

The former Bayou Boeuf Elementary School stands on a modern, multiple-building elementary school campus (see sketch map) on the south side of Bayou Boeuf within the rural northern Lafourche Parish community of Bayou Boeuf. The building has no special stylistic features and is being classified as No Style for the purposes of this nomination. Constructed in 1904, the one-story, frame building has been moved twice (in 1925 and 1951).

The school's original location was just a short distance back from the north bank of Bayou Boeuf within the same community. Highway expansion forced the Lafourche Parish School Board to move the building for the first time in 1925. However, it was simply rolled back to land directly behind the original site north of the bayou, approximately one-fourth to one-half mile from its current location. According to local residents who attended school there, the structure faced the nearby road rather than the waterway. In 1951 a new and larger Bayou Boeuf Elementary School opened on the other side of the bayou and a decision was made to move the historic school to the new institution's campus for continued use as a classroom. The small building was moved in one piece. First it was jacked up and rollers were placed beneath it. Then the movers rolled the structure onto a barge, and a motorized boat pushed barge and school from the north to the south side of the bayou. Once again upon land, the movers rolled the structure (with permission) across private property until it reached its new site on the new school's grounds. Former student Roland Torres (born in 1944 and seven years old when the move took place) especially remembers the event because it was his father's property across which the building was rolled. At the time of the move, the school was placed facing the road approximately sixty-four feet from its newly constructed replacement, a location which attempted to duplicate its former setting. However, a modern classroom building and a cafeteria/office building were built in front of it when the campus expanded in 1956 (see attached sketch map.) Immediately to one side of the 1904 building is a portable classroom.

The 25 x 40 foot gable roof historic building has a low roof porch featuring chamfered columns. A modern ramp for handicapped individuals descends from one side of the porch to the ground beneath a modern covered walkway. The building is pierced by six-over-six windows and is sheathed by clapboards. Vertical boards mark each corner of the structure. Louvered vents pierce the front and back gables. Two-light transoms surmount both the front and the back entrances. The current paneled doors appear to be replacements. Interviews with former students indicate that the building was subdivided into two rooms in the 1930s but became one large space in the 1950s. (Conflicting information exists concerning whether or not this removal took place during or after the historic period.) Its original interior configuration is uncertain. No historic interior fabric remains. Today the single classroom has paneled walls, tiled ceilings, and tiled floors.

Although the exact date is unknown, a small shed roof addition was appended to the rear of the school during the historic period. It originally served as the kitchen for the school, with the children eating at their desks. Entered from a small porch, it now contains restroom facilities.

Assessment of Integrity:

While the candidate's location on a modern school campus in close proximity to other buildings is admittedly less than ideal, there are two more important (overriding) issues. (1) The building remains within the same community it was built to serve. (2) It remains a rare surviving example of an important archetype (the small country school) regardless of location. Also, despite its alterations and the moves, there is no doubt that any student who attended school there would recognize the original Bayou Boeuf Elementary School should he or she visit the modern campus today. As a rare survivor illustrating the small frame schools which characterized education in rural areas of Lafourche Parish until fairly recent times, and as the only place where the children of the Bayou Boeuf community could receive an elementary education for 47 years, the school is an important National Register candidate.

SIGIFICANT DATE:	1904-1953
ARCHITECT/BUILDER:	Unknown
CRITERION:	A

The former Bayou Boeuf Elementary School is of local educational significance because for 47 years it was the only means of receiving an elementary education within the isolated Lafourche Parish community of Bayou Boeuf. It is also significant in education as a rare surviving icon of rural America -- the small wood frame country school. The context for this point is rural Lafourche Parish. The period of significance for both cases spans from 1904, the year of the school's construction, through 1953, the fifty year cutoff. The building continues in use as a kindergarten classroom.

Historical Significance: Only Opportunity for Receiving an Elementary Education

Attitudes toward public education in mid-nineteenth century Louisiana were very different from those held by today's educators and parents. At that time, the prevailing opinion was that education should be the responsibility of the family rather than of state or local government. As a result, parents who could afford the expense sent their children to private schools, and the idea of the "public" school was often equated with "pauper" education.

Although attitudes began to change in the late nineteenth century, opportunities for public education remained limited. The state's 1845 constitution had mandated the creation of public school systems in each parish, but the public-private partnerships which developed thereafter seldom worked properly. Though locals met their obligations by providing churches, lodge halls and other types of buildings for educational use, cost-conscious post-Reconstruction legislators often failed to honor the state's part of the bargain. For example, in 1871 the state owed Bossier Parish approximately \$40,000 in support funds for the so-called "public" schools that parish had established. Thus, for the most part, the responsibility for educating their children still remained in the hands of concerned parents.

