

The Preservation and Transformation of Destrehan Plantation:  
Physical Geographies and Social Landscapes of White Supremacy  
in Twentieth Century South Louisiana

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### Abstract

Certain regions of the American South are known for their plantation house museums that attract large numbers of tourists every year. One of the most popular regions, the River Road of South Louisiana, occupies a portion of the Lower Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Most River Road plantation museums' institutional narratives, the content conveyed to visitors during a site tour, centers around the late-colonial and antebellum periods from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and maintains the historical perspective of the white Creole planter elite. Plantation tours rarely detail the site's 20<sup>th</sup> century history, or the history of the museums themselves. The narratives that costumed interpreters present to visitors during daily tours carry an immense weight and responsibility of understanding our past, that in turn, affects our future. In the following essay, I argue that through the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of River Road plantations, we can trace the preservation of white supremacy post-emancipation and South Louisiana's racialized class system. A critical analysis of the Destrehan Plantation in St. Charles Parish demonstrates the preservation of white supremacist social and economic dynamics during the plantation's 20<sup>th</sup> century transformation from agricultural capitalism to the production of historical memory.



Introduction

The History of Destrehan Plantation:  
From Indigo and Sugar to Petrochemicals, From Vacancy to Public History

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The South Louisiana stretch of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, once known as the German Coast, boasts dozens of plantation museums along the state's River Road. One of the first museums that motorists encounter after leaving New Orleans is Destrehan Plantation located in a town of the same name, twenty-two miles from the city. Destrehan's unique history has been shaped by its ownership of private individuals, petrochemical corporations, and a historical society throughout its 234 years of existence. Destrehan and other River Road plantation museums focus their interpretation on the late colonial through the antebellum period. The plantations' twentieth century history is often left unmentioned in tours. As a student of public history, I crafted my thesis around Destrehan's twentieth century existence and the factors that contributed to its founding as a museum. Many prior scholars have critiqued these sites' interpretation and institutional narratives; their analyses informed my decision to take a critical lens to the plantation's most recent century, a century that is often negated and erased by the museums. Why is that? In the case of Destrehan, it is not for lack of a fascinating history.

In the twentieth century, Destrehan Plantation's use evolved from agricultural production to petrochemical refinement to a site of historical memory. The site's production was sustained by various forms of labor at the plantation, a component long ignored in plantation museums' interpretation because of its troublesome and exploitative history. Destrehan Plantation's labor force evolved from agricultural and domestic enslaved labor to agricultural tenancy and sharecropping, then residential wage labor in the refinery company town, and now, contributors to the site of public history. Through its 234 years, the site has produced a product for American consumption, whether that product be material commodities of indigo, sugar, and petrochemicals, or immaterial experiences of heritage, nostalgia, and historical memory.



law, Jean Noel D'Estrehan, for 21,750 piastres.<sup>5</sup>

D'Estrehan's social and political prominence contributed his name to the plantation for centuries to come. As one of the first state politicians in Louisiana, D'Estrehan served as a delegate to Washington D.C. and Louisiana state senator from 1812-1817.<sup>6</sup> A year after D'Estrehan's purchase of the plantation, he transitioned its monoculture crop from the volatile and difficult indigo to the promising and addictive sugar cane.<sup>7</sup> D'Estrehan died in 1823, followed two years later by his wife Marie Claude Eleonore.

On March 23, 1825, Stephen Henderson, a Scotsman and D'Estrehan's son-in-law, purchased the entire estate for \$114,400. When Henderson purchased the sugar cane plantation, he purchased eighty-three Africans and their descendants along with the land and Creole mansion.<sup>8</sup> Henderson continued sugar cane cultivation until his death in 1838, inscribing in his will the desire for the enslaved men, women, and children to be manumitted upon his death. However, Henderson's surviving family members executed the will and determined to sell the estate, including lands, house, and enslaved laborers to Pierre Adolphe Rost, another son-in-law of Jean Noel D'Estrehan.<sup>9</sup> Pierre Rost owned and operated the sugar plantation from 1839 until 1861, when he fled the war and served as the Confederate Commissioner to Spain.<sup>10</sup> During Rost's absence, he leased the plantation to two northern businessmen, George Fuller Brott and Isaac Davis.<sup>11</sup> Brott and Davis operated a store in New Orleans that sold manufactured goods

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, "River Road Historical Society: Life at Destrehan Manor from Colonial Times into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A Community Remembers and Interprets for the Future." *Education through Historic Preservation*. St. Charles Parish Virtual Museum. (1984): 2. <https://scphistory.org/ethp-list/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>7</sup> National Register of Historic Places, "Continuation Sheet," 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Eugene D. Cizek, "Addendum to Destrehan Plantation," Historic American Building Survey, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Cizek and Sensat, "River Road Historical Society," 8.

<sup>11</sup> "National Register of Historic Places - Continuation Sheet," 1994.

from Great Britain and New York to local white elites.<sup>12</sup> Rost's flight from the Civil War brought about the first major turning point in the plantation's structure and use.

Brott and Davis, two enterprising northerners, effectively began the system of tenant farming in the "Sugar Bowl" of South Louisiana plantations. The pair of entrepreneurs operated six Louisiana plantations during the first two years of the Civil War but unlike Destrehan's previous owners, Brott and Davis paid tenant laborers, formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants, a cash wage or a share of the crop yield.<sup>13</sup> During their ownership of Destrehan, Brott and Davis converted the sugar plantation to cotton and foodstuffs, likely to contribute to their merchant shipping business and the need for produce in Union-occupied New Orleans.

The next turning point of Destrehan's use occurred in June 1863 when the plantation became a prophetic symbol of the South's postwar future. Union troops seized Destrehan and converted it to the "Rost Home Colony" under the Louisiana Freedman's Bureau.<sup>14</sup> Destrehan remained under General Nathaniel Bank's control until early in 1865 when the war tumbled toward its conclusion. Inside the "colony" for freedpeople and refugees of color, residents subsisted on the tenant farming system. The Freedman's Bureau provided wages, housing, food, health care, education, and community in exchange for ten-hour days of agricultural labor.<sup>15</sup> During its three years of existence, the Rost Home Colony housed as many as 700 refugees who cultivated and processed corn, sweet potatoes, cotton, and sugar cane.<sup>16</sup>

The occupations of Brott and Davis, followed by the Rost Home Colony, were the beginnings of agricultural tenant labor on the estate, a transformation of the site's use and

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<sup>12</sup> *Daily True Delta*, January 14, 1864.

<sup>13</sup> "National Register of Historic Places - Continuation Sheet," 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Michael F. Knight, "The Rost Home Colony, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana," *National Archives* 33, no. 3. (Fall 2001): 3. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/fall/rost-home-colony.html>

<sup>15</sup> Knight, "The Rost Home Colony," 3.

<sup>16</sup> Cizek and Sensat, "River Road Historical Society," 9.



organization by northern capitalists and the Union military government during New Orleans' occupation. Pierre Rost returned from Europe in late 1865 and like other ex-Confederates, quickly received a federal pardon from President Andrew Johnson.<sup>17</sup> Rost returned to New Orleans in December of that year and regained the title to his estate. Title in hand, Rost demanded compensation for the use of Destrehan and received rental payments from the Louisiana Freedman's Bureau until December of 1866, when the Bureau disbanded the Rost Home Colony.<sup>18</sup> After the cotton and produce cultivation during the war, the Rosts returned the plantation to sugar cane monocropping.<sup>19</sup> Pierre Rost died in 1868; his wife Louise D'Estrehan Rost owned Destrehan for ten years. In 1878, their son Emile Rost purchased the plantation for \$60,000.<sup>20</sup> Emile Rost operated the sugar plantation through agricultural tenant labor until 1910, when he sold the property to businessmen Macon and Schneidau for \$95,000. The two land agents split the property with Grace Z. Dannell and formed the Destrehan Planting and Manufacturing Co. to continue sugar cane production for four years.<sup>21</sup>

1914 marks the plantation's permanent departure from agricultural production. Destrehan Planting and Manufacturing Co. sold 1012 acres of the estate to Herbert C. Wylie of Los Angeles, California – a purchasing agent for the Mexican Petroleum Corporation of California.<sup>22</sup> Mexican Petroleum's refinery and company town at Destrehan took four years to complete; its full operations began in 1918. The rapid transformation from agricultural to petrochemical

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<sup>17</sup> Eugene D. Cizek, John H. Lawrence, and Richard Sexton, *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, (Louisiana: River Road Historical Society, 2008), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Knight, 5.

"National Register of Historic Places - Continuation Sheet," 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Cizek and Sensat, "River Road Historical Society," 10.

<sup>20</sup> Landry Perkins, "Chain of Title and Ownership, Destrehan Plantation," Louisiana Digital Library, 1930.

<sup>21</sup> Cizek, "Addendum," Historic American Buildings Survey, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> Cizek and Sensat, "River Road Historical Society," 11.

production altered the estate's use and organization as well as the labor experience for the next 44 years, until the refinery's closure in 1958.

Much of the information stated so far is available from the Destrehan Plantation Museum website or their coffee table book and relates to the ownership of the plantation. However, the plantation's successful production, and therefore the leisurely lives of white Creole elite planters, originated with the hard labor performed by residential workforces. Whether the enslaved Africans and their descendants held captive at the site by the deLogny, Henderson, D'Estrehan, and Rost families, the tenant sharecroppers employed by Brott and Davis, the Freedman's Bureau Colony, or Emile Rost, or the residential labor force of Mexican Petroleum's refinery, labor defined the success and survival of Destrehan Plantation.

The skilled labor of enslaved men and women accomplished the difficult and dangerous tasks of sugar production required to sustain elite Creole leisure. From 1812 to 1863, enslaved Africans and their descendants cultivated and processed sugar cane at Destrehan, where sugar grew easily in Southern Louisiana's warm, humid climate. Unlike many other German Coast plantations, Destrehan had on-site boilers and refining houses. Enslaved laborers skillfully used scythes and machetes to cut down the cane, then split the cane and stripped the juices into vats over open flame. A multi-stage boiling process reduced the bubbling liquid sugar until only crystals remained, called raw sugar.<sup>23</sup> Enslaved laborers then loaded the granulated sugar onto barges, where it floated down to New Orleans to be sold to merchants, loaded onto ships, and distributed worldwide.<sup>24</sup>

During the Civil War, northern businessmen and Union occupation transitioned the agricultural estate from enslaved labor to paid labor. Although critically different from

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<sup>23</sup> Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Cizek, Lawrence, and Sexton, *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, 43.

enslavement, the tenant farming system relied on much of the same labor skills of agricultural production. When Brott and Davis leased the plantation, the enslaved labor force stayed at Destrehan and for the first time, received pay in exchange for their labor. Brott and Davis claimed that in response to payment, the labor force's production figures grew by one-third.<sup>25</sup> The Freedman's Bureau Rost Home Colony continued agricultural tenancy but shifted to a sharecropping system where payment derived from individual production amounts instead of a standard wage. From 1863 to 1866, the Rost Home Colony aimed to rehabilitate newly freed African Americans into the system of sharecropping and agricultural tenancy.<sup>26</sup> In effect, the Freedman's Bureau reconfigured the labor force's financial dependence on the plantation for the period of emancipation.

Once the Rost family regained ownership and control of Destrehan, sugar cultivation resumed under the sharecropping system introduced by the Freedman's Bureau. The Rosts did not easily transition to the system of paid labor – whether in wages or agricultural shares. The family's previous authoritative and violent consolidated control over enslaved labor had been replaced by fragmented and unshackled agricultural tenancy.<sup>27</sup> Rost demonstrated his difficulty adjusting to free labor by minimizing tenant laborers' pay. As a result, the sharecroppers struck on April 6, 1880 to demand payment of \$1 per day.<sup>28</sup> Rost's refusal to pay the tenant laborers speaks to the site's legacy of exploitation and Destrehan's long history of the power struggle between labor and capitalists. The power struggle between Rost and the tenant farmers lasted until 1910, during Destrehan's twilight years of agricultural production. Mexican Petroleum's

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<sup>25</sup> "National Register of Historic Places - Continuation Sheet," 1994, Section 7, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Knight, "The Rost Home Colony," 3.

<sup>27</sup> *New Orleans Daily Democrat*, April 7, 1880.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

1914 purchase of the site dissipated the system of agricultural tenancy and reestablished wage labor at the site for the first time since Brott and Davis' operations.

Petrochemical corporations preserved the system of residential labor but transformed it for the modern company town. At the Destrehan Refinery, the management and executives of the parent company of Mexican Petroleum, Pan American, adopted the South's stratified socioeconomic systems based in the hierarchies of race and labor while radically transforming the physical landscape. Creole plantation homes once encircled by sugar cane fields became surrounded by smokestacks and metal fencing, dirt roads and rural communities became company towns, and sharecroppers became refinery workers. Labor hierarchies designed by corporations and implemented in the company town served to divide the workforce based on race and prevent organizing. For a majority of its 44 years as a refinery, Destrehan's corporate ownership successfully stalled labor organization. Six years after the workforce walked off the job and accomplished the largest strike witnessed at Destrehan in 1952, it ceased operations.

The next turning point in Destrehan's history occurred when Amoco dismantled their refinery and deserted the site in 1958. Amoco's desertion left refinery workers of color without employment while company executives transferred white skilled positions and management to other refinery locations.<sup>29</sup> The revolutionary idea of reimagining Destrehan as a modern site producing goods for the modern age lasted 44 years. For the first time since deLogny's purchase in 1792, production at Destrehan ceased. The plantation house and lands stood vacant for twelve years, inspiring white residents to reconsider its future. The River Road Historical Society formed in 1968 with the explicit purpose to preserve the plantation house, saving Destrehan from

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<sup>29</sup> *Monroe Morning World*, November 8, 1958.

“destruction and oblivion.”<sup>30</sup> In 1971, Amoco deeded the house and four acres to the newly formed Society for the creation of a museum.

### The Destrehan Plantation Museum

The final turning point in the evolution of Destrehan occurred in 1978, when the River Road Historical Society opened the plantation house to the public for the first time. Production had begun again at Destrehan: the production of memory and nostalgia for an age that visitors had never experienced. The Society owns and operates Destrehan Plantation Museum to this day. It has been open to the public for 44 years, the same length of time that Destrehan existed as a petrochemical refinery.

As the Historical Society reconfigured Destrehan Plantation into a public history site, they confronted the challenges of which aspects of the site to transform for their purposes and which aspects to preserve. The Society adopted and preserved a New Orleans tourism narrative that prioritized elite white Creole landowners, popularized in the writings of Lyle Saxon and Harnett T. Kane. By echoing tourism works written in the 1930s and 40s, the Destrehan Plantation Museum tailored its own institutional narrative to one that already existed in the public discourse, one that was tailored to white interests. By establishing a museum, the Society also transformed the plantation into a site of education and their preservationist purpose aligned with community resistance to industries’ environmental destruction. This tension between preservation and transformation presents itself in each stage of Destrehan’s twentieth century existence, as its use evolved from agriculture to petrochemicals to public history.

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<sup>30</sup> Cizek and Sensat, 12.

During Destrehan's various twentieth century lifetimes, its ownership reconfigured the use and products of the plantation but preserved white supremacy in multitudinous forms. Racial progress in South Louisiana proceeded in ways that informed the use of spaces like Destrehan Plantation and accommodated revised forms of white supremacy. The white supremacy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the region's rapid transition to modernity and the establishment of Destrehan Refinery, invented social narratives that epitomized the lost glory days of antebellum racial capitalism. Created during and after the Reconstruction Era and commonly known as the "Lost Cause," this violent and overt white supremacy eulogized the undemocratic Old South of enslavement and laid the ideological groundwork for the Jim Crow Era.<sup>31</sup>

This blatant and ruthless form of white supremacy evolved in the 1920s and 1930s to a racism based in ethnographic stereotyping, an "othering" of nonwhite peoples. I refer to this version as cultural pluralism, a belief that American culture possessed no singular ethnic origin.<sup>32</sup> In Louisiana's early tourism books, this evolution from the 'Lost Cause' to cultural pluralism influenced the characterizations writers made about local peoples, especially Black Louisianans, to entertain white middle-class American tourists. In effect, this multicultural ideology might have accomplished little to disturb persistent white supremacy. Within these travel books, the orientation toward cultural pluralism tended to mix with exoticized portrayals of Louisiana's many cultures. In Louisiana travel books of the 1930s and 1940s, acknowledging the right of multiple cultures to exist proceeded within the dominant construction of white American supremacy.

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<sup>31</sup> Stacey Wilson, "Reviving the Old South: Piecing Together the History of Plantation Sites." Master's thesis, Texas State University: San Marcos. August 2013, 45-47.

<sup>32</sup> Brenda J. Child, "Nett Lake: Wild Rice and the Great Depression." In *Holding Our World Together*, (Penguin Books, 2012), 99.

During the postwar period, increased collective action and rights organizing met with another evolution of white supremacy. After the legal dismantling of Jim Crow with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, white supremacists also organized into social-political groups like the White Citizens Council who resisted progress through postulations of civility and municipal petitions.<sup>33</sup> When those petitions were unsuccessful in preventing the desegregation of New Orleans' public schools throughout the 1960s, whites fled to the surrounding river parishes. There, they established suburban landscapes that mixed with existing refineries and abandoned antebellum plantations. There, they established historical societies to preserve the spaces of white Creole planter elite.

