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HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

October 2015

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

“During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.” So begins Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

There is no House of Usher here, but please join us for the 22nd Annual Cemetery Tour on Saturday, October 31, 2015, at Cedar Rest Cemetery in Bay Saint Louis. The fun begins at 5:30 P.M. and continues until 8:00 P. M. Admission is free, but donations are graciously accepted.

After the tour everyone is invited to the Lobrano House around the corner from the cemetery at 108 Cue St. for punch, cookies, and other treats.

As usual, we will not have a luncheon in October so that we can devote all of our energies to the Cemetery Tour.



March 28, 1963—*The Sea Coast Echo*

The newly created Hancock County Port Commission met last week to discuss projects and a temporary organization. Seated from left are Dr. A.K. Martinolich, Jr., Beat 5 member; H. H. Shattuck, temporary chairman and Bay St. Louis member; Dean James M. Robert of Waveland; J. Norton Haas, Beat 3 and secretary; standing from left, Claude Graham, Beat 2; Arlie Strain, Beat 1; and Vernon Haas, Beat 4.

The History of the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission (1962—1979)

By
James Keating, M.D.

During the 1950s Hancock County had a poor, mostly agrarian economy with seemingly limited prospects for any dramatic future growth or prosperity. The subsequent transformation of the economy from relative “rags to riches” is a compelling story about a citizenry who raised themselves by their

bootstraps. Such growth required reinventing the economy and the business community by investing in a bold, multifaceted program. During the subsequent five decades, citizens have witnessed an increase of growth regional product (GRP) from an estimated thirty million dollars in 1950 to \$1,577,681,898 in 2012. An important part of this story was the creation of the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission (HCPHC).

After World II in the fifties, Hancock County had a typical, Southern rural economy principally composed of timber, cattle breeding and dairying, and farming. Other types of businesses

THE
HISTORIAN
OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor
Ellis Cuevas, Publisher

Published monthly by the
HANCOCK COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi 39521

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108 Cue Street

Telephone/Fax [228] 467-4090

Email address:

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on the coast like tourism, the seafood industry, and seasonal or “second home” resort type residential development were less significant. Because of economic and other considerations, the population of the county remained almost static from 1900 to 1950 (8,356 to 9,852). The population of the county in 1960 was approximately 11,000 with 4,600 in Bay Saint Louis. Hancock County still had large tracts of forests that could be purchased at reasonable prices. Timber provided the largest source of income (two million dollars annually) from trees cut for piling, poles, and pulpwood. The best corn whiskey in the deep South was distilled in northern Hancock County and adjoining counties. Although the sale of whiskey was illegal in Mississippi until 1966, the state collected more than 2.5 million dollars each year in a so-called “black market” tax on the sale of liquor. The *Sea Coast Echo* reported at that time that Hancock County was the poorest county in the state and that Mississippi was the poorest state in the Union. There was a compelling need for change, and Hancock County had some valuable natural and human resources to draw upon. The county had clever,

resourceful leaders with a strategic vision and the political will to perform the miracle needed to address the problems of rampant, chronic, abject poverty and a lack of jobs ubiquitous to the region in that era. This is the story of that transformative miracle.

Fortunately, one of the key players in this saga, Dr. Andrew Martinolich, is still living. He remembers many of the details of the history of this subject which were recorded in an interview with this author. Dr. Martinolich was one of the founding members and an early president of the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission (HCPHC) from 1965-1969. It is noteworthy that the concept of bringing industry and big business here did not meet with immediate universal acceptance. Many old-timers wanted to keep the towns and villages quaint, and there was serious mistrust of possible changes to the old Southern lifestyle that the quiet communities enjoyed. Furthermore, these grand projects were sure to raise taxes and might disrupt the old social/political order.

