

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Laurel Valley is an unusually large sugar plantation complex with approximately 80 buildings set on a tract of about 500 acres.

The boundaries were chosen to respect the historical boundaries which are still intact. The southern boundary has always been Bayou Lafourche and the northern boundary has always been the swampland to the north of the complex. The east and west boundaries have fluctuated over the years and in any case the significance of the complex historically extended to other plantations beyond the Laurel Valley tract. So the east and west boundaries were chosen to properly encompass the plantation complex.

The plantation is set on flat open meadowland which is surrounded by sugar cane fields. There are only two major land forms in the district. One is the natural levee which runs parallel to Bayou Lafourche. The other is a ridge which runs north-south near the main road from the bayou to the sugar mill; at one time it held a narrow gauge railroad which carried sugar cane. This forms the road bed for Louisiana Highway 308.

There are three main areas of buildings within the plantation. All of the buildings on Laurel Valley Plantation, with the exception of the sugar mill are of cypress frame construction with brick piers and chimneys and most now have galvanized tin roofs which replaced the original wood shingles. Most of the materials came from the plantation itself: bricks were made by hand, the cypress lumber was logged and milled at the plantation saw mill, and hardware was hand wrought by the blacksmith. Some of the houses show evidence of a crude type of prefabrication especially featured by "plug on" type additions. All the houses have a front porch and a gutter system for routing precious rain water to the cistern. These were also constructed of cypress.

1. Along Highway 308: There is a scattering of buildings which occur along Highway 308 just inland from the levee. At one time this area contained the entire plantation complex, but in 1850 the complex was re-located further inland. Today the oldest building in the area dates from the late 19th century. There is a group of c.1900 Creole cottages (one-story frame houses with two rooms front and back with porches, and chimneys between the rooms). There is the plantation church, a modern but simple block gabled roof building with a square front tower, which is in keeping with the district. There is also the plantation store c.1890, a board and batten gable roof building.

2. The Main House Complex: This complex is set amid a grove of live oaks across the east side of the district. The main house (A-1) is a one and a half story enlarged clapboard cottage with a three bay front porch, Renaissance Revival details, and a single frontal Queen Anne dormer. In about 1915 a rear extension was added. The interiors are not noteworthy. Adjacent to the main house is a frame servants cottage, with one room in the front and one in the rear.

3. The Production and Workers' Housing Complex: This area contains the ruin of the old sugar mill, which is surrounded by support buildings, a pond, and workers' houses of several grades. South of the sugar mill (D-36) is a group of approximately 45 cottages all of which date from around the turn of the century. These are laid out along the plantation's main road system. They fall into two major categories.

A. Shotgun houses: These simple two room houses (one front and one back with a chimney between) were for the lowest order of workers. They have simple pitch roofs with frontal gables and simple front porches. Most are laid out along two parallel roads which turn eastward from the main plantation access road.

B. Creole double houses: Somewhat larger and more comfortable than the shotguns, these frame houses which are similar to the servants cottage near the main house, are laid out in a row east of the main access road (C-2-12). They are also scattered around the area of concentrated shotguns. These were occupied by two families though most have been converted for one.

C. Single family Creole houses: These four room houses with rear wings have a similar front porch to the servants cottage. These were for the more senior employees of the plantation. Most of them are in a row which occurs to the east of the main workers' housing area (B-3-8). Their placement closer to the main house perhaps denotes the higher status of their occupants.

All of the workers' houses are in remarkably original condition. Despite the remodeling of some of the interiors, none of the buildings have been re-sided, and none of the porches have been removed, and most retain all their columns.

In addition to the aforementioned housing there is a special foreman's house (B-11) and an overseer's house (B1). Their placement closer to the main house than any other housing structures probably indicates their status.

Additional housing was afforded by the boarding house (D-39) when the plantation was fully operational. This c.1900 six bay two story clapboard frame, structure occurs immediately west of the sugar mill ruin.

Another large structure adjacent to the sugar mill is the corn barn (D-42) whose attic is equipped with rails and cars for easy moving about of produce.

Although the brick sugar mill was ruined by a hurricane in 1965, the walls stand to a full two stories on all four sides and the Laurel Valley Foundation intends to stabilize them. It is a handsome ruin with buttresses, arches, and an interesting rhythm of bays. The ruin still holds the complex together visually, and it conveys the sense of the functional center of the plantation. The adjacent ponds were used for the procurement of water in the sugar making process.

The mule barn (D-47) and the crane (D-40) no longer exist. Across the pond from the sugar mill ruin is the grinding mill and pump station, a large frame building which was used to grind corn and pump water.

