

FOREWORD

(TO THE FIRST EDITION)

It is difficult to write a complete history of St. Charles Parish. The parish was not gifted with an early newspaper and the St. Charles Herald can only count complete issues from 1917 to the present. However, the Herald, founded by Ex-Governor Michael Hahn in 1873, does give a historian a good base.

And, of course, all historians tend to be controversial, if only in a limited sphere. A difference of one year in a date will send some people scurrying up the wall. The omission of a name or its misspelling will reduce others to tears. The summary of a relatively recent political battle will evoke contempt from its participants who want the matter forgotten. And, even with these disadvantages in writing this book, I still feel that there is a need for a history of St. Charles Parish.

The greatest part of my original research took place at the L.S.U. Library in Baton Rouge. The Tulane Library collection, while not as extensive as L.S.U.'s, further contributed to the book.

Many thanks to John J. Growl, President of the school board, who spent a few late hours after school board meetings, filling in between the lines of historical episodes.

Gene Yoes, Jr., was a persistent help in the final two chapters. He didn't always win the arguments about what should be in the book, but his suggestions were helpful, and I thank him for them.

I received much help from Mrs. John M. Sellers Walton, who was reared in this parish but takes up residence in New Orleans and in Jackson, Mississippi. The Sellers history came almost entirely from her.

Mr. Leon C. Vial, Jr., gave me the honor of an interview, as did Mrs. Beatrice Triche Troxler. I spent hours with Mr. Richard L. Keller discussing Keller Home Place Plantation. Faye Walker Loupe was also gracious enough to let me look at some of her research.

I must also thank L.S.U. for my education and a little man named Dr. Edwin A. Davis, who has always come to mind when my interest in writing this book waned.

And, finally, my deepest thanks to my wife, Melody, who corrected my English and spelling, who gave her unsolicited comments and who spent countless hours originally, typing this book.

Henry E. "Gene" Yoes III

Spanish Explorers

A white man first saw the shores of what is now St. Charles Parish in 1542. It was the De Soto expedition that first came down the Mississippi River, but De Soto was not with the expedition.

By the year 1539 Hernando De Soto had seen much of the New World, but all of it had been in Mexico and South America. After his extensive explorations and fame, it was thought that he would retire to a life of luxury. He did not. De Soto had heard new and wonderful stories about the land north of Mexico, all of which was known as Florida. St. Charles Parish, then, was first part of Florida.

The Spanish explorer spent a year in Cuba, and then outfitted his men for the long search for gold. Landing in Tampa Bay, Florida, the expedition, with 620 men, headed north on foot, searching out various stories of gold and other riches. When supplies were low, De Soto's expedition plundered Indian villages and sometimes took Indians as slaves.

The explorers continued north on their quest for instant wealth, well into what is now Georgia. Still unsuccessful, the group turned toward the southwest and eventually ended up around present-day Mobile, Alabama. Discouraged, but still hopeful, De Soto and his men traveled north again.

In April of 1541 De Soto discovered the Mississippi River, and more importantly to them, a way out of that God-forsaken land. They knew a large river had to lead somewhere. The winter was spent in Arkansas. They built boats that would take them down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, though no one had any idea where the great river emptied.

That next spring, three years after landing at Tampa Bay, the Spaniards started down the river. The expedition halted at the junction of the Red River and the Mississippi. Here De Soto died of a fever in May, 1542. A hollow trunk was used for his coffin and his body was eased into the mighty Mississippi so that the Indians would not realize that the white men's leader had died.

Luis de Moscoso de Alvarado took over De Soto's command. At first, Moscoso chose to go overland to Mexico, but after venturing a few hundred miles, he returned to the

CHAPTER 2

THE GERMAN GOLDEN COAST: 1719 TO 1803

From 1699 to 1731 the brothers Iberville and Bienville struggled to establish the French in Louisiana. The entire territory had a population of only 195 by 1704, which actually dropped to 178 by 1710 even though the territory extended from present day Louisiana to Illinois! There was a "surge," however, to 400 white inhabitants in 1717.

France provided little help since her treasury had been depleted by various wars, so she turned over the colonization and trading rights of Louisiana to private companies.

Demeuves Concession

The earliest European settlement in the present-day confines of St. Charles Parish revolved around the Demeuves Concession, which occurred around 1718. It was named for its sponsor, a Frenchman, and the object was to establish a farming community. The Taensas Indians had been relocated from the parish, and the Concession given their lands.