Nevertheless, a dedicated group of businessmen, some recently back from college and graduate school, many of whom were local Jaycees, spent years conducting meetings, networking, and persuading the county of the need for a hospital and an industrial park. According to historical notes of a future Commission President, Dave McDonald, “Leaders among the proponents of such action were businessman H. Hardin Shattuck, a former member of the legislature and at that time manager of the rapidly growing Coast Electric Company and J. Norton Haas, a semi-retired timber owner and lifelong booster of Hancock County. Haas, a native son, was a tireless civic worker, and these two citizens performed most of the legwork in



Dr. Andrew K. Martilonich

moving the project from the 'thinking and talking' stage into actuality." County Supervisors R. J. Hubbard and Dolf Kellar embraced this vision early on and worked with these young, forward thinking businessmen to achieve a consensus among the electorate and the County Board of Supervisors to act. Clarence Ladner introduced House Bill #425 in the state legislature on June 1, 1962. This bill passed, permitting the county to build, own, and operate an industrial park and maritime harbor in Hancock County. Authorized by the Balance Agriculture with Industry Act, the legislation was handled in the state House of Representatives by Rep. W.J. Phillips and in the state Senate by Senator James Rester. In February 1963, J. Norton Haas presented a petition from the Bay Saint Louis Jaycees to the county supervisors to act on the above mentioned bill, and on March 21, 1963, this board passed a resolution that created the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission (HCPHC).

The first Commission was appointed and held an organizational meeting on March 20, 1963. The first principal action by the HCPHC was to recruit Michael Baker Inc., one of the best engineering firms in the nation, to study the subject and submit a plan of action. This Jackson, MS, and Rochester, PA, based company sent its best engineers to Hancock County and in April 1964 submitted a 143 page proposal. These experts recommended a maritime harbor to be part and parcel of the industrial park. In their opinion the best site was in the southwest corner of the county adjacent to the East Pearl River. This venture would later be called Port Bienville after the famous French explorer who named and explored the Bay of Saint Louis in 1699 and founded the city of New Orleans in 1718.

During an important period from June 1965 to November 1966, Michael Baker engineers were contracted to design the new industrial park and seaport at the East Pearl River location. In August 1965 the commissioners made an inspection tour of the projected seaport site on the boat of Leo Seal, Jr., a banker and valuable supporter of Port Bienville. Agreement was reached with the County Board of Supervisors on the method of funding capital projects and ongoing operational expenses. Construction projects would be funded by general obligation bonds backed by gasoline excise taxes (unpledged funds from the Beach Road Protection Fund). Land was purchased from the International Paper Company in November 1966. That tract contained 2,033 acres and sold for \$150/acre or \$304,812. Port Bienville is adjacent to Mulatto Bayou on the East Pearl River. On these grounds were the old abandoned Claiborne and Cedarland Plantations. In addition,

there is also an interesting and important archeological site of an early (1500 BC) Native American civilization. Although locals had been aware of the Native American artifacts here for many years, the site's historical importance was not realized until its excavation in 1967 during construction of Port Bienville. Called Poverty Point: Claiborne Site, it was a key satellite village and/or ceremonial ground believed to be part of a much larger regional trade network or cultural organization. Artifacts from this midden are preserved in the Monte Walden Collection at the Hancock County Historical Society (*The Historian*, September 2014).

The master plan for Port Bienville was bold and huge in scope and foresight with a total projected cost of facilities to be \$35,788,133. After purchase of the land, the Michael Baker Company was directed to proceed with awarding a contract for dredging a ship channel from the Pearl River to con-



Land purchase of Port Bienville from International Paper Company, November 1966

L to R—Jack Lott (Beat 4), Charles Lavinghouse (Beat 3), Dolph Kellar (Beat 2), Mary Quintini (Clerk of Court), J. Haas (head behind Quintini), J. "Boogie" Dean (Beat 1), Don Landry (Com. of Waveland), Michael Baker (engineer), A.K. Martinolich (Port Com., Beat 5), Michael Haas (Attorney), Mr. Andrews (International Paper Co.), Gerald Gex (Attorney), unknown

