

THE

HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

April 2015

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, April 16, 2015, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be photo-journalist Ken Murphy. He will speak on businesses which once stood along Beach Boulevard in Bay Saint Louis. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must insist that you please call by noon on Wednesday, April 15, 2015,** to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$10.00.

The Kate Lobrano House will be the "Hot Spot" on Second Saturday, April 18, 2015. Please visit us at 108 Cue Street as part of your Second Saturday festivities.



Louis J. Piernas
(1856-1954)

Longest serving
postmaster of
Bay Saint Louis

Did You Know This about Hancock County? Louis Joseph Piernas

By
Scott Bagley

Did you know that the longest serving postmaster in Hancock County during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a person of color? From 1889 to 1910, Louis Joseph Piernas, was appointed and served as postmaster of Bay St. Louis five different times during the administrations of three different American Presidents.

An Act of Congress of

March 2, 1867, made universal male suffrage one of the conditions for Southern States to be readmitted into the Union and put federal troops in the South to protect this right and maintain order. In 1870, the 15th Amendment guaranteed all male U.S. citizens the right to vote regardless of race. For the first time in the nation's history, African-American men and men of color had political power, and, in many areas of the South, they comprised the majority of voters—particularly in Mississippi. After the Civil War, the black vote was decisive in the election of several Republican Presidents. In keeping with the

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**LOBRANO HOUSE
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MONDAY — FRIDAY
 10:00AM — 3:00PM
 Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

MISSION STATEMENT

“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

political patronage system of the 19th century, many black men were appointed to political office in the South, including a number of offices of postmaster.

Louis Joseph Piernas was born on March 19, 1856, in Bay St. Louis. His father, also named Louis Joseph, was born in Cuba and was of Spanish descent. Even though the Piernas family were known as “free persons of color,” they were not from Africa, but people from France and Spain who emigrated to the West Indies. The elder Piernas came to the Gulf Coast around 1830, likely through New Orleans. He eventually made his way to Shieldsboro (later to become Bay St. Louis), married a local girl by the name of Adella, and thereby joined one of the few early “free persons of color” families to settle and purchase property in the area. Other families with this designation settling in Bay Saint Louis about the same time were

the Labats, the Barabinos, and the Lassassares. All these families lived close together near the present location of the Bay-Waveland Yacht Club on North Beach Boulevard and for the most part spoke French among themselves.

In 1868 young Louis Joseph Piernas attended a school for children of color established by Father Le Duc of Our Lady of the Gulf Catholic Church. He eventually made his way to New Orleans where he attended public school (likely high school) before beginning night classes at Straight University, all the while learning the barber trade. While never graduating from college, Piernas was well educated, being an avid reader of Edward Gibbon, Victor Hugo, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and William Shakespeare.

Returning in 1877 to what had then become Bay St. Louis, Piernas set up shop as a barber. Soon, however, he be-



Home of Louis J. Piernas at 202 S. Toulme in Bay Saint Louis

came very involved in the civic life of the area. He was appointed a county school trustee in 1887 and, at about the same time, served as Secretary and Auditor of the City of Bay St. Louis. Piernas was elected to the Hancock County Board of Supervisors representing Beat 5 in 1884 and was reelected to the same office in 1886. Most significantly, however, Mr. Piernas was chairman of the Hancock County Republican Party for sixty-five years. During this time, among other responsibilities, he served as a delegate to the National Republican Convention in Chicago.

No doubt that Mr. Piernas' chairmanship of the local Republican Party led to his multiple appointments as postmaster under the administrations of Presidents Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt. During Piernas' tenure as postmaster, the post office increased from a fourth to

a third class office, and the facility was moved from Beach Boulevard to the 100 block of Main Street.

In addition to political and other civic affiliations, Piernas organized the Promote Benevolent Association in 1887 and did much to better the cultural and educational life of black residents of Hancock County.

Mr. Piernas died on July 25, 1954, at the age of ninety-eight, at the time the oldest resident of Bay St. Louis. He and his wife had no children, but survivors included several nieces and nephews.

Before Hurricane Katrina there was a street named for Louis Joseph Piernas in Bay St. Louis. Subsequent road construction and repair following the storm allowed for the street name to change. There seems to be current discussion within city government to honor Mr. Piernas by returning the street to its orig-

inal name. Because Louis Joseph Piernas is a major figure within the rich tapestry of the history of Hancock County and within the City of St. Bay Saint Louis, the Hancock County Historical Society fully supports honoring Mr. Piernas in this manner.

SOURCES:

"Louis Joseph Piernas." *Mississippi Slave Narratives from the WPA Records*, 10 Feb. 2011, 2008 <msgw.org>.

"Louis Joseph Piernas." Obituary *Sea Coast Echo*, 20 Sept. 1954.

"98-Year-Old Negro, Oldest Resident, Dies Sunday." *Hancock County Eagle*, 29 July 1954.

Reminiscences of Ames Kergosien

"During the war [World War II], whenever a troop train came through town, half the population was at the depot to greet it. Dave McDonald met Frank Trapani in a fox hole in France.

