

THE

# HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

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Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

September 2022

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, September 15, 2022, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Speaking at the luncheon will be Tim Kellar, Hancock County Clerk of the Chancery Court. He will speak on the livestock marks and brands of Hancock County. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 228-467-4090. **Please call by noon on Wednesday, September 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. **Served at noon, lunch is \$15.00 for members and \$17.00 for nonmembers**, payable at the door. The catering order is submitted on Wednesday morning prior to the luncheon on Thursday. If you need to cancel your reservation, please call by 2 p.m. on Tuesday prior to the luncheon if at all possible so that the society does not incur unnecessary expenses. It is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef. The lunch menu is sealed pork chops, yellow rice, vegetable medley, dinner rolls, and gooey butter bars.

## ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

The 27th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Saturday, October 29, 2022. It will run from 4 p.m.—6 p.m. To be an actor or volunteer to help, please get in touch with HCHS by calling 228-467-4090 or by email at [hancockcountyhis@bellsouth.net](mailto:hancockcountyhis@bellsouth.net).



St. Augustine Seminary  
199 Seminary Drive  
Bay Saint Louis, MS

## HISTORY OF ST. AUGUSTINE SEMINARY

By  
Jim Schott

People from around the country arrived at Bay St. Louis, MS, train depot throughout the morning of September 16, 1923. They gathered to attend the benediction of St. Augustine Seminary, the first Catholic seminary for Black men in the United States. It was an event that most of the Black people attending thought would never occur in their lifetimes. A

crowd of two thousand, including marching bands and eight hundred Knights of Peter Claver, white uniformed in full regalia and swords held aloft, paraded through town to the seminary grounds.

The unlikely journey of a few German priests who led the founding of the seminary to achieve that day is a testament to their faith, perseverance, and courage. The immigrant priests were members of a Catholic religious order, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). They founded St. Augustine Seminary for the purposes of training Black men for the Catholic priesthood. Only 18 years before in 1905, the

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James Keating, Publisher

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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.”

SVD attempted its first mission to Black communities of Mississippi in Merigold located in Bolivar County in the Delta. This first attempt consisting in a short-lived chapel and school ended in less than three months when racially-motivated threats and violence forced the mission’s priest, Fr. Aloysius Heick, to flee for his life in the middle of the night.

Despite their failure at Merigold, the handful of dedicated SVD priests persevered in their mission work and in the coming years successfully opened schools for Black children in cities across the state. Their work convinced them that Black priests were necessary to achieve success in these communities as was a seminary to train these priests. Today, the names of these pioneering priests like Matthew Christman and James Wendel grace the buildings of

the St. Augustine seminary grounds which now serves as a retreat center and headquarters for the Southern Province of the Society of the Divine Word.

The Society of the Divine Word is an international Catholic order of priests and brothers formed in 1875 by German priests. Also known as the Divine Word Missionaries, it successfully converted people of diverse races around the world including Africa, China, and Oceania, and sent its first missionaries to the United States in the 1890’s. In 1905, the SVD began its missionary work in northern and central Mississippi. They successfully built mission churches and schools at St. Mary in Vicksburg (1906), Holy Ghost in Jackson (1908), St. Joseph in Meridian (1910), and Sacred Heart in Greenville (1913). By 1920, over nine hundred students were enrolled in SVD schools

President’s Corner

It is with sadness that I report the passing of Russell Guerin. Russell was a historian of note, prolific researcher, writer and an authority on life and times of Hancock County. He was a special friend and supporter of the Hancock County Historical Society and will be sorely missed.

The Kate Lobrano House will go from being the home of the history of Hancock County to a rollicking “Hot Spot” on Second Saturday, September 10th. Moonshine and Marshmallows is the theme for this fun outing so you and your friends will certainly want to be a part of this entertaining event.

Branding and marking livestock were an important aspect of life in rural Hancock County. Tim Kellar, Hancock County Clerk of the Chancery Court, has firsthand knowledge of the history and importance of branding. We are fortunate to have Tim as our speaker at our luncheon on Thursday, September 15th. His presentation will give you an insight into the unique role branding and marking played when livestock roamed free in Hancock County.

Chris Roth
President



The first four African American Priests to be ordained from St. Augustine are pictured at the left in alphabetical order: Anthony Bourges, Maurice Rousseve, Vincent Smith, and Francis Wade.

across Mississippi. Today, historical markers, civil rights trail stops, and internet testimonials pay tribute to the legacy of these missions and schools in the lives of Black Mississippians in the 20th century.

Despite the tremendous success of their schools, the SVD were not very successful at converting Black families to Catholicism. They came to believe that they would never be successful unless they could ordain Black priests to serve their communities. However, they met resistance from the US bishops and Catholic hierarchy and had to overcome the severe challenges posed by “Jim Crow” society including segregation laws, cultural restrictions, and racial violence of the period.