The unique evolution of the River Road Historical Society and its use of Destrehan Plantation was shaped by both segregationist and environmentalist notions that impacted the Museum's relationship to the people and land that surrounded it. In 1978, the Historical Society opened Destrehan to the public and local educators Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr. interpreted the plantation's historic value to locals and tourists. Destrehan's interpretation reflected a form of white supremacy based in social liberalism that prioritized educating local children from recently integrated schools, but also prioritized the preservation of historic structures and the land they occupied. The Museum's institutional narratives reflected a white Creole elite perspective that did not seek out Black contributions to the site's original interpretation. Black contributions would have complicated the cultural value of a plantation house and situated it with the context of an agricultural labor camp. Even now, when I visited the Museum in December of 2021, the orientation of the Museum revolves around the white Creole planter elite perspective and their spaces of luxury. The Museum has adapted their interpretation

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<sup>33</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 8-9.

from its original form, but many of the changes present themselves as a shiny, glossy polish that neglects the rough substance underneath.

During Destrehan's twentieth century existence, its various owners confronted the questions of what was to be preserved and what should be transformed through some new form of progress. As a petrochemical refinery, Pan-American executives and management preserved the labor and racial hierarchies which stoked division and staved off labor organization. Executives and management transformed the old agricultural estate for a modern and welfare capitalist company town during its 44 years. In effect, executives and management preserved the legacies of greed and exploitation rooted in the soil of Destrehan.

While the modern Destrehan Refinery churned out modern petrochemical products of refined oil, gasoline, and asphalt in the 1930s and 40s, popular Louisiana tourism writers articulated a new form of white supremacy for white middle-class entertainment. Through inventive strategies of exoticizing Louisiana's culture and people, tourism writers preserved the perspectives of antebellum white Creole elite for the modern and mobile white American tourist. As tourism writers tapped into cultural pluralism for mass entertainment, Louisiana politicians preserved racial and labor inequalities for the construction of statewide roads to both local and tourist benefit.

Once Louisiana's new paved roads were complete, travel writers had established the public narratives of New Orleans' tourism and encouraged motoring tourists to putter past the still-privately-owned plantations of old. The market was set for plantation museums to sprout up along the River Road. The River Road Historical Society transformed the mansion's use into a plantation museum in the 1970s by preserving the perspective of the white Creole planters and quieting the site's long history of labor exploitation and racial divisions. Although the white



supremacist discourse had evolved over a hundred years of Louisiana history, the Museum's original interpretation reflected "Lost Cause" ideology that preserved Destrehan Plantation as a testament to the best of Louisiana's past.<sup>34</sup> In the 1970s, historical societies' establishment of new plantation house museums prioritized the preservation of the house and its lands, therefore acting alongside contemporary environmentalist efforts to resist the industrial expansion that has degraded South Louisiana's environment for generations.

For 44 years, from 1914 to 1958, Destrehan Refinery produced petrochemicals and reproduced racial and labor hierarchies. For 12 years, from 1958 to 1971, the plantation sat vacant during Louisiana's tumultuous and progressive time that secured voting rights for African Americans and desegregated public spaces. For 44 years, from 1978 to 2022, Destrehan Plantation Museum's costumed interpreters in antebellum dress have produced daily tours that reproduce heritage and nostalgic memory for locals and tourists. It is to the start of this history that we now turn, as the last white Creole planter left the site and Destrehan Plantation became Destrehan Refinery.

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<sup>34</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr." *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991): 1-2. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

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- New Orleans Daily Democrat*: April 7, 1880.

### Photographs and Images

- Figure 1: 1858 map of Mississippi River 'ribbon' plots by Adrien Persac. Courtesy: Zoe Company 2013, Laura Plantation. Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo*, 103.

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## Chapter One

Louisiana Plantations' Petrochemical Revolution and the Production of Power:  
Destrehan Refinery and Company Town, 1914 – 1958

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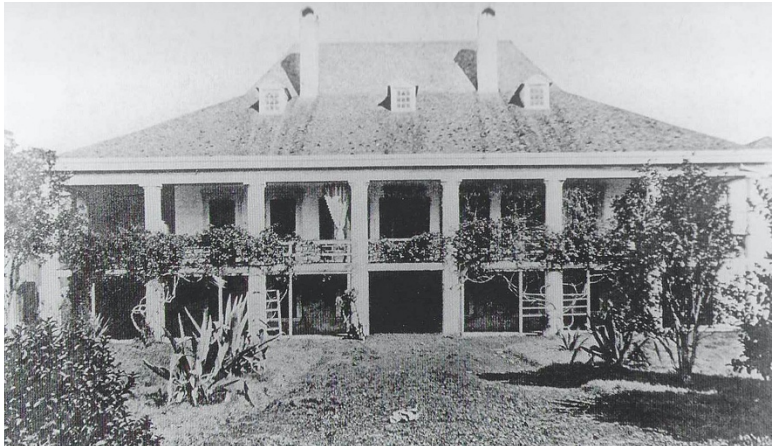


Figure 1: Destrehan Plantation House, ca. 1890. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, p. 24.

Destrehan Plantation's twilight as an agricultural estate came in the late nineteenth century. A photograph of the mansion's façade captures the plantation's last years of sugarcane production during Emile Rost's ownership.

Rost was the last familial

descendant to own the agricultural estate since Robin deLogny purchased the "ribbon" slice of riverfront land twenty-two miles north of New Orleans in 1782. The postbellum photograph shows tools and ladders sitting out front, vines crossing the front gallery and obstructing the architectural lines, while obvious roof stains speak of southern Louisiana's subtropical climate. At the time of this photograph, plantation agricultural racial capitalism had evolved from enslaved labor to sharecropping and tenant farming. Planters like Rost did not adjust quickly to the new system of free paid labor and many sold their familial plantations in the postbellum period. Shortly after this photo, a new industry's entrance to South Louisiana rapidly overturned its 'sugar bowl.' Oil and petrochemical companies purchased defunct River Road plantations and restructured them into refineries, productive sites for the modern age. As South Louisiana began a new century, the 'petrochemical revolution' was underway.

When Destrehan Plantation became Destrehan Refinery in the first decades of the twentieth century, some features of the plantation persisted as new ownership radically

transformed others. Mexican Petroleum Company (also known as Mex-Pet) and its parent corporation, Pan American Petroleum, preserved the manor house for refinery management living accommodations and offices. In preserving the mansion as a restricted space for the elite, company management reconfigured existing race and labor hierarchies for the purposes of a modern refinery. As the plantation evolved from agricultural commodities of sugar cane to modern commodities of asphalt, refined oil, diesel, and gasoline, the production shift reflected Louisiana's hybridized existence between the old and the new.

One of the few photographs taken during Mexican Petroleum's operation of Destrehan Refinery featured a view of the manor house's rear. This rare Mex-Pet photo captured a hybridized period in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when postbellum agricultural economies and lifeways mixed with twentieth century industrial landscapes. The undated photo captures a mounted



Figure 2: Rear of Destrehan Plantation house, ca. 1920. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, p. 29.

man, presumably a refinery manager, riding down the back gravel pathway towards the outbuildings, refinery structures, and company town. Before the widespread ownership of automobiles, refinery managers rode on horseback just as white Creole sugar planters had. Although the ownership of the estate had changed, as had the commodity it produced, the systems of power and labor hierarchies remained intact alongside the late-18<sup>th</sup> century plantation house.

With the construction of Destrehan Refinery, Mexican Petroleum transformed the plantation's physical landscape over four years, from 1914 to 1918. Destrehan's transformation from agricultural labor camp to petrochemical refinery and company town materialized as part of the 'petrochemical revolution' that occurred up and down South Louisiana's River Road. As River Road plantations became refineries, one important detail set Destrehan's transformation apart from other plantations. Mexican Petroleum preserved the historic Destrehan plantation house whereas most petrochemical corporations demolished the old structures of Creole aristocracy in the name of economic progress and full utilization of the large plots of land.

Louisiana's economic progress toward modern products of refined oil and petrochemical products resulted from strategic factors and political favors. Global petrochemical competitors chose Louisiana for the state's gulf location, capital-friendly state government, and a cheap labor force eager to leave sharecropping behind for the benefits of industrial wage work.<sup>1</sup> Mex-Pet's company town at Destrehan Refinery provided necessities to the residential workforce but controlled employees' daily lives under the paternalist system of welfare capitalism. Higher wages and freedom from long days in the field enticed men and their families to company towns where refinery employment accompanied a "mosaic of risks."<sup>2</sup>

The refinery employees, men of all races, confronted systems of risk and control designed by Pan-American executives who prioritized profit and wealth over the safety and comfort of employees. The racial and labor hierarchy of the modern refinery did not exist exclusively in hiring and employment practices, but in every aspect of the daily lives of Black and Mexican employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "Ol' Man River or Cancer Alley?" in *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Darin Acosta, "The Petrochemical Industrial Complex of the St. Charles Parish Industrial Corridor and its Influence on Urbanization Patterns." (*University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*, 2010), 14.



In the first decade of the twentieth century, Edward L. Doheny, founder and director of Pan American Petroleum, quickly expanded his fledgling company to a global competitor through corrupt dealings in the United States and Mexico.<sup>3</sup> When he was implicated in the 1920s Teapot Dome Scandal, Doheny demonstrated his immoral practices in the scandal's fallout.<sup>4</sup> In 1925, Doheny reorganized and sold Pan American to quickly liquidate his fortune before legal and financial damage could reach him.<sup>5</sup> Although Doheny did not reside or work at Destrehan Refinery, he and his Pan American corporation benefited from its production while enforcing divisions among the workforce.

Refinery executives' and management's domination of Destrehan's physical geography and social landscapes maintained divisions among the labor force during the first decades as a company town, but company leadership met with increased labor organizing in the World War II and post war periods. The Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) began as the International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well and Refinery Workers of America in 1918, the same year construction at Destrehan Refinery concluded.<sup>6</sup> Closed company towns, company run 'independent unions,' corruption, racial segregation, and poor infrastructure impeded labor recruitment in South Louisiana until the outbreak of World War II. In the war years, refinery workers increasingly left 'independent unions' for local chapters of the OWIU to collectively bargain for better wages and better working conditions.<sup>7</sup> Then, in April and May of 1952, the tension between capital and labor reached a fever pitch both nationwide and at Destrehan

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<sup>3</sup> Dan La Botz, *Edward L. Doheny: Petroleum, Power and Politics in the United States and Mexico*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 28.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times of Shreveport*, January 25, 1924.

<sup>5</sup> La Botz, 177-78.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Davidson, *Challenging the Giants: A History of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union*, (Colorado: The Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, 1988), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson, *Challenging the Giants*, 225.

Refinery, when over 300 employees, members of the OWIU New Orleans Local, walked out, shut down the refinery, and struck for better wages. The nationwide strike succeeded in securing a wage increase, but for Destrehan employees, it was short-lived. The Destrehan Refinery closed in December of 1958.

During Destrehan's existence as a petrochemical refinery, Pan-American executives and management sought to preserve the labor and racial hierarchies of the system of agricultural capitalism for their purposes as a modern company town. Pan-American preserved the late-18th century mansion but transformed the agricultural plantation into a modern refinery and welfare capitalist company town for 44 years. In effect, executives' and management's use of Destrehan preserved the legacies of greed and inequality that sacrificed the health and freedoms of the residential labor force, their families, and the surrounding communities.

### Agriculture to Petrochemical: A Reorganization of Destrehan's Physical Landscape

Destrehan Plantation's last agricultural products left its estate in 1910. Former enslavers like Emile Rost relied upon land, the only southern capital to outlast the economic destruction of the Civil War. Planters maintained their economic and political influence in postbellum Louisiana through existing solid assets. Then, in 1910, Destrehan's sugar mills burned and the fields flooded. At age seventy-two, Rost faced bankruptcy and sold the estate for \$95,000 to land agents Macon and Schneidau, who then sold the back half of the property to Grace Z. Dannell.<sup>8</sup> Destrehan, along with many other River Road plantations, changed hands in the first decade of the twentieth century. The *Times-Democrat* reported:

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<sup>8</sup> "Addendum to Destrehan Plantation," Library of Congress, Historic American Building Survey, Destrehan Plantation, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. No. LA-1212. 1989. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/png/habshaer/la/la0200/la0287/data/la0287data.pdf>

One of the plantations sold yesterday has played an important part in the agricultural history of Louisiana. It is the old Destrehan place... This plantation, in the early part of the nineteenth century, was owned by Noel Destrehan, the first United States Senator chosen to represent Louisiana in Congress... The plantation was owned by Judge P.A. Rost from 1839 to 1878, and since that time, until the signing of the deeds of transfer recently, by Judge Emile Rost... Several other large plantation deals are said to be pending in local real estate circles, there being a good demand for Louisiana lands from Northern sources.<sup>9</sup>

The Destrehan Planting and Manufacturing Company maintained the existing residential agricultural labor force of freedpeople and continued sharecropping sugar production for four years.<sup>10</sup> Then, in 1914, Macon and Schenidau sold the entire 1012 acres of the property to Herbert G. Wylie, managing partner of Edward L. Doheny's Mexican Petroleum Company, for \$50,000.<sup>11</sup> The Destrehan Refinery was born.

Wylie recognized Destrehan as an ideal location for Mexican Petroleum's first refinery in the United States. Local New Orleans newspapers reported in February of 1914 that the "chief promoter" of the oil conglomerate "will establish a large oil depot there. ... The company proposes to build... an immense oil refinery. Mr. Doheny expressed the conviction that the geographical advantages of New Orleans were unexcelled. Construction of the plant will start within the next thirty days."<sup>12</sup> The geographical advantage of a mile-long riverfront property adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico ensured that tanker shipments of crude oil would be received

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<sup>9</sup> *The Times-Democrat*, October 14, 1910.

<sup>10</sup> Cizek, Lawrence and Sexton, *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, (Louisiana: River Road Historical Society, 2008), 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *The Times-Democrat*, February 1, 1914.

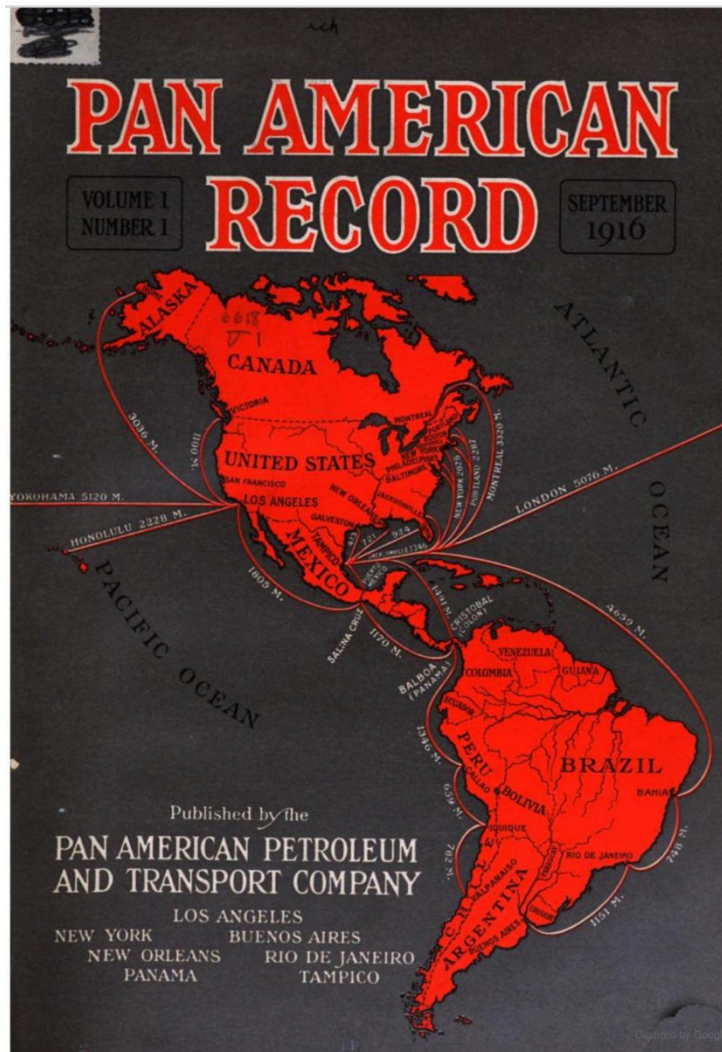


Figure 3: Cover, *Pan American Record*. September 1916.

directly from company rigs in Huasteca, Mexico. The ideal location of Destrehan immediately expanded Mexican Petroleum's vertical integration; Mex-Pet added refinement to their existing oil extraction and transportation operations. When Mexican Petroleum acquired Destrehan in 1914, the company conducted its primary operations in crude extraction from Mexican oil wells, transportation, and storage stations.<sup>13</sup> Doheny's Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Company possessed two affiliates: Mexican Petroleum of California and

Huasteca Petroleum of Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Doheny founded Pan American in the first decade of the twentieth century when he struck "black gold" in California and Mexico.

The fortuitous timing of world events and Doheny's relentless business tactics quickly brought him wealth and power at the expense of refinery workers. Doheny began his fortune in Mexico during the first decade of the twentieth century, aligning himself with corrupt autocrats

<sup>13</sup> La Botz, 120. Mexican Petroleum had stations in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Great Britain.

