

THE

HISTORIAN

www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

January 2020

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, January 16, 2020, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. The speaker will be Charles Gray, Executive Director, who will present "A Sentimental Journey." **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, January 15**, to make your reservation in order to help us plan seating which is limited to fifty-four people and to apprise us of the number of lunches to order. **Lunch is \$14.00 for members and \$15.00 for non-members**, payable at the door. It is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef. The lunch menu is chicken in white wine sauce, garlic mashed potatoes, Caesar salad, yeast rolls, and blueberry cream cheese dessert.

NEW MEMBER CAMPAIGN

It's now time for current members to renew their membership in the Historical Society. You will find information about the different types of membership the society now offers including a price list in the enclosed letter from the Board of Directors.

Membership is a key factor

(continued on p. 2)



This is the main entrance to the City of Diamondhead, just off Interstate 10.

HISTORY OF DIAMONDHEAD, MS (1969—2004)

By
James Keating MD

Hancock County, as well as most of the United States, enjoyed economic growth following World War II. There was pent-up consumer demand for affordable single-family houses. Subdivisions and resorts like Diamondhead were carved out of previously rural land into single land development real estate companies. The story of investor Malcolm McLean is vital to understanding the history of the creation and evolution of the city of Diamondhead from a retirement/resort village to a more

traditional bedroom community. Indeed, Diamondhead did not exist before 1969. The ups and downs of the national economy had an adverse effect on the project during the late 1970's and 1980's. The history of Diamondhead will be presented in two parts. The first article will relate the early years from 1969-2004 before Hurricane Katrina. In a forthcoming issue, the history of Diamondhead from 2005-2020 will be presented.

Malcolm Purcell McLean (1913-2001) was a native of North Carolina who started the McLean Trucking Company with an old used truck given to him by his father for high school graduation. The company prospered over the years and McLean proved to be an astute businessman and a brilliant transport entrepreneur. In fact, McLean invented

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Eddie Coleman, Editor
James Keating, Publisher
Charles Gray, Executive Director

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HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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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.”

the modern intermodal shipping container during the 1950’s and refit freighter ships to carry the boxes or containers. Moreover his steamship corporation, Sea Land Service Inc., became profitable steaming between New York and Europe. In 1969 Reynolds Tobacco Company bought Sea Land for \$245 M in cash and stock; this transaction netted McLean \$160 M personally. It was at that time McLean decided to invest some of his money into land development and building houses.

McLean formed the Diamondhead Corporation, which would invest in resort developments throughout the South from North Carolina to Texas. The first project was called Diamondhead because the land is the highest point of elevation on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, named after the volcanic cone in Hawaii. Another older

established resort, Pinehurst, was purchased in North Carolina. Furthermore, the Diamondhead Corporation would eventually invest in many other ventures: Lake Forest (Mobile), Falcon Head (Oklahoma), Lake Arrowhead (Atlanta), Newport (Houston), Mile High (El Paso), and Sandpiper Cove (Destin).

McLean purchased the forestland consisting of 5,700 acres in Hancock County from the Gex family for approximately \$3M (\$500 per acre). Walter Gex, Sr. acquired the original Gex acreage in 1937 from the Gulf State Paper Co. and the Easy Open Bay Company. The original Spanish land grant was awarded to Noel Jourdan in the eighteenth century. Incidentally, the Jourdan River is named after him and Diamondhead land is adjacent to its Rotten Bayou tributary. The original Choctaw name of *Banchawah* means decayed stream (Rotten Bayou) presumed to be the consequence of abundant decomposed deer corpses dumped into Devil’s Elbow by the local Indian inhabitants. This was a result of the process of tanning the hides for clothing or trade.

(continued from p. 1)

in supporting the mission of the Historical Society. Our goal is to increase membership by 96 new members in 2020, and we need you to join us in this effort. If each member will bring in one new member, we can exceed this goal. Now members can renew their membership and new members may join at our website through Pay Pal or credit card. You may also continue to pay by check at P.O. Box 3356, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521

To add some excitement, each time you sponsor a new member your name will be added to a drawing for a \$100 cash prize. At the Christmas Tea in December 2020, the winner will be announced.