Three SVD priests emerged as leaders and champions of this effort, Fr. James Wendel, Fr. Matthew Christman, and Fr. Arthur Janser. Wendel published a newsletter *The Colored Messenger* to drive awareness and move opinions on Black priests within the church. He engaged other activities, leaders, and the Bishop of Natchez on the topic. Christ-

man, a gifted educator and administrator, set about building a high school at the existing Immaculate Heart school in Greenville that could serve as a preparatory school and eventually serve as the initial seminary. Janser took up the task of gaining the approvals and financial resources from the Vatican, the “Commission for Catholic Missions Among Colored People and Indians,” and the Bishop of Natchez.

Sacred Heart College, precursor to St. Augustine Seminary, was established in 1920 in Greenville where the existing high school under Fr. Christman could be utilized to conduct classes and house the seminarians. As word of the effort in Greenville got out, threats began to reach the school in 1922. Charges of “depravity” and “subservience to Blacks” resulted in community investigations and threats. As a precaution, following specific KKK threats, seminarians even began to carry loaded guns on their missionary outings to the local community.

The SVD had never intended Greenville to be the permanent location for the seminary, and had been seeking an

alternate location. Southern Mississippi was closer to the concentration of Black Catholics along the coast from which to recruit candidates. The southern portion of the state was also perceived to be more tolerant of Catholics in general, and the SVD hoped it would not engender as much suspicion and controversy with regard to Jim Crow segregation laws and customs. Fr. Andrew Gmelch who was pastor of Our Lady of the Gulf parish in Bay St. Louis put the SVD in touch with the Voorhise family who sold them the property that would become St. Augustine. The first dirt was turned on September 29, 1922, and the cornerstone laid on November 23, 1922. The St. Augustine Mission House was completed in June 1923, and the students and staff were transferred in 1923.

During the development of the seminary, the SVD also determined to open a parish for Black Catholics in town. By this time, it was becoming more common to form unofficial Black churches in response to segregation laws, customs, and restrictions that plagued mixed race Catholic congregations and worship along the Gulf Coast. Father Heick was assigned to be Gmich’s assistant at Our Lady of the Gulf, to build a school for Black children, and to eventually invite the Black members to Our Lady of the Gulf into a separate church community under the care of the Divine Word Missionaries. This is how the SVD came to establish St. Rose de Lima parish in 1928.

Father Christman moved along with his students to his new position as the head of the St. Augustine Seminary in 1923 and led it until his death in 1929. There were financial challenges and limited support for the seminary. Most students lacked enough money to return home for visits and lived full time at the seminary. The students typically could not afford to pay full board and tuition and few were able to meet incidental expenses. The faculty, staff, and students cut corners where they could, worked the grounds themselves, and provided many of their own services.

In 1934, over 2000 people gathered again on the grounds at St. Augustine for the ordination of Anthony Bourges (Lafayette, LA), Maurice Rousseve (New Orleans, LA), Vincent Smith (Lebanon, KY), and Francis Wald (Washington, DC). These four men were part of the first classes back in Greenville. As their ordination approached, the SVD found themselves fighting against familiar prejudices and segregation barriers with very little support from American bishops to place these priests in their churches. Ultimately, they were able to work with Bishop Jules Jeanmard of Lafayette, LA (where 50,000 of the nation's 200,000 Black Catholics lived) to put together a place to navigate the social, legal, and political challenges to place these priests in the Lafayette Diocese.

Lafayette's Black Catholics reacted with "unrestrained enthusiasm" when Jeanmard announced that the four Black priests would come to the new Immaculate Heart parish in 1934. The four priests won the admira-

tion of Bishop Jeanmard and others for their work forming new missions, returning families to the church, and becoming pastors of their own churches throughout the region.

By 1965, there were 165 Black priests in the United States, most of whom had been trained and ordained at St. Augustine Seminary. But by the late '60s, ongoing financial pressure, the falling number of candidates to the priesthood, and cultural/social changes drove the closure of St. Augustine seminary in 1967. The site became the SVD's southern province headquarters novitiate, and a high school. The high school closed in 1982.

The St. Augustine Seminary and grounds at Bay St. Louis memorialize a remarkable history and legacy. The Society of the Divine Word Missionaries played an important role as a catalyst in building missions, schools, and clergy for Black communities. They worked to solve the political, administrative, financial, and social challenges in the midst of Jim Crow segregation to establish the St. Augustine Seminary and obtain the first diocesan assignments for their priests in the United States. Its priests, several becoming bishops in the US and internationally, ministered, educated, and set examples to bravely desegregate the Catholic church. St. Augustine stands as a testament to the many people who followed the encouragement of Father Arnold Janssen, the founder of the SVD, who in the darkest days of Merigold in 1905 encouraged his missionaries to proceed "gently, prudently, and courageously."

