

*THE*

# *HISTORIAN*

*OF HANCOCK COUNTY*

www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

March 2021

## 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.

### President's Corner

As you may have read in the last *Historian*, I have been asked to serve as President of our Society. I am honored to follow a long line of former Presidents who have contributed to the success of the Society. Equally as important is the long line of volunteers who have been and continue to be significant contributors to our organization. On behalf of the Board of Directors and myself, I want to thank all of the volunteers, past and present, who have given so generously of your time.

Volunteerism is especially important for the long-term success of our Society. While Eddie Coleman, who works part time, goes above and beyond the call of duty, we have a continuing need for volunteers. If

*(continued on p. 2)*



Schooners were the work horses of the carrying trade in the early history of Hancock County. Entrepreneurs earned immense profits from hauling cargo between Pearlington and New Orleans which provided seed money for other investments such as plantations, slaves, cotton gins and sawmills.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF ANTEBELLUM PEARLINGTON

By  
James Keating, M.D.  
And  
Virginia Olander, ed.

At one time in Hancock County history, the Pearl River was the only significant route into the wilderness of our county for settlers and supplies. The

town of Pearlington is located about five miles above the mouth of the Pearl River. The water in the river at Pearlington is deep, about twenty-five feet. Hence, it became a suitable port for schooner commerce with New Orleans and Mobile. This article offers a collection of interesting snippets that capture the spirit of the story of this sometimes forgotten place called Pearlington.

European colonization of Mississippi and Louisiana in the eighteenth century was not very

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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.”

successful financially. France, England, and Spain did not attract a large, mobile emigrant

*(continued from page 1)*

you have time to give to the Society, please contact me. Below is my email address and phone number as I am sure you have skill sets that we can put to good use.

While volunteers drive the engine, membership is the fuel that sustains the Society. Our membership continues to grow year after year. Thank you for renewing yours, and remember, if everyone recruits one new member, we can double the number of members in our society.

While our monthly luncheons have been interrupted, so has our personal interaction with members. Nonetheless, the *Historian* has been extraordinarily successful in sustaining our link to our members and the public. Eddie Coleman, Editor, and James Keating, Publisher, produce each month one of the most interesting and informative publications of any historical society. As you recruit new members, refer them to our website and the *Historian* as two excellent recruiting tools.

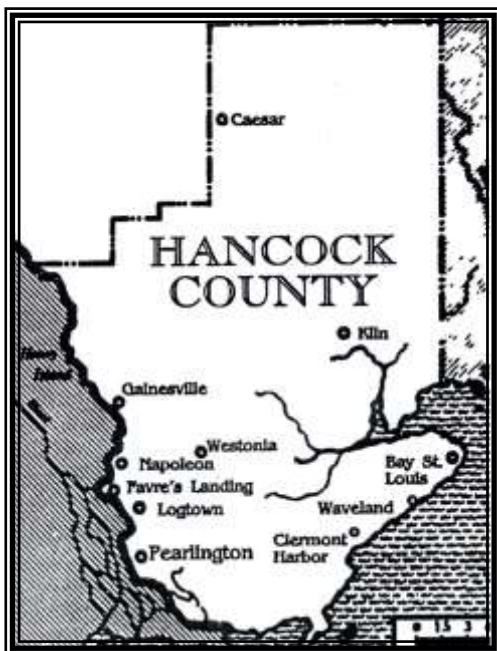
As always, any comments or suggestions as to how we might better serve our membership and community are welcome.

Best to You and Yours,

Chris Roth, President  
 228-323-1105  
[crothbsl@yahoo.com](mailto:crothbsl@yahoo.com)

population to New Orleans or the Gulf Coast. The United States purchased Louisiana in 1803 and annexed the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1811. Conversely, the economy of the Pearl River Valley and New Orleans under the auspices of the United States flourished in the nineteenth century with the Great Migration, the injection of capital (banking and insurance), and merchants with entrepreneurial experience into the regional economy. At the mouth of all of the Gulf Coast rivers, small ports such as Pearlinton and Gainesville, Mississippi, evolved supporting sawmills, shipyards, brickyards, cotton gins, taverns, and kilns producing naval stores (turpentine, tar, pitch, resin), and charcoal. Naval stores originated in the south producing products for the world's navies of wooden ships and helped support the southern economy for hundreds of years.