Chris Roth, Membership & Fund Raising Chairman



Malcolm McLean, founder of the Diamondhead Corporation

Dan Smith was a salesman for the Diamondhead Corp. in 1971 who reports that McLean poured a lot of money into the project attracting a team of twenty salesmen from all over the country, offering potential compensation of \$60,000-\$100,000 per year. Promotional items such as a \$15 gift, S & H Green Stamps, pots and pans, moon rocks, crock-pots, and family portraits were offered to the public who would drive out to the work site. There were 10,000 parcels available carved out of the original design or plan for the community of Diamondhead. A lot sold for three to ten thousand dollars depending on the location. A sale could be made for 10% down and a mortgage for a low interest rate of 4.0%.

By 1973, 3,700 lots had been sold and sixty houses had been built. In addition, a hundred condominiums were sold in the first year. These condos were furnished and were factory built. For example, they came with plumbing and electricity embedded in the separate units. They were transported by water to Rotten Bayou and then moved to the building sites similar in concept to the containers McLean used to move freight from trucks to ships. The national economy tanked in the mid 1970's affected by the 1973 stock market crash and oil embargo. Specifically, housing and land sales dropped and by 1975 all the salesmen except Dan Smith were discharged. In addition, a new accounting rule from the FASB (Financial Accounting Standards Board) was mandated by HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development). This rule adversely affected all land developers in the United States. For these reasons banks became reluctant to lend money to customers. Interest rates soared with accompanying double-digit inflation. Art Buchwald



Malcolm McLean, considered "The Father of Containerization," sits on the waterfront showing some of his container units.

quipped that 1980 would go down in history as the year when it was cheaper to borrow money from the Mafia than the local bank.

In spite of these challenges McLean built the promised infrastructure including streets, the Pines Golf Course, sewerage and water, country club, yacht club and marina, airport/runway, and more condominiums. By 1977, 361 condo units had been sold. McLean had committed an estimated sum of \$25 M to Diamondhead, and he was unwilling to let the project fail as had so many other land development projects in the United States in that decade. By 1980, the population of Diamondhead was 1,011 residents.

Artis James was made President of the Diamondhead Corporation in 1979 at age thirty-two and became the indispensable man for the Purcell Company and McLean over the next forty years. James is an accountant by profession and navigated the various McLean enterprises through many changes. The I-10 Interstate Highway was completed in this time frame and most of the early residents came from New Orleans. The early village was essentially a resort/retirement community. The influx of employees from the Naval Oceanographic Office at the

Stennis Space Center commenced the slow evolution of Diamondhead. It evolved into a bedroom community of wage earners and commuters to New Orleans or the Michoud Assembly Plant in New Orleans East. Diamondhead Corporation was selling houses as well as lots during the 1980's and created their own mortgage company.

In 1985, the Diamondhead Corporation organized a property owners association (POA). A homeowner-elected board of directors was elected to manage the amenities such as the golf course, country club, tennis courts, yacht club and airplane runway. In other words, there were now enough residents paying POA dues to finance this mission. McLean decided to change the name of the corporation from Diamondhead Corporation to Purcell Company, Inc., in 1985 that was purely cosmetic. The developer published the *Diamondhead News*, and new developments like The Oaks, Highpoint Townhouses, and the Harbor Houses were built. In a 2013 *Historian*, Louis Fuchs, president of the society, noted: "The POA struggled with imperfect records and management problems but eventually matured into an organization that

could successfully guide the community.”

Of note is during the 1980's Malcolm Purcell McLean decided to purchase United States Lines (USL) and commission Hyundai Ship Builders to construct a fleet of 4,400 TED (twenty foot equivalent units) container ships. He negotiated an \$800,000,000 loan from the X M Bank with a down payment of 10% financed by City Bank. These gigantic 1,000 feet long container ships that operated around the world service were fuel efficient and slow. Likewise, as was his custom with projects like Diamondhead, McLean overbuilt the container ship project. Simultaneously, all shipping companies worldwide expanded their fleets of similar container ships. As a consequence, the increased supply caused a decreased demand and the rates on the open market plunged creating a cash flow crisis for McLean. By 1982 McLean had made the Forbes 400 Richest Americans List with a net worth of \$400M. Nevertheless, the bank pulled his loan and the United States Lines went bankrupt in 1987. McLean had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy owing a debt of \$1.3 B.

