document.
- Create discussion opportunities with the below as a starting point:
  - What stands out to you in the history of Baton Rouge?
  - What is similar or different about Baton Rouge historically as compared to the present?
  - How can being familiar with the history of Black Baton Rouge impact the future of the community?
  - What did you learn about the history of Baton Rouge from the document?
- Intentionally support children in becoming familiar with the history of their community