On May 25, 1718, the French ship *La Marie* sailed from La Rochelle along with two other ships. The ships carried concessionaires, their employees and families. They landed at Dauphin Island, Alabama and were supposed to go to the Red River. However, they were reassigned to the Demeuves Concession after problems developed when they attempted to move farther north. This was 226 years after the discovery of America and 176 years after the first white man traversed the boundaries of the parish. The Concession failed, but the area became a staging ground for immigrants who were destined for other locations.

Second German Coast. Two distinct governmental units administered the two areas.

After the district was divided, in 1775, "Primera Costa de los Alemanes" (First Coast) made up St. Charles and "Segunda Costa" (Second Coast) made up St. John.

D'Arensborg was the first commandant of the Coast. Francois S. Bellile (1770-1782), Jacques Masicot (1783-1794), and Antoine Daspit St. Amand (1795-1805) followed him.

Separation of church and state was not a concern in the 1700's. In fact, many official announcements actually took place after

Holy Mass. On June 14, 1795, after Mass, the syndics-- Paul Toups, Bernard Bernoudy, Charles Darenbourg, Francois Aime,



*Karl Friedrich D'Arensborg
Swiss Officer appointed by Governor Bienville to be the
Commandant of the German Coast, a position he held for 40 years.*

Louis Foucher, Louis Laurent, Pierre Reine, Pierre Brou, Christophe Dumini de Glapion, Jean-Francois Piseros, Mathieu Hotard, Francois Trepagnier, Saint-Pe, Baptiste Daspit St. Amand, and Pierre Trepagnier-- gathered in the rectory and discussed the governor's order that the post maintain a prison. The decision was made to build a 20- by-14 foot prison to comply with the directive.

The River

The settlers relied on the Mississippi for their very livelihoods since it was the main transportation artery. However, each spring that very same river threatened the lives and homes of those settlers when it would flood its banks. The Mississippi has the third largest drainage basin in the world, draining well over a third of the continental United States. Each spring the Mississippi surges well above normal levels, as it is gorged with the melted snows of the northern United States. Even before this immense drainage system gets to southern Louisiana, it would flood thousands of low-lying areas, with no levee system to restrain it.

The elaborate levee system that protects Louisiana today, started out only three feet high and just wide enough for a road on its diminutive crown. Each land grant came with an obligation to maintain a levee along the river frontage. By 1731 a continuous levee of meager proportions extended from New Orleans to what would become St. John Parish. In 1732, the French colonial government mandated that the levees be upgraded to six feet and that a foot and bridle path be on the landside, with docks for vessels on the batture side. The batture is the land area between the levee and the river itself. Normally small levees were all that were normally needed in those days because several tributaries, like Bayou Lafourche, bled off high waters from the spring melt up north.

Due to a great flood prior to 1743, the French Colonial Government commanded landowners adjoining the river to complete their levee system by the next year or forfeit their lands to the Crown. The Marquis de Vaudreuil, successor to Bienville, issued an ordinance demanding that by the first of January, 1744, every planter needed to have his levees in safe condition.

Six years later in 1850, the list of largest landholders of St. Charles Parish included: Wid. Labranche & Co., 800 acres improved & 11,000 unimproved, \$60,000 cash value; Wid. B. Labranche, 1,000 improved & 6,000 unimproved acres, \$96,000 cash value; B. Labranche, 450 improved & 6,000 unimproved acres, \$80,000 cash value; William Polk, 400 improved & 5,000 unimproved acres, \$40,000 cash value; P.A. Rost, 1,350 improved & 3,300 unimproved acres, \$110,000 cash value; Barrett & Whitehead, 650 improved & 2,400 unimproved acres, \$54,000 cash value; N.H. Labranche & Co., 750 improved & 2,250 unimproved acres, \$65,000 cash value; Taneret & Co., 450 improved & 2,000 unimproved acres, \$55,000 cash value; D. Bouligny, 400 improved & 1,600 unimproved acres, \$30,000 cash value; Dr. W.R. Taylor, 600 improved & 1,200 unimproved acres, \$50,000 cash value; T.W. & S. McCutcheon, 800 improved & 950 unimproved acres, \$40,000 cash value; F. Meyronne, 500 improved & 940 unimproved acres, \$45,000 cash value; Wid. Edw. Fortier, 400 improved & 960 unimproved acres, \$60,000 cash value; Thomassin Andry, 600 improved & 760 unimproved acres, \$40,000 cash value; P. Soniat, 600 improved & 760 unimproved acres, \$30,000 cash value; Jules Trepagnier, 525 improved & 800 unimproved acres, \$35,000 cash value; Felix Garcia, 425 improved & 820 unimproved acres, \$40,000 cash value; D. Lanoux, 300 improved & 900 unimproved acres, \$45,000 cash value; Wid. A. Brau, 280 improved & 750 unimproved acres, \$20,000 cash value; B. Delhomme, 350 improved & 650 unimproved acres, \$18,000 cash value; Charles Ogsley, 600 improved & 360 unimproved acres, \$35,000 cash value; L. Frilou, Sr., 250 improved & 650 unimproved acres, \$58,000 cash value; and Similien LaBranche, 880 unimproved acres, \$20,000 cash value.