Back at Diamondhead, in this era, a group of dedicated community activist businessmen and company officers were successfully managing the affairs of the community and the Purcell Co. Vice President and Project Manager since 1969, Holcomb Hector, was integrally involved in the growth and development of Diamondhead in all phases of its construction. He also directed the construction of over 1,000 houses in the community in the first 25 years. Attorney Peter Casano was President of the

POA and rescued the sewerage and water infrastructure from the McLean bankruptcy, enabling the future creation of the Diamondhead Sewerage and Water District. Casano owned and operated various enterprises such as a motel, marina, restaurant, real estate and other financial businesses. Paul Montjoy was an early project manager in 1972. Montjoy became the POA Director in 1985. Later in life he served on the Board of the POA. The Purcell Corp. was reorganized as a private company in 1992.

In the decade of the 1990's, Diamondhead experienced a resurgence of its economy. The Mississippi Legislature passed the Mississippi Gaming Control Act in 1990 to boost the economy. This resulted in two dockside casinos opening in Hancock County—one in Bay St. Louis and one in Lakeshore. NASA expanded its mission testing new solid fuel rocket motors for the space shuttle in 1989. Many of its new workers found homes in Diamondhead. The population of Diamondhead increased from 2,661 in the year 1990 to 5,912 residents in the year 2000. Casinos employed thousands of people who wanted to live in communities like Diamondhead where the land was relatively inexpensive and the parcels already had water and sewerage infrastructure.

The Purcell Company decided to develop in this time frame an upscale subdivision called Glen Eagle located in the heart of the Diamondhead Resort. Glen Eagle consisted of 189 lots averaging 100-foot frontage in an area of gently rolling hills wrapped around the

newly built Cardinal Golf Course. It had winding roads named after famous golf course resorts such as Turnberry, Crooked Stick, and Cherry Hill.

Builders and carpenters moved to the coast from all over the country. A local realtor, Joe Floyd, reports that regular lots in Diamondhead were now selling for \$6,995. From 1995-1997 Diamondhead was building 50-100 houses a year. The POA dues rose from \$15 to \$25 per month. An 1,800 square foot house might sell for \$150,000. Lots were less expensive here than in any other development in the region. Houses were often sold in forty-five days or less.

By 1993, Malcolm McLean had bounced back and he created the Trailor Bridge Shipping Company. The company designed and built ocean-going barges for containers that moved cargo from Florida to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. McLean died of a heart attack in 2001. His son, Malcolm McLean, Jr., took his place in the Purcell Company.

Dan Smith and Ginny Milan had acquired a Century 21 Realty franchise in 1985 and their business prospered in this time frame as well as Jon Ritten, owner of Coast Delta Realty. Purcell Company was able to maintain the price of parcels of land because until 2001 the compound was a closed market. A list of available lots was given every day to this cluster of realtors located near the entrance of Diamondhead. “For Sale” signs were not allowed by the covenants to give a desired look of stability to the town compared to the typical resort communities.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Diamondhead was becoming more of a bedroom or destination community for the aforementioned local workers look-

ing for a place to live. These relative newcomers resented the increasing POA dues spent on costly golf course maintenance. Also some residents wanted the village to incorporate to become a city. Indeed, according to Louis Fuchs, a 1994 incorporation petition failed, but the effort laid down the groundwork for the future.

In conclusion, Malcolm Purcell McLean was the key investor that created the town of Diamondhead in 1969. The land development real estate company, the Diamondhead Corporation (aka Purcell Co.), was vital for the success of the community over the last five decades. Competent business management of this bold project, large in scope and foresight, characterized the leadership of the corporation from 1969-2004. The project took twenty years to really flourish. A welcome economic boom did occur after 1990 stimulated by the advent of the gaming industry on the Gulf Coast and the increased workforce employed by the Stennis Space Center. A forthcoming article will track the rest of the history of this delightful city of Diamondhead commencing with Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005.

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Who Built the Pirate House of Waveland?

By

Russell Guerin

(Reprint of an article in the September 2009 Historian)

It all starts with a legend, one passed down orally in the traditions of Hancock County, but most clearly stated in the Works Progress Administration history project. It states that the “Pirate House” was “the plantation home of a famous pirate—or an associate of pirates—who gave signal aid to General Jackson during the War of 1812.” The builder was suspected of being an “over-lord” of pirates that plied the Gulf waters in the early 1800’s. He was said to have organized pirates, including the brothers Lafitte, to defend New Orleans against the British, “whipping them into an army of loyal Americans.”

