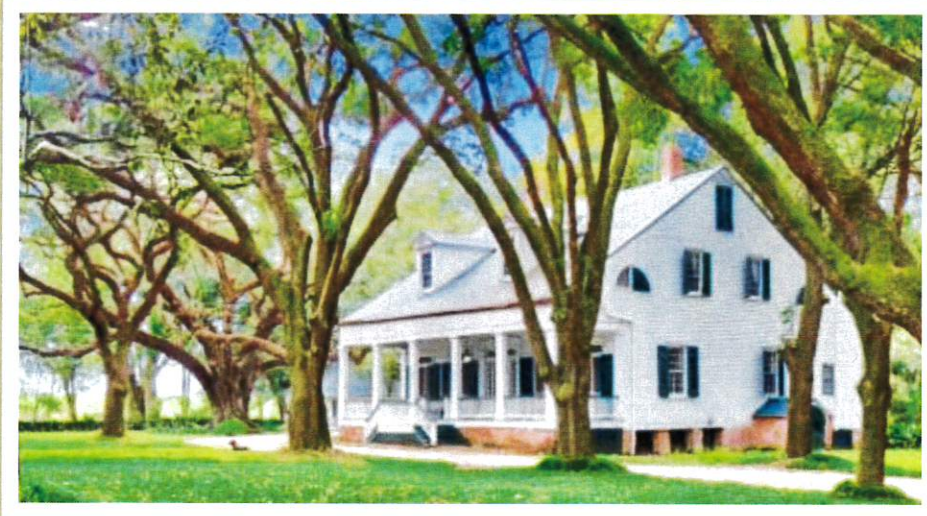
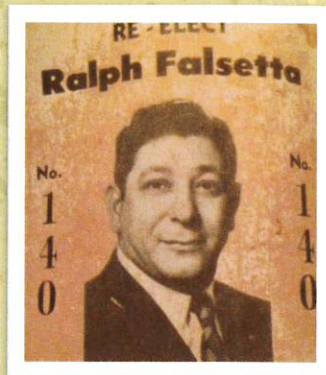


CITY OF DONALDSONVILLE

HISTORIC DONALDSONVILLE CULTURAL EDUCATIONAL PRESERVATION PROJECT & EXHIBIT SUMMARY REPORT



WORK REPORT

In order to complete the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation Grant, the City of Donaldsonville-Downtown Development District conducted a historical survey of historic preservationists led by Lead PI, Lee Melancon and Dee Dee DiBenedetto and supported by numerous volunteers including Glenn Falgoust, Andrew Capone, Peter Lemann, Cy Tortorich, Regina Mistretta, and the Oppenheimer Foundation.

MISSION OF THE PROJECT

The Donaldsonville Cultural Education, Public Knowledge, & Exhibit Project was an ongoing effort to preserve the City's unique cultural roots. As the population continues to age, the hope of preserving these rich cultures continually fade away as very little of the cultural genealogies have been preserved. Members of the preservation community have come together to ensure that their rich cultures were not lost.

This project focused on three cultural areas Donaldsonville's Jewish, Italian, and Sugar Planter Family histories.

Project outcomes included:

Researched and documented the impact of the Jewish, Italian, and Sugar Planters' heritage

Educated residents/tourists on the facts uncovered through the preservation of historic artifacts

Acquired public education/outreach tools that were flexible to showcase and educate target publics interested in learning about the historically significant facts

Created outreach materials to demonstrate the selected cultures.

The project uncovered that Donaldsonville's Jewish residents were among the most liberal minded citizens and are associated with every progressive move in the region's development.

JEWISH PROJECT SUMMARY

Many of Donaldsonville's most prominent citizens were large retailers providing supplies to the plantations and town. The PFORZHEIMERS, LEVYS, and KAHNS were among the families of the early Southern Jewish experience. Several early Mayors represented the Jewish Community such as Myer LEMANN, David ISRAEL, and Walter LEMANN. Today, the only remnants of the Jewish Community is it's cemetery, Bikur Sholim, and the Bernard Lemann and Brothers Building. The Synagogue still exists but is now home to the Ace Hardware.