<sup>14</sup> Owen L. Anderson and J. Jay Park, "South of the Border, Down Mexico Way: The Past, Present, and Future of Petroleum Development in Mexico, Part I," *Natural Resources Journal* 56, No. 2 (Summer 2016): 269.

and defrauding Mexican families for their land.<sup>15</sup> When Mex-Pet purchased Destrehan Plantation in February 1914, the on-going Mexican Revolution provided Doheny an opportunity to secure a cheap and skilled workforce eager to flee the violence.<sup>16</sup> Destrehan's first workforce was made up of white Anglos and Cajuns from Louisiana, a few African Americans, and Mexican nationals who fled the anguish of war to find themselves inside the fences of a company town. A few years into the refinery's construction, Doheny's wealth and Pan American's influence swelled following the 1917 American entrance to World War I. New war technology required massive and steady supplies of petroleum and oil products. Operation of ships, tanks, trucks, and planes became essential during the world's first technology-based war. At the peak of war production and demand, Pan-American transported 100 thousand barrels of oil a day by tanker; in 1917 alone Pan-American imported 35 million barrels of oil from Mexico to the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Doheny's schemes and the hazardous labor of the residential work force returned profits for Pan-Am. While constructing Destrehan Refinery and its company town, heavy labor demands met ecological hazards. In February of 1916, the levee below Destrehan Refinery in St. Rose washed out, threatening to flood miles of river-adjacent property after a heavy rainstorm.<sup>18</sup> In September of 1917, lightning struck a new storage tank at Destrehan Refinery and set it ablaze. Local newspapers reported that "the tank... had a capacity of 50,000 barrels and it is said to have been nearly full of oil at the time of the fire."<sup>19</sup> The article does not mention if any employees were harmed in the explosion, but it demonstrates the volatile nature of constructing Mex-Pet's

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<sup>15</sup> La Botz, 28 & xvii. Dan La Botz writes, Doheny had become "a symbol in Mexico for everything that is evil."

<sup>16</sup> Charles E. Smith, "'MexPet' Refinery at Destrehan, Louisiana," *Pan American Record* 1. No. 6. (July 1917): 14.

<sup>17</sup> La Botz, 73n9.

<sup>18</sup> *The Weekly Town Talk*, February 19, 1916.

<sup>19</sup> *Le Meschacebe*, September 8, 1917.

refinery that workers confronted every day. The hard work of residential employees opened Destrehan refinery in 1918 to full capacity.<sup>20</sup>

The ‘petrochemical revolution,’ economic progress across the Gulf Coast regions of Texas and Louisiana, transformed the use and appearance of historic spaces like Destrehan Plantation during the first decades of the twentieth century. Barrels of gasoline replaced the sugar barrels that filled river barges and distillation towers replaced swaying fields of sugar cane, but the plantation house at Destrehan remained the focal point of Mexican Petroleum’s refinery. Pan-American’s extensive renovations transformed the old plantation house, a private mansion, into a corporate space. Refinery workers added steel beams to the joists to ensure structural support for the second floor and installed screens across the house’s wide verandas.<sup>21</sup> Harnett T. Kane, a popular New Orleans travel writer in the 1930s and 1940s, documents Destrehan’s transformed appearance in his 1945 book *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana*.

Destrehan has been saved, though all about it is changed. Petroleum has supplanted sugar as the source of its upkeep; the land belongs to an oil company, and tankers spot the fields on which cane once sprouted. The slave quarters have been replaced by trim buildings for the workmen; the main residence is converted into a clubhouse for their use. Much has been done to protect and improve the house – too much. Awkward screens crisscross the front, spoiling the façade; trellises hide it in places. Yet in its main sections it is undamaged, and someday the excrescences may be removed.<sup>22</sup>

According to Kane, the beautiful façade of the Destrehan house, a testament to antebellum white Creole planters, did not survive the plantation’s transition to modernity. The mansion had “been saved,” but Kane claimed that the emotive quality of the plantation house had been spoiled by its transformation. Diseased and harmful “excrescences” did not serve an idyllic and romantic

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Pan-American Record* 1, No 1, (September 1916): 9.

<sup>21</sup> Cizek, Lawrence, and Sexton, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana*, (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1945), 138.

imagining of white Creole luxury. Kane longed for the romanticized memory of antebellum Creole planters without recognizing the twentieth century survival of elite leisure supported by social dynamics of inequality. Economic progress along the River Road did not dismantle the core hierarchies of race and labor, even if it did introduce “excrescences” to the façade of antebellum elite spaces.

During this transitional period from 1914 to 1918, Mexican Petroleum transformed the use of Destrehan into a modern petrochemical refinery, revolutionizing both the land and the products of the site. Instead of sugarcane and sharecropping, Destrehan now refined crude oil, creating modern products in a modern company town. The transformation into a refinery redefined the site’s economic and cultural value for many South Louisianans. The refinery provided necessities through employment, promising a form of progress to working-class South Louisianans who for generations had little choice outside of agricultural work. Destrehan’s ‘petrochemical revolution’ materialized some forms of progress while preserving the historic plantation house to reconfigure labor hierarchies based in race for a new modern industry.

### Global Industry in Local Louisiana

Louisiana exemplified the rapid industrialization of southern states at the turn of the twentieth century. When many former enslavers faced the increased operation costs of paid labor for the first time, they sold their plantations to established industries from the North and West seeking plentiful land and labor. Heavy industry relocated to the South, encouraged and

accommodated by state legislators who saw a way out of their deficient postbellum economic ruination.<sup>23</sup>

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, global petrochemical competitors became neighbors in southern Louisiana. The largest petroleum and oil corporations in the first half of the twentieth century consisted of just a few global competitors. Doheny's Pan American Petroleum of California competed with Royal Dutch Shell Oil of Europe and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil of Indiana for the preeminent position in petrochemical production and refinement.<sup>24</sup> In 1916, Royal Dutch Shell Oil constructed their refinery and company town on River Road: the New Orleans Refining Company or "Norco."<sup>25</sup> Standard Oil established their Louisiana refinery in 1909 outside of Baton Rouge; it preceded its neighbors to the south, Norco and Destrehan.<sup>26</sup> Within a decade, three of the largest global petrochemical companies invested in land along the Mississippi River and revolutionized the state's economy.

When Mexican Petroleum purchased the Destrehan property in 1914, the new petrochemical refinery perpetuated the social and political power rooted in river-adjacent land ownership. Petrochemical corporations' ownership of riverfront properties adopted the region's established systems of social inequalities based in racism and a neglected working class that provided the labor required to keep riverfront land productive. Corporations like Pan-Am saw Louisiana's strategic gulf location, low-cost and mostly non-organized labor, low state taxes, and

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<sup>23</sup> N.G. Dalrymple, "An Analysis of the Governorship of Huey Long," Ouachita Baptist University Graduate Thesis, 1968. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/232825512.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> La Botz, *Doheny*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> "Norco Fact Sheet," Norco Manufacturing Complex, Shell Oil. <https://www.shell.us/about-us/projects-and-locations/norco-manufacturing-complex/shell-norco-manufacturing-complex.html>

The company towns of Destrehan and Norco developed concurrently, but Shell's Norco Refinery outlasted Mex-Pet's Destrehan Refinery by sixty-three years. Shell Norco is still in operation today.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "Ol' Man River or Cancer Alley?," 251.



disenfranchisement of the local Black population as an ideal opportunity to expand their operations with minimal hindrances and operating costs.<sup>27</sup>

Private industry quickly purchased plantations like Destrehan for their strategic location and quality as the “best drained, most compact, most flood resistant, and least susceptible to hurricane-force storm surges.”<sup>28</sup> Destrehan’s mile-long river frontage on the deep and wide Mississippi River allowed large tank steamers to unload crude oil from Mexican wells directly to the refinery. The refinery distilled and refined crude oil direct from Huasteca’s oil fields into asphalt, refined oil, diesel, and gasoline.<sup>29</sup> Just as the plantation’s riverfront location assisted its agricultural production and transportation, so too did the river assist the refinery’s operations. The riverfront land occupied by industrial corporations, part of the “500-year flood plain,” is a product of the river’s natural levee and man-made levees designed by the French colonial planters and constructed by enslaved Africans to prevent crop flooding.<sup>30</sup>

Aside from strategic reasons, petrochemical corporations chose Louisiana for the state’s low-cost, underserved, and unorganized labor force. South Louisianans were eager for newer job opportunities with stable wages as the state’s high poverty rate and monolithic agricultural economy left many families without work or land. Companies like Mex-Pet recognized the high rates of unemployment as an opportunity to capitalize on underserved labor in new company towns that provided necessities and resources not acknowledged by the state government.

As petrochemical companies purchased riverfront land and established refineries, the residential workforces, and South Louisianans in general, dealt with the implications of Louisiana’s tax structure and capital-friendly state government. Scholar Darin Acosta details the

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<sup>27</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 251.

<sup>28</sup> Acosta, “The Petrochemical Industrial Complex,” 4.

<sup>29</sup> Charles E. Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 1 (September 1916): 9.

<sup>30</sup> Acosta, 5.

alliance between corporations and state politicians as possessing a “pro-growth attitude” that “incentivize[d] oil and gas development” over the health and wealth of the local population.<sup>31</sup> By the 1930s, Louisiana’s state budget and basic functions depended on tax revenue from local refineries. The high poverty rate in Louisiana led to insignificant individuals’ property tax revenues for municipal projects. Therefore, industry’s tax contributions funded local education and infrastructure projects, but Louisiana politicians remained hesitant to increase taxes on industry for fear of their relocation to another state.<sup>32</sup> In the 1930s, over twenty percent of industrial property tax directly financed Louisiana’s segregated public schools.<sup>33</sup> Each time the conservative state legislature passed commercial tax breaks for refining and manufacturing, public education funding took the hit.<sup>34</sup>

The Jim Crow era state legislature allowed petrochemical executives to direct their refinery locations to the backyards of disenfranchised Black Louisianan neighborhoods.<sup>35</sup> Louisiana’s petrochemical revolution was contingent upon the collaboration between state and industries for environmentally racist initiatives. Louisiana’s disenfranchisement of the Black population figures as one of the largest factors that attracted petrochemical companies to the River Road.<sup>36</sup> Jim Crow laws culminating in Louisiana’s 1898 state constitution prevented Black citizens’ democratic involvement, therefore impeding Black political resistance to massively wealthy companies and their executives. The River Road had been a concentrated plantation

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<sup>31</sup> Acosta, 8.

<sup>32</sup> “Letter from Governor Huey P. Long to the Couch Committee,” (Teaching American History in Louisiana, Huey P. Long Collection, Louisiana Digital Library), July 20, 1929. <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/tahil-hpl%3A212>

<sup>33</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 253.

<sup>34</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 291.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Willard, “Environmental Racism,” *Southern University Law Review* 19, No 1. (1992): 83.

In his article, Willard argues that the “Not In My Back Yard” (N.I.M.B.Y.) sentiment in Louisiana was rather: “Put In Black’s Back Yard,” or P.I.B.B.Y.

<sup>36</sup> Willard, 82.

region for centuries and many descendants of enslaved Africans established communities there immediately following emancipation. The region maintains a majority-Black population today.

The Louisiana state government's collaboration with global petrochemical industries reconfigured the established societal hierarchy in which Louisianans' financial survival often depended upon the plantation. From the outset of Louisiana's industrial makeover, both state and industry governed the lives and livelihoods of South Louisianians. Industry's possession of Louisiana's best land depended on the disenfranchisement of local African American citizens. By taking advantage of the state's low-cost, underserved, and large working class, petrochemical companies coerced impoverished communities into their company towns. In the first decades of twentieth century South Louisiana, agricultural sharecropper communities became industrial company towns.

#### The Company Town of Destrehan, Louisiana

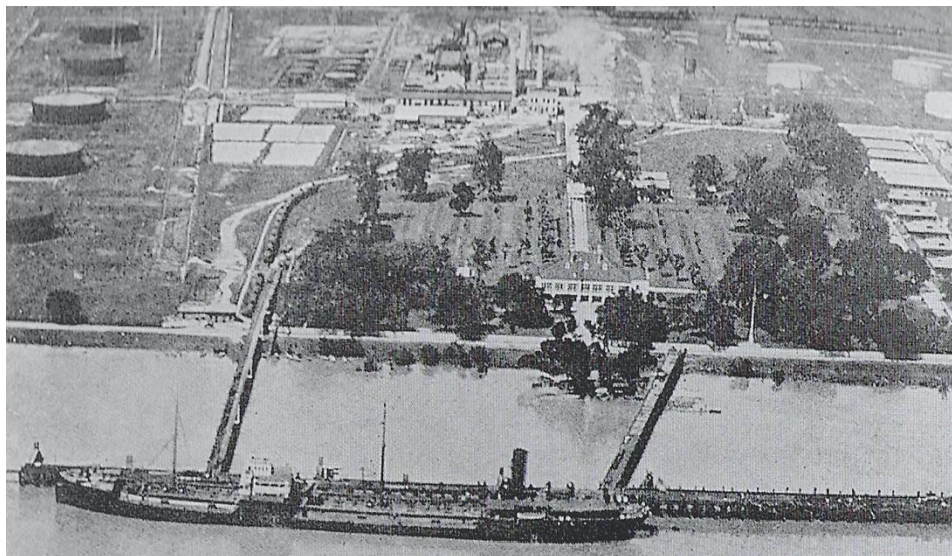


Figure 4: The Destrehan Refinery docks, main house, storage tanks, and processing facilities. Date unknown. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, p. 53.

Like many other large oil and petrochemical corporations, Pan American adopted “welfare capitalist” ideologies, creating company towns to provide housing and resources for employees and to thwart labor organizing in their refineries. The 1012-acre refinery at Destrehan was Mexican Petroleum’s largest single landholding in the United States and provided the space necessary for a new company town.<sup>37</sup> Historian Stuart Brandes defines welfare capitalism as “any service provided for the comfort or improvement of employees which was neither a necessity of the industry nor required by law.”<sup>38</sup> Welfare capitalism combined democratic ideals and bureaucratic techniques to address the needs of a modern labor force.<sup>39</sup> The Progressive Movement in the late nineteenth century advocated for rights of the working class and opposed the rampant exploitation of labor forces that exclusively served capitalists’ profits; Progressives’ solution advocated for labor organization and collective bargaining. Welfare capitalism sought to raise employees’ quality of life without negotiating labor rights through unions. By providing low-rent housing, education, and recreational spaces, company towns provided necessities and services to labor forces while discouraging the formation of labor unions through paternalist supervision and division.

Welfare capitalism existed to control the residential labor force through supervision and dependency on the *parent corporation*. The company town created an entire community whose lives, inside and outside of work, depended on their employment at the refinery. By 1916, up to 3% of the American population lived within a company town.<sup>40</sup> Low-cost housing, education, and recreational sports compelled under-served working class families to company towns where

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 1 (September 1916): 9.

<sup>38</sup> Stuart D. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism 1880-1940*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> Brandes, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

refinery management supervised their daily lives. The paternalistic company town aimed to meet workers' necessities and prevent any action that did not serve the interests of the corporation. By keeping wages competitive and rents low, corporations coerced skilled and non-skilled workers into the residential workforce.

The company town was an anti-union weapon of corporate violence that enforced corporations' economic and social control over the residential labor force. By racially segregating housing, companies like Mex-Pet divided the residential labor force and lessened the likelihood of labor organization.<sup>41</sup> Lease agreements, a mandated condition of employment, stipulated that if the employee left full employment, the lease was nullified. Therefore, if an employee joined a strike, their absence from full employment would jeopardize their family's home, their child's education, and their place within the community.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the fenced "closed town" patrolled by company police prevented employees' mobility and personal freedom to leave the grounds. Lease agreements and the "closed town" infringed upon civil rights and liberties of employees, but capitalists argued that it was a voluntary contract, as employees had the right to opt out of employment.<sup>43</sup> Corporations strategically chose to establish company towns in areas of the country that had stagnated economies and underserved populations distant from large cities. Did refinery employees have the right, or capability, to opt out of residential employment if it was their only option?

Although the company town structure exploited civil liberties and operated through coercive control, residential workers found community and camaraderie during company recreational activities. At the Destrehan Refinery, Mex-Pet encouraged recreational activities by

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<sup>41</sup> Brandes, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Brandes, 51.

sponsoring entertainment events, community spaces and a company baseball team. Out on the corporate version of the field of dreams, refinery workers of South Louisiana enjoyed America's pastime. Sports competition met with capitalist competition on South Louisiana baseball fields where the Destrehan Mex-Pet team batted against other company town teams like their neighbors at Shell Norco. Company sponsored baseball teams reinforced welfare capitalism's ideology that patriotism, Americanism, and capitalism composed the core of the nation... not democratic labor organization. The Destrehan baseball team encouraged workforce camaraderie but always under the condition of constant corporate supervision.

The constant supervision and paternalist structure of the company town emanated from the refinery Superintendent, Charles E. Smith. Smith used Pan American's company publication, *The Pan-American Record*, as a mouthpiece to shape the consciousness of workers. In his article, Smith presents the plantation's history to the company town workforce through the lens of his nostalgic perspective for slavery while invoking the refinery as a symbol of progress. In September of 1916, Smith began his article in the company town newspaper with a reminder of the plantation's past and its history of paternalism:

In the 'days before the war,' when Destrehan plantation was typical of the beautiful colonial homes of Southern Louisiana, with its succulent fields of sugar cane, and hundreds of slaves to serve every whim and wish of master and mistress, it would have been impossible... to believe that so soon this fine property... would be

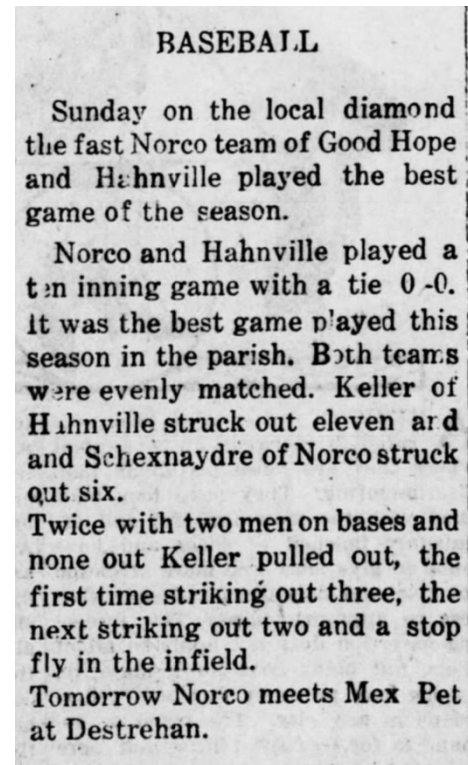


Figure 5: "Baseball," *Saint Charles Herald*, May 17, 1921.

the location of one of the most up-to-date oil refineries in the country.<sup>44</sup>

Smith's use of the company newspaper aimed to shape the workforce's perspective by simultaneously preserving the race and labor hierarchies from Destrehan's past while the plantation also manifested modernity as "the most up-to-date" refinery. Harnett T. Kane saw the conflict between modernity and romanticized nostalgia as detrimental to the site's cultural value, but Smith invoked both to remind workers of their position in the refinery's labor hierarchy.