LAUREL VALLEY PLANTATION

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

- A-1 Plantation House: woodframe, clapboarding, gable roof, dormers, 4 chimneys, 1½ stories, ca. 1880.
- A-2 Servants' Quarters: woodframe, clapboarding, 1 chimney, 1 story, gable roof, ca. 1880.
- B-1 Double Creole House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 chimney, gable roof, 1 story, unknown.
- B-2 School House: Woodframe, board and batten, 1 chimney, gable roof, 1 story, ca. 1910.
- B-3 Shotgun House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 chimney, 1 story, Victorian barge board, ca. 1910.
- B-4 -
B-8 Creole Type: woodframe, clapboarding and board and batten, 2 chimneys, porche, gable roof, 1880 ca.
- B-9 Telephone Booth: Operable, board and batten, 1 story.
- B-10 Weighing Station: clapboarding, utility construction, 1 story, ca. 1910.
- B-11 Plantation Foreman House: woodframe, clapboarding, gable roof, 3 chimneys, ca. 1900.
- C-1 Watchman/Overseer's House: woodframe, gable roof, 2 chimneys, porch, clapboarding, ca. 1900.
- C-2 -
C-11 Double Creole Tenant Houses: woodframe, board and batten, 2 chimneys, 1 story, porch, gable roof, ca. 1880.
- C-12 Creole Tenant House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, gable roof, ca. 1880, 2 chimneys.

- C-13 Office/Carriage House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, 1 chimney, gable roof, porche, ca. 1880.
- C-14 Shop: Woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, gable roof, ca. 1880.
- D-2 - D-4, 31,
33 Single-Tenant House/Creole House: woodframe, board and batten, 2 chimneys, 1 story, porch, gable roof, ca. 1884
- D-5 Multiple Tenant House/Storage Shed: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, 1 chimney, gable roof, ca. 1900.
- D-6, D-8 - D-30,
D-32 Single Tenant Shotgun House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 chimney, 1 story, porche, gable roof, ca. 1900.
- D-35 Loading Crane
- D-36 Sugar Mill: Brick and wood structure, ca. 1850
- D-37 Exhaust Stack: Brick, ca. 1850.
- D-39 Boarding House: woodframe, clapboarding, 1 chimney, 2 stories, gable roof, ca. 1900.
- D-41 Grinding Mill Pump Station: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, gable roof
- D-42 Corn Shed Barn: Woodframe, 1 story, gable roof, vertical boards, ca. 1880.
- D-43 Shed: open sides, gable roof, unknown date of construction.
- D-44 Pump House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, gable roof, unknown date of construction.
- D-45 Creole Tenant House: woodframe, board and batten, 1 story, gable roof, ca. 1890
- D-46 Weigh Station: shed type, ca. 1890.
- E-1 Plantation Church (Prot.): block and brick, gable roof, 1 story, used by black workers on pltn., adjacent cemetery, (replaced 1900ca. structure).
- E-2 -
E-3 Double Creole House: woodframe, board and batten, clapboarding, 2 chimneys, gable roof, ca. 1890.
- E-4 Plantation Store: woodframe, 1 chimney, gable roof, board and batten, ca. 1890
- E-5 Double Creole House: woodframe, clapboarding, 1 story, 1 chimney, gable roof, 1890 ca.
- E-6 Creole House: woodframe, clapboarding, 2 chimneys, 1 story, gable roof, 1900 ca.
- E-7 Creole House: woodframe, board and batten, gable roof, porch, 1 chimney, porch, ca. 1910
- E-8 Shotgun House: woodframe, board and batten, porch, 1 story, gable roof, ca. 1890.

SPECIFIC DATES
BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Laurel Valley is an excellent representation of the historic sugar production industry in the deep south. It also represents an economic epoch in the gulf states area. This of course is the sugar boom c.1890-1924, a period when Laurel Valley enjoyed its greatest growth and prosperity. With 76 extant buildings including the sugar mill ruin, the grinding mill, the corn barn, the main house, the workers houses, the church and the store, it is one of the largest surviving sugar production and manufacturing complexes in the United States.

Before the 1930's, Laurel Valley was a world within a world. People lived, worked, worshipped, and died within the confines of the plantation. They could buy supplies at the plantation store and educate their children at the plantation school. This enclosed life style is apparent today even to the casual observer.

In addition, Laurel Valley contains a fine collection of regional housetypes including several variations of the Creole cottage type and shotgun houses.