ITALIAN PROJECT SUMMARY

The Italian presence in Donaldsonville became prominent in the 1870s. These immigrants were recruited to initially replace the freed slaves during the reconstruction era, after the civil war. The 1870s were followed by the greatest surge of immigration between 1880 and 1920, with the majority being from Southern Italy and Sicily. In addition to these Italian immigrants replacing the field hands in the plantation sugar cane fields, these hard-working Italians provided public grocery stores, and seafood markets on almost every street corner in historic Donaldsonville. Donaldsonville would not have become the thriving historic showcase it is today without the Italian contribution these individuals brought to the table.

SONS OF SOUTHERN SUGAR PROJECT SUMMARY

Donaldsonville planters owned numerous plantations such as the Thibauts, Lemanns, and Kochs and were a new tribe settled in Louisiana. They built plantations, businesses, rice, and sugar mills. They did well, walked in the ways of the Lord, and were loved by their neighbors. The results include increasing the number of residents educated and made aware of the importance of historic preservation; increase the number of tourists visiting the City to improve the economy through sales and occupancy tax; and to create jobs as a result of increase leisure travel and retail expansion in the Main Street, Historical, and Cultural Districts.

PROJECT COMPLETION SUMMARY

The project related to three of the Office of Cultural Development's priorities in Cultural Development through Economic Development and Cultural Economy Development including: Objective 3. Assist in the restoration of 2000 historic properties by 2019, Objective 6. Create 2,000 new jobs by recruiting new businesses and supporting existing businesses in designated Main Street historic districts between 2015 and 2019, and Objective 4. By the year 2019, ensure the cultural workforce has incentives and is a centralized source for information and for replicating models to sustain people and preserve artistic and cultural assets, enhance capacity for production and develop new markets.

The project completed a historical survey, research analysis, and copy to be created by the Donaldsonville Main Street Historians Committee (DeeDee DiBenedetto, Andrew Capone, Glenn Falgoust, Regina Mistretta, Cy Tortorich, and others), interpretive electronic panel kiosks and printed companion were designed with artwork and illustrations by the Principal Investigator and Donaldsonville's Director of Community & Economic Development, Lee Melancon, III, who will also serve as the Project Director.

Photographic research was completed by historian, Dee Dee DiBenedetto with assistance from photographer and journalist, Michael Tortorich.

The historic kiosk designs were completed by Lee Melancon, III.

Donaldsonville's Jewish – Hebrew Community

“The Jewish community in Donaldsonville was always relatively small, but what it lacked in numbers it made up in vibrancy. A city publication from 1900 declared, “our Jewish residents are reckoned among the best and most liberal minded citizens, and are associated with every progressive move.” In fact, Donaldsonville has had several Jewish mayors, including Bernard Lemann (pro tem), Myer Lemann, David Israel, and Walter Lemann. Today, the only remnant of Donaldsonville's former Jewish community is its cemetery, Bikur Sholim. Although the community is no longer extant, the graves of the previous Jewish generations tell a great story about the Southern Jewish experience in “the Gateway to Plantation Country.” (Research by DeeDee DiBenedetto for Dr. Rockoff at ISJL)

One of Donaldsonville's largest Jewish families is buried in Bikur Sholim, Henry and Clara Pforzheimer and their seven children. All were lifelong residents of Donaldsonville and members of the Hebrew Benevolent Society, of the parish of Ascension, and the Bikur Sholim Synagogue. Son William Pforzheimer worked at the Bernard Lemann and Brother Store as a clerk. Carl Howard Pforzheimer (1879 – 1957) a great nephew of Henry Pforzheimer was an American banker and curbstone broker based in New York City. He was a founder of the American Stock Exchange.

Jews in Donaldsonville first gathered to worship together as early as 1849, but only officially became a congregation around 1860. In that year, 25 members of the community grouped themselves together as a benevolent society under the name of the “Hebrew Bikur Sholim Society of the Parish of Ascension.” The official act of incorporation was on 09 February 1860, and signed by Louisiana Governor Moore. The purpose of the society was “relieving the sick and destitute, in the promotion of education and religion and such other benevolent

acts as may be resolved upon.” The society’s charter consisted of these families: Bhém, Blum, Cahn, Israel, Kaufman, Kline, Lehman (Lemann), Levy, Lion, Mayer, Stern, Weil, and Weinchenk. The synagogue, now the upstairs to an Ace Hardware Store, was completed in 1871 and dedicated in 1872 by Rabbi Jacobs. At that time, the population of Jewish citizens in Ascension Parish numbered 179.