As superintendent of the refinery, Smith looked down upon the workforce from the second-story verandas of Destrehan's manor house. While traversing the pillared galleries, Smith imagined "hundreds of slaves to serve every whim and wish of master and mistress," placing himself as the arbiter of progress and inheritor of the position atop the labor hierarchy. Mex-Pet refinery management looked to "the 'days before the war'" to imagine their presence and management of the company town and refinery.

Mexican Petroleum's reconstruction of Destrehan Plantation accommodated a large workforce in need of housing, but that housing maintained the racial hierarchies and divisions of Jim Crow Louisiana.<sup>45</sup> Later in his article, Smith wrote about the conditions of company housing: "The Executive Officers were not less considerate of the welfare and comfort of their employees, as they have had erected for their use, beautiful cottages, bachelor apartments, mess hall, swimming pool, ice plant and an electric light system which afford them every comfort."<sup>46</sup> But, the comfortable housing and recreational spaces Smith listed accommodated only white employees.

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 1, (September 1916): 10.

<sup>45</sup> *The Saint Charles Herald*, May 7, 1921. The Lower Mississippi River region depended on company baseball teams across southern Louisiana for access to America's pastime.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 1, (September 1916): 11.

White employees at Destrehan Refinery truly received “every comfort” that they could expect from their *parent corporation*. Although half of all U.S. company town houses had no lighting and one-third had no running water, Mex-Pet provided white Destrehan residential employees with a statistically unique and privileged experience compared to other company town residents across the country.<sup>47</sup> The electricity, swimming pool, and ice plant are particularly interesting as during the late 1910s, most of the South outside of urban centers possessed very little infrastructure. Paved roads, electric grids and running water were rarities in the rural South. By providing these rarities, Mex-Pet provided comforts for white employees not enjoyed by most other South Louisianans, and especially not Mex-Pet employees of color.

Mex-Pet explicitly favored the white labor force by preventing Black and Mexican workers’ access to those amenities. Refinery executives and management adopted Louisiana’s racial system of Jim Crow as a mechanism of control over the residential workforce inside of the already oppressive company town. In effect, their policies fomented difference and stratification along race and labor lines that staved off labor organizing and its threat to corporate profits.

In a later installment of Smith’s article, he invited Mex-Pet employees to adopt his imagination of Destrehan’s company town through the romantic and white supremacist lens of the “Old South.” The article accompanied a photo of three African American men, presumably employees of the Destrehan Refinery, standing in front of the company’s post office. Smith wrote, “just above the post office appear the negro quarters, the same old quarters which served

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<sup>47</sup> Brandes, 42.



the planters for so many generations.”<sup>48</sup> The segregated and vastly unequal housing for African Americans reflected the historical geographies of the sugar plantation. As a plantation, the cabins for enslaved families at Destrehan sat one-quarter mile away from the manor house, now, the same cabins housed Black Mex-Pet employees geographically removed from the rest of the residential accommodations.<sup>49</sup> New “beautiful cottages and bachelor’s apartments” for white employees varied drastically from the old cabins which held within them generations of trauma and the foundations of Black history at the plantation.

Smith’s use of stereotypical images and language cast contemporary African American

employees as indistinguishable from enslaved Africans and their descendants. The old cabins “shelter quite a population of black souls who, however up-to-date they may be in their store clothes and shoes, are still the same, simple, childish and happy-go-lucky people as were their ancestors.”<sup>50</sup> From Smith’s perspective, African Americans’ intellect and humanity were exempt from modernity and progress. No matter which commodity the plantation produced, white perspectives divorced Black labor from Black humanity.

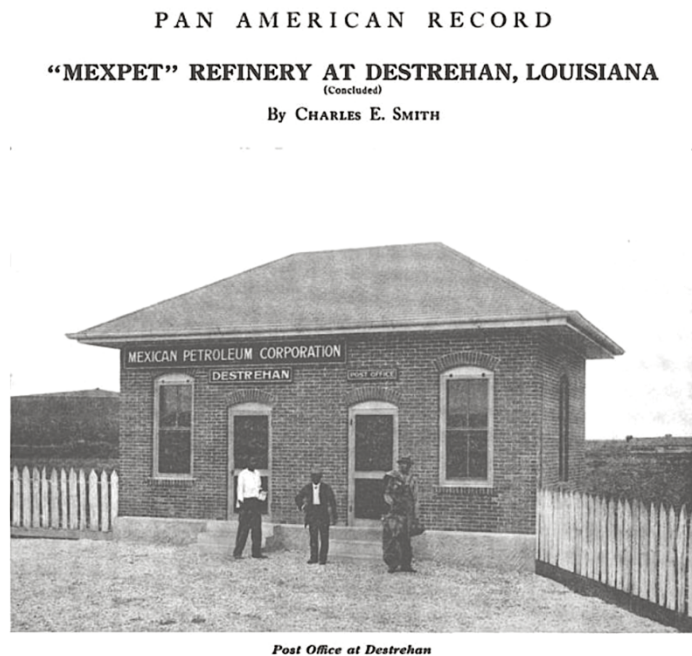


Figure 6: *Pan American Record*, Vol. 1. No. 6. July 1917, p.13

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 6, (July 1917): 13.

<sup>49</sup> Tour guide’s statement at Destrehan Plantation Museum, December 20, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 6, (July 1917): 13.

Smith's remarks disparaged the humanity of contemporary Black laborers while perpetuating the historical erasure of Africans' forced migration to North America during the Middle Passage. By writing, "their ancestors, who first came to Destrehan in the early days of the sugar industry of Louisiana," Smith posits that enslaved people decided to come to French Louisiana, instead of the horrors of the Middle Passage, kidnapping, bondage, and captivity.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout Smith's discussion of Black Mex-Pet employees, his racist language and stereotyped characterizations of African Americans used imagery rooted in slavery to influence Mex-Pet's contemporary labor force, at Destrehan and elsewhere, to imagine Destrehan as simultaneously an antebellum plantation and a modern refinery company town. This hybridized idea of Destrehan's past and present appeared most evidently in living accommodations. Black workers lived in old slave cabins, white workers lived in new "trim buildings," and Smith, the refinery superintendent took up residence in the old Creole mansion. Smith's residence in the mansion completed the refinery's multi-tiered hierarchical living accommodations based upon race, labor position, and privilege.<sup>52</sup>

Mexican Petroleum reconfigured antebellum plantation production in the modern age of oil and petrochemical refinement through residential segregation and the repurposing of antebellum slave cabins. Along with the company post office, Mex-Pet erected a company store and gasoline service station, "where touring parties of automobilists can replenish their stock of gasoline or cool their motors with fresh and sparkling water."<sup>53</sup> Destrehan's post office provided an essential service to the workforce whose residence in the company town stifled their mobility. The company store, an adaptation from plantation stores, acted as a crucial component of

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1, No. 6, (July 1917): 13.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1, No. 1, (September 1916): 11.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1, No. 6, (July 1917): 13.

company towns' exploitation of residential labor forces. Company stores over-charged for necessities of food and home goods to reduce their losses paid to workers' wages. A 1934 National Recovery Administration study found that company stores inflated prices anywhere from 2.1 - 10.4% compared to nearby independent retailers.<sup>54</sup> Company town residents invented their own names for company stores: "pluck-me stores" "gip-joints" and "robber-saries."<sup>55</sup>

Destrehan's company town structure, and welfare capitalism at large, produced a fundamental imbalance of power. Through modern aspects of welfare capitalism like lease agreements, a company gas station and company store, Mexican Petroleum regained some of its operating costs lost to workers' wages and preserved the residential labor force's dependence on the plantation. The lives and livelihoods of the residential workforce became reliant upon the company for their wages, housing, food, and essential freedoms of communication and transportation. Through the company town, executives and refinery management extracted resources of time and labor while stoking racial divisions among the workforces. The hybridized imaginings of Destrehan as a plantation of the "Old South" and a modern refinery preserved the racial and labor hierarchies made most obvious in company town living accommodations. Through the company town, Pan-Am's corporate leadership of the Mex-Pet Destrehan Refinery pulled power and capital upward through hierarchies rooted in the history and soil of Destrehan Plantation.

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<sup>54</sup> Brandes, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

### The Petrochemical Industry: A Mechanism for Power

As one of the largest global petrochemical and oil corporations in the first decades of the twentieth century, Pan American Petroleum Company established its first refinery in the United States at Destrehan Plantation. Edward L. Doheny's effort to expand the wealth and power of Pan American and its affiliate, Mex-Pet, led to the company's purchase of Destrehan in 1914. Doheny's investment in Destrehan expanded his influence as well as the company's operations. His shrewd and immoral business practices prioritized profits over employees and increased Pan American's economic force in the stock market. Doheny then utilized his personal and corporate influence to expand his political power. Under Doheny's control, Mex-Pet's ownership of Destrehan perpetuated the greed and power based in white capitalist ownership of riverfront land in South Louisiana. Like an absentee planter, Doheny never lived at the site, but his corruption expanded Pan-Am and Mex-Pet's influence in Louisiana and across America... until it caught up to him.

Over the course of four years in Mexico, Doheny established himself as a calculating capitalist willing to cross ethical boundaries for financial success. In 1902, Doheny incorporated the Mexican Petroleum Company of California for the new company's oil drilling in Mexico. Two years later, Doheny had secured a ten-year tax exemption from his collusion with Mexican president Porfirio Diaz.<sup>56</sup> Emboldened by political friendships and miniscule operating costs, Doheny's operations in Mexico exploited locals for their labor, stole land from Mexican families, and bribed officials. In 1906, the Mexican Petroleum Company struck oil in La Huasteca near the state of Tampico. Doheny named the Mexico-based affiliate of his oil

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<sup>56</sup> La Botz, *Doheny*, 28-32.

company after this successful drill, Huasteca Petroleum Company, and the Pan American Petroleum Corporation was formed.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout his time in Mexico, Doheny's investment in corruption returned corporate profits. Huasteca Petroleum Company began with oil production, specializing in extraction and transportation. To drill, the company required land. Huasteca acquired land in Mexico through mostly illegitimate practices, as the corporation faced little push-back from a destabilized federal government approaching the Mexican Revolution. Extortion, bribery, dispossession, force-outs, land-grabs, and forged documents constituted Doheny's cutthroat business tactics to attain land for drilling.<sup>58</sup> Doheny himself admitted to his perverse tactics: "you first try to win a man over, and failing this, you buy him."<sup>59</sup> Doheny's crony capitalist ventures in the United States and Mexico brought him \$10 million a year between 1910 and 1925.<sup>60</sup> A result of his crony practices in Mexico, Doheny's Pan-Am and its affiliates saw record-breaking stock growth throughout the first half of the 1920s.

Pan-American's new Destrehan refinery, oil production in Mexico, and increased public petroleum usage for the war, automobiles, and infrastructure projects reflected in the wall street ticker. In June of 1921, Mexican Petroleum stocks sold for \$139.25 each, the highest-valued individual stock across the exchange.<sup>61</sup> Both Mex-Pet and Pan-Am stocks soared higher in October of 1922. Wall Street reports showed that Mex-Pet had "cash on hand at this time amounting to \$27,500,000. The strength of Mexican Petroleum has been so pronounced and the rise so abrupt," as to overwhelm many other exchanges on Wall Street.<sup>62</sup> Petroleum was king.

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<sup>57</sup> La Botz, 32.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Gene Z. Harhan, *The Bad Yankee / El Peligro Yankee* (Chapel Hill: Documentary Publications, 1985): 6.

<sup>60</sup> La Botz, 123.

<sup>61</sup> *The Shreveport Journal*, June 9, 1921.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times of Shreveport*, October 18, 1922.

Vertically integrated petroleum corporations with production, transportation, refinement, distribution, and sales competed in a league their own.

Massive petrochemical corporations continued to grow in the post-World War I period. The fifteenth volume of *National Petroleum News* in 1923 printed the headline, “New Orleans Refineries Plan Enlarging Plants.” Royal Dutch Shell expanded its operations that year at its Norco Refinery a half-mile from Destrehan. G.M. Stein, sales manager for the Destrehan Refinery, considered diversifying their supply outside of Huasteca’s Tampico crude oil if import levels did not increase to meet demand.<sup>63</sup> In the early 1920s, high demand and sustained growth projected fortunes for executives, but also increased responsibilities for the residential workforce who maintained refinery processes. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Doheny rapidly expanded the corporate and financial growth of Pan-Am through corrupt business practices. Doheny might have imagined his legacy as a self-made capitalist and oil magnate, but by the mid-1920s, his name became synonymous with scandal following his bribery of a federal bureaucrat.

### Petroleum’s Political Power and the Teapot Dome Scandal

Doheny, ultimate controller and owner of the Destrehan property, did not reside at the plantation but utilized the capital it created to multiply his political influence. In the words of historian Dan La Botz, throughout the 1920s, “oil positively oozed from the White House and the Congress.” Bribery, corruption, and extortion gave the impression of individual bad faith acts, but “the reality was that petroleum was in power.”<sup>64</sup> Doheny himself played a leading role

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<sup>63</sup> *National Petroleum News* 15, (1923): 97.

<sup>64</sup> La Botz, *Doheny*, 184.

in the public unveiling of corruption between federal government and the petrochemical industry. Federal corruption involving Rockefeller's Standard Oil and Doheny's Pan American defined one of the first scandals covered by mass-media in the age of oil: the "Teapot Dome Scandal."

In May of 1921, President Warren G. Harding transferred management of federal oil reserves from the Navy to the Interior Department.<sup>65</sup> For over a year, the two largest reserves, Teapot Dome in Wyoming, and Elk Hills in California, sat vacant. Albert B. Fall, Secretary of the Interior for the Harding administration, illegally took personal control of the oil reserves in December of 1922. Once in full possession of the reserves, Secretary Fall gave Teapot Dome to Harry Sinclair of Standard Oil and gave Elk Hills to his old friend and former business partner, E.L. Doheny of Pan-American.<sup>66</sup>

The extent of corruption between the executive branch of the federal government and "big oil" received nationwide attention with expansive consequences. In March 1923, four months after gifting the reserves, Fall resigned as Secretary of the Interior.<sup>67</sup> After Harding's death in office in August of 1923, Calvin Coolidge's administration tried to mitigate the political fallout. Coolidge quickly appointed special prosecutors Atlee Pomerene, a Democrat, and Owen J. Roberts, a Republican.<sup>68</sup> In January of 1924, the senate voted unanimously to cancel the oil leases given to Doheny and Sinclair by Secretary Fall.

The Senate Lands Committee questioned Doheny on January 24, 1924.<sup>69</sup> Chairman Senator Walsh from Montana worked with special prosecutors Pomerene and Roberts and took

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<sup>65</sup> *The Monroe News-Star*, December 15, 1926.

<sup>66</sup> J. Leonard Bates, "The Teapot Dome Scandal and the Election of 1924." *The American Historical Review* 60, No.2. (January 1955): 304.

<sup>67</sup> *The Monroe News-Star*, December 15, 1926.

<sup>68</sup> Bates, "The Teapot Dome Scandal," 312.

<sup>69</sup> Bates, 310.

the lead in questioning Doheny. During the questioning, he implicated his own son, E.L. Doheny Jr. in the fulfillment of the bribe by stating that Doheny Jr. carried the money across state lines in a black satchel. Newspapers around the country detailed Doheny's shocking testimony:

The loan was made on a note, Doheny said, and the money in bills was brought from New York to Washington by Doheny's son in a small black satchel and turned over to Fall, who signed the note, which was then returned to Doheny in New York. ... Doheny's testimony regarding the loan to Fall is in direct contradiction to Fall's testimony before the committee that he never at any time approached Doheny on the subject of borrowing money.<sup>70</sup>

At his senate testimony, Doheny attempted to deflect potential charges by using the word "loan," instead of "bribe." Doheny claimed that Secretary Fall approached him about a \$100,000 "loan" to buy land "which would give him a footing."<sup>71</sup> Doheny's next response to Senator Walsh was just as shocking: Doheny stated that he and Fall "met in New Orleans last Sunday night [and] it was agreed that Doheny should appear before the committee and reveal details of the loan."<sup>72</sup> Why did the two men choose New Orleans, as they both lived in California? Did their meeting take place at Destrehan? Did the two men meet to conspire, or did Doheny decide to sacrifice Fall's friendship, livelihood, and reputation for his own? Likely the latter, Doheny's damning final answer in his testimony placed all responsibility on Fall: "If Fall were human he might be inclined to give more favorable consideration to a lease proposal made by [myself] after he had received the \$100,000 loan."<sup>73</sup> Secretary Fall refused to testify further after Doheny's damning statements.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *The Times of Shreveport*, January 25, 1924.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> *The Times of Shreveport*, January 25, 1924.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> *Springfield Republican*, February 3, 1924.



