

THE

HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

July 2020

NEWS FROM LOBRANO HOUSE

The Kate Lobrano House has reopened for members and visitors, and the hours remain the same: Monday through Friday 10:00 a.m. until noon and 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., closing from 12:00 –1:00 for lunch.

Monthly luncheons have been postponed until further notice, but we look forward to their return as soon as we feel we can do so without affecting the health of our members.



Catahoula Creek



ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is still a few months away, it's not too early to begin thinking about and planning the Cemetery Tour. The 26th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on Halloween Night, Saturday, October 31, 2020. Needed are volunteers to prepare the cemetery for the tour, to portray citizens buried there, and to act as guides. To volunteer, please call 228-467-4090. All actors and guides must be members of the Historical Society.

CATAHOULA

By
James Keating, MD

Virginia Olander, *Editor*

The Jourdan River inhabits the southern Hancock County coastal plain. A major branch of this river is the Catahoula Creek, named after a now extinct Catahoula Choctaw Indian tribe that once occupied this area. The Choctaw Indian word "Catahoula" means "beloved lake" or "lake people." In Louisiana, the name

Catahoula is applied to a lake, a parish, several small bodies of water, and the Catahoula is recognized as the Louisiana state dog. The Catahoula Creek has been notorious in history for occasional episodes of flash-flooding. The creek and another larger tributary of the Jourdan River, the Hickory Creek, are fed by artesian springs which provide a lush riverine ecological system which attracted the early Choctaw Indians and later the pioneer settlers that migrated from the Atlantic seacoast in the first half of the nineteenth century. These poor yeoman sustenance farmers traveled in long ox-drawn wagon trains along the Old

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James Keating, Publisher
Charles Gray, Executive Director

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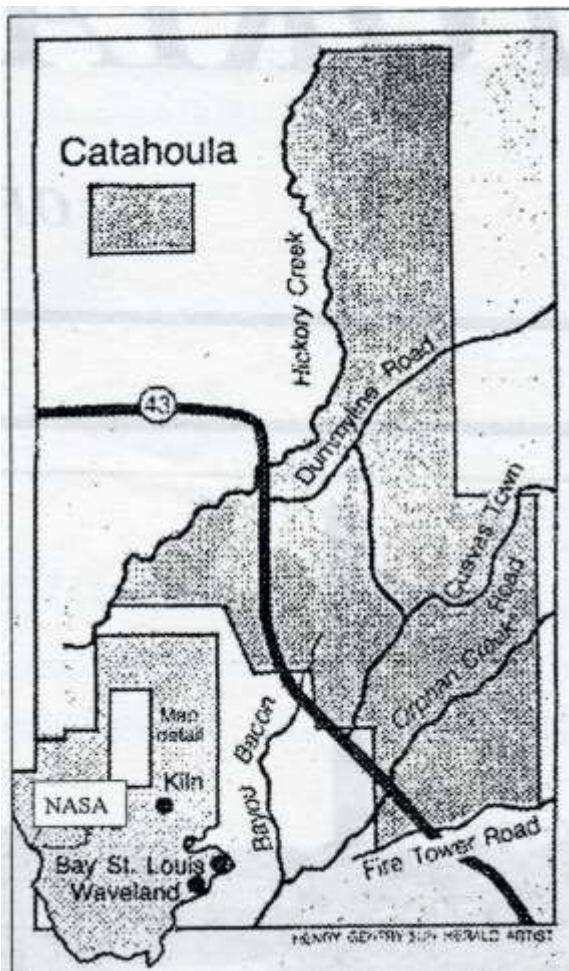
“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

Federal Road intending to homestead 160 acres of this fertile land that had become available after the Indian Removal by Andrew Jackson.

The history of Catahoula is the story about a group of hard-working families who raised animals for profit that successfully managed the land for over one hundred and fifty years. Precious little is written about the neighborhood in Hancock County called Catahoula. Historically, the important small communities in the Catahoula Creek basin were Caesar, Leetown, Catahoula, Benville, and Flat Top. This article will tell the compelling story of Catahoula, Benville, and Flat Top with anecdotes from the living descend-

ants of four original pioneer families that settled this land.