Church

The parish had always been predominantly Catholic. There was St. Charles Borromeo, the Red Church, on the east bank of the river and serviced the whole parish. One of the earliest churches in the state, it burned down completely in 1806. In

the same year, it was replaced with a wood frame building. The church property occupied part of the Le Sassier or Trinity Plantation.

The name Red Church came from the traditional color of the building. The church, said to be located exactly twenty-five miles above Canal Street, was a familiar landmark for river travelers. Captains stopped here to pay their crews and it always built up the anticipation of the first sighting of the queen city of New Orleans.



The Red Church of St. Charles Borromeo Church Parish built in 1806. It served as a landmark for riverboat captains to pay their crews before they landed in New Orleans.

The Trepagnier family gave the church a big statue of Saint Charles Borromeo. It stood in the cemetery for more than one hundred years. The cemetery is still one of the oldest in the state. Although parts of the cemetery were devoured by the river and are under the levee, the oldest tomb, now gone, was

moved to the Second German Coast (St. John) where he became commandant. He was appointed by Governor Alejandro O'Reilly and served until de Logny resigned that position in 1782. He moved to the First German Coast and obtained what would become the Destrehan estate. The reason given for the move was to avoid the flooding that plagued his crops in what would become St. John Parish.

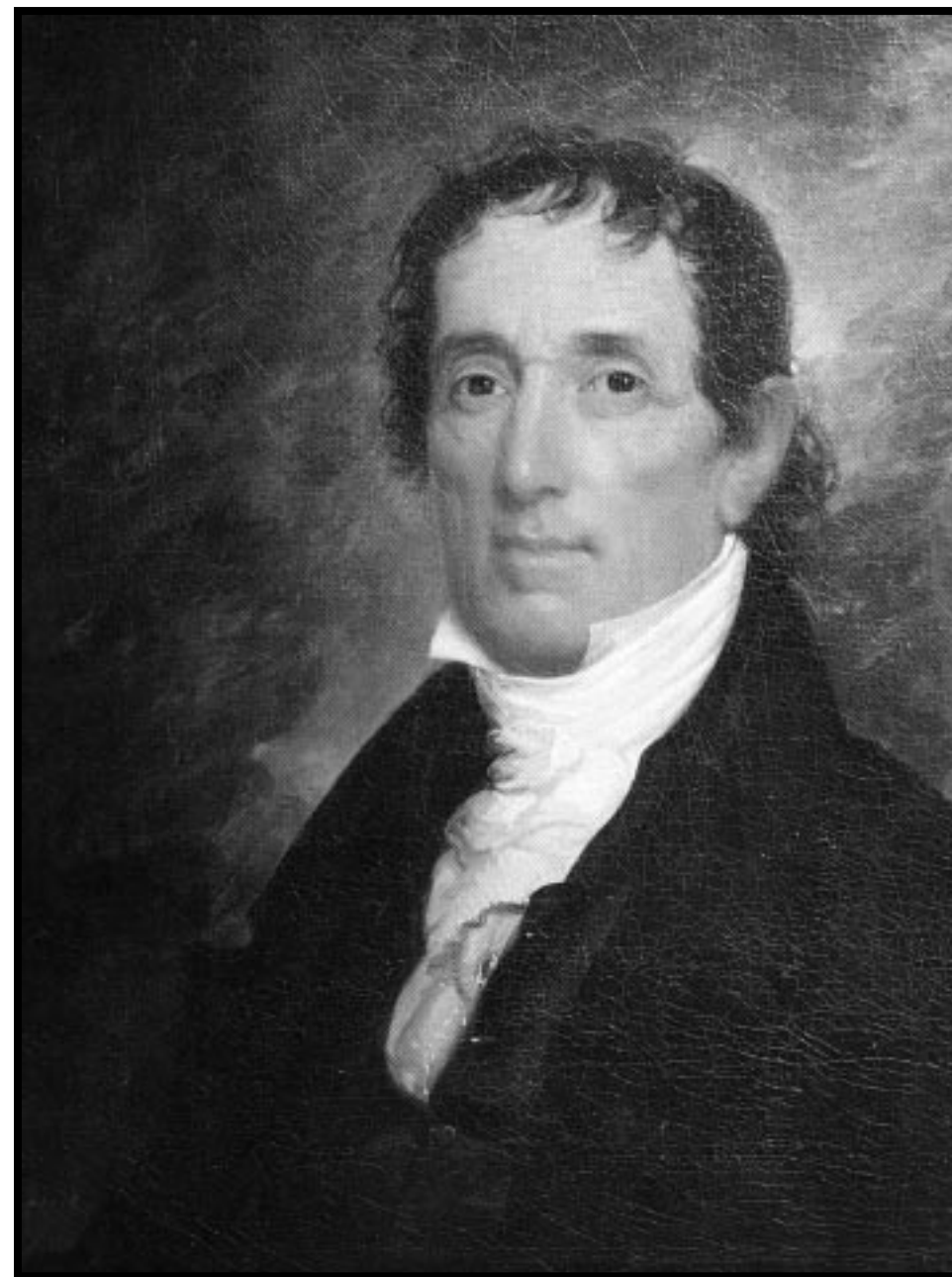
On January 3, 1787, he contracted with a free mulatto carpenter, Charles, for construction of a plantation house. The contract called for Charles to receive, "One Negro . . . a cow and her calf . . . 50 quarts of rice in chaff and 50 quarts of corn in husks . . . one hundred pisatres at end of the said work."