A separate article by this writer has put forward the conclusion that the Pirate House was used for the purpose of smuggling slaves into Louisiana at a time when importation was banned under the provisions of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. (The article is contained in the April 2005 issue of The Historian which may be found on our website.)

The house is said to date back to circa 1804. Some people believe that it was owned by Jean Lafitte. We do know that Lafitte, or a man who spelled his name similarly, entered into five purchases in Hancock County, and in one, written in French, he was referred to as “Sieur” Lafitte, giving him an appellation of distinction as “Sir” or “Lord” while witnesses to the document were not so identified.

An argument against the Lafitte connection is that we know the real pirate was very busy in other places, such as Louisiana’s Barataria and Texas’ Galveston. His activities seem to have been broadly in the Caribbean, whereas there is little evidence of his pirating in Mississippi waters.

Lafitte will not be the main character of this investigation into who might have built, very early on, a magnificent house, a virtual palace, in what eventually became Waveland but at the time would have been a beachfront wilderness.

On balance, it must be assumed that man would have been someone else.

He must have been wealthy, a person of great influence, and to fit the WPA report, someone who can be shown in history to have had contact with pirates and to have helped General Jackson and New Orleans defeat the British.

After much investigation, and assuming that there is any truth to the legend, that man can only have been one Jean Blanque.

Blanque is nothing less than an historical puzzle. Not a great deal is known of him. There has been found no biography, no memoir, no chapter in any book about this person, nothing really to elucidate his character. What we know of him are facts that in many ways are contradictory.



The Pirate House stood at 649 North Beach Boulevard in Waveland, but was destroyed by Hurricane Camille on August 17, 1969.

The earliest mention of Blanque has him arriving in Louisiana on the frigate *Surveillant*, the same voyage that brought Pierre Clement Laussat, Napoleon's appointment to be prefect of the colony just before the 1803 transfer. There is no indication that Blanque had any official duties relative to Laussat. The latter did mention Blanque in his memoirs, but only to say that he was "my faithful friend" and to call him by a peculiar title, "commissioner of war." This seems to have referred to his duties in the French army before going to Louisiana.

Whatever Blanque's plans had been in coming to Louisiana, he wasted no time in getting deeply involved as a lawyer and legislator and as a successful banker, merchant, and businessman. There are numerous records of his holding sway over a group of government officials with mentions such as "those who always voted with Blanque."

He lived in one of the finest houses in the French Quarter of

New Orleans and married into one of the leading old families. His wife was Delphine McCarty, who later became the infamous Madame Lalaurie, the mistress of the haunted house of Royal Street.

An anomaly, Blanque apparently led two lives. The public one is as described above, an upstanding pillar of his adopted community. The other, one that required less allegiance to that community, was in the words of historian, Clisby Arthur, "the man higher up in certain transitions relative to the importation of 'black ivory' and goods upon which custom duty was not collected."

As early as August 11, 1804, Blanque wrote a letter to the city of New Orleans protesting the seizure of his storehouse by the custom officers. Details are not known, but the letter remains in city archives.

Besides Arthur, other historians have taken a dim view of the dealings of Jean Blanque. Dr. Robert V. Remini, the biographer of Andrew Jackson, states that

Blanque owned a number of ships used by pirates. William Davis, in his book *The Pirates Laffite*, asserts, "New Orleans merchants, such as Jean Blanque, engaged sailors who plied both sides of the law" and "was also an investor in more than one privateer, which likely led to an acquaintance with the Laffites."

Indeed, there are a couple of mentions of a small schooner used by the Laffite band; its name was the *Blanque* and may have been the boat on which Pierre Lafitte suffered a mortal injury.

Davis tells in certain terms that Blanque was once prosecuted for involvement in a matter of twenty-seven thousand pounds of coffee pirated from an American ship. He also speculates on Blanque's having been the consignee of smuggled goods in an affair of "Captain Lafette's prize British merchantman *Hector*, revealed later to be an imposter smuggling goods under forged ship's papers."

It may be difficult to reconcile how respected, financially successful men of high places could double in endeavors of ill repute, giving the lie to their supposed patriotism. Examples, however, abound. About the same time, there was General Wilkinson, who worked both for the United States and Spain. Vice-President Aaron Burr came through Louisiana attempting to form a filibuster group and was tried for treason. Barthelmy Lafon had been a successful New Orleans architect, engineer, surveyor, cartographer, and scholar before he lost his wealth and took to pirating, and his venture did take him into the waters just off our coast.