The timber industry provided supplementary income and employment during the period 1870-1930. Cash crops such as sweet potatoes, cotton, tung oil, and soybeans came and went over the twentieth century. Dairy farming was popular during the 1950's and 1960's and the milk was sent to the Crosby Creamery in Picayune. Over the years, beef cattle farming has been the most consistently profitable sector of the agriculture economy in Catahoula and Hancock County. Most trade or commerce was conducted in the Kiln since Picayune was not a very big commercial center in the past. Early Catahoula evolved as a neigh-

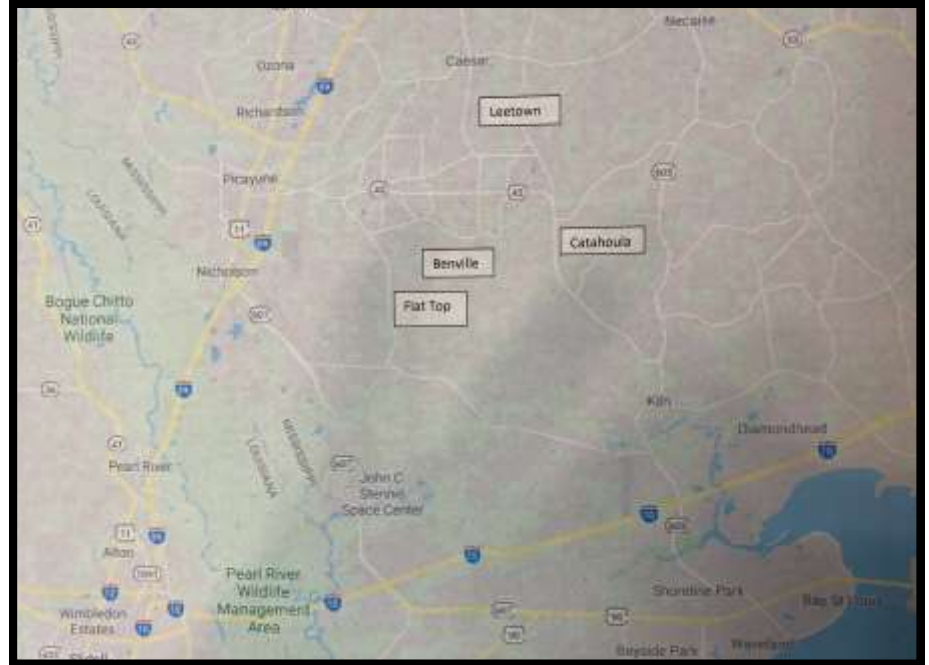


The neighborhood of Catahoula is depicted on this map as the shaded area between Hickory Creek and Fire Tower Road.

borhood after 1890 with a definite sense of community.

In 1961, the NASA project, called the National Space Technology Laboratories, (later renamed the Stennis Space Center) took a significant land mass in the southern part of Catahoula and Benville and all of the townships of Flat Top and Santa Rosa to be a Buffer Zone*. No residential houses were permitted in the Buffer Zone. James Lee and Robert Seal and many other families had to move from their houses on the lower Bienville Road and elsewhere. Only two percent of the land in the Buffer Zone continued to be used by cattle farmers. Most of the Buffer Zone which encompasses Devil's Swamp was timber forest owned by the International Paper Company.

Catahoula is a small rural community in the northwestern part of Hancock County that is traditionally considered the lush farmland between Hickory Creek and Fire Tower Road (see map). The early pioneer families from Virginia and the Carolinas include the Dosset, Lee, Mitchell, Seal, and Bound families. The Morans, Cuevas, and Ladner clans came from the old colonial families that settled first on the Gulf Coast and had originally migrated from Canada or Europe. A historically significant black population is embedded in Catahoula in the neighborhood called Sellars or Sellars Lane originally settled by Will Sellars. The Dummy Line Road and the Cuevas Town Road are key byways through Catahoula. The Lott McCarty Road is a historically significant byway in the adjoining neighborhoods of Benville and Flat Top, which are important culturally to the social



Map of Caesar, Leetown, Catahoula, Benville, and Flat Top

history of Catahoula. In fact, in 1892, a Catahoula post office was established with Anna Mitchell as postmaster that lasted twenty-six years. The community in the mid-twentieth century had a grammar school, two Baptist churches, two cemeteries, a tavern, and a grocery store. There is a strong community spirit in this neighborhood and many of the inhabitants are fourth generation cattle farmers that are distant relations by marriage to almost all of their neighbors.