As more and more people realized the role which education could play in improving the lives of their children, they responded to this challenge in a variety of ways. As they had in the past, plantation owners hired on-site tutors for their offspring. Other parents banded together to open schools in rooms of private homes or buildings (such as lodge halls) which remained vacant much of the time. Churches played an important role. In South Louisiana, for example, Catholic churches operated a number of parochial schools; while in Protestant North Louisiana churches sometimes allowed private secular schools to use their spaces. School boards finally began taking full responsibility for providing education for white children at the turn of the twentieth century. However, throughout the state, churches and northern philanthropic funds (most notably the Rosenwald fund) continued to make possible educational opportunities for African-American children.

Whether held in the local church, dance hall, lodge, or small building constructed by local citizens or school boards for educational use, these small rural schools shared a number of sad characteristics. Usually consisting of only one room, they were crude, stark, often unpainted and improperly heated. They sometimes lacked ceilings, and their furniture was generally homemade by parents of the attendees. Blackboards were usually placed between windows, forcing the students to look directly into a bright glare. Frequently, the schools could afford only one teacher, who was forced to work with children of all ages and grades. Curricula were limited to basic subjects such as math and reading. Well into the twentieth century, this type of building was the archetype for public education facilities in rural areas of Louisiana.

Bayou Boeuf is a Cajun French settlement located in northern Lafourche Parish. During the historic period its residents were people of modest means who earned a living by hunting and trapping. Until relatively recent times the area's swampy geography and the lack of good roads made travel difficult and kept the community fairly isolated. Despite this handicap, area residents have always valued education. The residents began campaigning for their own public school in 1894. At that time, children lucky enough to receive any education obtained it either from a private tutor or attended a school at Malagay, approximately three miles distant and difficult to reach. The residents' entreaties were not answered until 1895 or 1897, when a school opened in an old frame house located along the bayou. Its academic year lasted only five or six months. Whether this school closed or became too small to meet the community's needs is uncertain, but the school board promised to build a new school for Bayou Boeuf's children as soon as funds became available. In 1904 the school board was finally ready to address the issue of education in several rural Lafourche Parish communities. Along with four other villages, Bayou Boeuf received a 25 x 40 foot building (the candidate). The total cost of the five-building project was \$2,511.01.

A 1904 school board report describes the facilities:

These school houses are furnished with a ceiling overhead, blinds and sashes, a front porch, and are painted with a uniform color adapted [sic] by the Board that is maroon with green for the blinds. These school buildings, while not pretentious yet are a great improvement on the old style of school houses that formerly prevailed, and mark a distant [sic] advance in school architecture in this parish

The enrollment for 1904 was 78 students, with 50 being the average attendance. (Many children stopped attending during hunting and trapping season.)

Surviving students interviewed for this nomination attended the elementary school at Bayou Boeuf from the 1930s

to 1950. The number of students served during this period changed over the years; most interviewees remember the classrooms as being full but not crowded. The school contained two rooms (front and back) in 1932 when Harold Martinez enrolled.

During Mr. Martinez's time, the school taught grades one through seven. Later the number of grades offered would change, but the number of teachers seems to have remained constant at two. During Mr. Martinez's years as a student, one teacher taught grades one through three in the rear space. The curriculum included English, spelling, writing and arithmetic. The study of English was far more than learning about subjects, verbs and nouns; for virtually all of the students spoke only French when they began school. Thus, the teacher's first task was to teach them to speak English. The children learned by memorizing the letters of the alphabet and then learning to read. According to former student Ledera Granier, they learned quickly. The other teacher taught grades four through seven in the building's front room. Geography and history joined the basic curriculum for these older students; even later, health and science were added. The teachers (some of whom were not certified when they arrived) lived in the homes of local residents.

Each classroom contained double desks (two students per desk) organized in rows running from the front to the back of the room. Each grade occupied one or more rows. The teacher taught one grade and one subject at a time, usually in blocks of a quarter or half hour. While one group listened to the teacher, the other grades sat quietly or did their homework. After World War II, the school offered classes to returning veterans as well as to children.

