

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Louisiana State Capitol was built in 1847-49 and rebuilt in 1880-82 after the interiors were destroyed in December 1862 while it was used as a garrison for Negro troops. During the interim, as before the 1840s construction, the State was governed from New Orleans. As a Gothic Revival public building in America, it is a unique example of a rare type. Its architect, James H. Dakin, described it as "castellated Gothic." Thirty-five years later Mark Twain wrote, "Sir Walter Scott is probably responsible for the Capitol building; for it is not conceivable that this little sham castle would ever have been built if he had not run the people mad, a couple of generations ago, with his medieval romances."

Like a cathedral, the Capitol has a cruciform plan. The east-west axis is comparable to a nave and contains the House chamber on the west end at the second floor and the Senate chamber in the apse, each with a giant stained glass window behind the now vanished rostrum. The transepts continue in use as office space. Each arm of the plan terminates in two towers; those at the west are octagonal, the others square. The west front, facing the Mississippi River, was originally regarded as the principal facade and the names of State Officials responsible for the 1847 construction are incised in the marble panels flanking the great Tudor-arched entrance.

The fenestration with cast-iron hood moulds over the openings is the most authentic remnant of the original construction and to the extent that it controls the floor plan, the tie between the 1840s work and 1880s rebuilding within the shell. Crenellated parapets conceal the roofs, flat in Dakin's original design but now a variety of pitched forms. Exterior walls, painted beige with brown trim, are plastered brick above a granite plinth. Historic references to "the old gray castle" suggest that it may have been painted gray at one time.

Dakin's plans were submitted in a competition announced January 23, 1847; he was notified of their acceptance on May 5. Delays in fixing the site and obtaining satisfactory local brick postponed the corner stone ceremonies until November 3. The proposal accompanying the design stressed the economy of the style and the durability of the cast-iron decoration. Dakin's diary reveals extensive cast iron use on the interior and quantities of glass for some type of glazed dome but none of this survived the 1862 fire.

The architect chosen for the 1880-82 reconstruction was William A. Freret who tried to keep his work in the spirit of the original. Known changes include new emphasis on the north entrance, addition of a fourth story to the transepts, and open work cast-iron turrets on all the towers. Never popular, these were removed in 1937. The interior rotunda is Freret's showpiece. From a central iron column rising to the fourth floor level the stained glass dome begins with a narrow cone and opens, like the underside of a morning glory, then arches down to the twelve-sided, Gothic-arched cast-iron cage which encloses the rotunda above the second floor. A broad, free-standing stair spirals around the central column from the first to the second floor. The rotunda floors are checkered squares of black and white marble. Offices of the major government officials retain the original sills with the titles incised in the marble.

Since the removal of the State government to the new capitol in 1932, the building has been used principally to house the Louisiana Art Commission (now part of a State Department of Art, Historical, and Cultural Preservation), and offices of veterans' organizations. Architectural changes have primarily been toward restoration and safety. The legislative chambers are used principally as galleries which give them a somewhat vacant appearance.

The grounds, on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi, are thought by some to be the site of the Indians' baton rouge noted by French explorers as a boundary marker or council location. They are surrounded by the 1849 cast-iron fence. Segments were designed to fit without bolts. They were designed and cast by John Hill at his Baton Rouge foundry. The ornament includes pineapples on fence posts, eagles on gate posts, quatrefoils and fleurs de lys. Landscaping and planting, though a concern of earlier eras, is not based on original designs which are unknown. The long stairs from the west entrance to Front Street gate are flanked at the top by couchant lions which may be original. A number of monuments on the grounds exhibit varying eras and levels of taste.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Unlike the British, Americans rarely applied the Gothic Revival to major government buildings. The Old Louisiana Capitol in Baton Rouge is a singular example of a Gothic Revival design for the State's most important building. Although its checkered career includes a disastrous fire and periods of abuse, the building is again restored and is particularly notable for the 1847 west facade of James H. Dakin and the 1880 skylighted rotunda of William A. Freret.