

The Concordia Parish Courthouse was built in 1939 to replace an earlier parish courthouse which was demolished when the entire town of Vidalia, the parish seat, was relocated six blocks inland from the Mississippi River as a result of a federal flood control project. The four story brick and stone building is a restrained example of the Art Deco style. It stands facing four-lane U.S. Highway 65/84 in roughly the middle of a large grassy square. The courthouse retains its National Register eligibility because its exterior remains largely intact.

Both the façade and the rear elevation exhibit a three-part design consisting of a wide, four-story, seven bay central pavilion flanked by small, very slightly recessed, three-story wings. A fairly recent, compatible, small one-story wing projects from the center pavilion's rear elevation. The height difference between the pavilion and side wings creates the setbacks which are characteristic of the Art Deco style.

The majority of the building is sheathed in brick. However, its decorative elements, many of which are located on the pavilion's façade, are articulated in stone. For example, the pavilion's first story is entirely covered by stone, and its second and third stories have stone on the five middle bays. An Art Deco belt course between the first and second floors features a Greek key design. This belt course extends beyond the pavilion to encircle the building. Fluted pilasters separate the five stone-covered bays. The pilasters rise to a large stone panel bearing the building's name. On the side wings, a parapet located at the same height as the panel is outlined by a smooth belt course and coping. The entrance surround features a fluted area above the double door and a scalloped Art Deco motif bisecting the flutes. Alterations to the exterior include the previously mentioned rear wing, the replacement of the original windows and doors and the construction of covered walkways which attach to the sides of the building.

Newspapers from the period indicate that the first floor originally held parish and school board offices and the second floor held a courtroom and its supporting spaces. The fourth floor contained the jail, and its windows still display the bars used to prevent prisoner escapes. The use of the third floor was not recorded, but it surely must have held additional offices. Unfortunately, no record survives of any interior decorative motifs, and it has been subdivided and modernized to the extent that very little historic fabric remains.

Despite the loss of the interior and the exterior changes, the building clearly maintains enough integrity to qualify for National Register listing. In fact, there is no doubt that anyone from the historic period would recognize the courthouse should he or she return to Vidalia today. As the most important public building in "New Vidalia," the Concordia Parish Courthouse clearly symbolizes the most important event in the town's history -- its relocation in 1939 (see Part 8).

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1939  
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: J. W. Smith and Associates, Architects  
M. T. Reed Construction Company, Builder  
CRITERION: X

The Concordia Parish Courthouse is locally significant in the area of community planning and development because, as the town of Vidalia's most important public building, its construction symbolizes the relocation of the entire town from the west bank of the Mississippi River to a site approximately one-half mile inland from the waterway.

Settlement along the Mississippi in the area which would become Vidalia first occurred in the late 1700s when Don Jose Vidal received a large land grant from the Spanish government, which then controlled Louisiana. Part of Vidal's agreement with the colonial governor was that he would establish a military post and town at the site, which was located directly across the river from Natchez, Mississippi. Vidal named his town New Concordia. The post was first known as the Post of Natchez but by 1801 was called the Post of Concord.

The Spaniards named Vidal military and civil commander of the post, a position he held until 1803 when the United States purchased Louisiana from France. It was Vidal who donated the strip of land next to the river where the community's civic buildings were eventually constructed. He also erected the first steam saw mill, owned a cotton gin and a blacksmith shop, and gave land for Concordia Parish's first school. The Louisiana Legislature renamed the town Vidalia in 1811.

Information about the community's early development is sketchy. A ferry apparently connected it to Natchez by 1800. Vidalia's position as the seat of local government was confirmed when Concordia Parish was established in 1804. In 1833 (a time when most rural communities lacked financial institutions) a branch of New Orleans' Mechanics and Traders Bank opened. 1837 saw the construction of a courthouse and a \$12,000, two-story brick jail. Within a few years a tornado destroyed the courthouse, so town officials signed a contract for a new brick building in 1843. A new jail was built in 1859-1860 and a new courthouse (the community's third) in 1870 or 1871. The town incorporated in 1870. A new bank, the Bank of Vidalia, received a charter in 1903. The next year citizens voted to install electric light and water works plants. A natural gas system followed in 1928. The most important event in the town's history, its move from the river to formerly cultivated fields six blocks inland from the original location, occurred in late 1938 and 1939.