Keith Dosset (b. 1956) is a pharmacist in Picayune who lives in Catahoula on family land along the Dummy Line Road and Old Dosset Road. He is a fourth generation Dosset that lives in Catahoula. His great-grandfather, Alexander Dosset (1864-1941), was the first of his family to migrate to Hancock County from North Carolina to homestead 160 acres in 1887. Alexander was a blacksmith by trade. He built a dog -

trot log cabin, which is no longer standing, but the site is still present on the Dosset family farm. The log house had a clay chimney.

Keith's grandfather, Thomas Dosset (1884-1958), built a house around 1930 on Old Dosset Road, which is still standing, and in pretty good shape currently occupied by a tenant. Thomas raised cows and sheep on nine hundred acres of good pasture and timber land. In that time frame, the herds of cows and flocks of sheep grazed in the open forest. The sheep and goats would eat the forest brush so the tasty mast grass would grow and feed the cows. Keith's father, B. L. Dosset (1922-2004), also raised cattle but a stock law passed in the 1950's required the farmers to fence in the livestock. Keith attended the Benville Baptist Church and remembers swimming in the Hickory and Catahoula Creeks. The farm had well water but now there is city water in the neighborhood. The

cows drink from ponds built to hold the rain water. Keith's mother is from the neighborhood Seal family. He has reared two daughters.

Juanita Loveless Gex was born in Picayune, Mississippi, on February 14, 1930. She lived in Picayune until 1933 when her family moved to Catahoula. Her father, Printie Loveless, was a carpenter by trade and was recruited by the Pine Vista Plantation on the Dummy Line Road to manage their big tung and cattle farm. If a farm is over two hundred acres it can be called a plantation. Juanita attended the small Catahoula School until eighth grade. She then attended the Kiln High School on the Kiln Delisle Road and rode the school bus. She was an excellent student, played varsity basketball, and was editor of the yearbook. She watched the harvest of tung nuts and reports the plantation hired the many reliable, seasonal black workers from the Sellars neighborhood to work the farm. The black families attended the New Providence Baptist Church on Highway number forty-three. There were many large fields of corn in those days and every family had a large vegetable garden. After high school, Juanita moved to Bay St. Louis to work in the Hancock County Department of Welfare in the old Masonic building on Main Street. She married lawyer Emile Gex, who also had an office on Main Street. They moved to Picayune. Juanita is President of the Pearl River County Historical Society.

James Lee was born in Benville on May 1, 1935. Benville is a neighborhood adjacent to Catahoula just over the Cata-

houla Creek on the Lott McCarty Road. The township is named after the Reverend Ben Tony that founded the Benville Church around 1942 on the corner of Bienville Road and the Lott McCarty Road. Back in the day, the Texas Flat Road was the way to travel to Waveland and the Bay. His father, Curtis Daniel Lee (1900-1990), and his mother, Ina Smith (1912-1968), had an open range cattle farm at the fork of the Hickory and Catahoula Creeks, which is now in the Buffer Zone. The family was forced to move and build a new house at another location nearby. They also raised goats and hogs. The family attended the Benville Church and James is a builder of houses and an ordained Baptist preacher. The Benville Church is the cultural center of this village which is a necessary and vital part of the history of Catahoula, since the inhabitants of these two neighborhoods are so closely related, and their lives so intertwined. James married Flora Beth Miller (1938-2019) who was from the nearby village of Flat Top. Curtis and Ina are buried in the cemetery adjacent to the Catahoula Baptist Church on Highway 43.

James's grandfather, Jesse Joseph Lee (1875-1941), married Lusiser Mitchell (1878-1964) who was also a local cattle farmer with eighty acres and twenty cows. They had originally moved from Henley Field, Mississippi, in 1906. Henley Field is a historic settlement in early Hancock County started by Jeremiah Henley in 1810, which became a popular destination for early settlers from the Carolinas. It was located about six miles west of present day McNeill on the old Gainesville Columbia

Road about fifteen miles north of present day Picayune. Rubin Lee, was the first Lee from this branch of the Lee family to migrate to Henley Field from North Carolina around 1825. There is a separate clan of Lees that settled in Leetown who are distant relations from North Carolina.

Robert Seal was born at the Kings Daughter and Sons Hospital in 1946. He married Carolyn Cath (1945-2020) who is buried at the Standard Sandhill Cemetery. Robert is a gunsmith and owned and operated a sporting goods store on the CC Road. He owns 110 acres of land comprised mostly forest. Robert is the son of Elmer William Seal (1904-1978) and Cora Rozelia Ladner (1911-1967). They had ten children and a one hundred acre farm on the Green Brown Road. They grew sweet potatoes and had twenty five cows. Elmer supplemented his income by working at the Ingalls Ship Yard in Pascagoula Mondays through Friday. Elmer was a builder who worked on the Dummy Line railroad spur that became the main thoroughfare through Catahoula after the Sawmill Era ended. It is now the Dummy Line Road.

