

THE

# HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

June 2016

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, June 16, 2016, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be *Sea Coast Echo* writer Dwayne Bremer, who will speak on the last hanging in Hancock County. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, June 15, 2016,** 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 lunch is \$12.00.



This photo of J. F. H. Claiborne shows him in his later years. He was the first editor of the *Natchez Statesman and Gazette* and the *Mississippi Free Trader*. In addition, he served in the Mississippi Legislature and from 1835 to 1837 in the U. S. Congress.

## CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is five months away, it's time to begin making plans for the Hancock County Historical Society 23rd Annual Cemetery Tour. It will be held on Halloween night, Monday, **October 31, 2016**, at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Second Street. We will need members to volunteers to help prepare the cemetery for the tour (mark the path, etc.), to portray citizens buried there, to act as guides, and to serve at the Lobrano House. To volunteer, please call the Society at 467-4090.

## Gentleman Planter Or Confederate Yankee?

By  
Eddie Coleman

The nephew of W. C. C. Claiborne and the son of General Ferdinand Claiborne, John Francis Hamtramck (J.F.H.) Claiborne spent the last few years of the antebellum era and the Civil War and Reconstruc-

tion at Laurel Wood, his home on Mulatto Bayou in southwest Hancock County. It was also here that he wrote the works which brought him recognition as Mississippi's foremost historian of the nineteenth century.

Born on April 24, 1807 in Natchez, Mississippi, and educated in Virginia, Claiborne lived in Natchez for a time and served in the Mississippi Legislature and the U. S. Congress. As a result of his exposing a plan to defraud the

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**LOBRANO HOUSE**  
**HOURS**

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.”

U. S. government and Indians in the Choctaw lands case, he was forced to leave Mississippi for New Orleans. Here he became involved in the speculation of land, cotton, and slaves. Later he edited the main Democratic newspapers of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Disappointing business ventures and failing health caused him to turn to what he perceived a more lucrative avocation—gentleman farmer. He purchased Laurel Wood plantation in 1849. However, he needed a more steady income, so he sought an appointment from his friend President Franklin Pierce with whom he had served in Congress. Pierce appointed him supervisor of the timber district comprised of lands in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana in 1852. He was reappointed by President James Buchanan in 1857.

In 1853 Claiborne moved to Laurel Wood, located on the Gulf of Mexico at Mulatto Bayou between Waveland and the Rigolets approximately twelve miles from Fort Pike, LA. It was built in 1800 by one of the Sauciers, probably François, using slave labor. It had a pitched tin roof supported by high brick piers joined by iron bars to hold slaves brought into the territory in the early days of the nineteenth century. There were also slave quarters at the rear of the main house. (The house stood until the 1960’s when it was razed to make room for the Port Bienville Industrial Complex.)

At Laurel Wood Claiborne enjoyed a much more

leisurely life than he had been able to experience earlier, so he devoted his time and energies to scholarly and cultural pursuits. In fact, many of his early years at Laurel Wood were spent in writing Mississippi history. In 1858 with Benjamin Wailes, Joseph B. Cobb, and Benjamin Sanders, he organized the Mississippi Historical Society. He published *The Life and Times of General Sam Dale, the Mississippi Partisan* in 1860. In the same year, he published in two volumes *The Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*.

Although he had practically no training in agriculture or plantation management, Claiborne was able to make a financial success of Laurel Wood. He experimented with new crops and introduced new varieties of peas, which he acquired from France, England, and Germany. He also raised potatoes, other vegetables, and oranges. His dominant and most successful crop was Sea Island Cotton, and by 1861 with the help of one hundred slaves, he was out of debt and had an annual income of six thousand dollars.

Unfortunately, the Civil War disrupted his halcyon days at the plantation. Claiborne sent his wife and daughter to Natchez for the duration, and his son joined the Confederacy. Claiborne was torn between supporting the Union and supporting his favored South and the Confederacy. He tried to remain neutral by secluding himself at Laurel Wood and trying to “weather... the war in isolation.”