Laurel Valley's origin dates back to 1775, when Etienne Boudreaux secured a 528 acre land grant from the Spanish government. The plantation remained in the Boudreaux family until 1819 when the land was sold to Joseph Tucker. (Tucker's son, J. W. Tucker, married the granddaughter of Henry Schuyler Thibodaux, founder of the Thibodaux/Houma area.) The plantation would change hands several times throughout the nineteenth century, finally being sold to J. Wilson Lepine and Frank Barker in 1893. By this time additional land purchases had expanded the size of Laurel Valley to 3,023 acres. The Lepine family acquired a majority interest in the Plantation in 1903 when Frank Barker died.

The plantation first developed adjacent to Bayou Lafourche. Not much is known about this early complex, the present structures in that area date from considerably later. It is known, however, that Laurel Valley's main complex was moved from the bayou site to a point inland between 1800 and 1850. It was moved to what was then the center of its agricultural holding. At this time, the first sugar kettles were bought and Laurel Valley became both an agricultural farm and an industrial center.

Originally, the complex basically consisted of the brick portion of the sugar house which was built around 1850 and a main road dividing two opposing rows of 13 double houses also built about 1850. The "Big House" now standing was not built until about 1884, but the original plantation residence was probably in approximately the same location.

In the 1890's the plantation began to expand, thrive and become one of the important businesses of the area. Its crop was typical of the Bayou Lafourche farming district. Under the new Lepine and Barker ownership, the plantation complex was altered by removing a number of the double houses on one row and superimposing a plan of two lanes dividing opposing rows of 24 shotgun houses. These lanes were each punctuated with two wells to provide water and a meeting place. These additional homes along with the camphouse and boarding hall were located on the "sugar house" side of the main road. This gave them quick access to the center of activity. On the other side of the main road remained the single row of double houses. Behind these double houses and on a new land facing the mill pond, was added another new row of houses in the basic Creole style with additions. Each family residence had a cistern, privy, and occasionally a coop or other animal shelter, and a garden which was surrounded by a pickets fence.

The houses located closest to the "Big House" generally were larger and had more yard space, therefore, they housed the more skilled workers and provided them with a certain prestige. During this period the narrow gauge railroad brought cane in from neighboring farms for processing at the sugar mill. As Bayou Lafourche became less and less navigable, the railroad became the main mover of produce both into the processing plant and out to the market.

The main body of documentation includes the almost complete account of business records at the height of plantation activity between the years 1900 to 1926. Among the records are the bookkeeper's daily diaries from the years 1903 to 1913. As was the custom of that period, the daily activities were recorded along with information about the crop, weather, and any major event such as a flood, fire or death. Business records include the various account books, payroll ledgers and numerous letters of correspondence with other businesses nationwide. Such letters between the plantation and The Springfield Boiler and Manufacturing Company, J. S. Schofield's and Sons' Company in Georgia, C. J. Walton and Son in Kentucky, The John H. Murphy Iron Works in New Orleans, The Fulton Company in Tennessee, The Erie City Iron Works, The Luik Belt Machinery Company in Chicago, the Lambert Hoisting Engine Company in New Jersey, and others link the

economic history of the plantation with that of the nation. Also included in the collection are over one-hundred blueprints showing the details and location of the sugar house machinery within the mill, plans for hoists, engines, farm machinery, windmill and tower, pumps and other items necessary in the process of growing and refining sugarcane.

There exists from the turn of the century an appraisal/inventory by the American Appraisal Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This was apparently required by mortgage holders for insurance purposes and reveals the plantation's status in such detail as the number of bolts in the mill. It provides a picture of a rapidly expanding business under the aggressive management of Barker and Lepine. The one story sugar house was modernized and expanded into the three story mill shown in the blueprints included in the appraisal of 1909. However, Mr. Lepine's death in 1926 coincided with the advent of the Sugar Depression, and the plantation management passed into the competent hands of his son, J. Wilson Lepine, Jr.

Struggling to get the mill back into operation in 1928, Mr. Lepine wrote in a letter:

"Laurel Valley contains . . . 1,000 (acres) at present under cultivation with 60 heads of mules, implements, cart wagons, etc., 4 residences, tenant and labor houses and other improvements, 25 miles of railroad, two locomotives, 250 cane cars, all in fairly good shape, for I am this year going to use railroad, locomotives and cars. We will have about 500 acres of cane for the mill in 1929, sufficient money to care for full operation . . ."

The Great Depression of the 1930's brought economic disaster to the sugar industry and southern Louisiana which had just begun to see some hope of recovery. The sugar house was never reopened. However, Mr. Lepine was one of very few sugar planters who did not lose everything; he grew vegetables and potatoes which were shipped to V. J. Damiani and Bros. in Chicago and others. By 1950, the plantation was again in first-class order.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

John Howell Stubbs, A Preservation Study for Laurel Valley Plantation, Volumes I, II, and III.