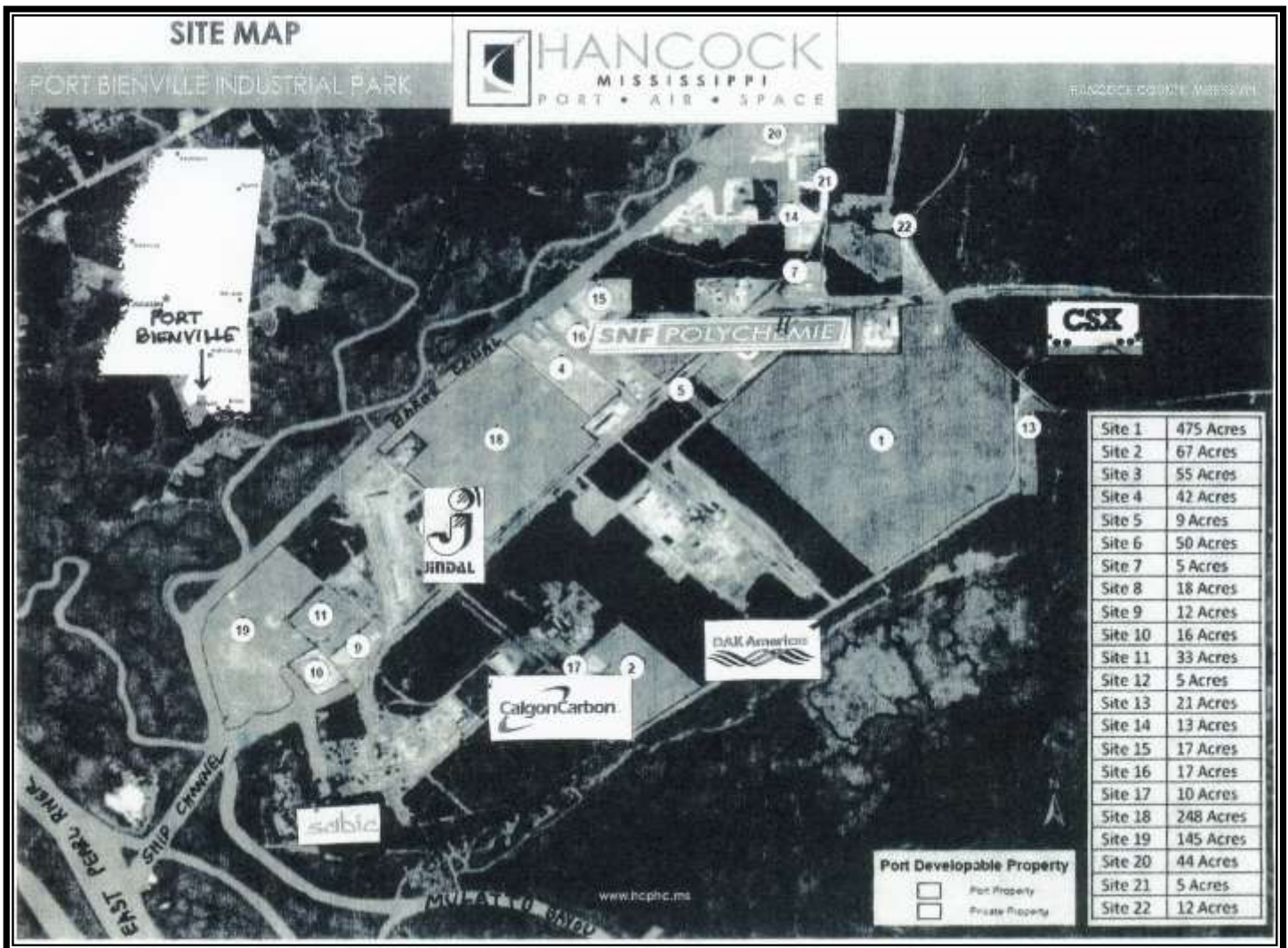
nect to a barge channel which would extend along the northern perimeter of the industrial park. (See diagram below.) Another contract was awarded for clearing and grubbing the forest. Ronald Artigues, a previous president of this commission, remarked that the decision to incorporate a short line railroad within the park to connect the future factories to the local nearby L&N Railroad was a brilliant idea that has contributed significantly to the financial success of the venture. An old locomotive was acquired from the Navy to move the boxcars and tank cars. Port Bienville required the infrastructure of a small town which included electricity,

gas, water and sewerage systems, and security.

Attorneys Gerald Gex and Michael Haas managed quite capably the numerous and interesting legal matters of the HCPHC. They were kept quite busy with the several landowners and construction contracts. In February 1971 the HCPHC received approval of its plan to finance the Industrial Park and Ship Channel with a U.S. Economic Development Administration grant of \$2,779,200 and a bond issue of \$926,400 to be paid by the commission over a thirty-year period. (In May 1992 the commission made the final payment of the bond issue, nine years ahead of schedule.)