However, Claiborne's decision about what to do was not an easy one. He considered several reasons for following the Confederacy: he supported states rights; he owned slaves and supported slavery; his son joined and ultimately died fighting for the Confederacy; and he was a neighbor and acquaintance of major political figures of the Confederacy. His arguments for remaining loyal to the Union were fewer, but for him stronger: he took seriously his duties as a U. S. timber agent and his pledge to support the U. S. government; and he placed the Union above the states. Therefore, he sided with the Union and, in effect, became a Union spy.

Although Claiborne may have thought he was spying in complete secrecy, the 8th Battalion, Louisiana Artillery was stationed just across the Bay of St. Louis in Pass Christian. Captain John Cavanaugh of this group wrote to Confederate Lt. General J.C. Pemberton. His message read, "A prominent citizen of Pearlinton, Col. J.F. Claiborne, is in daily communication with the enemy and no doubt keeps them advised of all that is going on in his neighborhood."

Further evidence that Claiborne was a Union spy may be found in his frequent and regular correspondence with Major General Nathaniel Banks, commander of the Union army occupying New Orleans. From letters Claiborne wrote to Banks, we know he reported that twenty wagonloads of salt were sent to Confederate General Joe John-



Laurel Wood  
at Mulatto Bayou

Laurel Wood was a planter's type house with a broad front gallery and dormer windows, the main floor resting on high brick piers. The gallery was reached by a single flight of steps, and its roof was supported by slender hand-hewn columns across the front. It had a wide central hall from which huge, high-ceilinged rooms opened. The walls in the hall and dining room were attractively decorated with paintings of fishing and hunting scenes by Coulon, a New Orleans artist. Atop the building was a square observatory, which gave an outlook across the vast stretch of marshlands to the Gulf of Mexico beyond.

ston. He also told of fortifications built at Mobile and of smuggling between New Orleans and Mississippi coastal towns.

It seems Claiborne did get a financial perk for his spying. He obtained a pass from Union Admiral David Farragut allowing him to transport cotton through the federal lines. He continued to grow cotton during the war and was able to transport and sell not only that which he produced but also the cotton bought from his neighbors along the Pearl.

Even though Claiborne spied for the Union on the one hand, he continuously pledged

his allegiance to the Confederacy on the other and was appointed by the Confederacy as the purchasing agent for the Belgian consul in New Orleans. In fact, Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin became aware of the cotton trade, stating that it was "evidently illegal, and ... trade with the port of New Orleans," rather than trade with neutral Belgium. However, Claiborne was not arrested by the Union nor the Confederacy during the war.

On July 26, 1865, Claiborne took the oath of allegiance to the United States. After the war he sought favor with

Adelbert Ames, the carpetbag governor of Mississippi who interceded on Claiborne's behalf with the federal government to compensate him for the losses at Laurel Wood. In return, Claiborne wrote articles defending General Grant and supporting him for a third term as President.

In 1870 at the death of his mother-in-law, Claiborne inherited Dumbarton Plantation and moved permanently to Natchez. Although he retained his Gulf Coast lands, his visits to Laurel Wood became less frequent, and his last prolonged visit occurred in 1876 when he was invited to speak at Bay Saint Louis during the centennial celebrations on July 4.

In his last years Claiborne wrote prolifically. In 1879 he published his first volume of *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State*; unfortunately his manuscript for volume two was lost in an explosion of a Mississippi River steamer. Claiborne died at Dumbarton on May 17, 1884, and is interred in Trinity Churchyard in Natchez.

*[Editor's note: There is another point of view about the loss of the manuscript. Some authorities believe it was lost in a fire which destroyed Claiborne's home in March 1884. Or, it could be that the house fire destroyed an entirely different manuscript.]*