Mary Elizabeth Seal, Robert's sister, went to the Catahoula Grammar School. She and Robert would visit their cousins, James Lee, and his seven siblings which was in walking distance from their house, but on the other side of the Catahoula Creek. There is a ford in the Catahoula Creek and since the two farmhouses were each other's closest neighbors, the eighteen children waded across the creek every day to visit each other and play. The ford could be crossed with a tractor or a pickup truck. Years ago a wagon might

cross the ford when the creek had risen and float behind horses or mules.

Robert's grandfather was Lawsen Seals who was a farmer with three hundred acres on the Dummy Line Road. He grew cotton and raised geese and cattle. The geese ate the weeds around the cotton plants and were sold for their meat. Lawsen might take a flock of geese by foot to the Kiln for market, which might take all day. Lawsen married Magnolia but their marriage was unhappy and they were separated. Robert's great-grandfather, Daniel Seals, married Mary Elizabeth and lived in Pine Grove, Mississippi, where he is buried. They had originally emigrated from Germany.

The fourth important family in Catahoula is the Mitchell Family. Rayford Mitchell had a large dairy farm in the 1940's on Mitchell Road not far from the family farm of James Lee. James Lee had a part time job milking Rayford's forty milk cows at dawn. Five of Lee children married Mitchell kin and

others married into the Seal family. Michael Randolph Seal currently lives on the old Mitchell land on the Seal Oak Alley Road. He is the great grandson of Magnolia Mitchell who married Lawsen Green Seal. There is a Mitchell Cemetery on this property that dates back to the Civil War. At that time, a company of Yankee soldiers was camped on the adjacent Hickory Creek. They had suffered many casualties and the Mitchell family nursed and cared for their wounded Yankee soldiers. Some of these soldiers did not survive and were buried behind the old farmhouse, which became the old Mitchell Cemetery where family members have been buried for 150 years.

In conclusion, some of the most attractive farmland in Hancock County is located in the neighborhood affectionately known as Catahoula. Early pioneer farmers from the Dosset, Seal, Lee, and Mitchell families migrated overland along the Old Federal Road to homestead this fertile landscape. Their descend-

ants successfully managed the land with cattle farming and various cash crops, and still proudly own this land that their forefathers farmed on old byways such as the Dummy Line Road. In a forthcoming article, the history of the neighboring communities of Leetown and Caesar will be presented.

Editor's note: A Buffer Zone is an area where the Government owns a restrictive easement that prohibits certain structures meant for human habitation for the protection of humans and animals as well as ecological protection. Approximately 1/3 of Hancock County comprises the NASA Buffer Zone.

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S. G. Thigpen

S. G. Thigpen was born in Jasper County in central Mississippi but moved to Picayune in Pearl River County in 1919. Here he established a hardware and building materials store which became his lifelong busi-



The old Mitchell Family Cemetery

ness. Having a great interest in history, Thigpen talked to customers, visitors, and anyone who came into the store asking them stories about the past in Pearl River and Hancock Counties. (Originally Hancock included present day Pearl River County, Harrison County, and Stone County.) In addition for fifteen years, Mr. Thigpen had a twice daily radio show in which he included many of these stories, giving us a rich history of the settlement of these two counties. In the 1960's Thigpen published several books including these stories. Pearl River: Highway to Glory Land is one of those books.

THE COURTHOUSE AT CAESAR

Edited by
Eddie Coleman

(There is very little editing on my part.)

If you had lived where Picayune now is between 1812 and 1836, your courthouse and county seat would have been at old Center, about one half mile east of where Caesar Church (*Union Baptist Church*) now stands. If you had lived at Bay St. Louis, Pearlinton, Byrd's Chapel, Derby, Savannah, Kiln, Steep Hollow, you would have gone to Center to pay taxes, get marriage licenses, and go to court, etc.

Center, the county seat of Hancock County, was located on a beautiful sloping hammock by which runs clear sparkling Catahoula creek on the east side and Playground branch, an ever running little stream of cool, clear

water, on the west side. Old homes and old time communities were usually built where water was plentiful.