#### SOURCES:

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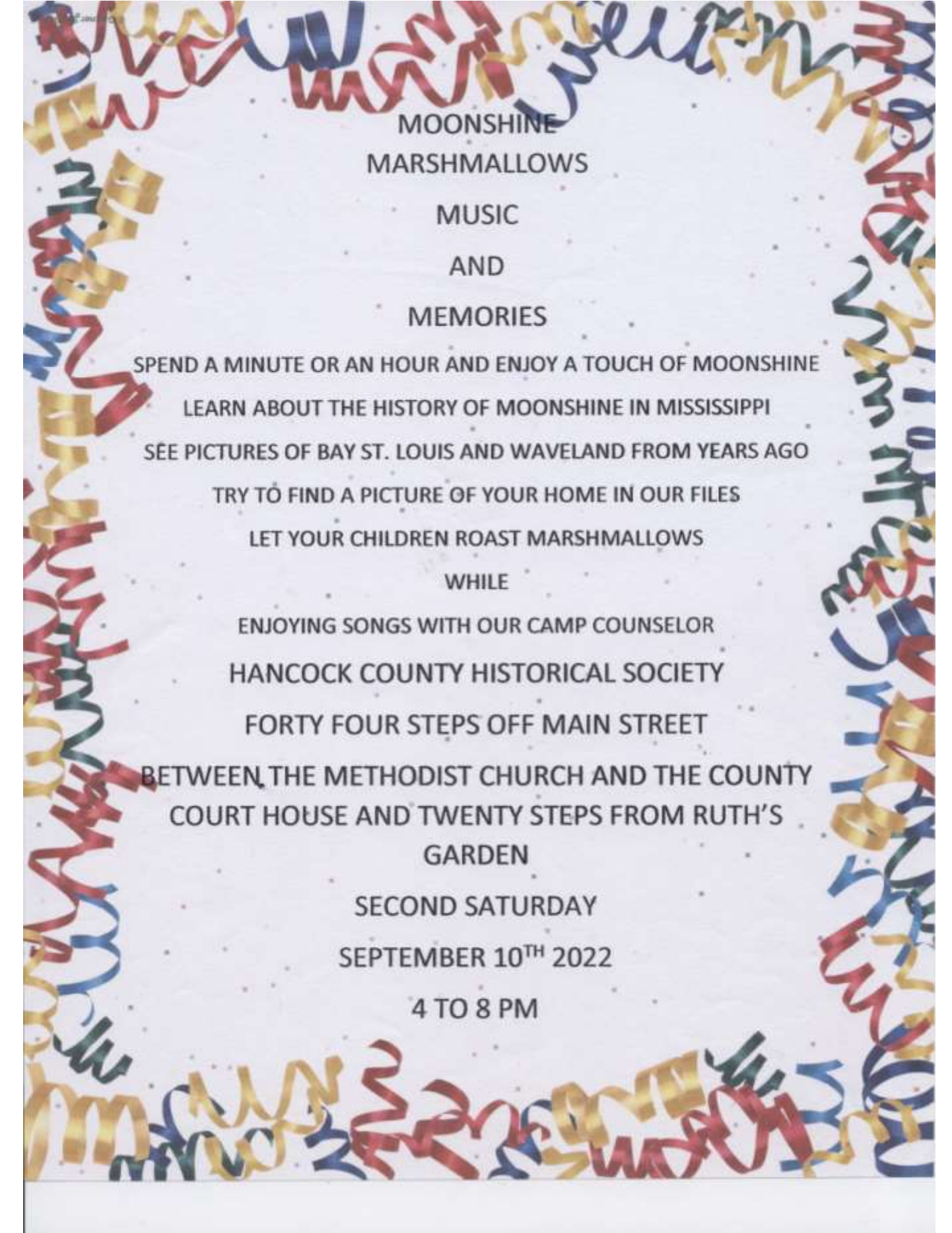
### CEMETERY TOUR

The 27th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on Saturday, October 29, 2022, at Cedar Rest Cemetery, 200 South Second St. in Bay Saint Louis. It will run from 4:00 p.m.—6:p.m. After the tour everyone is invited to the Lobrano House around the corner from the cemetery at 108 Cue St. for hot dogs, cookies, and other treats

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### **CONNECTIONS MATTER:**

*An Oral History of the People and Places of Hancock County, MS*

This movie will be presented on Saturday, September 17, 2022, at the Kate Lobrano house at 108 Cue St., Bay St. Louis, MS. Charles Gray was the inspiration for and the narrator of the film.

There will be two showings, one at 2:00 p.m. and the second at 4:00 p.m. The showing at 2:00 is for members of the Hancock County Historical Society. The showing at 4:00 is for the public.

**NEW MEMBERS**

Cathy Moss Battel  
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Janice Ferguson  
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Select items from the large collection of jewelry, collectibles, and artwork (excluding Mardi Gras items) will be for sale through the Hancock County Tourism Mardi Gras Museum in Bay St Louis, MS.

Any person interested in viewing and/or purchasing the items can make an appointment by calling the Hancock County Tourism Bureau.

Proceeds are designated by the Pogue family to benefit the Mardi Gras Museum as a tribute to Yancy Pogue and well-known Mardi Gras costume designer and maker, Carter Church.

**CONTACT:**

[tourism@playonthebay.org](mailto:tourism@playonthebay.org)  
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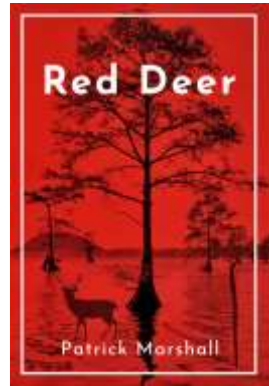
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