The Teapot Dome Scandal investigation revealed the extent of Doheny's connection to political elites. "There was a hint of another sensation" during the Senate testimony, when "Senator Walsh suddenly popped a question about a recent visit of Doheny to the White House. It developed, however, that it was merely a social call. Doheny and his wife had tea with President and Mrs. Coolidge and there were present several others who had nothing to do with the oil leases."<sup>75</sup> Despite the claims of others in attendance, the Doheny's invitation to the White House for tea demonstrated their uninterrupted and immediate access to the executive branch even during the scandal's nationwide fallout.

In May 1925, Albert Fall and E.L. Doheny were indicted for criminal conspiracy in Washington D.C. and the Los Angeles Federal Court invalidated Pan-American's lease of Elk Hills.<sup>76</sup> A U.S. federal court convicted Albert B. Fall of bribery and sentenced him to one year but he served only nine months. Doheny's criminal trial for bribery began on March 12, 1930, eight years after his son delivered the bribe in a black satchel. The trial's arguments lasted ten days and the jury deliberated for one hour on March 22 before returning a non-guilty verdict. Doheny was acquitted. In the eyes of the law, he did not send the bribery that Fall was guilty of receiving.<sup>77</sup>

The Teapot Dome Scandal occupied nearly a decade of political and legal apparatuses in its fallout, allowing Doheny to liquidate his assets a month before his criminal indictment.<sup>78</sup> As President and founder of Pan-American and its affiliates, Doheny owned and determined the company's use of Destrehan for 11 years, from the 1914 purchase to his 1925 division and sale of Pan American. During those 11 years, Doheny's corruption and immorality transformed the

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<sup>75</sup> *The Times of Shreveport*, January 25, 1924.

<sup>76</sup> *Monroe News Star*, December 15, 1926.

<sup>77</sup> La Botz, 177-78.

<sup>78</sup> *The Crowley Post Signal*, April 4, 1925.

economic power that he refined from the land and labor at Destrehan into political influence. Edward L. Doheny passed away in 1935, but the practices of ruthless capitalism continued through his widow Carrie Estelle and company leadership.<sup>79</sup> His disposal of friend and ally Albert B. Fall spoke to his personal



Figure 7: "Doheny Family Sells Pan-Am," *Crowley Post-Signal*, April 4, 1925.

ruthlessness; Doheny discarded Fall's friendship and livelihood for the sake of maintaining his own wealth, status, and power.

### Buyouts & Mergers

Following the scandal's fallout in 1925, Doheny split the Pan American Petroleum Company into two branches: Pan American Western Petroleum Company remained in California and Standard Oil of Indiana purchased Pan American Eastern Petroleum Company.<sup>80</sup> Headlines of "Doheny Family Sells Pan-Am" ran in regional newspapers across the United States. Articles reported that "control of the Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Company passed out of the hands of the Doheny family yesterday for a price estimated in financial circles at \$40,000,000."<sup>81</sup> British capital firm Blair and Co. joined Standard Oil in purchasing the Pan-American Petroleum Company, and therefore Destrehan Refinery.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Monroe News-Star*, September 2, 1935.

<sup>80</sup> La Botz, 162.

<sup>81</sup> *The Crowley Post Signal*, April 4, 1925.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

The new British American Pan-Am operated Destrehan Refinery from 1925 to 1949. In 1949, Pan American Petroleum ownership reorganized once again when it merged with Root Petroleum on August 31. The new company adopted the name Pan-American Southern Corporation and operated two U.S. refinery complexes: Destrehan, Louisiana and El Dorado,



Figure 8: Pan American Southern Advertisement, *The Crowley Post-Signal*, August 31, 1949.

Arkansas.<sup>83</sup>

Although executive leadership evolved throughout the refinery's 44 years of existence, the various corporations who owned

Destrehan preserved the social

and economic power rooted in riverfront land ownership. The Destrehan Refinery operated under a new corporation, but the company town remained until 1951. As the residential workforce at Destrehan labored daily for wages and endured unequal living arrangements, E.L. Doheny successfully escaped legal consequences and quickly liquidated his assets. Shortly after Doheny sold Pan-Am and the Teapot Dome Scandal concluded, the stock market crashed in 1929. The Great Depression renewed interest in labor organization and union membership surged nationwide, but in Gulf Coast refineries, organization did not increase until World War II. As refinery workforces organized, the welfare capitalist practices of the previous decades began to wane.

<sup>83</sup> *The Crowley Post Signal*, August 31, 1949.

### The Workforce and the Oil Workers Union

Widespread organized labor in Louisiana's Gulf Coast refineries materialized in the World War II and postwar periods after decades of executives' and refinery management's segregated and hierarchical operations within refineries and welfare capitalist company towns. The evolution of labor organizing in South Louisiana's refineries sought to resist exploitation, better the working lives (and residential lives in company towns), and bargain for increased wages.

In the petrochemical refineries of Texas and Louisiana's Gulf Coast, the multi-tiered labor force followed racial lines. Refineries across the Gulf Coast employed white men (Anglos in Texas, and Cajuns, or Acadians, as well as Anglos in South Louisiana), African Americans, Mexican nationals, and Mexican Americans. The hierarchical employment structure began with hiring practices. Skilled white employees with high school diplomas received ultimate priority, while unskilled and uneducated white employees were favored over skilled and educated Black employees.<sup>84</sup>

Pan-Am perpetuated structural violence against the residential workforce though segregated residences, labor positions, and daily lives. In the first years of Destrehan Refinery, Superintendent Charles Smith concluded his article in the *Pan-American Record* by praising the efficient and silent qualities of the refinery workforce.

Trained oil men, most of them with many years' experience in Mexico, they each perform their individual duties with intelligence and fidelity... Perhaps their... sufferings down in Mexico in the revolutionary days... taught [them] 'teamwork,' but rather it is, I believe, the inspiring example of the management. ...and so it

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<sup>84</sup> Tyler Priest, "Cat Crackers and Picket Lines: Organized Labor in US Gulf Coast Oil Refining," January 2018, 232. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322658288>

happens that the refinery at Destrehan runs like some great frictionless machine, silently and efficiently.<sup>85</sup>

According to Smith, the corporation prioritized production and efficiency, practices that silenced the residential labor force. Destrehan's silent workforce signified the success of Pan-Am's welfare capitalist principles: paternalism, control, and exploitation. The refinery superintendent interpreted the lack of cohesion among the refinery workforce as an attribute worthy of praise. The company town's design intentionally fostered a lack of cohesion amongst the hundreds of employees. However, to Smith, the disunity of the workforce assured Destrehan's function as a "silent," "frictionless machine."

The trend toward unity and organization began slowly in the Gulf Coast. During the first decades of the twentieth century, oil and petroleum boomed across the Gulf Coast, employing thousands of men as boilermakers, carpenters, welders, electricians, and pipefitters.<sup>86</sup> As Smith's article ran in the company newspaper, refineries in Trinity Bay along Texas' Gulf Coast began to organize in September of 1917. Workers at Goose Creek's Humble Oil Refinery, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, struck from September to November for better wages. The new labor organization and refinery leadership met an agreement and management promised not to discriminate against unionized workers in the re-hiring process. They lied. Employees were forced to sign "yellow-dog contracts" as a condition of employment, which forfeited employment status if an employee joined a union. Many men were fired, most fled the area, and some renewed their effort the following year to create an industrial union for all white refinery and oil field workers. In June of 1918, fourteen representatives of oil field and refinery workers met at the American Federation

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<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Pan American Record* 1 No. 1, (September 1916): 14.

<sup>86</sup> Tyler Priest and Michael Botson, "Bucking the Odds: Organized Labor in Gulf Coast Oil Refining," *Journal of American History* 99, No. 1. (June 2012): 6.

of Labor conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, three of the fourteen originating from Louisiana.<sup>87</sup>

The delegation secured a charter under the AFL for the new International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well & Refinery Workers of America, an industrial union open to white men employed in every stage of the oil and petrochemical industry.<sup>88</sup>

The conflict between capital and labor existed as a constant tug-of-war for living wages, safer working conditions, and the political right to organize. The same year that the International Association formed, Destrehan Refinery opened its full capacity and Doheny proudly proclaimed the high wages paid by Pan-American and its affiliates.<sup>89</sup> Doheny's proclamation of high wages and welfare capitalist company towns staved off labor organizing in Pan-Am refineries successfully for decades.

Politics figured prominently in the oil workers' unions of the Gulf Coast, where to be affiliated with radical and leftist unions popular in the Northeast risked violence and potential failure. Also, labor organizing in the Jim Crow South "consisted of a dual struggle by all workers for dignity, job security, and workplace control, and by racial minorities for workplace equality."<sup>90</sup> The new all-white International Association quickly and deliberately distanced itself from the leftist and racially integrated Industrial Workers of the World. In March of 1920, IWW recruiters distributed flyers across oil fields in North Louisiana and the International Association denounced both the recruiting and the organization at large. W.J. Pitcher of Local 101 told the Shreveport newspaper, "our organization... is affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and has no connection with the so-called union that is scattering this literature. ... If we find a

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<sup>87</sup> Ray Davidson, *Challenging the Giants*, 25.

<sup>88</sup> Davidson, 25.

<sup>89</sup> La Botz, 151.

<sup>90</sup> Priest and Botson, "Bucking the Odds," 2.

man holding a card with the IWW, he is... required to surrender his membership.”<sup>91</sup> As part of the AFL, the International Association prioritized bread and butter issues, the immediate betterment of working conditions and higher wages, unlike the IWW who prioritized widespread social and political organizing across industries, called for class solidarity, and denounced racial discriminatory policies in state and industry.<sup>92</sup>

The color line complicated goals of collective bargaining in the South for both Blacks and whites; segregated unions were only half as strong as integrated unions. The refineries of Texas and Louisiana’s Gulf Coast employed men of all races. According to labor historian Tyler Priest, in 1939, 4% of the Gulf Coast refinery workforce identified as African American and 2% identified as Mexican / Hispanic.<sup>93</sup> By the mid-1950s, African Americans made up 12% of Texas and Louisiana refinery workforces.<sup>94</sup> In the 1930s, many Black workers regardless of industry, favored the newly founded Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for their stance on racial equality.<sup>95</sup> The International Association renamed itself the Oil Workers International Union and left the AFL for the CIO in 1938, but remained segregated. Black-only labor organizations, auxiliary locals, reflected Jim Crow realities of separate but not equal. Many Black workers favored auxiliaries for the ability to operate their own local chapter, possess their own space, form their own rules, and exercise collective political agency during the height of southern disenfranchisement.<sup>96</sup> Once under the CIO in the late 1930s, Black refinery workers in Beaumont and Port Arthur, Texas established two all-Black auxiliaries of the Oil Workers International

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<sup>91</sup> *Shreveport Journal*. March 11, 1920.

<sup>92</sup> Emma Goldman, “The Industrial Workers of the World,” *PBS: American Experience*.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldman-industrial-workers-world/>

<sup>93</sup> Priest, “Cat Crackers and Picket Lines,” 235.

<sup>94</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*, (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 149.

<sup>95</sup> Ray Marshall, “The Negro and Organized Labor,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 32, No. 4. (Autumn 1963): 382.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 379.

Union. Even after the NAACP challenged the OWIU's discriminatory practices in the 1950s and won, Locals 229 and 254 chose to maintain their all-Black chapters rather than integrate into local white ones.<sup>97</sup>

By maintaining segregation, labor organizations did not challenge race, a major structure of exploitation and hardship faced by many refinery employees. As the Great Depression worsened, oil company towns provided reliable employment and housing as the agricultural industry crumbled in the rural South. Inside the fences, however, wages and positions directly aligned with skin tone. Historian and labor activist Dan La Botz claims that an employee of color at Mexican Petroleum refineries "did not compare himself to the poor peon laboring in the fields but to the Anglo-Saxon oil worker next to whom he worked and lived, and who was paid much more."<sup>98</sup> Refineries saved higher paid and skilled positions for white men and reserved unskilled positions or menial tasks for Mexican Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans, positions that possessed little possibility for upward mobility.<sup>99</sup> Refineries' hiring practices relied upon an "informal 'two-pool' system," that placed job applicants of color into gangs of menial and hard labor and white applicants into skilled or supervisor positions.<sup>100</sup>

The hierarchical racialized labor system within Gulf Coast refineries also aligned with occupational risk: management assumed little personal risk, skilled workers a moderate amount, and unskilled / heavy labor the most. High levels of occupational risk defined the lived experiences of both employees and residents in company towns. In 1933, F.E. Cash, District Engineer for the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Mines, compiled his study "Accident Experience of Four Louisiana Petroleum Refineries." Cash studied four unnamed

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<sup>97</sup> Priest, 240; and Davidson, 266.

<sup>98</sup> La Botz, *Doheny*, 151.

<sup>99</sup> Priest, 232.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



refineries from 1927 to 1932 whose production constituted seventy percent of the petroleum products in Louisiana. Cash's statistics revealed the total number of employees, man hours, fatal or temporary accidents, and labor days lost due to accidents. The figures demonstrated that every plant surveyed operated fifty-hour work weeks with some years' averages as high as sixty hours.<sup>101</sup> Most of the accidents involved burns from chemicals and hot substances, slipping or stumbling, dropping objects, fires, explosions, and shrapnel; no matter the incident, a worker was most likely to injure his feet and toes.<sup>102</sup> In the six years surveyed, the frequency and severity of accidents decreased in all four refineries. Cash attributed the decline to "combined efforts of operating companies and individual employees."<sup>103</sup> In the conclusion of Cash's report, he suggested practical improvements of safety apparel and improved site construction. Employees' use of goggles and "hard-toed (safety) shoes and leggings... for certain classes of work," and corporations' "proper construction, drainage, storage, and handling materials," would decrease accidents at Louisiana refineries even further.<sup>104</sup>

The death of Alex Royal, an African American employee of Destrehan Refinery, on November 5, 1929, occurred during Cash's study when a 5500-barrel asphalt tank exploded. The headline in the *Crowley Post-Signal* did not mention Royal's name but featured the cost of the explosion: "Negro Killed in \$14,000 Explosion in Destrehan, La.: Cause of Blast [sic] in Mexican Petroleum Company Refinery Being Probed Today." The tank's explosion blew Royal over 200 feet away, "near the company's office building. Fire followed the blast, and after

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<sup>101</sup> F.E. Cash, "Accident Experience of Four Louisiana Petroleum Refineries," United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Mines Information Circular. (May 1933): 2.  
[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Accident\\_Experience\\_of\\_Four\\_Louisiana\\_Pe/FXITE76RooC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Accident_Experience_of_Four_Louisiana_Pe/FXITE76RooC?hl=en&gbpv=0)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 7.

threatening all the oil company's property, was extinguished.”<sup>105</sup> How many other tragic and likely preventable deaths could have been prevented if Pan American and other corporations invested in safety equipment, harnesses, and adequate clothing for their employees? Refinery workers calculated personal danger and occupational risk for the sake of better wages, stable employment, housing, and freedom from agricultural labor; for Royal, that calculation resulted in the ultimate cost.

Refinery employment held risks for those within the metal fences as well as without, as natural and industrial hazards combined to create environmental hazards. Southern Louisiana's “toxic gumbo” of subtropical climate, frequent hurricanes, flooding, and pollution worsened the already hazardous nature of refinery work.<sup>106</sup> Destrehan Refinery employees compromised with the frequently volatile nature of life in South Louisiana while occupational hazards dictated their daily life. The widespread water and air pollution of petrochemical refineries along the Lower Mississippi River defined the future of the individual, community, and state of Louisiana. Although organized environmental efforts in South Louisiana did not begin until the 1970s, the transformation of plantations introduced environmental hazards to the workforce and the local community immediately. Within the metal fences, studies like Cash's forced refinery operations in the first half of the twentieth century to improve worker safety and mitigate immediate risk. The skill and expertise of the refinery workforce accomplished better working conditions in the 1920s and 30s, but in the 1940s and 50s, organized labor looked to improve wages.

Labor participation spiked during World War II and strikes increased across refineries nationwide. At this time, a vast majority of unionized Gulf Coast refinery workers belonged to

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<sup>105</sup> *Crowley Post Signal*, November 6, 1929.

<sup>106</sup> Beverly Wright, “Industrial Sprawl: Living and Dying in Louisiana's Cancer Alley,” American Public Health Association, 133<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting and Exposition, Philadelphia. December 10-14, 2005.  
[https://apha.confex.com/apha/133am/techprogram/paper\\_116045.htm](https://apha.confex.com/apha/133am/techprogram/paper_116045.htm)

“independent unions,” unions overseen by corporate management. Contrary to their name, independent unions were not independent of the employer, serving as a bureaucratic body for employees to bring forward grievances without the power of national labor organizations behind them. In 1941, the AFL and CIO had 3,000 refinery employees; 34,000 refinery employees belonged to independent unions.<sup>107</sup> During World War II, the CIO sought to change that. The Congress of Industrial Organizations rewrote its constitution to reflect a more democratic structure then launched organizing and recruiting campaigns across the South. Their efforts paid off. The war years witnessed a massive increase in organized labor members outside of independent unions. The OWIU doubled their 1939 membership numbers to 65,000 in 1945.<sup>108</sup> In the years immediately following the war, El Dorado, Arkansas, the location of Pan-American’s second refinery, established an OWIU chapter.<sup>109</sup> Although labor won the tug-of-war in the war years, the strong conservative backlash in the postwar period favored capital.

The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act defined postwar conservatism in American politics. The act targeted leftists in organized labor through forced anti-communist affidavits, banned solidarity strikes across corporations or industries, and prohibited union tactics that shut down refineries. In effect, the act forced union priorities to shift away from industry-wide and labor-wide social democracy toward a rigid focus on collective bargaining for wages and working conditions.<sup>110</sup>

Three years after the Taft-Hartley Act, the AFL demonstrated their preference for industrial expansion and increased job figures over social democracy and collective organizing. The more conservative and still largely segregated AFL met in New Orleans in April 1950. The Louisiana state convention gathered in the Municipal Auditorium, where a strict segregationist

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<sup>107</sup> Priest, 234.

