

Map 18 Louisiana Parishes

Map Skill: What is the parish seat of Rapides Parish?

Local Governments

As you read, look for:

- types of local government, and
- vocabulary terms **police jury**, **home rule**, and **municipality**.

People are more likely to have contact with their local government. In Louisiana, the units of local government are the parishes, municipalities, and special districts.

Lagniappe

Cameron is the largest parish in the state in terms of land area.





Parish Government

The primary local government division is the parish. Louisiana has had its present number of sixty-four parishes since 1912. The parish government and courthouse are located in the town or city known as the *parish seat*. In other states, these are called counties and county seats.

Why does Louisiana have parishes instead of counties? During Spanish colonial Louisiana, the church divisions were called parishes, and local government followed these divisions. In 1807, the territory of Louisiana used these parishes for local government divisions.

Police Jury

During Louisiana's Spanish colonial days, the local government resembled today's parish **police jury**. A group of citizens was chosen to supervise or police the parish. This group was referred to as a *jury*. Forty-six of Louisiana's parishes still refer to the parish-elected government as the police jury. Today, the police jury has five to fifteen elected members.

The police jury passes local laws for the parish government. The police jury is also responsible for building and maintaining parish roads and buildings such

Above: The parish courthouse is the seat of government for a parish. This is the DeSoto Parish courthouse in Mansfield.

Spotlight

Louisiana's Oldest Courthouses

The courthouse is the government building in each parish. Each courthouse is located in the town or city known as the *parish seat*, meaning the seat of justice and government. In some parishes, the earliest court trials were held in rough log buildings that were also homes.

The oldest courthouse building in the state is no longer used as a courthouse because the parish seat was moved to another town. The town of Jackson was the first seat of Feliciana Parish. Jackson's small courthouse, dating from 1820, still stands today. When the parish was divided into East and West Feliciana, the courthouse was relocated to Clinton.

The Clinton courthouse was built in 1840 and is the oldest Louisiana courthouse still in use today. Three other courthouses were also built before the Civil War. The Lafourche Parish Courthouse was built in 1856, the St. Martin Parish Courthouse was built in 1859, and the Claiborne Parish Courthouse was built in 1860.

All of these buildings have the Greek columns that reflect the strong interest in the classic Greek culture that was part of antebellum Louisiana. This ar-



chitectural style also shows the connection between American democracy and the democratic ideals of the Greek philosophers.



The courthouse in Jackson is the oldest courthouse building in the state (opposite page, above). Only four courthouses built before the Civil War are still being used. They are in Clinton (above left), Thibodaux (above right), St. Martinville (opposite page, below), and Homer (below).





Above: The courthouse in Houma is the center of Terrebonne Parish government, a home rule parish.

as the jail and the courthouse. The jury has the authority to raise money for parish expenses. The police jury also appoints the parish registrar of voters and the treasurer.

Parishes have other elected officials. The *sheriff* is the chief law enforcement officer and tax collector. The *assessor* determines the value of property for tax purposes. The *district attorney* is the chief prosecutor who represents the parish in criminal cases. The *clerk of court* maintains the court records and other official records such as marriage licenses. These officials are not under the control of local government; they report only to the voters.

The parish police juries sometimes create special districts to perform a specific service for a local area. The most common special districts include school, fire protection, levee, and water districts.

Other Parish Government Plans

Louisiana's current constitution gave local governments more power than did earlier constitutions. This power of political subdivisions to govern themselves is known as **home rule**. In other words, parishes and municipalities can manage their own affairs unless specifically prohibited by the state constitution or state law. Before this constitutional change, the legislature directed much of the business of local governments.

Some parishes have a *home rule charter*, which allows a community to organize its local government in a form other than the police jury. These other

forms of government include an elected parish president and an elected parish council or an elected parish council and an administrator selected by this council. Some of the largest urban areas, including New Orleans and Baton Rouge, have one combined government for the city and the parish government.

School Boards

Louisiana's local school systems have the same political boundaries as the parishes, except that there are four additional city districts in Baker, Bogalusa, Monroe, and Zachary. A school board is elected from districts based on population, and the members serve four-year concurrent terms. In other words, all school board members are elected at the same time and their terms all end at the same time.

The school boards are special local governments that are not part of parish governments. However, they are more closely regulated by the state than the other local governments. Local school boards receive money from the state for the education of the children in the district. A local school board can also collect funds through taxes and bonds. The board appoints a superintendent to supervise the school system.



Above: The West Feliciana Parish government is a police jury. **Left:** School districts are separate bodies, which are not controlled by the local government.

Right: Municipalities, such as Gretna, provide such services as police and fire protection to residents.

Figure 13
Louisiana's Ten Largest Cities, 2000

1. New Orleans	484,674
2. Baton Rouge	227,818
3. Shreveport	200,145
4. Lafayette	110,257
5. Lake Charles	71,757
6. Kenner	70,517
7. Bossier City	56,461
8. Monroe	53,107
9. Alexandria	46,342
10. New Iberia	32,623



Municipalities

Within the political boundaries of the parishes are **municipalities** (cities and towns) of different sizes. Some people who live in a parish also live in a municipality, while others live in the rural area of the parish and have no municipal government.

The smallest municipalities are *villages*, with a population from 150 to 999. A village becomes a *town* when the population reaches 1,000. An increase to 5,000 earns the label of *city*. Each local government elects a mayor and a council or a group of commissioners.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What kind of government do most parishes have?
2. Name two officials elected for a parish.
3. What is one other kind of parish government?
4. What is the purpose of the school board?