

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Foundation for Historical Louisiana Names "Treasures in Trouble" 2011-2012 Endangered Properties List Released

In a continuing effort to fulfill its mission of cultural and architectural preservation, the Foundation for Historical Louisiana (FHL) has named endangered historic properties and entities, calling them “treasures in trouble,” to draw attention to their potential loss. FHL is designating five properties in the Greater Baton Rouge region, as well one grouping of New Orleans Lower Mid-City Historic District homes moved from the swath of construction for the new medical center, as endangered treasures and in need of advocacy efforts to preserve.

Named are the **Livingston Parish Courthouse**, circa 1940; First **Guarantee Bank of Ponchatoula**, a mid-20th century modern building designed by renowned Louisiana architect John Desmond; **True Friends Hall** in Donaldsonville, circa 1886; The **Royal Hotel** in Amite, circa 1900; the **Laurel Street Firehouse**, circa 1940; and dozens of **moved homes originally located in the National Register Lower Mid-City Historic District of New Orleans and intended for recycling.**

This year’s Treasures in Trouble were selected predominately from the nine parish capital region that includes Ascension, Livingston, and Tangipahoa. Nominations came from citizens concerned about preservation and each entry is architecturally and culturally significant, said FHL board member and Treasures in Trouble Chair Mark Drennen. Also serving on the committee are Lenore Feeney, Robert Hodges, Doug Cochran, Sandra Stokes, Mark Upton, Michael Desmond, PhD., along with the FHL professional staff.

“The Treasures in Trouble recognition draws attention to these unique properties that are so important to their communities. Each property represents a tie to the history, architectural, and cultural story of its location. Additionally FHL will bring together individuals and organizations from the various parishes to develop a business plan of action for each named property. “Spotlighting these neglected and sometimes forgotten properties is the first step in bringing them back into commerce and showcasing their full potential and possibilities for economic development,” stated Doug Cochran, FHL Board of Directors Chair.

Recognized by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana as the 2011-2012 Treasures in Trouble are:

The **First Guaranty Bank in Ponchatoula** is an example of a 1960 modern bank design. Mid-century modern architecture reaching fifty years of age is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Preservationists nationwide are currently evaluating and documenting these structures. The bank building

is now "endangered" because the owner has requested to demolish the building to construct a new structure rather than rehabilitate the current structure, according to the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation. The **First Guaranty Bank in Ponchatoula** is eligible for both State and Federal historic preservation tax credits for commercial properties up to 45% of the approved rehabilitation costs.

True Friends Hall located at 711 Lessard Street, constructed in 1886, is the largest and oldest existing benevolent society hall remaining in Louisiana. The roof was damaged by Hurricane Gustav. In addition, the hall was damaged by fire in 1973. Local fundraising efforts of the River Road African-American Museum volunteers and board members did get the windows and entryways boarded up. The building needs a roof to prevent further water damage and health hazards. Benevolent societies such as the True Friends Benevolent Association played a vital role in the African-American community from the 1880s to 1980s. Benevolent societies were organized to take care of the insurance needs of its members, many of whom were recently freed men and women. The organizations provided burial and health insurance to pharmacists, doctors, midwives, and funeral homes. Some provided assistance for families whose homes were destroyed by fire and protection for orphans. The River Road African-American Museum has an extensive file of original documents and photographs on the history of the organization. Musical greats Fats Domino, Plas Johnson, and Renald Richard all played under its roof.

The Royal Hotel, circa 1900, is located in the heart of Amite's downtown across from the old Train Depot. The two-story roughly 5,000 feet Classic landmark holds deep significance-not only in its own rich history, but as one of the fine old buildings in the heart of town that gives Amite its ambiance as a historical city. It is among the 45 buildings in the Amite National Register of Historic District. In 1990, Amite activist Leah Beth Simpson and other preservationists began work to restore the hotel, but unanticipated complications with property heirs hindered the progress. The volunteer preservationists are now trying to purchase the property from its current owners who want to demolish it and construct affordable housing units. Working with the FHL, Simpson and other leaders have formed a non-profit organization called the Tangipahoa Hotel Cultural Center. The goal is to raise the \$85,000 to buy the building and eventually raise additional funds to renovate the structure into offices for the Amite Arts Council, an Amite museum, and other uses. Over \$25,000 has been pledged to date. Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long gave a speech from the second story balcony in the 1930s and legend has it the Kingfish spent the night in one of the ten hotel rooms. According to Simpson, "losing that building after all these years and all our struggles to keep it would break our hearts."

The **Laurel Street Firehouse**, at 18th and Laurel Street, is no longer an EMS station and sits empty. The structure is recognized as historically significant because of its 1940s architecture. "Any building without a specified current use or a foreseeable use in the near future is in danger of becoming demolished due to maintenance costs or falling into disrepair and demolition by neglect," said FHL Director of Preservation Field

Services Erin Brush. This handsome building needs renovation and a plan that puts it back into service for the community. FHL is calling on the City-Parish to recognize its unique construction, its need for renovation, and a well-thought out reuse goal. It is located adjacent to Historic Magnolia Cemetery. Some have suggested a fire museum, but the Old Bogan Firehouse, home of the Arts Council is serving this function.

Livingston Parish Courthouse, circa 1940 and of the WPA Art Deco era, will soon be abandoned to make way for a modern courthouse to serve the parish's growing needs. Because there are no clear plans underway, FHL believes this historic structure is in danger of neglect and abandonment. In recent discussions on the new courthouse, it was stated that the historic building has exposed wiring and holes in the walls and stairwells, as well as roofing and lighting issues. It was built as a courthouse before WW II when the population was 17,790 and the census is now 128,000 persons.

Historic homes moved from the Historic Lower Mid-City New Orleans District are “again” endangered. The medical center site for the Veteran’s and Louisiana State University hospitals has been cleared of blocks of homes and many historic structures. Early plans for the multi-billion-dollar hospital projects called for simply demolishing houses. Most structures dated to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Many were deemed of historical significance but labeled as “too many to move.” However, upon taking office, Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s administration reviewed the situation and yielded to citizens and preservationist’s pressure to save as many of the historic homes as possible. To get them under wires and overpasses, the relocated houses arrived in their locations without roofs and in some cases with their second floors shorn off, walls gone, and architectural details missing. Most are still in that condition. They are exposed to wind and rain, salvage thieves, and other criminal elements. Shockingly, despite official comments in February 2011 that the houses were about to get roofs after too many months without them, a half year later, the so-called “dry-in” process is still incomplete. FHL believes that the relocation plan has not been well-defined and funded or sufficiently monitored to protect this valuable housing stock.

According to FHL Executive Director, Carolyn Bennett, this is the fourth year that the organization has announced a Treasures in Trouble roster. Some of the named buildings from former years have been St. Paul’s Church in Bayou Goula, the LSU Huey P. Long Pool, the Bucky Geodesic Dome, the Lincoln Theater, and The Marston House. The Foundation for Historical Louisiana is a 48 year old, membership-based organization and is a local partner of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. For further information visit www.fhl.org.

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