<sup>108</sup> Priest, 235.

<sup>109</sup> Davidson, 262.

<sup>110</sup> Priest, 239.

policy began in 1946 after the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, a leftist and racially integrated civil rights group, tried to host their first postwar meeting there.<sup>111</sup> The policies governing the use of the Municipal Auditorium reflected the policies projected from the stage: conservatives in labor organizations sought to distance themselves and unionizing from the communist label. Louisianan politicians, businessmen and state AFL leaders railed against communism's "infiltration" into labor organization nationwide. Speakers at the convention argued that to be an American is to support capitalism and labor efforts simultaneously. According to the AFL speakers, not only did leftist labor organizations pose a threat to Americanism, but to Louisiana's economic progress. New Orleans Mayor Delesseps S. Morrison, the city's first mayor not affiliated with the "Old Regular" political machine, echoed the capitalist principle that industrial growth produced "good for the people... a better standard of living."<sup>112</sup> Against what framework did Morrison compare Louisianans' standard of living to determine its status as "better"? Louisiana's economic progress, decades of politicians prioritizing capital's best interest, resulted in environmental destruction through pollution and perpetuated social inequalities.

The threat posed to labor through the Taft-Hartley Act resulted in Destrehan Refinery workers' delay in joining the 1952 Oil Workers International Union strike for better wages. Refinery workers across St. Charles Parish belonged to both local chapters of the OWIU and corporate-run independent unions. *The Monroe News Star* reported on the first day of the strike, April 30, 1952, "Oil Men on Jobs." Destrehan Refinery workers stayed on during the first days of the national strike, likely deterred by threats from company leadership and legal

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<sup>111</sup> Fairclough, 138.

<sup>112</sup> The Louisiana State Federation of Labor, "Proceedings of 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention," (April 3, 4, 5, 6, 1950): 14.

repercussions. “Nearly 600 workers belong to the New Orleans local, which includes employees of the Pan-Am Southern refinery at nearby Destrehan,” but Shell’s large Norco Refinery maintained an independent union.<sup>113</sup> Then, on May 13, 1952, *The Times of Shreveport* reported that New Orleans oil workers joined the strike. “The first strike here by the Oil Workers International Union CIO members began today when 350 members walked out of the Pan-American Southern Corp. plant at nearby Destrehan. Closure of the 8,000-barrel per day refinery was the outgrowth of a nationwide walkout of petroleum workers in wage disputes.”<sup>114</sup> Destrehan Refinery likely employed around 500 men in the early 1950s. Therefore, 350 workers constituted a large percentage of the entire refinery workforce who belonged to the OWIU and walked out of the refinery.

Strikes and walkouts at a petrochemical refinery required the complete shutdown of a plant for safety reasons. As such, the practicalities of refinery strikes involved complicated but necessary collaboration among the various positions and therefore across races. Shutting down a refinery was a dangerous and time-consuming process, but when successful, interrupted the entire oil and petrochemical supply chain. Large corporations depended on skilled and unskilled labor forces’ cohesion to process and refine crude oil into petrochemical products. Interrupting the refinement process stalled transportation, distribution, and sales, quickly impacting the corporation’s bottom line.<sup>115</sup> Over twenty-two locals of the OWIU participated in the weeks-long nationwide strike. The walkout quickly applied pressure to oil and petrochemical companies by decreasing supplies of gasoline and other refined petroleum products across the country.

Technical issues also contributed to decreased production when “about 250,000 gallons of

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<sup>113</sup> *The Monroe News Star*, April 30, 1952.

<sup>114</sup> *Times of Shreveport*. May 13, 1952.

<sup>115</sup> Priest, 239.

gasoline were lost in a barge explosion near New Orleans” the day before Destrehan oil men walked off the job.<sup>116</sup> The strike concluded when OWIU representatives and industry executives reached an agreement. The OWIU proposed a wage increase of 18 cents an hour to the federal government’s independent Wage Stabilization Board, and on May 14, oil and petroleum industry executives countered with 15 cents. The OWIU accepted the compromise and the strike ended.<sup>117</sup>

The successful 1952 OWIU strike during the postwar conservative backlash revealed the power of collective bargaining and labor unity, as well as the workforce’s ability to collaborate across position and race. Although refineries like Destrehan in the 1950s still racially segregated their workforces, the OWIU and many other industrial unions began integrating their local chapters.<sup>118</sup> Increased labor participation, integrated union chapters, and willingness to disrupt the company’s profits demonstrated the prevalence and effectiveness of labor organization in midcentury South Louisiana refineries. The 1952 OWIU strike came one year after the 1951 reconstruction of Destrehan Refinery dismantled the company town and many of the welfare capitalist policies that accompanied it. However, despite the improvements in wages and working conditions, in 1958, the final shipment of petrochemical goods left Destrehan Refinery.

### The Closure of Destrehan Refinery

In 1951, for the first time since 1914, Pan-Am modified Destrehan. Pan American Southern announced new projects that invested “hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of faith in the South’s industrial future.” Pan American Southern split the \$12,500,000 “expansion program” between their two refineries at El Dorado, Arkansas and Destrehan, Louisiana. The

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<sup>116</sup> *The Crowley Post-Signal*. May 12, 1952.

<sup>117</sup> Davidson, 229.

<sup>118</sup> Marshall, 375.

investment aimed to “convert Destrehan to one of the most modern refineries in the South and increase the company’s gasoline production by 60 percent.”<sup>119</sup> Executives hoped that the new modern facilities at Destrehan would meet production expectations, but their investment lasted only seven years. In 1958, the refinery’s last owner, American Oil, shuttered the plantation house and deconstructed the refinery. The closure of Destrehan Refinery meant the failure of this radical experiment to transform an agricultural plantation into a modern refinery and company town.

The 1951 investment modernized the refinery for the midcentury and demolished the company town structures of exploitation and captivity. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, details the refinery’s first update since 1914, describing the dismantling of the company town as a “cost,” instead of a benefit. Author Eugene D. Cizek writes, “the new facility was state of the art. One cost of this improvement was the dismantling of the Destrehan company community.”<sup>120</sup> New suburban neighborhoods housed employees and the town of Destrehan possessed its own municipal facilities no longer controlled by the company.

Destrehan’s reconstruction took two years to complete. In April of 1953, Pan American ran newspaper advertisements titled, “World’s Newest Refinery Makes New Kind of Fuel for Your Car! Pan-Am opens world’s most modern refinery at Destrehan, La.” The ad campaign boasted of its new technologies: “Here Pan-Am engineers have perfected a new, highly advanced technique for ‘building’ better gasoline.”<sup>121</sup> Pan-American’s “new” engineered gasoline was both a marketing instrument to set their product apart from increasingly steep competition and a product of Destrehan’s “state of the art” facility.

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<sup>119</sup> *The Bunkie Record*, April 6, 1951.

<sup>120</sup> Cizek, Lawrence, and Sexton, *Destrehan*, 54.

<sup>121</sup> *The Eunice News*, April 2, 1953.

As mentioned previously, the large investment into the Destrehan and El Dorado plants preceded increased labor organization across Gulf Coast refineries. The OWIU's strikes and collective bargaining increased wages immediately following Pan-Am's massive investment in technological updates. As Pan-Am tried to maintain their usual and comfortable level of profits, labor rights, modernization, and steep competition applied increased pressure.

Pan-Am's advertisement campaigns of "new" gasoline and large capital investments for modern equipment returned brief profits. Steep competition and more producers in the market necessitated a strict analysis of the company's expenditures after Destrehan's modernizing investment failed to meet expectations. Also, an increasingly unionized workforce undercut totalitarian executive power to set wages and hours. The 1956 buyout of Pan American Southern Corporation by American Oil (Amoco) was the final, last-ditch effort to sustain the refinery's existence.<sup>122</sup> After forty-two years of ownership, the Pan American Destrehan Refinery became the American Oil (Amoco) Destrehan Refinery. Amoco's investment in Destrehan lasted only two years. The Destrehan Refinery closed at the end of 1958.

American Oil "blamed economic and technological reasons for the closure of Destrehan Refinery." Amoco possessed "more modern facilities at other locations. ... 'Closing Destrehan is a regrettable but necessary step the company must take to stay healthy in the face of keen competition.'" <sup>123</sup> Seen in the context of increased labor organization in St. Charles Parish, what truly led to the refinery's closure? Did Amoco cite other "modern facilities" and "keen competition" as excuses to mask the reality of labor pushback? Whatever the reason, from the

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<sup>122</sup> Cizek, Lawrence and Sexton, 54.

<sup>123</sup> *Monroe Morning World*, November 8, 1958.



outset of Louisiana's petrochemical revolution in 1914 to an insufficient expenditure in 1958, Destrehan's period as a refinery came to a swift end.

Destrehan's closure affected an estimated 470 employees. Refinery manager H.A. Heiss said, "benefits estimated at more than one million dollars would be distributed to the 470 employees and 'for those whom we cannot transfer, we will do everything we can to place them in other industries here in the New Orleans area.'"<sup>124</sup> Reminiscent of hiring practices, Amoco transferred supervisors and management positions, mostly white employees, to other Amoco locations while those lower in the labor hierarchy received severances. Despite public postulations and employee severances, Destrehan's closure did affect the local economy. By January of 1959, Destrehan sat vacant for the first time in its 177-year history. Local newspapers covered the closure's effect on unemployment and economic stagnation:

Less encouraging to Louisiana, which is dependent on oil and gas for a major share of its state revenues, is the cut-back in industry employment. Latest figures from the Division of Employment Security show a reduction of 6,400 persons in oil and gas production, when compared with similar 1957 figures... Another serious blow... is the shutdown of the American Oil Company refinery at Destrehan. This refinery had been taking about an average of 30,000 barrels of oil per day for processing. The shutdown represents the first reduction in crude oil processing capacity for Louisiana in many years.<sup>125</sup>

The decisions made by private industry directly affected the economic stability and livelihood of an entire community. The design of welfare capitalist company towns fostered Louisianans' dependency on the petrochemical industry for the community's economy and individual's livelihood. Although Destrehan's company town had been demolished in the early

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> *St. Mary and Franklin Banner-Tribune*, January 4, 1959.

1950s, company executives continued the dynamic of financial dependency on the plantation until its closure. Petrochemical company towns evolved the dependency of the plantation system under modern smokestacks and distillation towers. Pan-Am sacrificed the health and environmental quality of the Destrehan community during the refinery's productive years; Amoco sacrificed local economic livelihoods in service of its bottom line and in effect, exerted its power over the workforce one final time. Industry executives and management fled the area where their refinery had extracted resources and polluted the local community for 44 years. Amoco's 1958 closure of the refinery closed the book on Destrehan's existence as a producer of commodities. No longer did indigo, sugar, or petrochemical products cross the levee to barges on the Mississippi River for distribution. Destrehan's twelve-year vacancy from 1958 to 1971 reminded locals of what had once been, both antebellum Creole aristocracy and refinery company towns, but it also encouraged some locals to imagine what the site could be.

## Conclusion

Oil and petrochemical corporations rapidly purchased plantations along the Lower Mississippi River in South Louisiana during the 'petrochemical revolution' of the twentieth century. Global competitors chose Louisiana for the state's underserved working class, gulf location, and low state taxes.<sup>126</sup> Pan-American reworked Destrehan's landscape for a modern, industrial purpose to refine crude oil into gasoline, diesel, and asphalt. To accompany the new, modern products, Pan-Am adopted welfare capitalist policies and built company towns. The paternalistic structure of Destrehan's company town created a workforce whose residence,

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<sup>126</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 251.

finances, health, and essential services depended on the *parent corporation* while those global industries exploited local Louisianans' mobility, safety, and labor.

Company executives and refinery management prioritized production and profits over the health and safety of residential workers. Pan-Am invested in the construction of the company town structures that provided necessities but at the expense of civil liberties: hierarchical housing based on race, company stores that over-charged for basic items, and fencing that prevented refinery workers' mobility. Pan-American Southern invested in modernizing the technology used by skilled and unskilled workers, while resisting investments in increasing workers' wages. However, this prioritization of profits over labor rights eventually met with organized resistance through unions' strikes and walkouts.

The Destrehan Refinery's exploitation of both land and labor defined its relationship to South Louisianans, inside and outside of its metal fences. But increased labor organizing during World War II and the postwar era resisted the exploitative relationship between employer and employee. After Pan-Am's 1951 multimillion dollar modernizing investment in the Destrehan Refinery removed company town structures, the 1952 OCAW walkout for better wages demonstrated local labor's evolved and empowered tactics to prove their economic value. The "state of the art" Destrehan was short lived; the plantation sat vacant by January 1959.

In the forty-four years as a refinery, executives' and management's use of Destrehan Plantation bore the imprint of agricultural antebellum slavery, preserving the social hierarchies of race and labor for a modern purpose. Petrochemical corporations reconfigured the dynamic of financial dependency on the plantation into a dependence on the refinery, ensnaring both the local economy and the livelihood of individuals. Company towns, forced contracts, "independent unions," and business-friendly government served the interests of wealthy, landowning, capitalist

elite at the expense of working-class civil freedoms. At Destrehan, production evolved from sugarcane to petrochemical products. No matter the commodity, white capitalists' ownership of land along the Lower Mississippi River preserved social inequalities in South Louisiana while reconfiguring those inequalities for their purposes.

After Amoco shuttered the Destrehan Refinery in 1958, the vacant plantation house stood visible from the River Road for twelve years. The empty and dilapidated plantation house testified to what the River Road once was, a site of white Creole agricultural capitalism operated through enslaved labor and vast inequalities. But the empty mansion, with broken shutters and busted windows, also spoke to what the River Road would soon become as a product of South Louisiana's tourism industry and its evolution of white supremacy.

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#### Photographs and Images

Figure 1: Destrehan Plantation House, ca. 1890. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*. 24.

Figure 2: Rear of Destrehan Plantation house, ca. 1920. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*. 29.

Figure 3: Cover, *Pan American Record*. September 1916.

Figure 4: The Destrehan Refinery docks, main house, storage tanks, and processing facilities. Date unknown. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*. 53.

Figure 5: "Baseball." *Saint Charles Herald*. May 17, 1921.

Figure 6: *Pan American Record* 1, No. 6. July 1917. 13.

Figure 7: "Doheny Family Sells Pan-Am." *The Crowley Post Signal*. April 4, 1925.

Figure 8: Pan American Southern Advertisement. *The Crowley Post Signal*. August 31, 1949.

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## Chapter Two

### “America’s Most Interesting City”: Travel Writers and the Narratives of New Orleans’ Public Tourism from Post-Reconstruction to World War II

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On my trip to the Destrehan Plantation Museum in December of 2021, I took note of the items available in their gift shop. The usual museum souvenirs, refrigerator magnets, ornaments, and t-shirts, sat amongst many books available for purchase. Autobiographies, Black history, historical fiction, cookbooks, and travel books presented themselves on various counters. Featured beside the Museum's coffee table book, *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, I found *Gumbo YaYa*, the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project collection of "Louisiana Folktales" compiled in 1945. The five-hundred-page collection tells many fantastical legends of pirates, ghosts, and the people of Louisiana who constructed those stories. The book presents New Orleanians in ethnographic chapters devoted to Irish, Italian, African, Creole, and Cajun legends and histories.

*Gumbo YaYa*'s white Project writers preserved white supremacist discourses through their adoption of new contemporary ideas regarding cultural pluralism, evident in their divisions of New Orleanians according to ethnic and racial lines. The cultural pluralism of *Gumbo YaYa* gestured toward inclusion by illuminating histories and lifeways of nonwhite Louisianans, but did so from a position of social power, therefore creating an exoticized portrayal of African descended peoples and European immigrants. Cultural pluralism recognized cultural differences and the right of other peoples to exist in America without assimilation but denied outright consideration of social frameworks of power.<sup>1</sup> By denying those systems of power – especially race in the Jim Crow South – white travel writers' work stayed within the bounds of white supremacist ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hulsether, "Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement: Consensus, Pluralism, and Contestation for Cultural Hegemony," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 23, No. 2. (January 1993): 14.

Louisiana's white travel writers of the 1930s and 40s exoticized Louisiana's peoples and cultures through a pervasive discourse of "otherness." Louisiana's multicultural society of white Creoles, Germans, Acadians, enslaved Africans, and free people of color grew more diverse as large numbers of Irish and Italian immigrants arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tourism writers and the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project highlighted the state's diversity and the framework of cultural pluralism to transform local histories into exoticized tales of pirates, Voodoo, and ghosts. Tourist books like *Gumbo YaYa* invited contemporary audiences of white middle-class Americans to adopt the exotic and romantic idea of a bygone Louisiana. That tourist version of Louisiana's past can still be purchased today from the River Road Historical Society at Destrehan Plantation Museum's gift shop for \$19.95.

While popular travel writers reconfigured white supremacist discourses for public entertainment, Destrehan and many other River Road plantations remained inaccessible to the motoring tourist, privately owned by families or corporations. However, the work done by white travel writers created a lasting tourism narrative which, along with Louisiana's new roads, paved the way for plantation museums' emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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Many scholars of southern and Louisiana history have narrated the twentieth century emergence of the state's public tourism industry through the lens of politics and commerce. Historians Anthony Stanonis and Edward Haas have detailed the contributions and corruption of New Orleans' political machine, the Regular Democratic Organization, in favoring local tourism

businesses over the business of governing.<sup>2</sup> Sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham traces the commercial contributions of the Association of Commerce's Convention and Tourism Bureau and the Vieux Carre Commission to revolutionize New Orleans' primary industry from shipping to tourism, beginning with the 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition.<sup>3</sup> Instead of reiterating these scholars' work on the prominent role of white capital and machine politics in staging New Orleans tourism industry for white audiences, this chapter will detail the role of Louisianan travel writers for the same purpose.

