

THE

# HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

February 2018

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, February 15, 2018, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. In observance of Black History Month, guest speaker will be Nathaniel Fairconnetue who will speak on his life in Bay St. Louis. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, February 14**, to make your reservation in order to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people and to apprise us of the number of lunches to order. Lunch is \$12.00, payable at the door, and it is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef.



Merchants Bank  
Formerly located at 205 South Beach Blvd., Bay St. Louis, Mississippi  
Building destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, 2005

## The History of the Merchants Bank

By  
James Keating, M.D.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the economy of Hancock County had emerged from that of frontier market subsistence to an immature, relatively undeveloped system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Equally important, the population of the county had increased from an estimated 1000 people in 1817 to

11,866 in 1900. At that time there were several flourishing towns in Hancock County which included Pearlinton, Logtown, Gainesville, Caesar, Kiln, and Bay St. Louis. The county seat had moved from Gainesville to Bay St. Louis reflecting a shift of the epicenter of population and business. Steamboats, and later railroads, had transformed the marketplace which fueled the timber, turpentine, and seafood industries. Moreover, many businesses in the aforementioned towns such as mercantile and feed stores, drugstores, saloons, general merchandise stores, sawmills, oyster factories, and shipyards were conducting business transactions or commerce on a daily

## MEMBERSHIP FEES

It's time for current members to renew their memberships in the Historical Society and to encourage family and friends to join us, too. The price of membership is **\$30.00** per year. If your membership is due, your address label will read "Time to renew your membership." Please mail your renewal checks to Hancock County Historical Society, P. O. Box 3356, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521.

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“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.”

basis generating increased employment and prosperity. Consequently, it was time for this marketplace to have its own bank.

Until the very end of the nineteenth century Hancock County did not have its own bank. The closest banks were in New Orleans and Biloxi. Before that time, according to old timers, merchants such as one August Keller provided safekeeping as a convenience to his regular customers. Keller operated a general mercantile establishment on Washington Street in Bay St. Louis which was painted blue, giving it the nickname the “Blue Store.” In the back of this store, Keller had a safe where customers could keep their money for safekeeping, payable on demand. John Osoinach, who worked for Keller for several years, opened his own store. He acquired the unofficial title of the county’s first banker because he cashed and issued checks for his own customers. Sheriff Joseph F. Cazeneuve at this time permitted country folks to put their money in the huge county safe where cash or valuables were properly marked.

In 1903, a casual conversation occurred between the publisher of the *Sea Coast Echo*, Charles G. Moreaux, the young lawyer, Walter Gex, Sr., and the local merchant, John Osoinach in the office of the newspaper. It was here that the concept of creating a second rival bank to the Hancock County Bank, established in 1899, was born. With the immediate assistance of local merchant, Lucian M. Gex, father of Walter Gex, Sr., as well as many of the most prominent names in the county such as Judge John A. Breath, Mayor John K. Edwards, and five other businessmen, the bank became a reality. Accordingly, Merchants Bank was incorporated in September 1903 and boast-

ed forty-seven founders listed in its charter.

The bank rented the corner portion of the newly built Sea Coast Echo Building on Front Street (now North Beach Boulevard). It opened for business on October 15, 1903, with boards placed across two barrels to form a counter for paying and receiving. Wanting to be the bank’s first customer, Gaston G. Gardebled had arrived early that morning at the entrance to the bank. He was a contractor and builder who would later become a future director of the bank and a future mayor of Bay St. Louis. He made the two boards bounce when he enthusiastically slammed down the first deposit of a bag of coins.

A massive safe was purchased from a jewelry store. Charles R. Rea gave up a good position at the Interstate Bank in New Orleans to become the cashier of this new bank so firm was his faith in the good prospects of this venture. He later became this bank’s president, and still later, he became president of the Peoples Building and Loan Associates. Young Walter Gex, Sr., was elected attorney of the bank. In 1907 the bank moved into its own building on Front Street (now South Beach Boulevard) next to the railroad tracks. This bank building cost \$10,000 and the second floor was made into a suite of offices for the law firm of Gex and Gex.

Walter Joseph Gex, Sr., (1878-1937) was perhaps the most outstanding figure in the history of Hancock County in this early period of the twentieth century. He was the indispensable man and is considered the founder of the Merchants Bank and was responsible for much of the bank’s success. Gex was a student of Saint Stanislaus College and graduated in law from the University of Mississippi.



Walter Gex, Sr.

In this time frame, he and his brother, Emile, opened the law firm of Gex and Gex.

