

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Red Hat Cell Block, Louisiana State Penitentiary, West Feliciana Parish, LA

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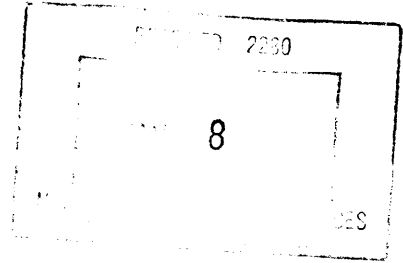
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Red Hat Cell Block, Louisiana State Penitentiary

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number Louisiana State Penitentiary

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Angola

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: West Feliciana Code: 125 Zip Code: 70712

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: Locally: X

Jonathan Fricker, Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

January 7, 2003

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
Determined eligible for the National Register
Determined not eligible for the National Register
Removed from the National Register
Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper (Handwritten signature)

Date of Action (Handwritten: 2/20/03)

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private:
Public-Local:
Public-State: X
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing
1
1

Non contributing
buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: government Sub: correctional facility
Current: recreation and culture Sub: museum

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: concrete
Walls: concrete
Roof: other: tar and gravel
Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The first cell block at the Louisiana State Penitentiary is a small, narrow and long, flat roofed, concrete building constructed in 1935. Generally known as Angola (see Part 8), the state penitentiary occupies vast rural acreage in a big loop of the Mississippi River adjacent to the Mississippi state line. Access to Angola is via a twenty-mile road (LA 66) off the main highway (U.S. 61). Louisiana Highway 66 dead-ends at Angola. The candidate is located to the far rear of the facility, toward the Mississippi River, in an area where there are few buildings today. (Almost all of Angola dates from the mid-1950s and later.) The cell block is known as "Red Hat" because the incorrigibles kept there were identified by a red top on their straw hats. The inhospitable place they inhabited looks much as it did when constructed with the exception of an addition that almost reads as a free-standing building.

Red Hat is about eighteen feet wide and some 130-140 feet long. At the front, accessed via a heavy steel door, is a small receiving area with barred openings. (Like the openings elsewhere at Red Hat, there are only bars – no glass to provide protection from the elements.) Another steel door opens into a long corridor running the length of the building. Above the steel door, one on each side, is a mechanism to open the cell doors. The first room on each side of the corridor is roughly square in shape. One was a shower room; the use of the flanking room is unknown. Then begin the tiny cells, twenty to each side. The cells are five feet wide and seven feet deep. Everything is concrete, including the "bed," which runs the depth of the cell. Immediately adjacent was the toilet (since removed). Light came from a small barred opening at the top of each cell. (A report written shortly after Red Hat's construction noted that it had forty cells capable of housing eighty prisoners. One finds it hard to imagine two people in a space five by seven feet.)

A system of steel doors controlled from the receiving area confined prisoners behind bars. The doors are solid steel about half way up and barred at the top. Meals were passed to prisoners via a slot below the bars. For inexplicable reasons, a few of the cells (3 or 4) at the front have a different system for meal delivery. Here a metal device flips out and rotates into the cell.

The only change to Red Hat (other than the plumbing removal) is a side addition that connects nominally with the original building. Also, there were originally guard towers, one to each side.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): NA
A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance: social history

Period(s) of Significance: 1935

Significant Dates: 1935

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: unknown

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Red Hat Cell Block is locally significant as a milestone in the development of prisoner control at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. As surprising as it may seem, Angola did not have a cell block until Red Hat was built in 1935. The immediate catalyst was the killing of two guards during an attempted escape in 1933. Seen within a larger perspective, Red Hat was one step in a series of "control" measures inaugurated in the mid-1930s. The cell block takes its distinctive name from the trademark straw hats with red trim worn by its inmates.

The chief unit in the Louisiana State Penitentiary (now and when Red Hat was built) is known by the name of the former Mississippi River plantation on which it is located, Angola. Eight thousand acres had been purchased during the notorious convict lease era by S. L. James, a private individual who operated the system for profit from 1869 until 1901. In that year the state assumed control, but financial concerns, rather than penal reform, remained foremost: to make the system pay for itself at a minimum and perhaps even make money. (Little attention, if any, was given to rehabilitation. Real penal reform did not occur until the 1950s.) The work was agricultural and the "workers" were about 85% black. According to Louisiana penal history authority Mark T. Carleton, the new state system was driven by two issues: cost and race. James had been called "the largest slaveholder of post-bellum Louisiana." Now this distinction belonged to the State of Louisiana.

One of many problems in the state penitentiary system was political patronage; in fact, the first professional penologists were not hired at Angola until the 1950s. Paid guards were very few in number – some 20 for a prison population over 2,000, and they were generally regarded, even by their employers, as "white trash." The issue was addressed in 1915 by essentially turning guard duties over to convicts themselves, a deleterious measure that continued at Angola into the 1970s. Added to all this was periodic flooding of the Mississippi that wreaked havoc on the ability of the "plantation" (over 18,000 acres by 1940) to even break even.