Students living on the same side of the bayou as the school walked or rode mules to class each day. Each time the bayou flooded, they had to make their way through mud after the water receded. Those living across the bayou came by boat, as there was no bridge. A cistern provided drinking water; each child was required to bring his or her own cup. (Later students remember a "community" cup.) Outhouses (one for boys and one for girls) located as far as possible from the building provided restroom facilities. A wood burning stove heated the building during the winter months. No janitorial services were provided, so the children were responsible for keeping the school clean.

The method of providing lunch for the students changed over the years. At first some children went home for lunch while others brought theirs in a tin pale. Later, the school board paid former student Essie Cortez \$21 per month to cook food for the 30 children then in attendance at her father-in-law's home near the school. She then carried it to the building and carted the dirty dishes away. The children ate at their desks, and Mrs. Cortez had to be very careful to make sure each child got the same amount of food! Finally, the school board added a small kitchen to the rear of the building.

The school served only the Bayou Boeuf community in its early years, but redistricting and the closure of the old Malagay school brought outside students by the late 1940s. The building and its limited grounds became too small, so the school board decided to construct a new Bayou Boeuf Elementary School across the bayou. At this time the decision was also made to move the historic school to the new site for continued use as a classroom. (This move is described in Part 7.) The move took place in 1951. According to Shirley Rome, who started school in 1942, Bayou Boeuf residents were "excited" that the school was being saved and moved because it was (and remains) very important to them. The candidate provided the only schooling many Bayou Boeuf children ever received; the nearest secondary school was several miles away, over poor roads, near Thibodaux. A closing comment by Norman Granier, who enrolled in 1932, best sums up the community's attitude. Going to school was a challenge, he said. It "opened up a whole new world to me."

Historical Significance: Rarity of Small Wood Frame Rural Schools

The former Bayou Boeuf Elementary School is a rare survivor to tell the story of rural education as it typically appeared across Louisiana in the early twentieth century. Prior to consolidation, which generally occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, every little community had a school where grades 1-6 or 1-7 were taught. Such schools existed by the hundreds across the state and were the face of rural education. For example, in 1922 two-thirds, or 29, of the schools in Tangipahoa Parish were small rural schools with one to three teachers. For most rural areas, the nearest secondary education would have been in the parish seat.

Rural education in Lafourche Parish reflected these facts. The number of rural schools in addition to the five constructed in 1904 is unknown, but the one room school would have been the norm. Every community would have had one, for the parish's swampy conditions and poor roads isolated villages and made travel beyond the local area difficult. These schools would have taught only the elementary grades. The closest high school was located near Thibodaux, Lafourche's seat of government.

As transportation improved, consolidation resulted in fewer but larger schools throughout Louisiana as well as in Lafourche. No longer needed, the early rural schools usually either deteriorated until they fell down, were torn down, or

were converted for different uses. In Winn Parish, for example, only two of the many rural schools which once existed have survived. (Both the Brister School and the Phillips School are listed on the National Register.) Two of the five Lafourche Parish rural schools built in 1904 now serve as homes, and it is believed that two more no longer exist. Fortunately, consolidation did not result in the loss of the old Bayou Boeuf school, and it remains an important part of elementary education in the community. In addition, it is an important reminder of education as it was offered to rural students in the past.

NOTE: This National Register nomination results from the wish of Bayou Boeuf citizens and Lafourche Parish officials to celebrate two special achievements. The first is the one hundredth anniversary of the original Bayou Boeuf Elementary School, which will occur in 2004. The second is the recognition of the current elementary school as a School of Academic Achievement and a School of Exemplary Academic Growth because Bayou Boeuf's 2001-2002 school performance score improved by 104 points, or 512 percent, in a single year. This was the highest growth rate in the state of Louisiana.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Borne, Denise Constant, "The Little Red Schoolhouse," typescript, n.d.; copy in National Register file.

_____, Unidentified manuscript; copy in National Register file. This manuscript, provided by the Bayou Boeuf Centennial Committee, has lost its cover sheet. However, committee members confirm that it was written by Mrs. Borne, who served as a teacher and then principal of the Bayou Boeuf Elementary School. The manuscript is meticulously documented using Lafourche Parish School Board records and interviews with local citizens. Committee members believe it may be a thesis written by Mrs. Borne while studying at Nicholls State University.

Houma Daily Courier, January 6; copy in National Register file.

Interview with Essie Cortez, November 12, 2003.

Interview with Dennis Martinez, November 12, 2003.

Interview with Harold Martinez, November 12, 2003.

Interview with Norman and Ledera Granier, November 12, 2003.

Interview with Roland Torres, November 12, 2003.

Interview with Shirley Rome, November 12, 2003.