Nevertheless, at the turn of the nineteenth century, only a few settlers had populated the Pearl River Valley basin. The American Magistrate at Fort Stoddard (Mobile), Ephraim Kirby, reported to President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 “that only the establishment of American rule could end the economic depression of the area wrought by Spanish control.” Kirby estimated that about thirty families lived along the lower Pearl River. By 1812 almost all of the land on the Mississippi side of the river had been granted to owners by earlier French, English, and Spanish governments. These settlers were insecure about the safety or validity of their land titles. In addition, the region was lawless and a band of pi-



A cluster of growing small commercial villages evolved on the lower Pearl River in the early 19th century which included Pearlington, Logtown, Napoleon, and Gainesville.

Pearl River as Justice of the Peace. Simon was a prominent, educated planter who owned and operated schooners, raised cattle, and owned slaves. His diversified business interests included being an important middleman in the newly emerging cotton sector of the regional economy. Cotton was transported by flatboat down the Pearl from upriver plantations or by wagon from local farms to "The Gin." This cotton gin processed the cotton and was located one mile north of downtown Pearlington on Favre's plantation. From there it was transported across Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans. Simon financed his multifaceted operations with loans from the banking sector in New Orleans. He died in 1813 in Mobile, but his gravesite is unknown.

Plantations were built on these tracts of land near Pearlington which Favre as Justice of the Peace had approved. One famous house, located on Bayou Mulatto and probably built in 1800 by Philippe Saucier, was called *Laurel Wood* by its most famous occupant, J. F.

rates made their headquarters in the location that would one day become the town of Gainesville.

It became apparent to all that annexation was inevitable to end the chaos in this disputed territory. Accordingly, in 1811 President Madison annexed the Mississippi Gulf Coast below the thirty-first parallel. Then, Governor W. C. C. Claiborne sent Dr. William "Fat Doctor" Flood to the coast to establish American sovereignty there. On January 9, 1811, Dr. Flood, a Louisiana planter and physician, docked the sloop *Alligator* in Pearlington and appointed Simon Favre Justice of the Peace for the newly formed Biloxi Parish. This area later became the Hancock County of the U. S. Mississippi Territory.

Simon Favre (1760-1813) was a very interesting character in this story and an early resident of Pearlington. He was the grandson of a French emigrant, Jean Favre, Jr. (Faure). Simon was the official government Interpreter of the Indian

Nations for France and Commandant of the Pearl River during Spanish rule. His father, Jean Claude Favre (1721-1782), acquired his twelve hundred acre tract as early as 1767, which Simon inherited and settled on shortly after his father's death. Simon married Celeste Rochon (1777-1840) of Mobile, Alabama, in 1801. He approved numerous land grants along the



*Laurel Wood*  
The home of J.F.H. Claiborne



The Pearlington Cemetery, shaded by a grove of ancient oak trees, is the final resting place of many historic individuals whose lives and works contributed to the remarkable history of Hancock County.

H. Claiborne (1809-1884). *Laurel Wood* was located two miles southeast of Pearlington and became one of the most successful cotton plantations in the area under Claiborne's management.

Jean Baptiste Doby (D'audy) (c.1770-c.1835) was awarded a Spanish permit of 1,280 acres (two square miles) on Bayou Cowan, which is in the present day subdivision of Pearlington called Oak Harbor. Doby was a native of Hyeres, Provence, France from which he emigrated sometime before 1796. He married Marie Jeanne Girand (1772-1849) of New Orleans that same year. Doby owned and operated schooners that serviced the Gulf Coast in that era. He picked Bayou Cowan as a perfect site to homestead and acquired the land in 1809. He built a home and a shipping dock called "Doby's Point" for his schooners, crewed by his slaves, the essential, experienced, and able seamen at that time. Doby planted cotton and raised cattle and hogs. He chose this spot to homestead because it was next to the "bustling com-

munity" of Pearlington that was necessary for his carrying trade.

After the War of 1812, the Great Migration resumed. In 1817, Willis H. Arnold ran a school called The Pearlington Academy. In 1820, Lt. Col. Zachery Taylor (1784-1850) built a road from Pearlington to Shieldsboro (Bay St. Louis). Pearlington supplied many of the bricks from the Bennet and Morte brickyard for the construction of Fort Pike on the Rigolets during its construction from 1819-1826. The Rigolets (pronounced rig'-oh-lees) is a long, deep water strait in Louisiana between Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne.

It was now time for the proper formation of a town. In 1819, Elihu Carver made the plot and diagram of the streets of Pearlington, which is still in existence today. The Pearlington Company was formed in 1820 to govern and form the town and "develop its growth and prosperity." General George Henry Nixon (1778-1824), a distinguished army commander in the previous wars with the British

and Creek Indians, was elected the first President (mayor) of the Pearlington Company. He had retired to Pearlington a few years before his death. In 1806, he married Rebecca Bracy (1788-1868) who was from Virginia. They are buried in the Pearlington Cemetery. In 1820, a sale of lots in the town was advertised in the newspapers in New Orleans and Natchez. In 1822, the Mississippi Legislature acknowledged the charter of incorporation of the city of Pearlington.