Gex was an excellent lawyer, actually a courtroom legend. In a case involving the death of a railroad worker, the suit brought by his widow and children against the railroad was for the princely sum (at that time) of \$10,000. In his summation, the barrister paused, his hands and voice trebling with emotion, to brush the tears from his eyes. A swell of grief swept the courtroom carrying with it the sentiments of both judge and jury. An astounded colleague later said he had never seen a man more moved by another's misfortune. "You'd cry too," said Gex, "if it meant \$10,000 for your client."

Walter Gex, Sr., married Amanda von Gohren (1881-1948), who was the daughter of a prominent local physician. Gex was the son of a local lumber merchant, Lucien Myrtille Gex (1851-1919) who was born in France. Walter Gex's mother, Marie Victoria Demourelle (1852-1948) was born in New Orleans. Lucien and Marie moved to Bay St. Louis in 1885 to escape the oppressive summers in New Orleans in exchange for the

refreshing sea breezes of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Lucien M. Gex was a natural entrepreneur and started the L. M. Gex General Merchandise and Country Produce Store on the corner of Sycamore (then Good Children Street) and Hancock Street in Bay St. Louis. Nevertheless, "the calling of choice for four future generations of this family would be the law—making it, interpreting it, and dispensing it." At least ten attorneys are descended from Walter Gex Sr., and his brother, Emile.

Walter Gex, Sr., rose to the peaks of his law profession, but was also a dominate figure and an outstanding factor in the social and economic affairs of everyday life in Hancock County. Gex was the first king of Mardi Gras in 1897 in Bay St. Louis. His grandson, Judge Walter Gex III, explained that Gex, Sr., and his business friends started the Merchants Bank to rival the group of businessmen who had opened the Hancock County Bank in 1899. The county benefited from such competition by its "movers and shakers" in the young, but vibrant, economy of that era. Both banks would soar in success over the twentieth century.

Later in life, this shrewd businessman owned a sawmill at the end of Blue Meadow Road. Gex had extensive investments and business interests all over the South and was widely known in Washington, D. C. He bought a large tract of timberland in Florida reputed to cover most of a county. Gex also bought the land that would later be sold to the Diamondhead Corp. (aka Purcell Corp.) that became the City of Diamondhead. Gex went to South America at one time to start a business to provide wood ties to the railroads. He was also a distributor of a brand of Scotch whiskey.

Walter Gex, Sr., died in Florida on February 6, 1937.

The young Merchants Bank was an immediate success. The original four-hundred shares of capital stock offered at fifty dollars (\$50.00) per share soon jumped in value to \$75.00. At the end of the first year, the new bank paid a 14% dividend. After only four years the bank built its own beautiful red brick building with Spanish roofing next to the railroad tracks on Front Street (South Beach Blvd.). To serve the public better and to grow with the times, the name of the bank was changed in 1920 to Merchants Bank and Trust Company.

In 1960 Guy Cameron Billups, Jr. (1947-2005), bought a controlling share of the stock of Merchants Bank and Trust from the Gex family. The bank at this time had an estimated value of fifty million dollars. Billups assumed the role of chairman of the board, and William Allison was recruited to be the president. At that time the bank had only two branches in Bay St. Louis and Waveland. Over the next thirty-five years under the prudent stewardship of Guy Billups, Jr., the bank expanded to thirteen branches along the Gulf Coast. The bank specialized in consumer loans such as individual car and boat loans. The bank prided itself on its style of keeping long term employees, many of whom stayed for as many as thirty-five years. Then in 1997 the Whitney Bank of New Orleans in a strategic move to cross state lines made a purchase offer to the Billups family three times the bank's book value. As a result Whitney acquired the Merchants Bank and Trust Company estimated to be worth, at the time, approximately two hundred million dollars.

The economy of the United States exploded during the nineteenth century. The rise of the commercial banking sector was crucial for local businesses to thrive, expand, and prosper. Thousands of small banks in the United States arose to meet the needs of sawmills, factories, merchants, and entrepreneurs large and small. State banks adopted the innovation of the demand deposit account also known as a checking account. These transactional checking accounts of individuals and businesses provided an additional and significantly greater source of revenue for small banks besides traditional savings accounts.

In the developing marketplace of Hancock County commercial banks, savings banks, insurance companies, and other financial intermediaries helped to fuel growth by channeling wealth from savers to entrepreneurs. These businessmen used these loans to increase the profitability of their enterprises and hence the efficiency of the overall local economy. Small banks such as the Merchants Bank actually created new wealth in Hancock County.

