

In and about Washington

May 2025
FREE—TAKE ONE

Hope wanes over Washington Elementary closure

Parents are holding onto a slender hope that this may not be the last month that there is a Washington Elementary School, but only a slender one.

Protests have so far been futile after the parish school board voted in February to close the school, and superintendent Milton Batiste has indicated the decision is final.

There has been talk of a legal challenge to the closure, but that would be both lengthy and expensive. Parents have also appealed to Congressman Cleo Fields to use his influence to keep the school open, but it is not clear just what he can do.

Johnnie Fontenot, who's ten children and six grandchildren attended Washinton Elementary, is one of those who appealed to the congressman. She, like others, complains that failing schools in communities with

more than one school are being kept open but Washington Elementary, our only school, will be closed.

"We were promised by the school superintendent from the previous administration (Dr. Patrick Jenkins) that if the school continued to show improvements and meet the state requirements it would remain open," she wrote to the congressman. Washington Elementary has been cited as one of the state's most improved schools in recent years.

Fontenot noted that school board president Bianca Vedell voted against the closure, and that board member Raymond Cassimire, Washington principal Kyle Sylvester, Mayor Dwight Landreneau, and "parents, grandparents, 122 students, 24 employees of Washington Elementary, and over 500 petitioners throughout St. Landry Parish" oppose the closing.

Under one plan, Washinton students will be bused to Plaisance, Grand Prairie, Port Barre, or Palmetto. Another would send them all to Palmetto through the fourth grade, then to North Central in Lebeau. As of the end of April no firm plan had been announced. Fontenot says there are concerns about the "safety, reliability, and even space on school buses" taking students anywhere. "Many times parents receive notification that a bus is not available to pick up students in the morning or bring them home. ... In most instances, there are no substitute drivers nor buses. ... It is the parents' responsibility to pick up the student."

She and others say many parents in Washington do not have adequate transportation to pick up a student sent to an outlying community or to get to the school in an emergency. Parents are also concerned about what time small children will have to board buses. Students from Washington who attend North Central High must now meet a bus at 6:15 a.m.



Johnnie Fontenot, standing at right, and other Washington Elementary supporters provided hot dogs and drinks at an April 5 event for students who may see their school closed.

Of Note

THE WASHINGTON

Recreation Center on Martin Luther King has been named the designated site for the St. Landry Council on Aging meals program. The council will offer meals for qualifying people over the age of 50 at the site and deliver them to homebound people who qualify. The program will begin once necessary paperwork is done and funding secured.

THE DEADLINE for graduating high school seniors to apply for a Steamboat City Association scholarship is June 30. Applications are available at steamboatcityassociation@gmail.com.

THE AMERICAN LEGION is still seeking donations to help repair and maintain the legion home. Send checks to American Legion Post 209, P.O. Box 45, Washington LA 70589.

YOU CAN DONATE to the Washington Cemetery Foundation via the Venmo payment app or by check to P.O. Box 42, Washington LA 70589.



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Antique fair

A gorgeous spring weekend brought a steady stream of shoppers to the April Antique Fair and Yard sale at the Old Schoolhouse Antique Mall

Group to continue Main Street effort

A group of Washington citizens will continue to investigate the possibility of the town's participation in the Main Street program after hearing a presentation on April 16.

Amanda Lanata, assistant director of Main Street Louisiana, discussed resources, grant opportunities, and other benefits available through the national program that focuses on economic revitalization of small communities with historic main streets. The Steamboat City Association will lead an effort to establish a steering committee and consider funding options.

"We discussed the challenges of funding this endeavor, but all present agreed the benefits outweigh the challenges. The Town is interested in becoming a Lagniappe community, which is the first step to becoming a Main Street community," according to Hallie Coreil, organizer of the meeting.



Playground equipment

Workers from Opelousas delivered a trailer load of donated playground equipment for Jourbert Park on April

WASHINGTON WEATHER

May is forecast to be warmer and wetter than average.

April 1-27

High: 86, April 18

Avg. High: 78.7

Low: 45, April 12

Avg. Low: 59.0

Avg. Temp: 73.4

5-Year Avg: 67.4

April Rainfall: 4.77

Avg. for April: 3.81

Rain for 2025: 18.88

20-Year Avg: 17.68

Next budget will mirror this year's

The Town Council began the process of approving a budget for the coming fiscal year that will likely look like this year's tight budget. The current fiscal year ends on June 30.

The budget document for fiscal year 2025-26 was introduced by title at the April meeting. A public hearing and vote are planned for the May 19 meeting.

The current budget anticipated about \$2 million in revenue and \$1.9 million in expenses, and the new one will be similar, according to Mayor Dwight Landreneau.