To understand the reason for the move, one must appreciate the seriousness of the flooding which repeatedly occurred along the Mississippi. Each spring snow melt from Northern states combined with rain water to swell the river. In the early days planters built levees in front of their property. Flood control was placed on a more systematic footing with the Mississippi River Commission and later the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. By the late nineteenth century the Mississippi Valley was at least theoretically protected by a government funded flood control program consisting of a higher and more consistent system of levees than planters provided in former times. Government policy insisted that levees alone would contain the river, and the response to overflow was to build levees even higher. This changed with the immense and legendary flood of 1927, which broke the levees in many places. In that year water stretched for miles beyond the river's normal path, leaving many Louisiana residents homeless and causing great economic hardship. It is for good reason that this event is known as the Great Flood.

After the flood of 1927, the Corps of Engineers realized the folly of the strict "levees only" policy. They adopted a more comprehensive approach which included, in addition to levees, such measures as spillways and "massaging" the river's course. One such effort was to straighten Giles Point, a bend in the river located just north of Vidalia. This act greatly increased the strength of the water's flow as it passed by the Louisiana town. At this time the river narrowed at Natchez and Vidalia, which meant there was less space in which the water could move downstream. The Corps concluded that the only way to prevent flooding at and above Vidalia was to widen the river at that spot. Natchez stands safely atop a high bluff, so Vidalia (located at water level) had to be sacrificed.

When other buildings and towns were lost to the river, they were demolished and their citizens moved away. This did not happen to Vidalia, which was literally moved to a new site building by building. According to the oral tradition, political pressure was brought to bear in Washington to "save" Vidalia. Regardless of how it came about, the town was moved with federal funding. In July 1938 the Chairman of the State Planning Commission, who approved all applications for federal grants from within the state, visited the town and explained the application process. Although no record of Vidalia's application has been discovered, the town won Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds for the project.

Before the move could begin, a great deal of work had to be accomplished in a relatively short time. The federal government asked the state to obtain the required lands. The Louisiana Department of Public Works carefully surveyed and mapped the old town in an effort to value and record exactly what each person owned. Property owners also estimated the worth of their properties and submitted their figures to the Fifth District Levee Board. Using the 1937 tax records as their reference point, and then subtracting 22.5 percent to help pay

for the services the new town would need, this entity cut some valuations and raised others. These cuts frustrated citizens, as reflected in these lines from a poem written by Mrs. C. E. Schicle and presented to the Vidalia Garden Club in November 1938.

I cuss - and fuss - as I figure by Heck,  
How to build me a house with my government check.

Once the survey of the old town was complete, the workers moved to the new site, where they staked out the streets and marked the locations of block corners. At this point work was turned over to local surveyors Proby Sessions of Vidalia and Walter Babbitt of Natchez. These partners subdivided the blocks into lots, planned the construction of the streets, and chose the locations of water and gas lines. According to Sessions, who was interviewed by a local journalist in 1978, this part of the project took a year and a half to complete. Sidewalks were laid and streets graded by WPA workers. According to Sessions, all of this work was done by hand using shovels and wheelbarrows.

Newspaper articles (see Note) and historic photos make it clear that the Levee Board began issuing move orders in November 1938, long before the new streets and utility services were ready. Some moves actually took place as early as December, causing one journalist to quip, ". . . isn't it delightful weather for people to be cut off from heat, water and light?" By the end of January discouragement was evident, for the move had

. . . reached such proportions . . . as to change the light vein of humor in which it was at first mentioned, into one of seriousness for large tracts of desolation greet the eyes in one direction and another, and it would seem that an upheaval has taken place in the long peaceful little town of Vidalia, leaving ruin and sadness in its wake.

February brought a happier interpretation of events, for the move was helping local businesses. According to the press, the project had turned Vidalia into a ". . . three or more ring circus. . . ."

All available rooms are taken; the restaurants are crowded [sic]; trailers are spotted about town on recently vacated lots; stores are filled with customers; sight-seers throng the thoroughfares; cameras are clicking daily and people are clamoring for "before and after" pictures of historical and aged buildings . . . the whole town seems to be a seething mass of action that will go down to posterity and in history.

By May 1939 the press was happily describing events in the new town.