Publius Rutilius Rufus Pray (P.R.R Pray, 1795-1839) was a distinguished lawyer who practiced in New Orleans with General Eleazer Wheelock Ripley (1782-1839). Pray moved to Pearlington in 1822. By this time Pearlington was enough of a commercial center to support their law practice. Pray was also a local politician who served in the Mississippi Legislature from 1826-1829 and served as a Judge of the High Court of Errors and Appeals in 1837. He invested heavily in real estate and lived with his wife, Maria Learner (1899-1848), and their children in Tusculum, a neighborhood in Pearlington. Pray and Maria are buried in Belle Isle Cemetery in Pearlington.

Residents of New Orleans moved to Pearlington and other spots along the Gulf Coast during this time to escape epidemics of disease like yellow fever. The fresh air or sea breeze and the general environment were deemed more healthful than that experienced in the city, especially during the hot months of the year.

Although the county seat of Hancock County was in Caesar and then Gainesville, the county courts were held alter-



nately each six months in Pearlinton and Shieldsborough. There was a sheriff in town that performed weddings. There was no Methodist church until 1846, but the Pearl River basin did have the services of a circuit rider Methodist pastor who would visit each town possibly as early as 1807.

By 1831, Pearlinton was a small but busy port. Consequently, Andrew Hawthorne established a mercantile store there at that time. The town traded firewood and some lumber products and cotton with New Orleans in exchange for supplies such as flour, sugar, and tools and manufactured goods that were needed by the settlers. Herds of cattle and flocks of sheep producing wool were raised locally with resultant trade with New Orleans. There were six small timber mills in Pearlinton alone. The steam-powered circular saw replaced the old fashioned primitive buck-saw allowing the lumber industry to advance from charcoal and firewood to lumber building materials.

William "Captain Bill" Poitevnt (1814-1890) was an entrepreneur who migrated from North Carolina to Pearlinton in 1829 and made a fortune owning and operating ships on the Pearl River and the Gulf Coast. He married Mary Amelia Russ (1819-1873) from Pearlinton. Schooners and small sloops and catboats were the principal vessels carrying freight and passengers before the advent of steamboats. Captain Bill Poitevnt built a general store and lumber mill in Gainesville with the profit from the carrying trade.

Gainesville was another

commercial port on the Pearl River that would rival Pearlinton for business and prominence in the early and mid-19th century. Gainesville served as the county seat from 1830 to 1857. A cluster of growing small villages evolved on the lower Pearl River that also included Logtown and Napoleon. Entrepreneurs from these towns such as the Poitevnt family developed cooperative ventures that made this region a busy and prosperous marketplace.

Pearlinton eventually emerged as the larger community and dominant commercial center on the lower Pearl River after the Civil War and is the only remaining town still surviving. In this antebellum period of Hancock County history, a socio-economic class of upper echelon citizenry emerged that was wealthy, propertied (real estate and slaves), and entrepreneurial. These early families intermarried and had names such as Russ, Poitevnt, Favre, Seal, Weston, Graves, Leonard, Daniells, Wingate, Nixon, McArthur, and Pray.

Steamboats were a transformative stimulus to growth and commerce in the United States and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The newly invented steam engines provided boats or "steamers" the ability for the first time in history to travel up rivers such as the Mississippi and the Pearl. The steamboats that operated on the Pearl River were smaller than those on the Mississippi River and were adapted to the narrow and shallow waterways. In 1835 the *Choctaw* (130 tons) was the first steamboat to travel this river to the state capitol of Jackson in central Mississippi. By 1840,

there was regular steamboat traffic on the Pearl. In 1845 two large steamboats, *Mad Anthony* and *Irene*, carried passengers, bales of cotton, and hides to New Orleans. A few small steamboats were built in the Pearlinton shipyard, but most of the vessels on the Pearl River were built in the shipyards in the northeastern region of the United States.

In conclusion, early settlement in Hancock County occurred in the lower Pearl River Valley. The commercial port of Pearlinton, near the mouth of the river, evolved as an important community in the first half of the nineteenth century. Entrepreneurs such as Simon Favre and Captain Bill Poitevnt established their fortunes by owning and operating schooners in the immensely profitable carrying trade with New Orleans and Mobile. Cotton emerged as the dominant agricultural product in this era, to be superseded by the timber industry later in the century after the advent of railroads. An upper echelon of relatively wealthy families prospered in this time frame, and their descendants represent an important and valuable solid bedrock foundation of Hancock County society today.