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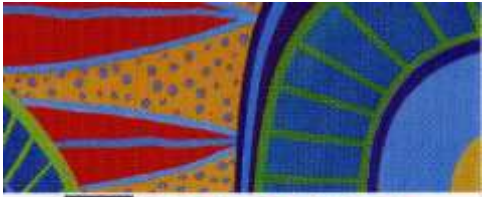
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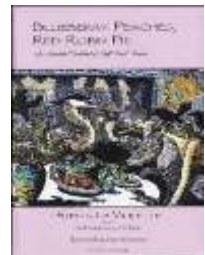
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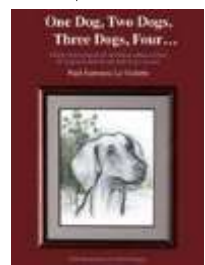
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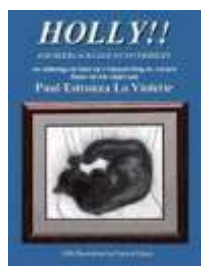
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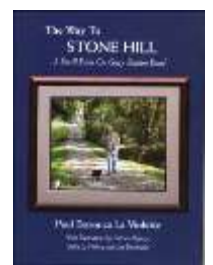
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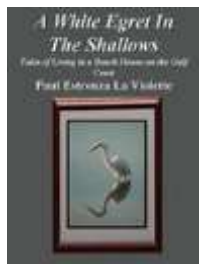
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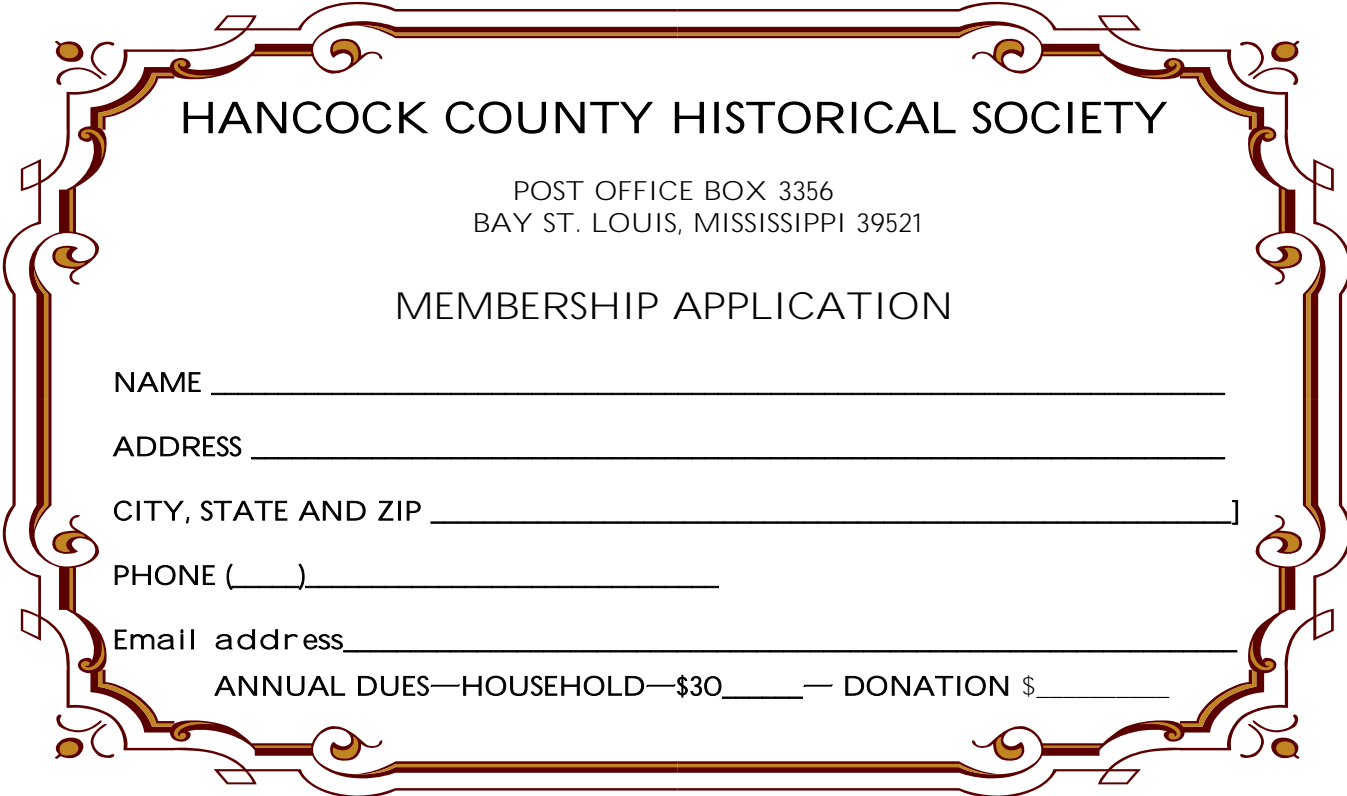
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