Jewish life began a steady decline in the early twentieth century. The story of Frenchman Gaston Hirsch says it all. In 1946, Gaston arrived in Donaldsonville. After serving in the French army during World War II and even spending four years as a POW, he came to America. Hirsch owned a men’s clothing store in Donaldsonville, where there were a few Jewish-owned stores left, like David Bloch’s clothing store and the Lemann Brothers store. After his business died out, he became the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery. By the late 1990s, there were only two Jews left in Donaldsonville. After Hirsch’s death, Irv Birnbaum, was often profiled as “the Last Jew in Donaldsonville.” Upon his death, the Jewish community of Donaldsonville was gone.

SOURCES:

The Daily Times Trade Edition

The Donaldsonville Chief

Gallant Creoles— A History of the Donaldsonville Canonnières pub 2013 by Marshall

The Lemann Family of Louisiana published 1965 by Bernard Lemann

A Pictorial History of Donaldsonville published 1996 by the Chief

American Jewish Historical Quarterly published September 1976 published by
American Jewish Business Enterprise

The Jewish Confederates published 2000 by Robert N. Rosen

The Civil War Diary of Clara Solomon – Growing Up in New Orleans 1861-1862
published 1995 by Elliott Ashkenazi

Donaldsonville Immigrants – Sicilians and Italians in Louisiana

Ascension Parish sugarcane cultivation required a large labor of skilled and unskilled workers. Each fall, in the late nineteenth century, the harvest season attracted thousands of Italian labors to Louisiana's sugarcane fields beginning during Reconstruction Era.

Of the first Italian immigrants to Donaldsonville were the Mistretta, Chimera, Sotile, Pizzolato, Marcello, Milano, Matassa, Belina, Capone, Savoia, Fontana, Belafore, Bonadona, Bellina, Casso, Cataldo, Alonzo, Provenzo, Bagala, Sagona, Inzerrella, Carbo, Giambrone, Salomni, Randazzo, Latino, Graffeo, Genusa, Gagliana, Gulatto, Falsetta, Valenti, Miglicco, Scorsone, Regira, Capello, Ruggiero, Colandro, Tasullo, Bagala, Cataldo, Dinino, Imbraguglio, DiVencenti, Vega, Cafiero and DiBenedetto families.

By the year 1920 over four million Italians had immigrated to the United States, representing more than ten percent of the nation's foreign-born population. Most of these immigrants took their first steps on US soil in a place that has now become a legend – Ellis Island. In the late nineteenth-century, the peninsula of Italy had finally been brought under one flag, but the land and the people were by no means unified. Decades of internal strife had led to a legacy of violence, social chaos, and widespread poverty. As transatlantic transportation became more affordable, and as work of American prosperity became more affordable, and US recruitment, Italians found it increasingly difficult to resist the call of "L'America".

In this new Italian-American immigration community, It became common place to have the local Italian merchants selling oysters, fresh seafood, running a produce stand or grocery on most corners in the downtown Donaldsonville district, with many laborers in the cane fields. Most of these families belonged to

the Donaldsonville Societa Italiana di M.B. Conte di Torino and the St. Joseph's Altar Society. The social group gatherings usually entertained with a parade, which traversed the principal streets of the town and served to attract a large crowd to the fairgrounds. The mounted marshals proceeded to the brass bands furnishing the music.

Many of these Italian-Americans faced economic as well as ethnic prejudices upon entering the labor force, and often times these immigrants were called derogatory names such as "guineas" or "dagos". The "Donaldsonville Chief" newspaper published on 17 October 1908, in a letter from the editor states: "The corporation must make money, and it is going to do so if there is any possible way to wring it out of the property or the employees. Result; cheap labor, and cheap labor means ignorant labor, which, in turn, means immoral labor and immorality inevitable results in crime. There is a volume in that one sentence. For proof it is only necessary to point to the thousands of ignorant and vicious Dagos that are brought here every year to work on the sugar plantations".