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## THE S. S. CONTESSA

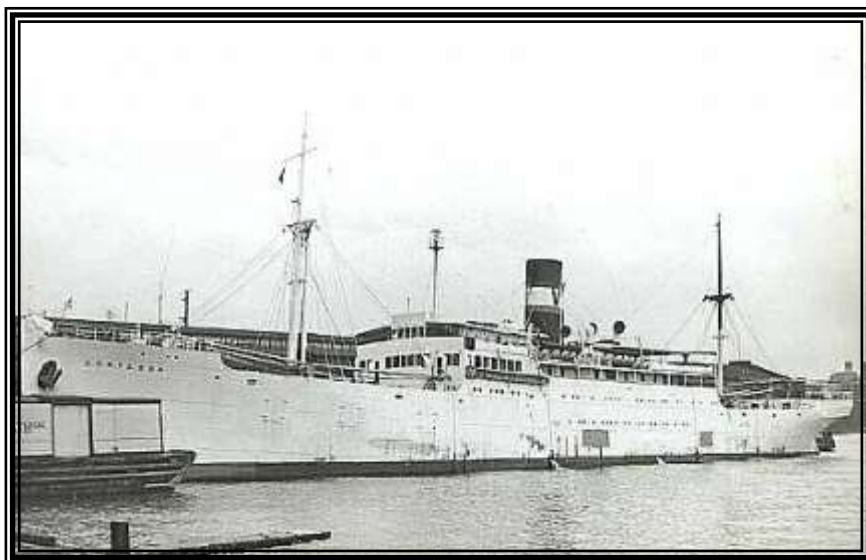
By

Chris Roth

***This is Edward R. Murrow and CBS News interrupting tonight's broadcast to bring you an update on the invasion of North Africa by British and American forces "to spill the raw materials of victory over Rommel and the conquest of the Avis-Vichy-held south flank of the Mediterranean."***

Back story:

Key to the success of this World War II invasion was the resupplying of the British Airforce twelve miles upriver from the mouth of the Sebou River which is north of Casablanca, Morocco. Because of the depth of the river, traditional ships in the invasion fleet could not enter the Sebou River. This disadvantage resulted in the search for



*The S. S. Contessa*

a shallower draft vessel yet one large enough to carry supplies and munitions upriver. The only vessel available to handle this assignment was a banana boat. Yes, a banana boat! The *S. S. Contessa* had been conscripted by the United States from Standard Fruit and Steamboat Company. Pre-war, the *Contessa* hauled bananas and occasional cruise passengers to and from points between the US and the various Caribbean islands. Her master, Captain William H. John, was British and had considerable courage and experience.

Captain John was ordered to take his ship to Newport News, Virginia, and to await further orders. Upon arrival in Newport News, his ship was immediately dry-docked for repairs and retro fitted for its unknown mission. "She was a war-battered old tub, gallant and willing, but way out of her depth" for this mission. Thinking he had a week of leisure, Captain John invited his wife, Bessie, to join him only to find out his liberty was cut to under twenty-four hours.

Captain John answered the call to duty without knowing his

destination or when he would return. While the refit and loading of *Contessa* was being completed, his priority was to locate his crew. He searched for capable replacements for those who had left the area. He found eighteen sailors he needed among those serving jail time for excessive celebrations while on liberty, and the local sheriff was glad to be free of them.

With a full crew and petrol, munitions, and other critical supplies, *Contessa* began her precarious voyage across the Atlantic to North Africa. Slow and heavenly laden, she was the easy target for the German submarines and narrowly avoided one attack.

The mouth of the Sebou River was bordered by jagged rocks and pounding seas. After a long voyage through stormy seas and close contact with the enemy, Capt. John did not want to lose his ship just twelve miles from his destination. While he cleared the river entrance, the sides of the hull were gashed, and water gushed in almost overwhelming the pumps. Barely

clearing the mouth of the river, his water laden hull shortly ran aground. With no other choice but to wait for high tide to hopefully float him off, the ship and crew endured rebel sniper fire from the banks. At any given time, a properly placed bullet would have been the last of Capt. John, his crew, and the *Contessa*.

The next day the tide did float *Contessa* off the sand bar; however, she was turned around by the current. With no choice Capt. John backed *Contessa* upriver, once again running aground. This time, however, he was within striking distance of the airfield. The crew and soldiers at the airfield worked feverishly to ferry the supplies "while the fighting planes from Britain roared back out of the sky to be refueled and armed."

With crew safe and sound, *Contessa* made it to Gibraltar for temporary repairs and to New York to be refitted for additional action.

