Known as the Gateway to Acadiana, Opelousas traces its history over two hundred years. The City of Opelousas uses 1720 as the official founding date; however, Opelousas can trace its roots back over 10,000 years.

Archaeologists and historians believe that Native Americans may have lived here nearly 12,500 years ago in small nomadic groups. The Opelousa Indians, a small band of the historic Attakapa Tribe, lived in the area known as Opelousas for hundreds of years. The present-day city takes its name from the Opelousas, which, although given many meanings, translates to black leg. Local legend says that the tribe painted their legs a dark color, hence the name. Recently, research has discovered that the name may be an interpretation for a loose phrase meaning “this place is very hot.”

France established the Louisiana Colony in 1699. As early as 1706, the Opelousas Country was known to Frenchman, although some historians believe that French explorer Rene’ Robert Cavelier, sieur de LaSalle, during one of his four land excursions in the late 1600s, may have been among the friendly Opelousa Indians in 1687. According to the Council of Commerce Records of 1710, Opelousas could claim a semi-white presence frequently visiting the area since 1708. A map drawn by a priest named LeMaire in 1716 and “Delisle’s Care de la Louisiane” of 1718 shows the name Loupelousas on it. The latter drawing places the tribe along Bayou Nezpique, in present-day western St. Landry Parish. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the region between the Mississippi and Sabine rivers was called Opelousas.

In 1733, representatives of the Opelousas appeared before the French Superior Council and asked that traders and trappers be sent to trade with the tribe. These Indians remained in the Opelousas area and lived peacefully among the settlers for nearly one hundred years. In 1814 about 20 members of the Opelousas were still alive. There is no mention of them in later historical accounts.

French Captain Renauld d’Hauterive sent a military exploration team to the Opelousas area to establish a French governing presence here, in 1719. By 1720, Opelousas had become a midway stopping point for travelers going between Natchitoches and New Orleans. Natchitoches is Louisiana’s oldest permanent settlement, established in 1714, and New Orleans followed in 1718. Local tradition claims 1720 as the official founding date, making Opelousas the third oldest city in Louisiana.

In 1763, the Treaty of Paris was ratified, which officially transferred Louisiana from France to Spain. That same year, Louis Pellerin, a French soldier stationed at Opelousas, received a land grant to establish a permanent settlement. The original streets of Opelousas were laid out during this time and the town grew from this original town plan. Acadians (Cajuns) arrived in the Opelousas region in 1765. The British exiled them from their homes in Canada after France lost Nova Scotia to Great Britain. The Spanish established a garrison and the population grew to more than one hundred families in 1769.

Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the County of Opelousas was created, with Opelousas becoming the seat of government in 1805. Opelousas County was renamed St. Landry Parish, after the Catholic Church located here, on March 31, 1807. In Louisiana, civil subdivisions are referred to as parishes, instead of counties, which is the result of the strong Roman Catholic influence in the state. St. Landry Parish is commonly referred to as old Imperial St. Landry Parish.
because seven parishes were created from the original Opelousas County. The original district extended from the Atchafalaya River on the east to the Sabine River on the west, north to the present boundaries of Avoyelles and Rapides Parishes on their southern extremities and to the lower part of Allen Parish. To the south, it extended to the Gulf of Mexico and included the present-day parishes of Acadia, Evangeline, Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis and parts of Allen and all of St. Landry. The first courthouse building was constructed in 1806. Since that time, four other structures have served as the courthouse in respectively 1822, 1847, 1888 and the present structure built in 1939. Opelousas has continuously been the center of area government since the 1700s. Louisiana became the 18th state admitted to the Union in 1812 and on February 21, 1821, the Louisiana State Legislature incorporated the Town of Opelousas.

Opelousas continued to grow during the 19th century. It boasted of many fine shops, restaurants and an opera house. Opelousas was, in fact, just like any other southern town: fine antebellum homes and large cotton plantations dotted the landscape. All this serenity came to an end with the outbreak of the American Civil War.

Opelousas became the capital of Confederate Louisiana for almost a year (1862-1863). Governor Thomas O. Moore moved to Opelousas and lived in the old Mouton Home on Liberty Street, which became the Governor's Mansion and today it is the oldest remaining governor's mansion in the state. While Opelousas was the capital, the Legislature met in the LaCombe Hotel, while the capitol building was the parish courthouse. The town also served as a command post for both the Confederate and Federal troops, a Southern training camp – Camp Overton, and the Medical Department of the Confederacy in Louisiana was located here.

Opelousas was spared much of the heavy fighting during the Civil War, although two Federal invasions of Opelousas took place in 1863. The Battle of Opelousas was fought on October 21, 1863 and the first Federal occupation of the city began. The Confederates recaptured the city, only to lose it again to Union troops. It remained occupied for the duration of the war. After the war, in 1868, several bloody riots took place in the city as a result of reconstruction efforts in the South.

Today, Opelousas enjoys its unique and diverse culture and history. From the early Native Americans and other settlers from France, Africa, Spain, Acadia, England, Germany, Italy, Asia and Eastern Europe have influenced the culture of Opelousas and St. Landry Parish. These distinctive groups have made their impact on the culture here. The great Cajun/Creole cooking only found in this region of the state, is a contribution from the many ethnic groups here and these have helped Opelousas earn the international reputation as the home of good food and Southern hospitality. Famous chefs such as Tony Chachere and Paul Prudhomme are from Opelousas.

Other famous people have graced the Opelousas landscape, also. Among them are: Jim Bowie, famed hero of the Alamo, General Garrigues de Flaugeauc, a solider in Napoleon Bonaparte’s army, Olympic gold medallist Rodney Milburn and renowned author John Ed Bradley.

Opelousas is the "Zydeco Music Capital of the World", and is the birthplace of Zydeco legend, Clifton Chenier. Zydeco dance clubs dot the St Landry Parish landscape. Slim's Y-Ki-Ki is know throughout the world for its toe-tapping Zydeco music that entertain visitors to the area.

Opelousas has been the center of government and politics for centuries. Many prominent statesmen and colorful politicians have come from the city. Louisiana governors Jacques Dupre’
and Andre’ Bienvenu Roman, United States Senators Allan B. Magruder and Thomas Posey, United States Congressman Henry D. Larcade, Jr and St. Landry Parish Sheriff D.J. “Cat” Doucet were all Opelousans.

Religion has always been at the heart of the city. One of the oldest churches in South Louisiana, St. Landry Catholic Church, traces its history back to 1756. It is known as the Mother Church of Acadiana. Officially established in 1770, the first church building was built in 1767. The present church building was completed in 1909. The old church records date back to the 18th century, and serve as a treasure chest for historical and genealogical research. Two other historic churches are the Louisiana Memorial United Methodist Church, which is the oldest Methodist Church west of the Mississippi River, founded in 1806, and the Little Zion Baptist Church, the first African-American Baptist Church in Opelousas, founded in 1867.

It is impossible to capture the spirit of the people here, with their diverse culture and unique history. Opelousas is interwoven with the people, culture and history of Louisiana. With the diverse ethnic groups here, visitors and locals alike will be charmed by this old city, and will earn a special place in the hearts in the hearts of those who walk its streets.

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