The first occupant of the park was Coastal Millwork which assembled furniture and kitchen cabinets. It would be 1979 before a major industry, Borg-Warner Chemical Co., built a fifty million dollar plastic chemical plant that foreshadowed the financial success of Port Bienville.

In 1965 the HCC Board of Supervisors authorized the HCPHC to undertake a second major project: a commercial airport with adjacent airpark. Michael Baker Co. did a site selection study, and a tract of land adjacent to the Stennis NASA Missile Testing Facility buffer zone was chosen. In 1966 general obligation bonds of \$750,000 were



issued for construction of the airport. Comprising 530 acres, the land was bought from L.O. Crosby, Jr., for \$160,000 on June 22, 1967. An FAA grant of \$1,248,875 was acquired in 1972 for airport expansion. With a runway of 8500 feet, the airport is owned and operated by the HCPHC.

The current airport consists of a terminal building with conference space, pilot lounge, restaurant, and airport administrative offices, twenty-four T-hangers for smaller aircraft, a Fixed Base Operation that provides fueling, marshaling of aircraft and aircraft repairs, a fire station, and an air traffic control tower. There are three large hangers occupied by maintenance and rehab organizations working on retrofitting older aircraft. In addition, there are several other hangers on the field.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) built a Missile Testing Facility in Hancock County near Port Bienville in the early 1960s which would later be called Stennis Space Center. It is also adjacent to the

above mentioned commercial airport which was named Stennis International Airport. Both facilities were named after Mississippi U.S. Senator John C. Stennis. In the next four decades the HCPHC would become the economic development authority for the county which greatly improved the economic well-being and quality of life by creating and retaining jobs that facilitate growth and provide a stable tax base. The Stennis Space Center has since become a client and/or economic partner with the HCPHC.

In conclusion, the creation of the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission has played quite a large part in transforming the county from the poor, mostly agrarian economy it was in the first half of the 20th century into the robust, diversified \$1.5 billion per year GRP its citizens now enjoy at the beginning of the 21st century. The current population of Hancock County is approximately 46,000 people with a median family income of about \$44,500, up from

\$1,334 in 1950. Its citizens have been truly blessed by and are grateful to the forward thinking men who had the vision and determination to create the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission.

(A second companion article will appear in a future Historian, charting and analyzing the deft management and financial brilliance of the County Board of Supervisors, the Port and Harbor Commissioners, and their directors responsible for the unmitigated success of two major assets of Hancock County— Port Bienville and the Stennis International Airport and Airpark.)

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Pictured are dignitaries at groundbreaking ceremonies for the new Hancock County Airport in May 1968. L to R—Russell Elliott (President of the Hancock County Board of Supervisors), Brad Dye, Jr. (Dir. of the A & I Board), Lt. Gov. Charles Sullivan, Donald Landry (Pres. of the Port & Harbor Comm.), and Charles Hill (Port Dir.)

It is time to elect board members to serve from January 2016 through December 2017. Final selections will be made in elections at the November meeting.

Our nominating committee will submit its recommendations, but we are also asking the general membership for nominations. If you would like to serve or to recommend someone, please call 467-4090 or nominate from the floor at the November meeting. The offices being filled this year are president, second vice president, publicity chairman, and historian. Thank you to those who served on the board during these past two years.



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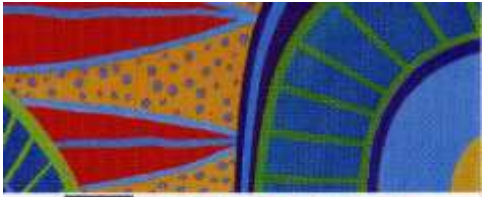
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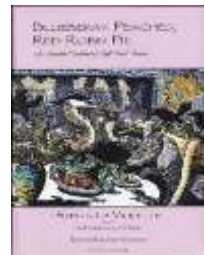
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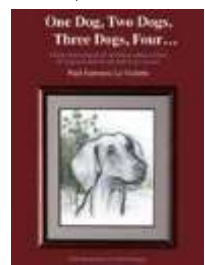
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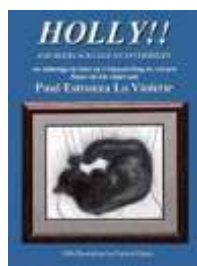
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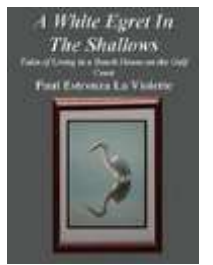
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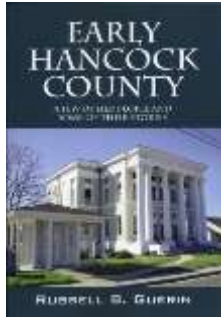


