



VACHERIE, LOUISIANA

Oak Alley Plantation

Mute Victims of Katrina: Four Louisiana Landscapes at Risk



In the year 1704, Canadian-born Michel Arceneaux built a four-room house and planted 40 live oaks between the house and the river. Native to the area, the live oak trees thrived. By 1722, the young trees had already attained a stature that hinted at their future magnificence. Today, there are 28 trees remaining in two rows of 14 each that make up the most spectacular setting in the entire Mississippi River valley – and Oak Alley Plantation is a National Historic Landmark. Tourism to the plantations along the Great River Road is one of the fastest growing segments of Louisiana’s economy, a powerful economic development force. As Louisiana’s most visited plantation home, Oak Alley was on target to have about 250,000 visitors for the year – before Hurricane Katrina brought tourism to a standstill.

HISTORY

“In the beginning ...” there were the trees! Abstracts from the Civil Records of St. James Parish indicate that in the year 1704, Michel Arceneaux, scion of what is believed to be the first family to settle in South Louisiana, claimed 250 arpents (an arpent measures slightly less than an acre) along the west bank of the Mississippi River. He built a four-room house and planted 40 live oaks between the house and the river. Native to the area, the trees thrived, and by 1722, when the early Capuchin Fathers arrived at St. Jacques de Cabahanoce to establish the settlement of St. James Parish, the young trees had already attained a stature that hinted at their future magnificence. This is the site – and these are the trees – that would become Oak Alley Plantation.



Jacques Joseph Roman, the first known member of the Roman family in Louisiana, was in the Colony as early as 1728. In 1741, he married Marie D'Aigle, whose family had moved from Canada. Of their five children, only one son – Jacques Etienne – and his two sisters survived to inherit a sizeable estate. At the age of 29, Jacques Etienne married Marie Louise Patin: their youngest son, Jacques Telesphore, married Celina Pilie in June 1834. At this point the fortunes of the Roman family had reached their pinnacle. Brother Andre was serving his first term as governor of Louisiana, while Josephine (Jacques Telesphore's only surviving sister) was married to Francois Gabriel "Valcour" Aime, the "Sugar King Of Louisiana".

In May of 1836, "Valcour" Aime, his brother-in-law and friend, sold Jacques Telesphore the plantation that riverboat captains later dubbed "Oak Alley". Jacques Telesphore and Celina plunged with enthusiasm into the project of their plantation home. The architect is believed to have been Celina's father, Gilbert Joseph Pilie, and master builder George Swainy was contracted to direct the construction, a task which took over two years to complete.

Improvements and additions continued through the end of the decade, and the kitchen facilities were finally completed in 1841. Furnishings and interior fittings had been arriving continuously by steamboat, and special care was given to the gardens, where Jacques spared little expense in his desire to lure Celina from the city to his beloved Oak Alley. The final result was a plantation home to be envied by the most discerning of the well-to-do sugar planters of the day. Legend has it that Celina Roman proudly christened her new home "Bon Sejour" (pleasant sojourn), but travelers on the Mississippi, impressed by the avenue of mighty oaks, called it "Oak Alley", and so it remained!

The Roman family resided at Oak Alley throughout the Civil War. Jacques Telesphore had died in 1848. His widow, typical of the upper class woman of her day, was totally inexperienced in business matters and, to her, the productive part of the plantation had no function other than as a source of revenue for her and her participation in the heights of Creole society. Her only surviving son, Henri, assumed manhood and responsibility for family affairs in 1859. His valiant efforts to preserve the position and holdings of his family failed against the overwhelming social and political turmoil resulting from the Civil War and Reconstruction. Thus the Roman family, already weakened by Celina's incessant spending, joined the ever growing tide of once powerful and proud Creoles caught in a downhill slide toward oblivion. In 1866, Henri was forced to sell the plantation and all but their most personal belongings at auction for a mere \$32,800.

Members of the Roman family, the Buchanans, remained on the plantation for a number of years after the sale, perhaps in an administrative capacity. In 1881, Antoine Sobral, a native of Portugal, purchased Oak Alley. Under this new ownership, the plantation flourished, and Sobral was accepted as one of the area's most outstanding figures, both as a proud veteran of the Confederacy and as a generous and wise gentleman who commanded respect from all who knew him. His reign had lasted 24 years when, in 1905, poor health and advancing years convinced him that he should accept an offer to sell Oak Alley. Luck, however, did not smile upon the new owners, whose plans to develop the plantation as a business venture soon failed. The house, unused since Sobral's residency, was boarded up and left to face the elements. Bats and other creatures, domestic and wild, took up occupancy, and what had once been the site of envied elegance appeared doomed to disappear in the shadows of the oaks and underbrush.

Then, in 1917, yet another owner, Jefferson Davis Hardin, Jr., came to Oak Alley. He poured his fortune and dreams into the plantation, devoting special care to the oaks in the alley. He set about to transform Oak Alley into a model farm run by scientific methods. The home and gardens benefited from the careful ministrations of Mrs. Hardin and her daughters and, for a few years, the estate once again knew the happiness of warmth and care. The old plantation jail (today the Foundation office building) was modernized to provide a temporary residence until restoration of the crumbling manor house was complete, and the family eagerly awaited the day they would at last move into their new home. However, like so many of the area's planters of the time, Mr. Hardin came to the end of his resources after a run of misfortunes in the form of fires, floods,



sickness in his herds, and even a costly court litigation arising from a train derailment caused by one of the Hardin's errant cows! In 1924, his dream of rehabilitating the mansion never realized, he signed Oak Alley over to the Whitney Bank, and silence again settled over the plantation.

In 1925, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Stewart purchased Oak Alley. They were the fifth and last resident owners. The Stewart's restoration of Oak Alley was one of the first along the Great River Road and began the trend toward saving old plantation homes in this area. The restoration took two years at a cost of \$60,000.00 – or \$10,000.00 more than the purchase price of the 1,360-acre plantation. The Stewarts recognized the historic and aesthetic value of Oak Alley and felt it was a privilege to live there. To insure that the house would remain open for all to share, Mrs. Stewart bequeathed the mansion and 25 acres surrounding it to the Oak Alley Foundation, an educational, literary, historical trust. Today, Oak Alley Plantation is a National Historic Landmark. This designation was based, in part, upon the spectacular trees and the “Oak Allee” that still graces this historic home.

Disaster again struck in August and September of 2006, when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ripped through southern Louisiana, their outer fringes bruising and battering Oak Alley. 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.

However, 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. With the crippling effect of the hurricanes, that crucial stream of visitors has stopped. In fact, it was weeks before basic services began to return. Hotels quickly filled with FEMA workers, utility repairmen and construction crews. Baton Rouge and the small towns surrounding New Orleans filled with refugees and workmen. There were no accommodations available for out-of-town guests, and there were no visitors to the plantations.

THE THREAT

Loss of income has put Oak Alley Plantation 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. As the months have passed, only a few visitors have returned: sadly, the forecast for tourism is dismal for years to come. With the approach of spring and summer, the maintenance of Oak Alley will be compromised due to lack of income.

Tourism is the link to employment, restoration, care, maintenance and project development. Admission funds are routed throughout the business networks of the plantations and one path takes the money to the gardens. Without tourism, the future of the landscape at Oak Alley 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 this unique and irreplaceable cultural landscape!
- (And please visit us soon!)

Please visit www.OakAlleyPlantation.com for further information.

Site Address

Oak Alley Plantation
3645 Hwy. 18
Vacherie, LA 70090