Three years after construction was begun in 1790, the structure was completed and Charles was paid. Unfortunately, Robin did not enjoy the fruits of his labors for long. He died in 1792.

On December 16, 1792, Jean Noel d'Estrehan who had married Marie Claude Celeste Leonore Robin de Logny, and his brother, Jean-Baptiste Honore d'Estrehan de Beaupre, purchased Destrehan plantation from his father-in-law's estate. The plantation became solely his upon the death of his brother. It is from him that the plantation, and consequently the town, receives its name.

The name d'Estrehan, now written Destrehan, is an old one in Louisiana. The first one of that name to come to Louisiana came with Bienville, founder of the city of New Orleans. Jean Noel d'Estrehan de Beaupre was the son of Jean Baptiste d'Estrehan des Tours, the first of that line in Louisiana. Jean Baptiste, whose father Jean Baptiste Destrehan was treasurer to the King of France, was born in France and moved to Louisiana in the 1700's. He, no doubt, arrived in New Orleans decked in the aristocratic garb of that time: wig, satins, laces, and jewels. Early in the eighteenth century, he received a grant of land from the King of France.

The King also bestowed upon Baptiste the post of Royal Treasurer. With a characteristic political bent, he branched out into other political areas. In one instance, he incurred the enmity of Governor de Kerelec when he sided with Commissaire de Rochemore concerning a dispute about the financial administra-



Jean Noel Destrehan.
Photo courtesy of River Road Historical Society.

have the full enjoyment of the house, which she inhabited during the rest of her natural life.

Felix Drausin Fortier was born in St. Charles Parish at Home Place on December 7, 1824. He married Amme Amelie



*An early picture of Home Place (circa 1900) complete with the plantation bell to the left and the cistern on the right. The barn can also be seen at the left.
Photo courtesy of Richard L. Keller*

Brou, born on February 3, 1826. When they were first married, they went to Home Place to live with his parents. Drausin and Amme had four daughters.

On March 26, 1855, Dominique Bouigny and Edmond Ganucheau sold their interest in Home Place to Gustave Bouigny and Drausin Fortier. The plantation took the corporate name of Drausin Fortier & Co., but this did not last long. Drausin died in this same year, on September 24, of yellow fever. He was thirty-one years old. His wife, Amme, left Home Place and moved to New Orleans to live with her mother-in-law, Felicite.



Damien Haydel purchased Home Place in 1885.