



VACHERIE, LOUISIANA

Laura Plantation

Mute Victims of Katrina: Four Louisiana Landscapes at Risk



In 1805, Guillaume Duparc, a French veteran of the American Revolution, took possession of a 12,000-acre site just four miles downriver from Oak Alley Plantation in St. James Parish. With only seventeen West African slaves, he began to clear the land, build a home and grow sugarcane on the site of a Colapissa Indian village. This endeavor, like many others, led to a unique blending of European, African and Native American cultures that gave rise to the distinctive Creole culture that flourished in the region before Louisiana became part of the United States . Today, Laura Plantation offers a rare view of this non-Anglo-Saxon culture. Architectural styles, family traditions and the social/political life of the Creoles have been illuminated through extensive research and documentation. African folktales, personal memoirs and archival records have opened windows to Creole plantation life – a life that was tied directly to the soil with an agrarian-based economy, a taste for fine food and a constant battle to find comfort in a hot, damp environment. Laura Plantation stands today as a living legacy dedicated to the Creole culture.

HISTORY

Situated 54 miles above New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the historic homestead of Laura Plantation spreads over a 14-acre site with a dozen buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The main house along with Creole cottages, slave cabins and farm buildings rest on an elevated landmass of rich alluvial silt created by a geological fault.



Here, by 1720, Colapissa Indians had established a large ceremonial center known as Tabiscania or “long river view”. These Amerindians hunted, fished and trapped in the nearby swamps, bayous and the Mississippi River. They collected and cultivated native plants for both food and medicine. They also built homes from cane reeds and saplings that were then plastered with mud and thatched with palmetto fronds.

In 1785, Spain ceded the land along this stretch of the Mississippi River to Acadian (Cajun) and German families. Spain held dominion over the Mississippi River region and the port of New Orleans, and as New Orleans grew, it became apparent that its population would need to be fed. The lands adjacent to the city were too swampy or marshy to support crops of any substantial size: therefore, Spain looked to colonize the areas upriver where the rich land could provide abundant crops. Exiled Acadians along with families of German, French and Alsatian descent thus were given small plots of land north of New Orleans. An early form of “truck farming” developed as the settlements grew, and the river provided a convenient shipping corridor to market. These farmers introduced European varieties of fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants.

In 1805, Thomas Jefferson bestowed a land grant at this site to Guillaume Duparc, a French veteran of the American Revolution. Upon receiving his land grant, Duparc quickly retired from the military and moved to his newly deeded property. He bought adjacent farms from the Acadians and established a plantation of approximately 12,000 acres. With seventeen African slaves, Duparc began the arduous task of clearing the land, building a home for his family and starting his new life as a plantation owner. Early records show that indigo was an important crop for export. Rice, cotton and pecans were also shipped out and a diversified garden supplied the owners and workers with fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices. It was sugarcane, however, that would make the family fortune. Sadly, Duparc would not live to see the success of this venture; he died in 1808.

After Duparc’s death, his widow, Nanette Pru’homme, managed the plantation for twenty-five years. Nanette was the first of four generations of women who would operate the plantation. Each generation of the family cleared more land and expanded the acreage of cultivated crops. Through births and purchases, the slave population grew to nearly two hundred. The plantation became a self-contained village with a sugar mill, dairy, blacksmith shop, large kitchen, smokehouses, barns, overseer cottages and 64 slave cabins.

The Duparc-Locoul family brought a refined taste for French garden design to this rustic area. Adjacent to the main house, a pleasure garden was built to provide respite from the cruel summer heat. Manicured walkways circled beds of exotic, imported plants from Europe and Asia. This luxurious parterre was a rare exception to an otherwise utilitarian use of the land. The Laura Plantation gardens also provided a backdrop for memorable occasions.

Peppering the property, Creole cottages housed paid workers. Within the fenced perimeters of these homes grew rows of vegetables and fruit trees flourished. Two miles back from the river, a “village within a village” existed, the slave quarters. West Africans and their descendents lived in cypress cabins along a central lane with small plots of vegetables grown to supplement the meals provided by the plantation. Sugarcane was the driving economic force of the plantation. It was the cycle of this crop that dictated the cycle of daily life and family life.