Perhaps obligations to country were not yet engrained in the young republic. In the case of Blanque, such an assumption can be

understood in light of his having just come to Louisiana in 1803. In addition, there are indications that he was less committed than many to the causes which he expressed outwardly. One example is in the 1812 proceedings of a committee to form a state constitution and government. Blanque was appointed to this group and voted against the annexation of West Florida; while there were other “nay” votes, his was suspicious if in fact he owned property and pursued an illegal trade there, namely at the Pirate House.

Another incident occurred in September 1814, when he was appointed to a committee of nine formed to cooperate with the military in defending New Orleans against the impending British invasion. Considering that he was one of the legislature’s most vocal members, it is curious that he did

not sign the findings of the committee.

Later, on December 31, 1814—a mere fortnight before the Battle of New Orleans—Blanque was accused of being part of a plan “among several members of the legislature to surrender the country to the enemy.” It was said that their belief was that the British would respect their property. Although the accuser retracted his charge of treason, there remains the question of what was the real character of the man Jean Blanque.

Returning to the legend, the owner of the Pirate House was believed to have organized pirates to defend against the British. Perhaps he did not do the organizing, but was the enabling force.

Although the legend credits the overlord of the pirates with organizing them to help in the defense of New Orleans, the record of

events shows that few, if any, citizens or military welcomed them initially. Indeed, Jackson had called them “hellish banditti.” Claiborne had put out a reward for Lafitte’s capture.

Historical fact in which we can feel secure tells of the brothers Lafitte’s turning down and reporting an offer to serve the British and then being determined to help the cause of New Orleans. The determination to join the fight came from the Lafittes, both Jean and Pierre. It was they—incidentally after Blanque had been instrumental in getting Pierre out of prison—who were intent on petitioning Governor Claiborne to allow the Baratarians to join the fight. But they did not have direct access to Claiborne, and therefore sought an intermediary who had the stature to request an audience. To him they delivered letters which he presented and won their case. That man was Jean Blanque.

One can see how the legend may have evolved over the years. It was not exact in historical detail, but the meanings were there, and they point to the personage of Jean Blanque.

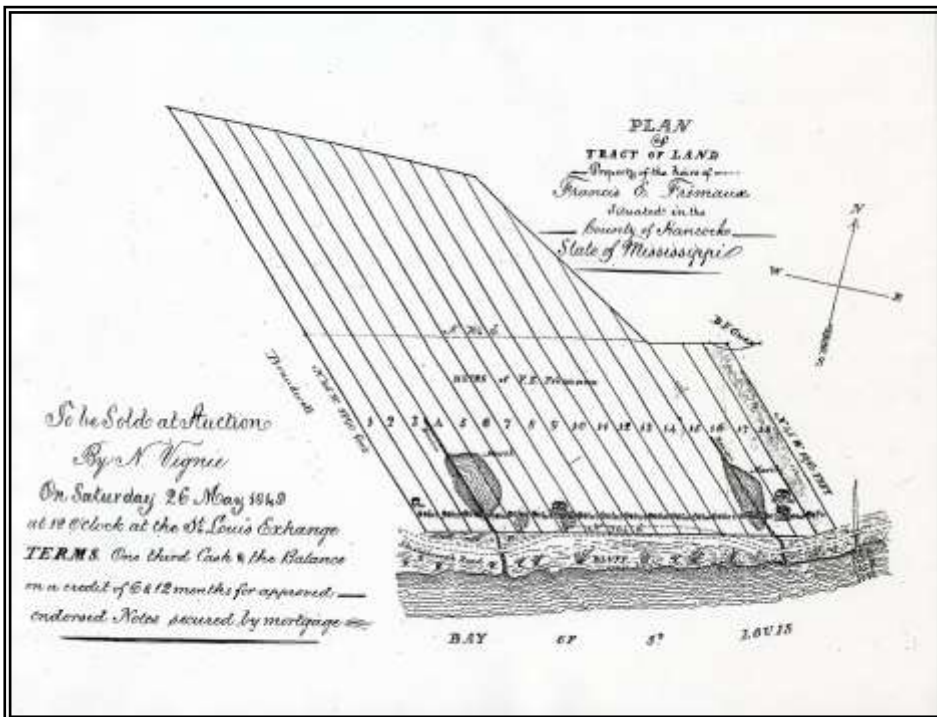
Pirate House Swan Song

By
Russell B. Guerin

After years of research and writing about the Pirate House, I have now reached as close to a conclusion as my limits can bear. If I never uncover another fact, I can rest easy in my retirement.