"Everyone in town had a Victory Garden and kept hens and roosters. A half hour before dawn you could hear them crowing all over town! When the war ended, my folks went to New York and San Francisco to greet the returning troops.

"Many families had 'swimming platforms' anchored 50 yards or so out from the beach.

"There was one in front of Charles Breath's home—another in front of the home at the corner of Highway 90 and North Beach, and another at the junction of South Beach and Aiken Road. Everyone was wel-

From Louis Joseph Piernas' interview as part of the Mississippi Narratives prepared by the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration (1930s)

"I was born right here in Bay St. Louis, near what is called the Cowan settlement, but my ancestors were here before the Cowans and had a land grant from the Spanish government. I was born free, and so were all my fore parents. Some of them fought with Jackson in the Battle of new Orleans—we always just called it 'Jackson's War....'

"My father, however, was born in Havana. His parents died, and he came back to his kinfolks over here. My mother's people came from San Domingo; that is where we got the mixed blood.... [W]e lived right there in the north end of Bay St. Louis, near where the Peerless Factory now stands. My grandmother owned all that land at one time."

come to use them. Mrs. June Breath taught all the children the Red Cross life-saving methods. There was no fee.

“I was on the rescue team and hated it! We had to search the waters until the drowning victim’s body was recovered and returned to the crying relatives on shore.

“All the [well-to-do] families had a maid who cleaned the house and looked after the children. They would take afternoon walks to the fire station, located behind the middle school on Second Street and Ulman Avenue. The firemen would let the kids climb on the trucks, honk the horns, and blow the whistles.

“There were four swimming pools available locally, at the Reed Hotel, the Gaudet home (at the site of St. Claire’s Church), the Walter Gex home, and the Merchant Marine Academy [across the bay at Henderson Point]. The kids lived in the water for six months out of the year. They were only required to get dressed up and wear shoes on Sunday, ‘Manners Day.’

“There was a volunteer, as well as a regular, fire department. In the event of a fire, the siren would blow once for Ward I, twice for Ward II, etc., and everyone would come running.

“The sound of reveille and taps could be heard across the Bay waters from Henderson Point at the Merchant Marine school headquartered there. The government was experimenting with chartreuse green dye in the water as a shark repellent. It didn’t work!

“There was an army

bomber range near Highway 603 and 43 just north of where I-10 crosses that road today. Steel mats were used for the landing field, and when the bombing activity was discontinued after the war, many townspeople picked up the mats for use as fences, driveways, and so on.

“The Peerless Oyster Factory was located off North Beach Blvd., where the Bay-Waveland Yacht Club is today. The concrete structures next to the swimming pool were the turtle-holding pens.

“Many sea turtles were caught out of the Bay. They were put into the pens until a sufficient number were collected to be processed. The machinery at the factory was then modified, and the turtles were butchered and canned.

“The factory had a loud whistle which blew 15 minutes before work began and again at the appointed hour. The daily workers rode to work on a white Ford Model-A truck that was sent around town by the factory. Many Black and Slavic people worked there.

“Back O’Town was an area along Third (Blaize) Avenue between the depot and Washington Street. The bottling plant was located in the two-story building, which was afterwards used as a boarding house in the movie *This Property Is Condemned*. It is owned by the Scafidi family. They bottled Hiers Root Beer and Mission Orange. The Marquer brothers worked at the plant as mechanics and often had to climb into big vats of syrup, greasy overalls,

shoes, and all to make repairs. The popular name for the soda was ‘slop pop.’”

SOURCE:

Vinsonhaler, Chris, ed. and Elizabeth Veglia, Project Director. *Pearls: Myths and Memories of Hancock County, The Renaissance Project*. No publication information given.



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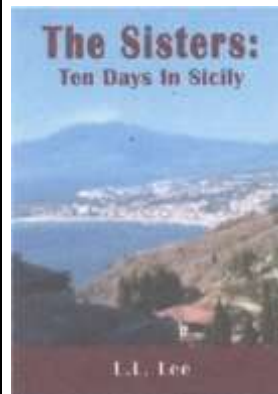
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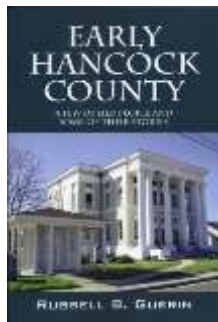
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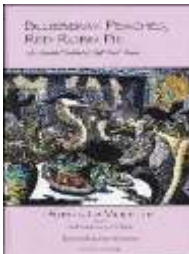
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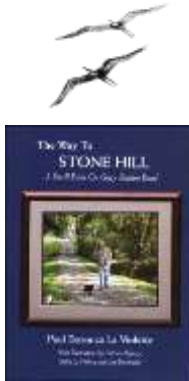
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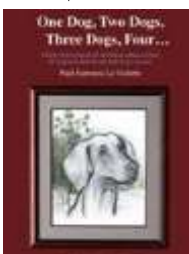
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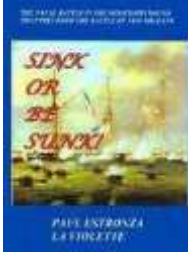
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