The Council will also amend the current budget to reflect actual spending for this year. The town has shown small surpluses for the last several years and has nearly paid out old debt caused by overspending in the past.

Sales tax issue to be on October ballot

Washington voters will decide October 11 whether to reinstate a 0.2 % sales tax that expires at the end of June. The tax generates about \$30,000 in revenue that is dedicated solely for street, sidewalk, and drainage improvements. A public hearing is scheduled for 5:50 p.m. on May 19 at Town Hall.

Sales taxes in Washington total 1.20%, but that is broken into two taxes. A 1% tax was approved in 1974. This tax does not have an expiration date and does not need to be renewed.

The 0.2% tax was approved in 1990 and must be renewed regularly. It was last renewed in 2010. The October 11 proposition calls for it to be continued until 2035.

This tax will officially end on June 30, lowering the local sales tax to 1% and resulting in a decrease in maintenance revenue. If the 0.2% proposition is approved the Washington tax rate will return to 1.2% in 2026 and bring the revenue back to what it has been in the past.

Overall, a total of 9.2% is collected here, including 2.0% for parish schools, 0.75% for law enforcement, 0.80% for the solid waste commission, and 4.45% for the state.



New meters installed

Electronic water meters were installed throughout the Washington water system during April. The old meters will be sold to a salvage company and proceeds will be used by the utility department. The town is looking for grant money to also update gas meters.

From Town Hall

LOUISIANA LIFE magazine is asking people to vote on the best town in Louisiana. To vote for Washington as your favorite town go to www.louisianalife.com/vote-for-your-favorite-louisiana-town. The winner will get a big write-up in an upcoming edition. The deadline to vote is June 30.

AS EXPECTED, the Town Council made no change in the property tax millage, which will remain at 6.55 mills, where it has been for years.

THE COUNCIL approved sale of a 2016 Ford F-150 truck with a starting price of \$3,000. It will be auctioned online through the LPS Municipal Surplus Property Program.

THE COUNCIL meets at 6 p.m. on the third Monday of each month at Town Hall.

UTILITY CUSTOMERS are reminded that bill payments are due on the 17th of each month and that payments received after 3 p.m. are posted on the next business day. A \$10 late fee is charged if the bill is not paid on time.

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Caterpillars were cotton planter's worst enemy

Decades before the boll weevil began to munch on St. Landry cotton crops planters had to fight a caterpillar, sometimes called a cotton worm or army worm, that was every bit as destructive. A long-time observer of the destruction said in a letter to the *Opelousas Courier* in 1867 that the pest first appeared in St. Landry about 1840, and it apparently liked the place.

In September 1844, the *Opelousas Patriot* reported that, "This destructive insect has nearly completed its ravages in this section of the country, by destroying every green leaf and young boll on the cotton plant. ... Scarcely a plantation, if any, has escaped. ... We will not be exaggerating the loss, we think, if we put [the crop] at one-half the amount it would have been, had it not been for those scourges."

According to the history given by the 1867 writer, the worms first appeared in St. Landry in July 1840 "and at the end of September had cleaned out the fields." They appeared again in July 1841, "but did very little damage, as they were not sufficiently numerous." in 1846, according to the 1867 letter signed by "Old Foggy, "cotton moths ... were brought here in countless numbers ... [by a] south-east wind, and all the fields over a large extent of country were attacked simultaneously. ... By the 10th of July a green cotton leaf could not be found. ... The worms [ate] over the fields three times before the frost." In 1849, Foggy said, "the crop was destroyed by the end of August."

The *Courier* reported in September 1856, "We learn with regret that the army worm caterpillar has made its appearance in our parish, and may be seen in every planter's field doing rapid and irreparable damage. It was not enough that a rigorous winter froze the plant – not enough that the wind and rain should deal destruction among the crops last month, but the caterpillar, had also to come and destroy the last hope of a fraction of a small crop."

In July 1868 a committee of planters studied the problem and decided fire was the only way to kill them. It recommended "fires ... twice a week [during the growing season], on every Wednesday and Saturday ... by everybody and everywhere." The committee said fires should "be made on as elevated position as practicable," 250 yards from the growing crop. After the harvest, "cotton and corn stalks, as well as all objects of vegetation capable of sheltering the larvae, should be burnt," the committee said.

The *Journal* reported later that month, "The planters in this vicinity are generally trying the effect of fires lighted at night in their fields, with the purpose of destroying the butterfly, which is generally believed to be the parent of the worm." The butterflies, or moths, were fatally attracted to the flame.

Some farmers pulled up and burned any plant found to have a single worm on them. They reasoned that pulling up a quarter of the crop was better than losing the entire field.



Looking Back

In and About
Washington

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