Previous articles on the Pirate House and the man Jean Blanque can be found on the Society’s website in the “Guerin Collection.”

I have always put some faith in the WPA (Works Progress



Dated May 26, 1849, this is the earliest map the Historical Society has showing the location of the Pirate House. The house sits near the beach in lot 7 on the map. The two bodies of water, one on the left and the other on the right, are natural inlets and still exist today. The pond on the left is quite noticeable from the beach. The one on the right is just east of present day Aiken Road.

Administration—later Works *Projects* Administration) description of the man who built the house. It is simply too close to what we know about Blanque to have been imaginative, yet there was always an annoying reminder of how unlikely it would have been for a man who came to Louisiana from France in 1803 to be owner of property in what is now Waveland.

A second reason for dismissal of Blanque was the finding that another slave dealer had been arrested and had his house seized by Spanish authorities in 1807, that being Antoine Peytavin. Evidence shows that his house was at the site of the Pirate House.

Why now a reconsideration? I have now found a startling fact: Blanque is shown as having bought waterfront land in Biloxi in 1804. A fine map comes to us via the internet from the Trudeau papers. [Cf: Trudeau, Carlos (Charles) Laveau (1750-1816) compiled by Pintado in 1795-96 and set down by Trudeau in official records in 1804. Library of Congress, Map Division, G4014.N5G46 1819.P5]

Amazingly, not only did Blanque manage to own Biloxi land that early, but his next door Mississippi neighbor was a Peytavin. It is easy to believe that two slave dealers who owned adjacent lands knew each other. It is also acceptable that they might have been engaged together in the same enterprise in Hancock County.

Once the above thoughts settle, a new look at another old map is in order, that being of the Frimeaux tract. While I cannot count the number of times I have studied that map, I must confess that I have ignored something of possible importance. This is the 1848 map of the Pirate House site. It illustrates clearly that large pond where Mr. Sandy Villere, present

owner of the site, showed me hundreds of ballast stones. Clearly portrayed are the little inlet and a house next to the pond. The latter I have always believed was the Pirate House.

A new look with wider vision shows more: another pond with an inlet and a house close by. (*See map, p. 7.*)

I can now accept not only that Blanque might have been the man described in the old legend, but also allow that two people who worked in the same illegal industry not only knew each other, but also might have been neighbors in Waveland as well as in Biloxi.

The Christmas Tea and Installation of 2020 Board of Directors

The annual Christmas Tea with the installation of the 2020 Board of Directors was held on

Thursday afternoon, December 5, from 3:00—5:00 P. M. at the Kate Lobrano House, the home of the Hancock County Historical Society at 108 Cue Street, Bay Saint Louis.

After a brief recap of ongoing projects at the society for the past year and projects for the forthcoming year, President George Saucier, introduced the 2020 Board Directors, and Charles Gray, Executive Director of the Hancock County Historical Society, presented each with a certificate of office. Serving on the board are George Saucier, President; Beverly Frater, First Vice President; Bryan Frater, Second Vice President; Georgie Morton, Treasurer; Nicolette Murphy, Secretary; Jim Keating, Publicity Chairperson; Jim Codling, Historian; Victoria Olander, Director of Communications, and Chris Roth, Membership and Fund Raising Chairman.



Front row L to R: Beverly Frater, Virginia Olander, Georgie Morton
Second row L to R: Nicolette Murphy, Bryan Frater, George Saucier, Chris Roth
Third row L to R: Charles Gray, Jim Codling, Jim Keating

THANK YOU

The Historical Society would like to offer a big thank you to Alan and Natalie Hodges for their kind donation of the materials to update the entry ramp. Special thanks also go to members Dave Wessinger and Bryan Frater for donating the labor to install it.



Virginia and Boa Olander



Cris Roth and David Mayley
Chris and Jim Codling

SCENES FROM
THE CHRISTMAS
TEA



Pam Hines, Beverly Frater, and
Nicolette Murphy



Jim Keating and Sheila
Edwards



Rosemarie Schaaf and
Terry Downs



Jim Codling, Nicolette Murphy,
Henry Doussan, and George
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