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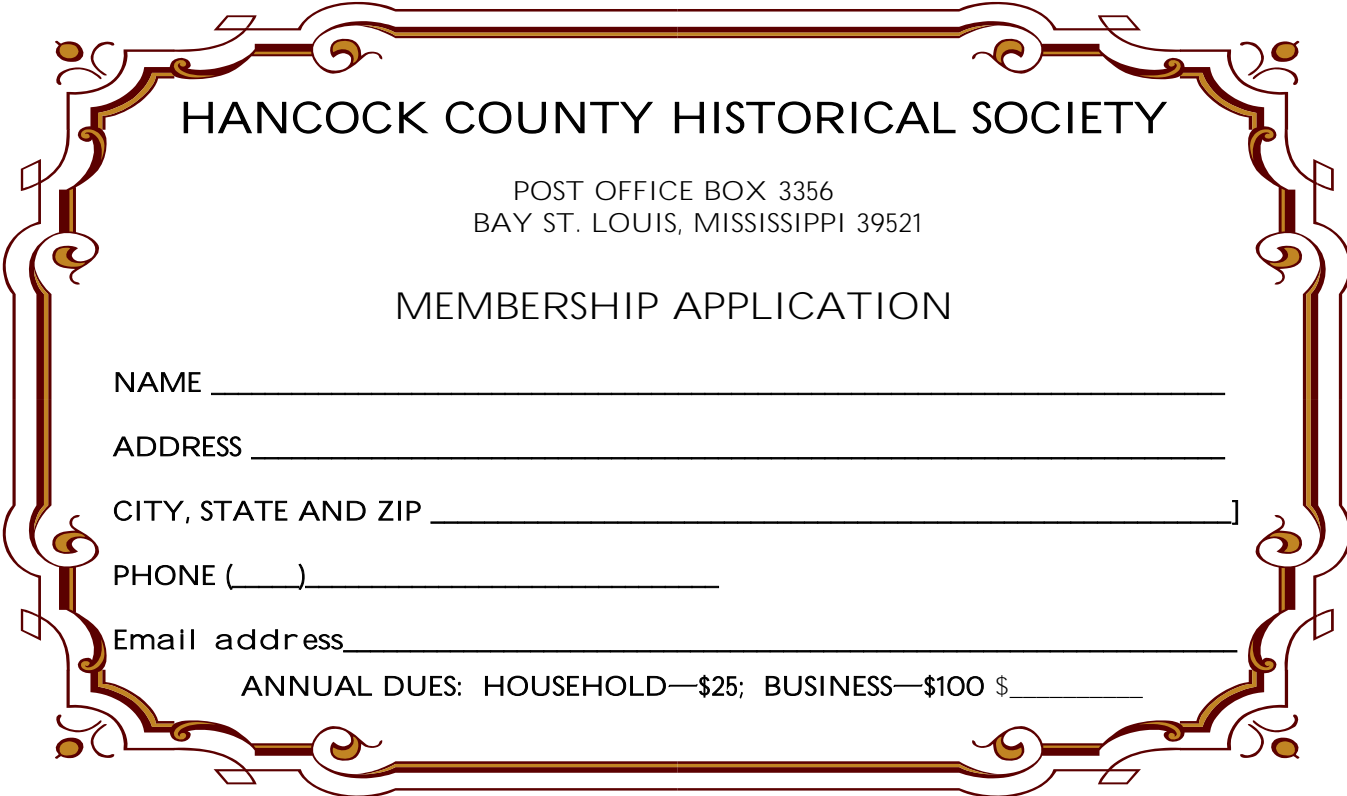
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