The many works of Louisiana's travel writers provide a fascinating window into the prominent racist ideologies that bolstered the creation of New Orleans' public tourism industry. Through the lens of Louisianan travel writers, we can trace the evolution and sustainability of white supremacist narratives such as the "Lost Cause." Travel writing also points to the efforts of Black writers and publishers, as well as labor and rights organizations, to resist the dominant white supremacist narrative being sold to Americans. We can also trace through Louisiana Highway Commission travel booklets, the state's efforts to market their new roads and old landscapes simultaneously to American tourists when the agricultural and manufacturing industries stagnated in the Great Depression. White travel writers facilitated Louisiana's transformation into Jim Crow modernity and influenced the public's lasting idea of what New Orleans was and who called it home. The works of Louisiana's travel writers from the post-

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<sup>2</sup> See: Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

Edward Haas, "New Orleans on the Half Shell: The Maestri Era, 1936-1946," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 13, No. 3. (Summer 1972).

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<sup>3</sup> See: Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture and Race in the Big Easy*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

Reconstruction period to World War II demonstrate that the New Orleans tourism industry was created by whites for white consumption.

The works of travel writers helped shape popular discourse as post-Reconstruction politicians reconfigured white supremacy for the twentieth century. White supremacy and the subjugation of Black contributions to Louisianan culture and history were crucial to the creation and marketing of New Orleans' burgeoning tourism industry. White local travel writers' intellectual labor cast the New Orleanian historical elite into the mold of a white supremacist ideal that celebrated and prioritized New Orleans' European heritage and diminished its long history of racial mixing. This is evident in the work of New Orleans' first prominent travel writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Grace King, who popularized the genre writing during the first years of Jim Crow.

The popularity of Grace King and the reversal of Reconstruction Era progress in the last decade of the nineteenth century emerged as social and political reactions to Radical Republicans' advancement toward racial equality. In the two decades after the Civil War, from 1867 to the late 1880s, Black Republicans began to break down Louisiana's antebellum racial lines in politics and society. Black politicians entered local and state office, where white and Black Radical Republicans rewrote the state constitution in 1868. Although vestiges of segregation continued along individual and private lines, Republicans' state laws and policies of Reconstruction dismantled absolute white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> As federal troops withdrew from Louisiana at the end of Military Reconstruction in 1877, the Redeemers, a faction of white elites who promulgated the "Lost Cause," halted the forward momentum of Reconstruction Era Radical Republicans. Following the end of Reconstruction, Democrats established their version

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<sup>4</sup> Dale A. Somers, "Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations, 1865-1900," *The Journal of Southern History* 40, No. 1. (February 1974): 30.

of the Solid South in Louisiana during the election of 1886. As soon as they entered office, the Redeemers began reinforcing and hardening the color line, more than it ever had been in antebellum Louisiana.<sup>5</sup> The Redeemers encouraged the “Lost Cause” ideology of a grand and romantic South that existed prior to the Civil War, its culture destroyed through the abolition of slavery. The “Lost Cause” served as the propagandistic historical narrative that accompanied both the social and political establishment of Jim Crow policies in Louisiana.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, the Louisiana Redeemers reestablished state and legal white supremacy. The Redeemers’ strategic and methodical codification of racial ideology unfolded from 1887 to 1898. When the Redeemers entered office, they publicly promised to uphold the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> amendments, but encouraged municipalities and wealthy white businessowners to enforce segregation in private spaces.<sup>6</sup> After private spaces of businesses and churches segregated, schools, transportation and other public facilities followed. The Redeemers in state government passed discriminatory legislation in the mid-1890s, and the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld their Separate Car Act.<sup>7</sup> First heard in the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1892, Homer Adolph Plessy, a man of mixed-race heritage, challenged the Separate Car Act’s violation of the 13th and 14th amendments following his arrest for sitting in a white train car. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court ruled on the case, upholding Louisiana’s Jim Crow law and validating racial discrimination for interstate travel.<sup>8</sup> The *Plessy* case originated in Louisiana but had national ramifications. *Plessy* paved the way for the 1898

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<sup>55</sup> James Tice Moore, “Redeemers Reconsidered: Change and Continuity in the Democratic South, 1870-1900,” *The Journal of Southern History* 44, No. 3. (August 1978): 357.

<sup>6</sup> Somers, “Black and White,” 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Plessy v. Ferguson (1896),” National Archives: Milestone Documents. Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>

Louisiana State Constitution which disenfranchised Black Louisianans and made Jim Crow segregation official across private and public spaces.

White representatives from across the state gathered at the Convention of 1898 to write Article 197 of the new state constitution, designed to disenfranchise every Black Louisianan.<sup>9</sup> Sections 3, 4 and 5 of Article 197 contained three disenfranchisement clauses. The clauses listed qualifications for literacy tests, property ownership exceeding a value of \$300, and the notorious “grandfather clause.” The clause grandfathered in Americans, Creoles, and European immigrants, if they could prove their grandfather had the right to vote pre-Reconstruction. The “grandfather clause” enfranchised poor illiterate whites who would have otherwise been disenfranchised by the literacy and property qualifications. Despite the Redeemers’ efforts to divide working-class Louisianans across the color line, many immigrants, especially Italian Americans, marched with African Americans in the streets to protest the state’s regressive political slide.<sup>10</sup> However, wealthy white Louisianans owned and operated the state’s most widely distributed newspapers and publishing houses.

As the Redeemers worked to codify white supremacy, white travel writers of the late nineteenth century assisted in fostering many middle- and upper-class white Louisianans’ support for that project. During this post-Reconstruction period, popular writers played a crucial role in the development and distribution of the “Lost Cause.” Although masquerading as innocent tourist books, the contents between the book’s covers contained propagandistic racism. The writings of Grace King collected and disseminated racially biased interpretations of local

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<sup>9</sup> Yale MacMillan Center, “State Constitution of Louisiana, 1898, Suffrage and Elections: Article 197.”

<https://glc.yale.edu/state-constitution-louisiana-1898-suffrage-and-elections>.

And Somers, 25.

<sup>10</sup> George E. Cunningham, “The Italian, a Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898,” *The Journal of Negro History* 50, No. 1. (January 1965): 30.



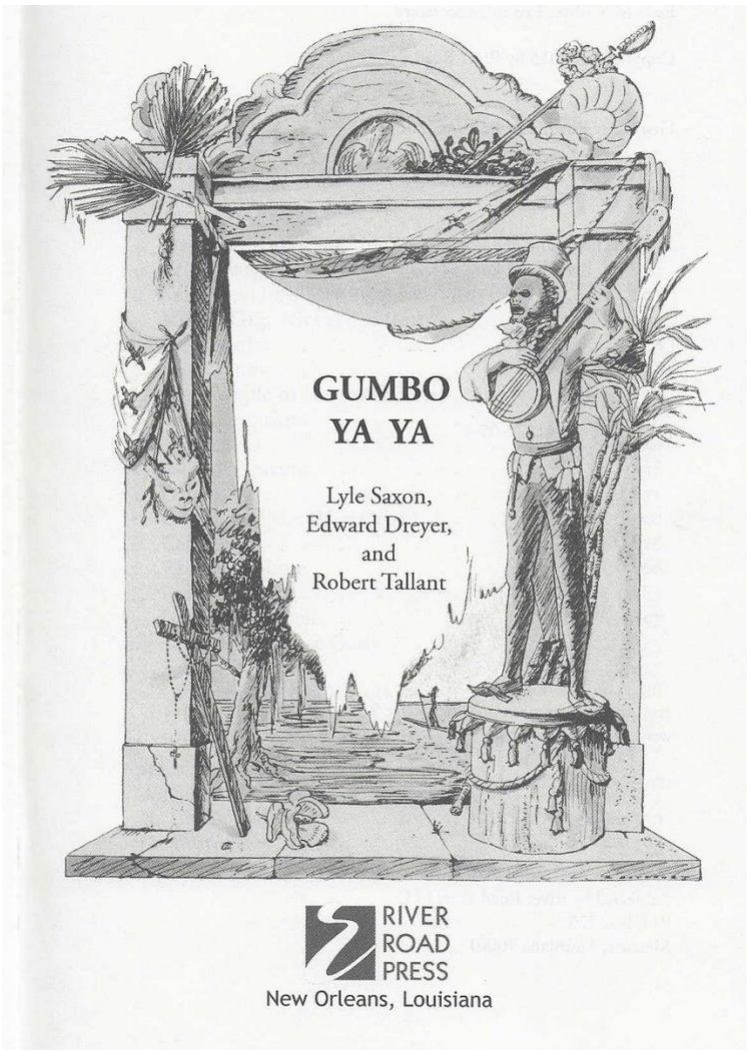
history, cultures, and peoples for white audiences in the South and across the nation. King's book, *New Orleans: The Place and The People*, published in 1895, just as Homer Plessy was appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court, strongly reflected the core of "Lost Cause" ideology. "The surrender of the Confederacy, the end of it all," wrote King, "is the one watershed at which all good stories, voluble resentments, gay denunciations, and humorous self-confessions turn back. It is the one item of their past over which the women of New Orleans shed tears."<sup>11</sup> King mourned the "end of it all" – the end of antebellum white social, political and economic domination. King's mourning served as a propagandistic tool to foster white support of Jim Crow. Her statement conspicuously removed an important detail: it was *white* women who shed tears at the conclusion of slavery's reign in the South. King's writing laid the groundwork for the twentieth century travel writers' further romanticization of antebellum history and demonstrated the contributions of many white women to Louisiana's system of white supremacy. Her racist and propagandistic books inspired the works of twentieth century travel writer Harnett T. Kane, Federal Writers' Project Directors Lyle Saxon and Edward Dreyer, and contributor Robert Tallant.

Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant collaborated to create the aforementioned *Gumbo YaYa*, the last of three tourist books published under the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana. In the preface of the book, the authors thank Grace King for her contributions: "We are grateful to those earlier writers who recorded some of the phases of Louisiana folklore."<sup>12</sup> In keeping with King's "Lost Cause" racial hierarchy, *Gumbo YaYa* praises the white Creole elite of Louisianan plantations as the source of all positive local cultural attributes. To the "patrician race" of

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<sup>11</sup> Grace King, *New Orleans: the Place and the People*. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1895), 316.

<sup>12</sup> Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Original and Unabridged*, (New Orleans: River Road Press, 1945), preface.

Figure 1: Cover Page, *Gumbo YaYa* (1945)

Creoles, “New Orleans owes a debt of immeasurable proportions; the Mardi Gras, the world-famous cuisine, the gaiety, the whole intricate fabric of the charm that distinguishes the city from any other in America.”<sup>13</sup> *Gumbo YaYa* suggests that the preservation of white Creole “plantation culture” is of utmost importance to the preservation of Louisiana’s uniqueness and “charm.”

Although many plantation house museums did not materialize until the latter half of the twentieth century, the labor of white travel

writers paved the ideological and economic path that led to their creation. Saxon, Dreyer, and Tallant echoed King’s “Lost Cause” propaganda fifty years later in *Gumbo YaYa*. “Old Southerners” spoke of the “utopia before the war... It was here and it is gone.” They wrote, “the best of all possible worlds existed in the South and it was destroyed. And, truly, if merely a part of this remembered grandeur once existed in reality, Louisiana plantation life must have been almost paradisiacal.”<sup>14</sup> In 1945, the “old Southerners” were the last generation to have lived in

<sup>13</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, *Gumbo YaYa*, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 212-213.

antebellum white domination. “Old Southerners” – Confederates – longed for their lost “utopia” in the bygone era of African enslavement. The paradise of Creole planters, built on captivity and violence of Africans and their descendants, disappeared after the Civil War, but “Lost Cause” propaganda and Redeemers’ politics reconfigured white supremacy for the twentieth century.

Lyle Saxon and his contemporaries of the Federal Writers’ Project wrote their travel books to embellish local histories and create fantastical legends that created an imagined version of antebellum Louisiana in the hearts and minds of white American tourists. Saxon served as the sole Director of the Louisiana division from 1935 to 1943. President Roosevelt’s New Deal established various alphabet agencies to address high unemployment figures. The Federal Writers’ Project was overseen by one of the largest agencies, the Works Progress Administration, and hired local writers to create guides for major cities around the United States. The guides’ explicit purpose was to foster local tourism industries during the economic stagnation of the Great Depression. Although the Project guides were not factual accounts of local cultures, peoples, or history, federal funding and oversight encouraged the American public to interpret the local guides as authentic and unbiased.<sup>15</sup> After the establishment of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1935, the Louisiana chapter published its popular *Guide to New Orleans* in 1938. *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* followed in 1941. Both works reflected Saxon’s affinity for Mardi Gras, “plantation culture,” old folkways and local legends.<sup>16</sup>

By the time of his appointment to lead the Louisiana Project, Lyle Saxon had published half a dozen travel books under Pelican Books. Saxon’s first books, *Fabulous New Orleans* of 1928, and *Old Louisiana* of 1929 focused on antebellum lifeways and Creole plantation culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Melissa L. Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Federal Writers’ Project in Louisiana, *The Federal Writers’ Project Guide to 1930s New Orleans*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938).

Saxon claimed to be one of the last surviving Louisianans to have spent their childhood on a plantation, although the historical record disagrees. Saxon did not grow up on a plantation, but in a suburb of Baton Rouge.<sup>17</sup> Saxon exercised his imagination about his own history as well as the state's. His many travel books encouraged tourists to visit a romantic relic of Louisiana's bygone era and the hard truth about the implicit violence of "plantation culture" did not inspire his idyllic narratives.

In *Old Louisiana*, Saxon's historical revisions painted a peaceful and whitewashed portrait of plantations. The first-person narrative imagined Saxon driving the reader around Louisiana's plantations. In chapter 22, Saxon drove the reader along a motor tour of plantations from New Orleans' city center. Working his way up River Road, Saxon pulled up to Destrehan Plantation.

One of the first houses of importance on the highway, after we leave New Orleans, is the D'Estrehan Plantation-house. It lies just there, ahead of us, in that grove of trees. I shall stop the car before the gate and you can look your fill. The name D'Estrehan is famous in Louisiana, for the family came with Bienville. The house is now the property of an oil company and one of the officials lives in it. It has been restored almost beyond recognition. It appears to be almost new. The house dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century... I wish I could tell you the architect's name, but no one remembers. Let us drive on. The road is growing more interesting now, and the oil tanks are left behind.<sup>18</sup>

Saxon's description of the Destrehan Plantation house oozed with fascination for the relics of bygone Creole aristocracy while neglecting to mention the company town that surrounded the plantation house when Saxon wrote this account. The name of the forgotten architect was Charles Paquet, a free man of color, who likely designed other nearby plantation homes; Pacquet

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Stanonis, "'Always in Costume and Mask': Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 42, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana*, (Louisiana: The Century Co., 1929), 294-95.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015037375311&view=1up&seq=6&skin=221>

oversaw a team of enslaved people at Destrehan who built the mansion. All of these factors, mentioned in passing or completely omitted, did not serve the manufactured façade of New Orleans and its surrounding area that Saxon's work aimed to sell to white tourists.

Saxon's many publicized works prioritized entertainment over authenticity. His accessible vocabulary, fictionalized stories and historical liberties appealed to many Americans seeking leisure and escapism during the tumultuous 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Saxon's individual works contain similar language and format to his later work in the Federal Writers' Project, although the Project guides came with federal instructions. The national office provided a "Folklore and Customs Guide" to state and district offices listing instructions for consideration, collection, and writing of local guides. Project writers collected folklore and customs through oral histories of rural, uneducated, and marginalized groups. Historian Melissa Cooper states, "writers were instructed to seek out... the 'oldest residents' of communities, especially those who were 'close to the soil' because 'circumstances... cut them off from education and progressive enlightenment.'"<sup>20</sup> By seeking out residents whose lived experiences remained outside of "enlightenment" or modernity, the Project sought to capture local color – stories that made each locality unique. In effect, this practice inspired local tourism by transforming history into legend and exoticizing local peoples, worsened by the fact that the majority of Project works in Louisiana involved white writers and Black subjects.

However, that is not to say that exceptions to this rule of white writers and Black subjects did not exist. The work of Black tourism and travel writers provided an essential counternarrative to the popular white supremacist tourism narrative. Saxon and the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project established an all-Black auxiliary in 1942 under New Orleans' Dillard

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<sup>19</sup> Stanonis, "Always," 36.

<sup>20</sup> US Library of Congress, FWP Folklore and Customs Guide, taken from Cooper, *Making Gullah*, 120.

University, Louisiana's first Historically Black College. Clarence A. Laws, Octave Lilly Jr., and Marcus Christian led what became known as The Dillard History Unit. The works compiled by Black students and writers stressed the unity of Black Louisianans, despite various backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities. Historical evaluation of "French Creoles" and "American Negroes" posited the groups as equals and collaborators by emphasizing their similarities.

The Dillard Unit's insistence of collectivism echoed the previous work of Black historians. Just as the work of Grace King inspired the white men of the Writers' Project, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's work inspired the writers and students of the Dillard History Unit. Both Dunbar-Nelson and the Dillard Unit asserted their claim to the Creole identity which had been redefined in the "Lost Cause" model as a term exclusively for whites, instead of its historical meaning: native to South Louisiana. Dunbar-Nelson wrote in her 1916 "People of Color in Louisiana" that Black South Louisianans define Creole as a "native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly more apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive and wholly unique."<sup>21</sup> In reclaiming the identity of "Creole," Dunbar-Nelson emphasized Black South Louisianans' pride of being multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, juxtaposed to the contemporary racial ideology that posited Americans as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Creole was just the opposite of that narrow definition of American: European, West Indian, African, and majority Catholic.