***This is Walter Cronkite at CBS with tonight's news and a special report from Bay Saint Louis, MS, on the aftermath of Hurricane Camille. We were just informed that one of our heroic WWII veterans was killed in Camille. Today we learned that Captain William H. John and his wife, Bessie Sigworth John, perished when their home at 990 South Beach Blvd., Bay Saint Louis, was destroyed. Captain John will long be remembered for his delivery of fuel and armaments to a British airbase in Morocco at a critical time in the Allied Forces invasion of North Africa as Captain of the Contessa.***

(Writer's note: Portions of this

article were excerpted from *12 Desperate Miles* by Bertram B. Fowler reprinted in the *Saturday Evening Post*, August 28, 1943. Special thanks to Dr. William (Bill) Bradford, former President of the Hancock County Historical Society, for his contribution to this article.)

## ARBOR DAY IN THE BAY

By  
Anita Warner

The term *Arbor Day* literally means tree day, and the word arbor comes from the Latin word for tree. Arbor Day was founded in 1872 by J. Sterling Morton in Nebraska City, Nebraska. By the 1920s each state in the United States had passed public laws that stipulated a certain day to be Arbor Day, but it was not nationally recognized

until 1972. Arbor Day is typically observed the last Friday in April. However because of the climate here in Mississippi, we celebrate on the second Friday in February.

The Bay Waveland Garden Club annually installs a tree in a prominent location around town. This year the club donated a specimen live oak tree to St. Augustine Seminary in the Bay. The seminary lost one of its registered oaks in Hurricane Zeta, and the club offered to replace it. Anita Warner, chair of the Arbor Day committee, organized the event held on February 12. It was a wet, cold day, but with the help of Raul and Isaac Verduco, the tree was installed.

The Bay-Waveland Garden Club and the Hancock County Historical Society maintain the Live Oak Tree Registry. Their mission is to register live



Members of the Bay Waveland Garden Club who presented the tree to St. Augustine Seminary on a cold, wet February day.

L. to R: 1st VP Anita Warner, Parliamentarian Kathleen Kemp, members Nanette Murphree, Barbara and Bob Hecet





The tree which was installed to replace the one lost in Hurricane Zeta.  
L. to R: 1st VP Anita Warner, President Ginny Littlefield,  
and members Barbara and Bob Huet

oak trees that are one hundred years old or older within Hancock County. In addition it is the intention to protect and conserve these natural resources that promote historical events, aesthetic value, and environmental significance. The project operates under the auspices of the *Société des Arbes* (tree society). The registration chairs are Shawn Prychitko and Anita Warner who find, measure, and document century-old southern live oaks. If you have live oak tree you would like to register, you may get in touch with Shawn or Anita at [treeregistry@gmail.com](mailto:treeregistry@gmail.com) or call the Historical Society at 228-467-4090.

## PROHIBITION AND HANCOCK COUNTY

By  
Eddie Coleman

Mississippi proclaimed itself a “dry” state in 1908-1909

and was the first state to ratify the Eighteenth Amendment. Seizing the opportunity to fulfill a need, residents along the Gulf Coast used their fishing vessels to smuggle the “demon rum” into the state. Other enterprising folks began making moonshine to turn a buck.

Rumrunners began smug-

gling the illegal liquor from islands in the Caribbean especially from Cuba. Many of them met ships bearing European alcohol off the barrier islands and brought in the bounty.

Between 1908 and the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, “thirsty” Hancock County residents crossed the Pearl River at Gainesville to visit the numerous “floating bar rooms” on the Louisiana side especially the *Blue Goose*. Often county residents drank their fill and returned with saddlebags full of the drink.

Other residents of the area made “shopping” trips to New Orleans to imbibe and “make groceries” of alcoholic beverages for personal use and for entertaining.

In his book, *The Mississippi Gulf Coast*, Charles Sullivan gives the following account of moonshine in the Kiln during the time of national Prohibition:

“Probably the best-known Mississippi town in the North during the Roaring Twenties was the Hancock County village of Kiln, from which the Chicago-based Capone Gang secured vast quantities of ‘Kiln Lightning.’ From time to time ‘revenooers’ discov-



The Blue Goose



ered whole rail cars loaded with just enough pine lumber to conceal hundreds of cases of liquor or truckloads of ‘corn squeezings’ nesting under egg cartons. In just one 1923 raid near Kiln, federal agents captured four cookers, one of them ‘a 300 gallon fellow—looking like the grandfather of all the stills.’”

Even though “some spectacular hauls” were made in the area by federal officials, the greater share of the illegal liquor reached its intended destination.

**SOURCES:**

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