The Italian-Americans have contributed greatly in helping make Donaldsonville the melting pot that we have become today. One significant contribution is the Italian cuisine. The art of cooking has always been part of the Italian domestic landscape. From the earliest arrivals, the Italian immigrants have brought vineyards and other forms of horticulture. Such dishes introduced as pizza, spaghetti, meatballs and lasagna have added greatly to the American culture. Many of Donaldsonville citizens opened Italian restaurants, and contributed espresso, cappuccino and lattes to the coffeehouses. Donaldsonville has proudly had an Italian named Dominique Variani as Chief of Police, and many Donaldsonville Fire Chiefs such as Pasquale Fontana, Julien Bagala, and G.J. Mistretta.

Some Italian-American businesses located in Donaldsonville were:

First and Last Chance (Charles "Collie" Savoia)

Matassa Motors

Capone Pontiac Company

Matassa Furniture Store

Bellina's Grocery Store

Randazzo's Gas Station

Joseph Casso Gas Station

Giambrone Grocery

Pizzolato Sugarcane Farming

Lucien Casso's Oyster and Fruit Store

Chief of Police Dominique Variani

Cheap Tony (Colonel A.D. Vega)

Capone Cleaners

Sources:

1880 Federal Census

1900 Federal Census

1910 Federal Census

1920 Federal Census

1930 Federal Census

1940 Federal Census

The Donaldsonville Chief newspaper

Times Picayune newspaper

The Library of Congress archives

Donaldsonville Public Library

Washington Post

US Citizenship Info

PBS The Italian Americans

"The Italian Americans: A History" published 2014 by Maria Laurina

"Bridges to Italy, Bonds to America" published 2010, by Iorizzo / Rossi

"The Italian American Table" published 2013 by Simone Cinotto

"Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives" pub 2011 by Sciorra

"A Pictorial History of Donaldsonville" pub 1996 by The Chief

Donaldsonville Italian-American Citizens Summary

Louisiana responses to the first Italian immigrants occasionally took uglier forms as Italians were a despised minority rooted in the working class, and these early Italians suffered widespread discrimination. The most notorious incident being the 1890 lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans.

During the first part of the twentieth century in Donaldsonville, the Italian-American citizens were no longer the first generation immigrants and were able to rise above a subsistence level of life, they were able to involve themselves in America's economic mainstream. From the sugarcane field workers to the corner grocery stores, these citizens found instant wealth as fruit stand vendors, food suppliers, merchants, and restaurateurs. These courageous brave Italian-Americans withstood racism and discrimination, proved their value and contributed greatly to the Donaldsonville culture.

The cultural pattern of Louisiana was constantly evolving after the Civil War, and Donaldsonville would not have become the great historical melting pot that we are without having had contributions from businesses such as First and Last Chance Restaurant (Savoia), Matassa Motors and Furniture Store, Capone Pontiac Company and Cleaners, Bellina's Grocery Store, Randazzo's Gas Station, Joe Casso Gas Station, Giambrone Grocery, Lucien Casso's Oyster and Fruit Store, and Cheap Tonys (Vega) Discount Store.

Donaldsonville Sons of Sugar

Regarding Americans' fascination with the Old South, Louisiana in particular, the historian Craig A. Bauer puts it plainly: "Whether from the "moonlight-and-magnolias" romanticized vision of plantation life as has been presented in the fictionalized media or from a study of the historical tomes written about the antebellum period, there remains a strong interest among the general public in the details of this society and culture of long ago."

