

The Louisiana Public Health Laboratories

The Louisiana State Board of Health came into existence in 1855, as the first state institution of its kind in the United States. A devastating yellow fever outbreak in 1853 was the major impetus for the creation of the board. The legislative acts which created the Louisiana State Board of Health provided for the operation of quarantine stations to inspect all incoming ships and their cargo to avert the spread of yellow fever throughout Louisiana and surrounding states and created a sanitary program for the City of New Orleans. For many years after its creation the State Board of Health met repeatedly with strong opposition to the implementation of sanitary practices such as water quality, mosquito control and sewerage rules. These new practices and rules were viewed by many as an attack on personal liberty.

The Louisiana State Board of Health established a chemical laboratory under the direction of Dr. Abraham L. Metz on March 15, 1891. This laboratory was housed in a single room located at 422 Chartres directly across the street from the offices of the Board of Health then located in the Civil Courts building at 400 Royal Street in New Orleans. The Chemical Laboratory analyzed food, dairy products and beverages for contamination and examined cistern and well water for purity.

Louisiana became the first state to create a bacteriological laboratory on April 15, 1894 under the direction of Dr. Paul E. Archinard. The bacteriological laboratory was located in the City Hall Annex building which then stood at 546 Carondelet. Early testing consisted of performing cultures and microscopic examinations of clinical specimens for diphtheria, malaria, tuberculosis and typhoid fever. In 1921 the first branch public health laboratories were established in Shreveport and Monroe.

Dr. Archinard served as director of the bacteriology laboratory until his death in 1912. He was followed by Dr. William Seemann who served as director for 26 years until his death in 1938. Dr. George Hauser, who had been assistant bacteriologist since 1917, became laboratory director in 1938 and served until his death in 1977. Dr. Henry Bradford was appointed director in 1977 and served until 2005. Dr. Stephen J. Martin was appointed as the fifth director of laboratories in June 2005.

Following a reorganization of the Louisiana State Board of Health in 1940 a Bureau of Laboratories in its present form was established. A new Public Health Central Laboratory was created by combining the chemistry and bacteriology laboratories under the direction of Dr. Hauser. Today the Louisiana Public Health Laboratory is located administratively in the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals; within the Office of Public Health.

The Louisiana Board of Health was housed in three separate buildings in New Orleans until 1957 when all Board of Health Activities were co-located in a State Office Building at 325 Loyola Avenue. This building housed the New Orleans Central Laboratory until it was destroyed by hurricane Katrina in August 2005. The OPH Laboratory was moved into a temporary facility located in Metairie, Louisiana from 2006 to 2015 during the design and construction of a new state public health laboratory facility. In January 2015 the OPH Laboratory moved into a new 71,000 square foot state-of-the-art laboratory facility located on the Capitol Park Complex in Baton Rouge.

During its 124 year history the OPH Laboratories have continuously adapted to the needs of the citizens of the state of Louisiana. This has included continuous changes in the organization of the laboratories and in the technologies that have been used to address emerging public health issues such as HIV, Bioterrorism, food and water borne disease, pandemic Influenza or Ebola. The OPH Laboratory currently is organized into four subject matter areas: Biochemistry and Newborn Screening, Chemistry, Microbiology, and Molecular Biology and Virology. Sections for Administration, Emergency Preparedness, Laboratory Safety and Quality Control provide support to all laboratory sections.