

New Orleans: The First State Capital

Cabildo 1803-1812



The territorial governor was W.C.C. Claiborne.

In the **Government House**, the legislature debated an issue that would shape the political landscape for the next 100 years: In which city should the state government be located. As early as 1814, politicians representing rural parishes argued that a capital in Donaldsonville or Baton Rouge would better reflect the state's interest. On February 4, 1825, the legislature agreed to move the capital to Donaldsonville the following year. Fifteen days later, those opposed to relocation delayed the move until 1829. However, the legislature moved sooner than planned: The Government House burned in 1827 and the capital moved temporarily to the **Orleans Theater**.

Is That a Fact?

- Cabildo refers to a type of government and not an architectural style.
- In 1803, the Louisiana Territory was officially transferred to the United States Government in the Cabildo.
- The Cabildo was 17 years old when Louisiana attained statehood; the Government House, 51.

The Cabildo is best known as the birthplace of Louisiana statehood. In 1812, statesmen gathered in this former Spanish courthouse to create the 18th state of the Union. Some historians say the Cabildo served briefly as Louisiana's capitol. True or not, the new state government soon chose its first capitol building—the Government House.

Government House 1812-1827



Governors serving here were W.C.C. Claiborne, Jacques P. Villere, Thomas B. Robertson, Henry S. Thibideaux, and Henry S. Johnson.

“A tremendous [sic] fire broke out here on Friday night about half past ten o'clock . . . valuable property was lost great confusion prevailed and several (lives?) were lost, and some crippled [sic] from throwing out furniture and other effects from the upper stories into the streets—the Legislature is now without a house to sit in . . .”

-John Moore, state representative, to John Close
New Orleans 2/4/1828

A Capital Deferred: Challenges and Setbacks

After the Government House burned in 1827, the **Orleans Theater** briefly housed the legislature while a more suitable structure was sought. Several days later, the government moved to the **Ursuline Convent**. Meanwhile, construction of the new capitol was not going well.

In 1827, legislators visiting Donaldsonville found serious defects in the building's construction. That same year, the government sued Antoine Peytavin, the

architect, for failure to complete the capitol building. Construction was further delayed in 1829, when an epidemic killed all but one worker. These problems did little to mollify those politicians opposed to leaving New Orleans. Nevertheless, the legislature moved to **Donaldsonville** in 1830, still wondering whether the new state house would be ready.

Orleans Theatre 1827

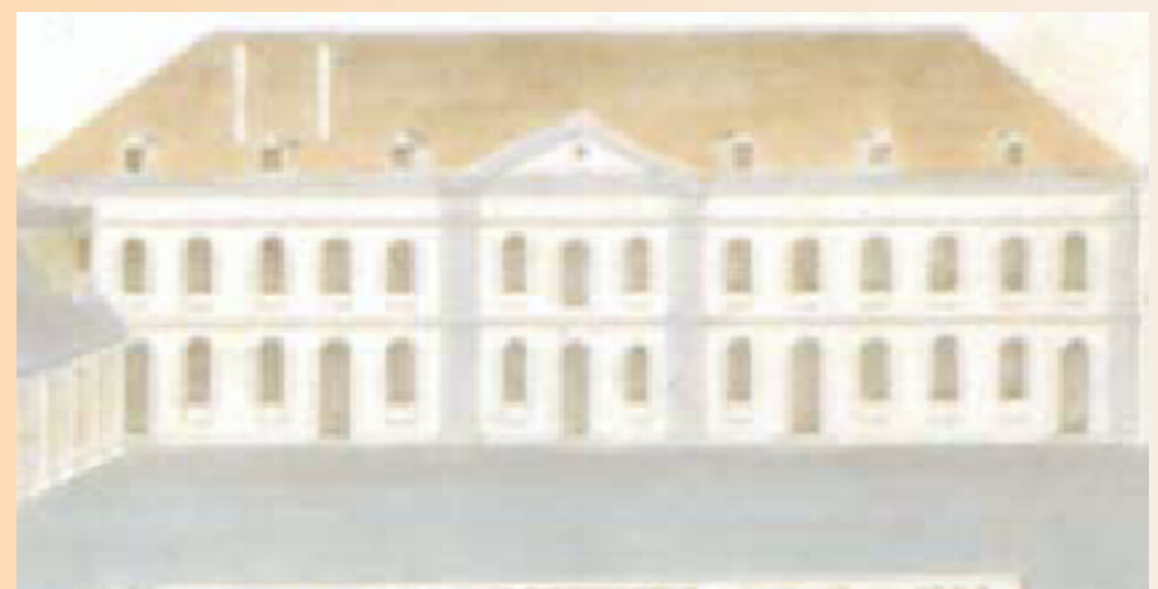


One governor served here: Henry S. Johnson.

“... the Legislature is now without a house to sit in—a meeting was held this morning at the Orleans Street ball room and a committee appointed to procure a suitable house for the balance of the Session.”

-John Moore, state representative,
to John Close
New Orleans 2/4/1828

The Old Ursuline Convent 1827-29



Governors serving here were Henry S. Johnson, Pierre A.B. Derbigny, and Armand Beauvais.

Is That a Fact?

- Built in 1745, on the site of the previous convent, the Old Ursuline Convent is one of the oldest existing structures in the Mississippi Valley.
- The Old Ursuline Convent served as a nunnery and as the archbishop's residence before it became the state capitol in 1827. It is now home to the archives of the archdiocese.
- The present Ursuline Convent is located on State Street and has been there since 1912.
- The Orleans Theatre was converted into a home for black Catholic nuns in 1881.