No better spot could have been found for the county seat from the standpoint of water or the land itself. The land there is a rich sandy loam under laid with red clay gently sloping toward the two streams, with perfect drainage.

Besides water and drainage there were other reasons why Center was selected as the county seat of newly formed Hancock County. For one thing, it was almost in the geographic center of the county. Another reason was that it was the main Indian community and center of population of this entire area and had been for probably hundreds of years. The big chief of the Choctaws in this area made his headquarters there. All roads, maybe I should say all trails, led to this community. It was there that the Indians held their powwows, their games, and meetings of other kinds. It was there that the Indian ball games took place, pretty much as we now have basket ball tournaments here in Picayune.

The original name of this community was an Indian name meaning "Center" or "coming together" or "where everybody meets up." When the white people came in, they used the corresponding English name and called it Center. It seems to have been by far the biggest Indian settlement in this whole section of the county....

The big Indian town was located further up the slope from where Hancock County Courthouse was built and was centered somewhat north of the pre-

sent road between Catahoula Creek and Playground Branch. There is much evidence to show that Indians lived there....

Mr. A. J. Bilbo who owned this old place for many years and who died about 1940 gave me much information about old Center. He went with me down the slope from his home to where old Center stood. He showed me the location of the old dungeon, or jail, where there is still a slight depression in the ground. He showed me where houses had stood as was evidenced by clay deposits from the chimneys. When I was there, grown trees had covered the old town site, but it was very evident a village had once been there.

Mr. Freeman Lee, who died up in his nineties about 1940, gave me considerable information about old Center. He remembered seeing soldiers drill there in preparation for going either to the Mexican or Civil war—he did not remember which. He remembered practically all trails leading to Center and that there were no such things as roads as we have now, some trails wide enough for a wagon to travel over. He told me that as a young man he rode a horse or walked from the old Lee Homestead in present Leetown to Walkiah Bluff to attend parties or social gatherings. He would cross Catahoula creek and hit the old trail from Center to Walkiah. He remembered well the old Jackson Military road cut through the heavy pine timber and of passing through Picayune when there was only one house on this old trail in what is now the corporate limits of the city. One time he went to a home of a Mr. Stockstill. Big rains came



Old Caesar jail

and the streams got up so that he was about two weeks getting back home. There were no bridges back then. He told me of a man going from somewhere up on Pearl River to Center to get his marriage license to get married the next Sunday. The creeks got up and he was gone for about three weeks. His folks and the girl's folks wondered what in the world had become of him, some of them speculation that maybe he had fled the country. But when the water went down, he showed up, and the marriage took place....

Rev. L. G. Varnado, now in his eighties and living at Poplarville, wrote me this right lately: "My grandfather Jones was sent here as a peace officer when this area was incorporated as Mississippi territory in 1812. He was born in the Alleghany mountains in Georgia and was used to a rough jungle life as well as the nature and characteristics of Indians. He was a full blooded red Irishman, his father

coming direct from the old country. He married a bride who was born in Sweden. They had three children when the government sent him here. He settled in the midst of the Choctaw Village and seat of government which stood east just across the branch from Caesar. Chikala was then the Choctaw chief. My grandfather helped build the first jail there near where his house stood. They dug a pit about eight feet deep, then cut logs and tapered up a pen somewhat like we used to build bird traps and then cut a hole in the top. They would let the prisoners down by a ladder. When the ladder was removed, there was no way of escape. Food and water were let down by a rope. At this place was born Zachariah Jones who became one of the most useful men of his day in this section in the church and civic life, also a mechanic. Grandfather made close friends of the Indians and was loved in [sic] after years by them." Mr. Jones has many descendants now in the Caesar ar-

ea. He lived after the Indians were gone for many years at this old place.

Center was a village with a post-office, log courthouse, a jail, an inn or hotel, a barroom, one or more small stores, and a few homes for county officials and others. Henry Necaise, an old negro [sic] who died about 25 or 30 years ago at 110 years old told me of going to Center as a boy to a murder trial in which some of his folks were involved. Some man was called as a witness. The judge told him to be seated in the witness chair, but the man continued standing. He was again told to take the witness chair, when he said, "Judge, I rode a mule 30 miles to get here and I am so sore I can't sit down." The judge and everybody laughed, and the man was allowed to continue standing.