"Nestled in a valley at the junction of the patriarchal Mississippi and the Bayou Lafourche, where nature runs riot in its luxuriance to charm the eye, where the magnolia and the rose send out their perfume to scent the air, where the mellow, tuneful notes of the nightingale's song charm the ear, where every breeze is laden with a benison of health and specific of vitality, lies Donaldsonville, the capital seat of Ascension parish, the METROPOLIS OF THE SUGAR BELT and one of the most delightful and most promising of the cities of the lusty New South".
(Donaldsonville Daily Times Trade Edition, February 1898)

Most of the gentlemen, these prominent Donaldsonville citizens were in their middle-aged years at the turn of the nineteenth century; several had participated in Civil War engagements; many had witnessed the almost total destruction of their town by Union gunboats and landing parties. Reflect on how it became their task to pick up the pieces and rebuild Donaldsonville, thus becoming its second founders, the sons of sugarcane planters and the plantation merchants, Donaldsonville's Sons of Sugar.

SAMUEL AYRAUD of Palo Alto Plantation. Sam was a popular Donaldsonville City Treasurer, the obliging and courteous proprietor of the famous R.E. Lee Hotel, and also of the Sam Saloon. The Sam Saloon was an elegant place fitted up with a fine billiard hall, private card rooms, and a well-stocked bar, with a lunch counter attached. Mr. Ayraud was held in the highest esteem by all who knew

him, and particularly so with the traveling public, who were always accorded a hearty welcome and carefully looked after when they stopped at that Robert E. Lee Hotel.

HENRY C. BRAUD the Donaldsonville Representative for the Ascension Branch Sugar Planters' Association. In 1874 Henry was made book-keeper for the Houmas Plantation Store and paymaster for five plantations, which position of trust he continued until 1897. He was also a board of directors for the Donaldsonville Ice Company and postmaster at Burnside.

CARL "CHARLES" ANTON KOCK owner of St. Emma Plantation and Belle Alliance Plantation. Charles, the patriarch of the Kock family, was known as the "Heaviest German Importer" and well loved by his family. Sister Alice Kock of the Academy of the Sacred Heart published a wonderful tribute to her ancestor Charles entitled "Kock of Belle Alliance – Memoirs of a Nun" compiled by Mary Louise Johnson in 1988. Mr. Charles Kock was known as the "Heaviest German Importer" and was listed as a man of enlarged experience, fine intellect and cultivated talent, a connoisseur in all of life's elegancies as well as a devoted patron of the arts" in his obituary. He is described as being intimately connected with the mercantile community, and his death was a public loss. A man of refined culture, charming in society.

CAPTAIN JEAN REYNAUD JACQUES PROSPER LANDRY of Souvenir Plantation. Captain Landry's father, Valery Landry came from Acadia, the land of Evangeline, and here let it be said that Evangeline is not entirely a creation of Longfellow's imagination. Valery Landry was appointed by the Governor of the Province Commandant of the Port. Prosper grew up on Belle Homme Plantation which was one of the most valuable plantations on the "Coast of Acadia." Captain Landry, this gallant creole "when war was declared, he bade farewell to his young wife and two small children and enlisted in the Cannoniers de Donaldson." Prosper painlessly passed away at his home of St Patrick Street in Donaldsonville and was interred in the Landry tomb. "It may be said that no citizen of Ascension Parish

stood higher in the esteem of his friends and the public generally than did R. Prosper Landry, and his demise has caused a void that only time can fill and a wound that naught but a divine Providence can heal.” (Donaldsonville Chief newspapers of April 1907)

BERNARD LEMANN of Palo Alto Plantation. Bernard was described as “Donaldsonville’s Wealthy Sugar Planter and Merchant” as the senior member of the firm of B. Lemann and Brother, the leading industrial and mercantile firm. Owning and operating several large plantations in this section and Vice President of the local branch of the Sugar Planters’ Association, and at one time Mr. Lemann served for a short period as mayor pro tem at Donaldsonville. From early manhood he was associated with his father, the late Jacob Lemann, in the management of the latter’s plantation and mercantile interests, and the latter were conducted in the son’s name. The business steadily prospered and their real estate holdings have increased until the family’s possession included no less than eight separate and distinct sugar plantations, together with several adjacent farms and tracts near Donaldsonville and four or five valuable pieces of property in this town.

SOURCES:

Donaldsonville Daily Times Trade Edition

Donaldsonville Chief Newspaper

Times Picayune Newspaper

Donaldsonville, Its Businessmen published in 1976 by Henry Garon

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Educating the SOS published in 2017 by R. Eric Platt

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