While treatment of prisoners was generally better than in the convict-lease years, it did vary from administration to administration. In the first two decades of state control, treatment improved and the death toll dropped significantly. But Carleton labels the 1920-40 period "years of erosion." By 1940, he writes, "the Louisiana State Penitentiary had marched backward toward the age of lessee James." All available evidence indicates that in the lean Depression years, with the over-riding goal of self-sufficiency even more critical, convicts were particularly pushed to the limits. One result was a high number of deaths – some 41 annually.

It was within this context that Angola received its first cell block – its first real jail in the generally accepted sense of the word. In the S. L. James days convicts lived in former slave quarters on the place. When the state assumed control, barracks were built, where men slept in crowded bunk bed conditions and took their meals. Each barrack had one tiny room where a convict would be placed for particular punishment. (Whether this room was barred is not known.) Armed convict guards roaming the place were the deterrent to escape. But obviously they were not sufficient deterrent. There were 113 escapes for the period 1932-34. The most serious came in September 1933 when two prison employees were killed – the direct catalyst for the construction of the cell block known as "Red Hat."

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Quoting from the 1934-36 biennial report of the Louisiana State Penitentiary:

“The September tragedy of 1933 showed clearly that trouble-makers must be segregated and placed under conditions of very definite control. A special cellhouse was built of reinforced concrete. It has forty cells capable of housing eighty prisoners. These troublesome convicts are housed there under absolute control. To date the segregated population has not exceeded 23. It is 19 at this writing. The idea of the cell block is not to punish but to control. Each cell has running water, toilet facilities, and individual bed. Meals are served individually. The occupant can't hold secret caucus with others; he can't terrorize others; he can't stealthily leave his bed and approach a sleeping man to do him harm while the guard is not looking – he is under control. This group, dubbed the red hat gang by their fellows, is under special guard. They work under special guard. The system is a deterrent to those who might be tempted to violate the rules. No one wants the individual service of that cell room, and discipline and order have been easier since the adoption of the system.”

The report then proved its point by providing escape figures from before and after Red Hat's construction. There were only four in 1936.

Angola's first cell block was one aspect of a pattern of control exerted in the 1930s. By August 1936, as reported in the Louisiana State Penitentiary biennial report, twenty-five guard towers had been erected along the perimeter of Angola, “manned day and night with riflemen under constant supervision of a civilian employee riding the line.” “Modern” weapons were purchased and guards were trained in marksmanship. “Security of confinement had become an obsession” at Angola by 1940, writes Carleton. Angola had become the “Alcatraz of the South” proclaimed newspaperman Harnett Kane in a full page photo story in 1939.

The 1940 report for the prison system concluded that the “first and foremost duty is to keep the prisoners safely.” Relegated to second place, for the first time officially, observes Carleton, was the duty to make the system as light a burden on the taxpayer as possible. In the same report, the warden noted with some pride that there had been no successful escapes for almost four years. Eight men, however, had been shot and killed in attempts.

“Red Hat” is indeed a notorious place in Angola history and legend. It was a place to avoid. Crowded bunk beds, three atop each other, must have seemed like bliss in comparison to the tiny cells with their concrete beds. A legendary nurse at Angola, Mary Margaret Daughtery, related later in life: “I even went into the Red Hats.” “There was one boy there that was in a coma, and the guards said it wasn't safe to take him out. I said, ‘Well, if he's in a coma, either come here or I'll come there.’ So I went into the Red Hats. The boy had diabetes, so I gave him some insulin and he snapped right out of it. On yes, the guards were afraid to go in. Yes. But I didn't mind going into the Red Hats. The odor, though, would knock you down. They had just little bitty rooms with a toilet . . .” While Nurse Daughtery may have been exaggerating about the guards being afraid, her recollections are indicative of the cell block's notorious status.

Even more notorious is the infamous heel slashing incident in 1951 which led to sweeping reforms at Angola in that decade. Thirty-one inmates slashed their heel tendons to protest conditions, causing Angola to receive intense scrutiny and nationwide publicity. (Nurse Daughtery's testimony before an investigative committee was particularly damning.) In a much repeated quote, *Collier's* magazine labeled Angola

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“America’s Worst Prison.” Robert Kennon ran successfully for governor in 1952 with a “clean up Angola” campaign. A “new Angola” was dedicated in 1955, at which time “Red Hat” relinquished its status as the facility’s only cell block. The small building was then periodically used as a disciplinary block and the site of executions. (Executions were via the electric chair in Louisiana until 1991.) Today it is a popular stop on a prison tour given by the Angola Museum. (The museum, operated by the penitentiary, is housed in a modern building.)

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Biennial Report of Louisiana State Penitentiary, 1934-36.

Biennial Report of Louisiana State Penitentiary, 1938-40.

Butler, Anne and Henderson, C. Murray. *Angola, Louisiana State Penitentiary: A Half-Century of Rage and Reform.* Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1990.

Carleton, Mark T. *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System.* LSU Press, 1971.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: less than an acre

UTM References: **Zone** **Easting** **Northing**
 15 632400 3426440

Verbal Boundary Description: Boundaries parallel building elevations, each at a distance of 20 feet.

Boundary Justification: Boundaries were chosen to discretely encompass the nominated resource. As noted elsewhere, the acreage at Angola is vast.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register staff

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: September 2002

PROPERTY OWNERS

Louisiana State Penitentiary
Angola, LA 70712