Murrell, one of the most notorious robbers ever to operate in this section, with a wide reputation as a hole-up man and killer, was once arrested and put in this old dungeon, but before he could be tried confederates came in and rescued him from the jail, or he bribed someone to let him out. Anyway, he got out and was never tried.

Mr. George Bilbo and Mrs. Caz Stockstill have both told me of stories their grandmother used to tell them in the long ago about old Center. As a child she went to the old Indian dances which were always held under the same old big tree. Fires for light would be built in a circle around this old tree, and the Indians would start early in the night with their dance which always ended at sun up. They danced and sang all night. I myself, as a child, used to go to the

Choctaw dances up in Jasper County when there would always be a big crowd, not only of Indians but also of white people.

Mr. Bilbo and Mrs. Stockstill also told me that their grandmother would tell of the many Indian teepees, wigwams, or whatever you call them that were located between Playground Branch and Catahoula creek, saying there must have been anywhere from 50 to 100 of them, all inhabited by Indians.

Jackson's army camped at their location on its way from Alabama to New Orleans in the fall of 1814. This was an ideal camp site as the land is dry natured, lies well, and there is plenty water available.

The first county officers at Center were William Hunt, Clerk of the Superior and county court; Duncal McCall, Sheriff; and later Elihu Carver was Sheriff; Thomas Hunt, assessor and collector; Roger A. Heron, justice of the peace; Joseph Villis, justice of the Quorum (I think this is the same as the Board of Supervisors now); William A. Walker, Clerk of the Superior court of Law and Equity. In 1836 the courthouse was moved to Gainesville. Center died when the courthouse was moved. The Indians left about the same time.

SOURCE:

Thigpen, S. G. *Pearl River: Highway to Glory Land.* Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1965.



GETTING TO KNOW YOU

We have prepared a series of articles about our Board of Directors and Staff. We hope you enjoy their interesting recollections of how they got here.

CHARLES HARRY GRAY

Executive Director, Hancock County Historical Society

I was born in Waynesboro, Mississippi, in 1934.

I am a descendant of Thomas Gray, Jamestown, Virginia, 1608, who was given the first land grant in Virginia; Clinch Gray, Surveyor General for the Mississippi Territory, who signed Mississippi's constitution in 1817; and Harry Gray, who was a Mississippi Legislator during the Civil War.

I graduated from Waynesboro High School in 1951 and from Mississippi Southern College in pre-med with a major in biology and a minor in English, in 1955.

I served in the U.S. Army, 15th Infantry, Germany from 1956 to 1958.

After being discharged from the Army, I moved to New Orleans in 1959 where I became co-owner of Corinne Dunbar Incorporated, which included the famous restaurant by that name and a number of French Quarter and Marigny properties. During the next thirty-three years, I took twenty-nine cruises around the world, visiting one 159 countries, many of them more than twenty-five times.

In 1984 while sailing in



Charles Harry Gray

the Mississippi Sound, I saw Beachwood Hall standing on the bluff at the Bay of Saint Louis and bought it that afternoon. I then sold the restaurant and retired to the Bay. Beachwood was built in 1840 and was a preservation rather than a renovation, having been well maintained for 144 years. I became so fascinated by the house and the beautiful little town that I started researching the history, both of the house and the town. I became president of the Hancock County Historical Society in 1987 and have served in most of the board positions during the last twenty years. During this time the Society has grown from six members to more than One thousand, making us one of the largest civic organizations on the Gulf.

I have served on numerous committees and boards, including the Gulf Coast Art Association and the Restoration of Beauvoir Gardens and Cemetery. I wrote and published *The First 300 Years* for the Bay St. Louis tercentenary.

I designed and then directed the installation of Tercentenary Park in 1999. I was a fellow at the L.K. Anderson Library. I was one of the *Coast Magazine's* "People to Watch," and I was the Hancock County Chamber of Commerce's "Citizen of the year" in 2000.

In 2002 the Board of Directors appointed me Executive Director For Life.

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought extreme changes to Hancock County. I returned to the Bay to find the Kate Loblano House without a roof and partially off its foundation. Beachwood Hall was completely washed away and my warehouse on Washington Street was also gone. Every news agency covering the disaster came to us in search of information and subsequently there are numerous publications available documenting the recovery.

The following decade on the Coast was wonderful. People working together, rebuilding, and watching prosperity returning.

In 2018 I purchased Monument Cottage in Coldstream, Scotland and spent most of the year restoring my house and orchard.

I returned home for health reasons and was quickly able to resume my duties at the Historical Society.



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