Customers put a premium on face-to-face contact, personal service, and long term relationships provided by Merchants Bank and Hancock County Bank, not possible with the other banks used in the past in New Orleans and Biloxi. Merchants Bank served customers in the more rural areas such as farmers who were not served as well by the out of town banks. The economically rising marketplace community of Hancock County required commercial banking services such as secured and unsecured loans, cash credit, certificates of deposit, money transferring and discounting. Citizen depositors required retail banking with checking accounts, safety deposit boxes, personal and home

equity loans, and mortgages as well as trustee, executor, and attorney services.

In conclusion, the advent of the small commercial banks such as the Merchants Bank was a sentinel event in the economic history of Hancock County. The county has benefited historically from a community spirit and generosity of its leading businessmen like Walter Gex, Sr., and others who have supported local vital institutions such as schools, churches, and hospitals. Forthcoming issues will address subjects of interest such as the Hancock County Bank, the history of the seafood industry, and the establishment of local newspapers such as the *Sea Coast Echo*.

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## HISTORICAL SOCIETY PROJECT

By  
Charles Gray

An ongoing endeavor at the Hancock County Historical Society is the creating of biographical sketches of Hancock County residents, past and present. This includes both summer and local residents through the years.

These pages are based on a publication series created by Dunbar Roland, the first president of the Mississippi Historical Society. We are asking all members to help create a mini-biography of friends, members of their families, and/or themselves.

Each entry should consist of a photograph (when possible), the full name and both the birth and death dates. In the interest of consistency, the following sequence is suggested:

Full Name  
Date and place of birth  
Name of parents and siblings  
Education, schools,  
Profession or work field  
Hobbies, personal observations, etc.  
Marriage: to whom, when, children  
Death information including burial location.

The complete document should be one complete typed page. It will be helpful to provide slightly more than a page to allow room for editing. There should be a separate page for each person. We are including a reduced sample of Mrs. May Beyers as a guide. Please call the office for further information at 228 467-4090.



The Historical Society is selling the Kate Lobrano House plaques like the one shown above. Crafter by Society member Jenise McCardell, they are available for \$25 each at the Lobrano House at 108 Cue St.

**MARY CATHERINE (MAY) HOGAN BEYER**



Mary Catherine (May) Hogan Beyer, daughter of Thomas James Hogan and Mary Margaret Clair was born May 21, 1902 in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was graduated from Sophie Wright High School in 1917 and McNally Business College in 1918. In 1928 she married Charles R. Beyer and they had two daughters: Elizabeth (Betty) Cullen Beyer and Margaret Marion Beyer.

Mrs. Beyer and her husband came to Bay Saint Louis in 1946 when he retired from the Navy.

With the philosophy of "One does not have to be rich to help people; one only needs the desire to do", Mae continued to be active in school, church and civic projects. She continued her Gray Lady program for the Navy Relief Society at the Veterans Administration in Gulfport.

In 1954 she helped to organize the Hancock County Heart Fund and worked 14 years for its growth. In 1964 she helped to organize Hancock County United Way, which funds 18 charity organizations. She worked for them for 20 years. From helping Arnette Giles of Pearlinton, with 40 retarded and abandoned children in her home, May Beyer solicited expense money and from this beginning the Hancock County Retarded Children's association grew. Mrs. Beyer served on the board for 15 years.

In 1976 she was listed in Who's Who in American Women for her 25 years of charity service. In 1982 the Hancock Chamber of Commerce nominated her as "Outstanding Citizen of Hancock County," the first woman to receive this award.

Her friends and family say she was "involved in everything all the time." Her daughters say she was on the phone or typewriter with everybody who could or would get involved with charitable projects. She sent out 5,000 letters once a year for the United Way to raise funds. And even if the donations were only \$1, each person got a thank you note - another 5,000 or more letters.

She died Sept. 5, 1991, and is buried in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Bay St. Louis.



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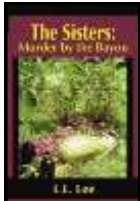
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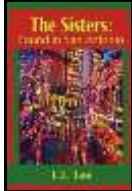
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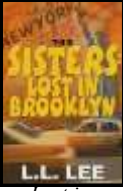
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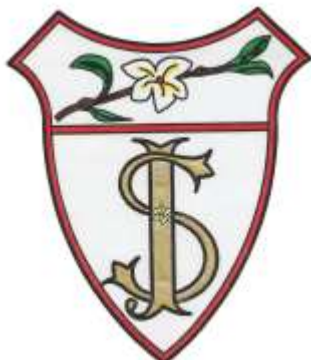


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