Within the Laura Plantation landscape, a thriving farm fed the plantation’s population. A passion for food infused Creole traditions. Family recipes and annual celebrations kept gardeners busy all year long. The rich soil and mild climate allowed for full-time cultivation of seasonal favorites. An abundance of riches came from the gardens. The potager produced ingredients for exquisite dishes: Creole tomatoes, okra, pole beans, eggplants, onions and merlitions. From the orchards came persimmons, pecans, and wild cherries, cooking pears, kumquats, oranges and Japanese plums. Sassafras, bay leaves, peppers, garlic and shallots filled the kitchen and dining room with spicy aromas. Holidays were toasted with homemade wines and brandies.



In 1891, Laura plantation was sold to the family of Florian Waguespack. The Waguespack family continued sugarcane production, along with general farming operations. Over time, however, many buildings fell into disrepair and were lost. By 1981, the main house was inhabited by four, unmarried elderly sisters who were unable to maintain the house and gardens. The family decided to sell the property to a consortium of investors who planned to demolish the site and build a Mississippi River Bridge . The underlying geological fault ruined their prospects, and the project failed. The main house was unoccupied and the buildings and grounds were neglected. The St. James Sugar Cooperative bought the property at auction in 1992. Sugarcane production continued, but no work was done to the historic homestead.

The Laura Plantation Company, LLC, was formed in 1993 and acquired the historic homestead with the purpose of restoring the site and opening it to the public. Initially, the site opened to the public with restoration to the main house and only basic landscape development. Over the years, the Laura Plantation Company restored additional buildings and completed major landscaping projects. Walkways, roads, fences and gates were built, a potager was planted adjacent to the original kitchen, cottage landscaping was introduced, a pecan orchard was established, and vegetable plots were replanted near the slave cabins. In 1999, the French parterre was rebuilt. Landscape architect Mark Thomas, along with Grounds Manager, Sand Marmillion, researched and recreated this fine example of a Creole pleasure garden, a project made possible in part by a generous grant from the French Heritage Society. A devastating fire damaged the main house in 2004; however, it is being restored using traditional building methods and will reopen by Spring 2006.

THE THREAT

When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ripped through southern Louisiana in August and September 2005, their outer fringes bruised and battered both Oak Alley and Laura Plantations. Massive oak trees lost limbs, ancient pecans split, young trees were bent or uprooted, and flowers and leaves were stripped from branches. In spite of this damage, the landscapes remained intact. Cleanup and pruning -- along with staking and bracing -- helped to save most of the historic gardens and their plants. The truly serious damage to these historic properties came in the months following the storms: the worst blow was neither the wind nor the water – it was the devastating economic impact on the tourism industry of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast Region.

Located just an hour from New Orleans , Laura Plantation relies heavily on visitors from the city to support its operations. Tourists often made the journey upriver to see the fine Creole plantations and to gain an understanding of antebellum Louisiana . With the crippling effect of the hurricanes, that crucial stream of visitors stopped. In fact, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were so hard hit that it was weeks before basic services began to return. Hotels quickly filled with FEMA workers, utility repairmen and construction crews: there were no accommodations available for out-of-town guests, and there were no visitors to the plantations.

This loss of income has put the plantations in dire economic straights. Employees have been terminated, and operations have been reduced to the basics. Gardeners have been laid off. Expensive pruning, spraying, fertilizing and turf management routines, as well as landscape and gardening projects, have been severely diminished or terminated. Plans for development and expansion have been cancelled or postponed indefinitely. Lack of a labor force has prevented seasonal plantings, and some areas have been totally untended. Given all the years of hard work invested in the development and care of these important landscapes, this is a huge setback and a serious threat to their future.

After all that Laura Plantation has survived, it would be tragic to see its decline or loss. It is only with the return of visitors that Laura Plantation can hope to recover from the shocking aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Tourism directly supports its operations and is the link to employment, restoration, care, maintenance and project development. Without admissions funds and donations, Laura Plantation's future is precarious.



It is vital that the public understand that — while New Orleans and the Gulf Coast took a powerful blow — they are already on the mend. Hotels, restaurants and tourist destinations are open, and transportation is available! And, while there are many areas still in need of repair, the Great River Road and the plantations are safe, accessible -- and they welcome the return of visitors.

HOW TO HELP

Please, visit us soon!

- Become part of the rebuilding effort: if you cannot visit, please donate money to care for these unique and irreplaceable cultural landscapes!

- (And please visit us soon!)

Please visit www.lauraplantation.com for further information.

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