Passing through Vidalia and looking from side to side and all around in the set back town one sees and even hears many activities for workmen are as thick as ants, laying the foundation of the new courthouse. . . . a concrete mixer is busy, and noisily so, turning out its products for foundations and side walks which are being laid on many of the streets; new houses are going up fast; old ones are still being moved and repaired; a movie house is nearing completion; new bricks are arriving and being hauled to the town hall for its veneer of bricks; trucks are rushing here and there with gravel and sand; excavations are made with spades and loaded wheelbarrows are pushed speedily by WPA workers . . . ; all in all, everything is progressing with a click and people here are so engrossed with their interests they seem oblivious of what the other part of the world is doing, so intent are they upon their own affairs.

Eventually more than 100 homes and commercial buildings were moved to the new town site. To accomplish each move, workers jacked up the building, placed a rolling mechanism beneath it, and then pulled the building to its new site by truck. Some residences, as well as the town's masonry public buildings, were not moved. These were demolished, with replacements being constructed in "New Vidalia," as it was known. The

Concordia Parish Courthouse was one of the replacement buildings.

Construction of the new courthouse seems to have especially excited Vidaliens. As a *Natchez Democrat* reporter realized, the courthouse ". . . will certainly give the town a deal [sic] of prestige and a center building or nucleus around which the town will continue to grow." Articles bragged that the courthouse would be ". . . one of the most modern in Northeast Louisiana."

The contract (for just under \$100,000) was awarded to the M. Thomas Reed Construction Company of Monroe, Louisiana in late March 1939. Work began on April 17, a Monday. By August the building's concrete and steel frame and concrete top story (the location of the jail) had been poured. Later that month workers started to lay the structure's brick veneer. The non-arrival of important building materials delayed work for two weeks in late August and early September, but work was again progressing by September 7. Although the *Democrat* projected that construction would be complete by mid-November, the Concordia Parish Policy Jury did not officially accept the courthouse until January 10, 1940. Despite this final delay, the construction of the building within nine months' time was a major accomplishment.

Whether a dedication ceremony was held is unclear. Nevertheless, newspapers make it obvious that Concordia Parish residents felt extremely proud of their ". . . new, beautiful, stately, spacious Court House . . ." Officials allowed citizens to tour the building; a feature of special interest was the elevator -- a first for Vidalia.

The commercial buildings of "New Vidalia" for the most part did not follow the old tradition of being grouped around the courthouse square. Instead, they were moved or built (mainly the latter) to face the same highway as the courthouse. They begin in the block just east of the courthouse and continue in a line for perhaps two blocks. An October 1942 Sanborn map shows the buildings facing the courthouse square to include a filling station, two stores, a post office, a school, a church, and the city hall and adjacent jail. The residences moved to "New Vidalia" were (and are) scattered in a neighborhood behind the courthouse.

#### Other surviving buildings associated with historic context (moving the town):

In the abstract, the logical property to represent the most important event in the town's history, its relocation, would be the collection of buildings as a whole that were relocated. However, this is not possible due to integrity reasons. They are scattered amongst newer structures and most have individual integrity problems. This leaves the possibility of major public buildings that were either moved or newly constructed because of the move. Here the two candidates are the former city hall and the courthouse, both extant. In "New Vidalia" the city hall shared space with a fraternal organization. Apparently the building in question is the town's old city hall building moved and partially reconstructed. The splendid new courthouse, a much larger and more visually prominent building, is the most powerful symbol of "New Vidalia." It was the move that occasioned the need for the courthouse.

The candidate was replaced with a new courthouse in 1976. It now houses offices for parish agencies and the main branch of the Concordia Parish Library.

NOTE: The archives for Vidalia's historic newspapers no longer exist. To compile the story of Vidalia's move, it has been necessary to consult the files of the *Natchez Democrat*, which was published across the Mississippi River from the Louisiana town. Since newspapers of that era tended to copy articles from neighboring newspapers, the *Democrat's* articles can be assumed to provide accurate coverage of events. Also of help were articles from Monroe, Louisiana newspapers, which are pasted into a scrapbook housed at the Louisiana State Archives. Modern retrospective articles

published in Vidalia's current newspaper, especially those written while it was still possible to interview participants and consult the now lost historic newspapers, are also especially helpful in reconstructing events.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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