By providing a counternarrative to the white supremacist writings of King, Saxon, and the Louisiana Writers' Project, Dunbar-Nelson and the Dillard History Unit asserted their social and political power through tourism writing. Through their writings and accounts of Louisiana

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<sup>21</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana, Part I," *The Journal of Negro History* 1, No. 4. (October 1916): 367.

Black history, the writers “provided a model for solutions to the political and social issues” of their own historical moment.<sup>22</sup> The Dillard Unit’s culminative work, *The Negro in Louisiana*, blended local historiography with social activism but remains unpublished to this day.

Instead of local legends, caricatures and stereotypes, *The Negro in Louisiana* argued for racial equality through research, statistics, and oral histories about Black Louisianan life from the colonial period to the 1940s. Dozens of chapters on Black occupations, organized labor, religious practices, enslaved and free Black Louisianans’ lifeways, Black professionals, suffrage and resistance to disenfranchisement, outweighed the small amount devoted to folklore and voodooism – the typical focus of white travel writers’ discussion of local Black populations. By focusing on Black agency and labor, the Dillard Unit constructed an idea of Louisiana history that placed Black contributions front and center. The Dillard Unit argued that Black labor and African cultural contributions made the state of Louisiana unique, not white elite Creole planters’ plantation homes. In fact, enslaved Black labor created the white Creoles’ antebellum spaces of leisure that Saxon and the white Writers’ Project glamorized. Dillard Unit leader Marcus Christian wrote, “wherever there is work to be done, either pleasant or unpleasant, black labor is called upon to make the wheels of progress keep turning smoothly and steadily.”<sup>23</sup> *The Negro in Louisiana*’s writers’ own labor diversified and challenged the white supremacist narrative of Louisiana’s popular tourism.

While white travel writers fostered the exoticization of Louisiana’s multicultural history and its peoples, Black writers and publishers, without access to the vote, utilized the discourse of public tourism to assert a counternarrative to white supremacy. The white Federal Writers’

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<sup>22</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*, (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>23</sup> *The Negro in Louisiana*, Marcus Christian Collection, University of New Orleans Library, 1942, (Chapter 34), 1. <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/uno-p15140coll42%3Acollection>

Project in Louisiana published three popular books that shaped the future of New Orleans' tourism industry through federal funding. Under the control of the white Louisiana Writers' Project, the unpublished status of *The Negro in Louisiana* demonstrates the social and economic power of tourism writing, as well as the power of white supremacy that relegated hours of Black labor, researching and writing, to gather dust on the shelves of history. Although it remains unpublished, researchers can access a full transcribed manuscript of *The Negro in Louisiana* from the University of New Orleans' Marcus Christian Collection.

While the Dillard Unit resisted white supremacist tourism narratives at the local and state level, at the federal level Sterling Brown served as the Federal Writers' Project Editor of Negro Affairs. Brown reviewed manuscripts for authenticity and anti-black biases. As Cooper argues, racist accounts were so prevalent that "curtailing the anti-black biases reflected in the manuscripts that state writers submitted would prove to be an almost impossible task."<sup>24</sup> However, Brown's position and ability to reject problematic manuscripts maintained a crucial form of resistance to racist reification of Black southerners as objects for mass consumption. Other Black academics nationwide voiced their displeasure with the Project's local guides' racist stereotypes. Cooper notes Howard Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's comments on the prevalence of white writers' bias in perpetuating racist notions of Black exoticism. "If money is going to be spent for the purposes of determining African 'survivals' among Negroes in America, it should be given to competent anthropologists," instead of local newspaper and tour guide writers.<sup>25</sup>

The Project's travel guides and their fostering of New Orleans' urban tourism industry reflected popular contemporary discourses of cultural pluralism, an ideology that emerged from the 1920s seen as advancement toward consideration of other cultures within the United States

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<sup>24</sup> Cooper, *Making Gullah*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Cooper, 132.



without the condition of assimilation. The growing academic fields of anthropology and ethnography inspired a “search for alternative voices” that led to “a dead end because such voices are marginalized or co-opted by more powerful texts of dominant culture.”<sup>26</sup> Although white travel writers recognized Louisiana’s many cultures, their descriptions of those cultures and ethnicities emphasized difference contrasted to whiteness. Project writers wrote what they saw from their position of social privilege. Popular travel books and tour guides placed the many ethnicities who called New Orleans home within an exoticized framework that served to entice white American’s imagination, fear, and curiosity. American historian Mark Hulsether provides an example of cultural pluralism’s lack of power consideration: “The relation between an uneducated slave and educated master is not simply ‘pluralism.’”<sup>27</sup>

The cultural pluralist travel books reflected white privilege and reconfigured white supremacy. In effect, popular travel guides straddled the line between local tourism advertisements and racist propaganda. From the outset, tourism materials combined “Lost Cause” perspectives of antebellum grandeur with new racial ideas considered more politically correct that still exoticized non-Anglo Saxons, creating caricaturized portrayals.

White writers portrayed Black New Orleanians as caricatures subservient to whites socially and culturally throughout Louisiana’s history.<sup>28</sup> In *Gumbo YaYa*, white Project writers placed the history of emancipation within the stereotypical racist framework of childishness and foolishness. “Most slaves were confused and like lost children, many exhibited strange reactions to emancipation.”<sup>29</sup> Louisiana Project writers reduced the complexity and diversity of African American experiences between emancipation and Jim Crow to that of monolithic criminality:

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Hulsether, “Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement,” 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*, 196.

<sup>29</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, *Gumbo YaYa*, 256.

“Negroes became beggars, squatters on the levees, criminals.”<sup>30</sup> White supremacy – Black southerners’ lack of access to social and economic welfare, denial of democratic participation and threat of racial violence – determined African American experiences in the early twentieth century, not racially inherent traits of criminality. Aside from the racist tropes of criminality and vagrancy, white travel writers cast local Black populations as dangerous and exotic through the fantastical tales of Voodooism.

Saxon and Writers’ Project books relied upon what historian Melissa Cooper terms the “Voodoo craze.”<sup>31</sup> The “Voodoo craze” began in late nineteenth century academic discourses of anthropology and ethnography but quickly dispersed among the American public. White Americans interpreted Voodoo as proof of Black exoticism and inferiority.<sup>32</sup> In practice, white Americans’ fascination with superstitious versions of Voodoo perpetuated the dehumanization and cultural erasure of Afro-descended Louisianans. Cooper argues, “at the very moment when travel to exotic locales emerged as a white middle-class pastime, primitivist travel memoirs... and travel guides... made the prospects of visiting places inhabited by authentic voodooists exciting.”<sup>33</sup> When local travel writers’ efforts fell short of enticing Americans’ travel to the Crescent City with tales of “plantation culture,” Black Louisianans’ exotic African origins provided another form of manufactured authenticity and fantastical local legends.

According to early twentieth century white social scientists and travel writers, Voodooism was inherent to southern Blackness, simultaneously “racially specific” and “loosely defined.”<sup>34</sup> White supremacists utilized the combination of African specificity and ill-defined

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<sup>30</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, *Gumbo YaYa*, 257.

<sup>31</sup> Cooper, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 44.

practices to construct a nationally marketable idea of southern Black identity that opposed dominant white Christian norms. In reality, Voodoo consisted of a complex and diverse centuries-old system of religious and spiritualistic practices and an outstanding example of southern multiculturalism that did, in fact, survive the terror of enslavement.<sup>35</sup> Voodoo, traditionally spelled Voudou, derived from West Indian and African medical expertise and spiritual traditions during enslavement, as well as European Catholicism.<sup>36</sup> The herbal practices often cited by white writers and social scientists as nefarious activity were medicinal traditions passed down through generations of Black and poor white families who lacked healthcare access in the South.<sup>37</sup>

Aside from medical care, the practice of Voodoo afforded social and religious interaction in the colonial and antebellum periods between poor white Creoles, free Black Creoles and enslaved Africans and their descendants. *The Negro in Louisiana's* chapter on Voodooism focuses on the cooperative and interracial qualities of Voodoo, rather than emphasizing its practice as exotic and nefarious. In 1850, New Orleans police arrested Voodoo practitioners in their private home and charged the group with “unlawful assembly of free colored and slaves.”<sup>38</sup> Then, during the Reconstruction period, increased white fear about Voodoo paralleled Black Republicans’ political involvement and social progress.<sup>39</sup> Voodoo carried different meanings depending on the source. Many poor New Orleanians, no matter the race, used Voodoo as a mechanism for social collaboration. Wealthy white New Orleanians, especially the local white

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<sup>35</sup> Cooper, 44.

<sup>36</sup> The Dillard History Unit, *The Negro in Louisiana*, (Chapter 11), 2 and 50.

<sup>37</sup> Cooper, 65.

<sup>38</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 11), 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, (Chapter 11), 21.

press, used Voodoo to foment fear and reinforce the color line when it was crossed by the working-class population.

Voodoo broke down many social structures of inequality that white Louisianan elite sought to perpetuate. The practice of Voodoo created a social and religious space for New Orleans' most marginalized groups to gather. Voodoo crossed the hierarchies of race and gender. Black women led many of the Voodoo churches as priestesses and maintained medicinal knowledge passed through generations, and therefore received the brunt of state violence, meted out in attempts to deter its practice. Most of the people arrested for Voodoo were Black women, charged with catch-all statutes of "keeping a disorderly house" or hosting "unlawful gatherings" in their private homes.<sup>40</sup> The interracial practices of Voodoo continued past the colonial and antebellum periods, through Reconstruction and the twentieth century. No matter how much the white press tried to tie Voodoo to the local Black population exclusively, multiracial Voodoo practices maintained a space for resisting race, class, and gender inequalities.<sup>41</sup>

The white press and white travel writers' inaccurate portrayal of Voodoo mobilized white fear and fascination of Black magic. Casting Voodoo as a mythicized, evil, Black stereotype reinforced Jim Crow racial hierarchies and redirected attention from the white-perpetuated violence of lynching.<sup>42</sup> In effect, white travel writers commodified marginalized local peoples and their forms of social agency, turning them into products for white consumption, entertainment, and profit. Their "efforts were a critical form of power in which the ability to put into circulation certain images of New Orleans occurred with little or no substantive input from local residents who were absent or featured in these images."<sup>43</sup> The absence of Black realities

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<sup>40</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 11), 16.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Gotham, Kevin Fox. "Authenticity in Black and White," 83.



founded *The Louisiana Weekly* in 1925 with the Dejoie family; he also distributed the national Black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, around New Orleans and Louisiana. Taylor compiled *The Crescent City Pictorial* to distribute to white tourists during their time in New Orleans.

Taylor's booklet challenged the dominant narrative of white supremacy. Taylor published and distributed the booklet as a souvenir, meant to be carried home with white Americans across the country as a means of dismantling Black erasure and exoticism. Taylor's 1926 pamphlet contained hundreds of photographs of "colored spaces" within New Orleans. Collages of Black schools, colleges, homes, churches, healthcare, end-of-life care, and leisure filled the twenty-eight-page booklet. Taylor's booklet distributed knowledge of Black culture, lives, homes, and institutions to disrupt the dehumanizing tourism advertisements of the 1920s. Taylor did not have federal funding like the Writers' Project of the following decade, but his booklet aimed to materialize the financial and social benefits of Black participation in the growing New Orleans public tourism industry. *The Crescent City Pictorial* documented, publicized, and distributed images of Black New Orleanian lives to modify white American tourists' understanding of who called New Orleans home.

The white travel writers not only exoticized Black Louisianans for white entertainment, but their narratives also emphasized differences based in race, class, and ethnicity. As New Orleans tourism industry exploded in the first three decades of the twentieth century, New Orleanians collaborated under labor and civil rights organizations across racial, ethnic and class lines. New Orleans' chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People formed in 1915 to resist local residential segregation. Black elites and professionals combined their finances and expertise to assist middle- and working-class Black New Orleanians' legal challenges to segregation ordinances. The NAACP won a few of their legal challenges during the

1920s, but, residential segregation advanced through white private interests, property owners and local politicians' determination to maintain the color line.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from cross-class collaborations, New Orleanians also organized across race. The Urban League opened its Crescent City office in November of 1938, led by activist Clarence Laws, leader of the Dillard History Unit and contributor to *The Negro in Louisiana*. The Urban League's interracial leadership board wanted to set an example for other organizations in the city. *The Negro in Louisiana* highlighted this collaboration: "An excellent example of this interracial teamwork is seen in the executive board of the New Orleans Urban League, which has for its personnel leading members of both [races] high in the church, the state, and society."<sup>48</sup> The new League office was "devoted to promoting better racial relationships in the city, and to bettering the condition of the Race industrially and socially."<sup>49</sup> The *Chicago Defender* reported that students from Xavier University and Black writers from the Dillard Unit assisted the new chapter with social and clerical work for Black New Orleanians. The Urban League also worked to integrate local labor unions whose membership clauses excluded Black workers in the area.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1942 compilation of *The Negro in Louisiana*, the Crescent City had a long and established history of interracial and interethnic cooperation in labor. Segregation did impact labor struggles across various industries, but the Dillard Unit highlighted notable instances of interracial cooperation through these years in contrast to Gumbo YaYa's emphasis on divisions and "othering." In 1883, the umbrella organization of the Central Trades and Labor Assembly oversaw thirty different Black, white, and interracial labor organizations with 15,000 members.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 45), 14.

<sup>49</sup> *The Chicago Defender*, November 6, 1938.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Somers, "Black and White in New Orleans," 31.

Italian immigration to New Orleans reached its peak in the last decades of the nineteenth century and many worked in the sugarcane fields alongside African Americans. Italian Americans also created the local fruit industry and operated many of the city's grocery stores. Because of their occupations, Italians found camaraderie with African Americans in populist politics and labor organizing.<sup>52</sup> Then in the post-Reconstruction period, interracial cooperation in labor stagnated alongside the state's reestablishment of the legal color line.<sup>53</sup> Unions hobbled their advancement toward collective bargaining by neglecting and excluding an entire group of workers. When New Orleans dockworkers organized across position, race, and skill in 1902, the integrated union struck when employers' demands of workers kept expanding without increased pay. In response, dock employers and shipowners brought in white strikebreakers from out of state to stoke the flames of racism and foment divisions among the local labor force, to little success when other labor unions joined the effort.<sup>54</sup> The dockworkers' ultimately successful strike in 1902 offers an example of interracial cooperation and class solidarity during the first years of Jim Crow when racial ideologies permeated political initiatives, leisure travel books, and workspaces.<sup>55</sup>

From 1916 to 1923, New Orleans' longshoremen organized four different strikes. *The Negro in Louisiana* records this integrated labor effort: "A militant Irish element" led the final strike in 1923 when "Negro and white longshoremen began to make demands for shorter working hours," wage increases, and overtime pay.<sup>56</sup> The interracial cooperation between Irish and African American longshoremen stands in stark contrast to *Gumbo YaYa*'s contentious portrayal of the two groups. *Gumbo YaYa* emphasized the Irish longshoremen and stevedores on

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<sup>52</sup> Cunningham, "The Italian," 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> Somers, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Arneson, "To Rule or Ruin: New Orleans Dock Workers' Struggle for Control 1902-1903," *Labor History*: 164.

<sup>55</sup> Arneson, 166.

<sup>56</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 32), 3.



the docks as well-paid and content, while detailing the Irish expulsion of Black Creoles from the Irish Channel, a riverfront neighborhood historically known as Lafayette. By the 1930s, many Black families returned to the Lafayette / Irish Channel neighborhood, living amongst Irish Americans. *Gumbo YaYa* closes the “Irish Channel” chapter with a quote from resident Jennie Green McDonald: “I’ll stay in the Irish Channel, even if it has become the Black Sea.”<sup>57</sup>

Whereas the Dillard History Unit sought to portray class solidarity and interracial cooperation, Louisiana’s Federal Writers’ Project emphasized ethnic and racial differences. By emphasizing the differences and distrust between ethnic groups instead of collectivism, the Project whitewashed New Orleans’ vibrant history and culture, creating a romanticized and exoticized fiction.

White supremacist and romanticized narratives stood in stark contrast to the reality of New Orleans’ histories of interracial cooperation, interethnic camaraderie, and class solidarity. Black and white Radical Republicans dismantling of the color line during Reconstruction was followed by swift and intense backlash from the Redeemers who reestablished white supremacy and implemented Jim Crow periodically in the last decade of the nineteenth century. White tourism writers beginning with Grace King straddled the line between racist propaganda and tourism advertisements. Their works commodified New Orleans for public consumption, transforming the reality of Voodoo into a fictitious mechanism designed to illicit white fear and curiosity. Although politically disenfranchised and economically marginalized, Black New Orleanians’ organization and intellectual labor provided a counternarrative to popular tourism books. In the twentieth century, New Orleans, the city, and the people, were sold in tourism books as commodities for public consumption.

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<sup>57</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, 74.

The popular works of travel writers and the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project presented the spaces of elite white Creole planters, plantation homes, as the last remnants of antebellum Louisiana. In reality, many of the ideologies and hierarchies that had defined antebellum Louisiana persisted through the twentieth century. Enslaved Black labor built the plantation homes that white tourists motored past and ogled at. In the twentieth century, Black Louisianans contributed to the economic and social fabric that made the local tourism industry possible, including the construction of roads on which white Americans motored.

The local public tourism industry depended on the ability of American tourists to access New Orleans and the surrounding areas. Louisiana's new paved roads of the 1930s crisscrossed the state and connected disparate regions for the first time in the state's history. Louisiana's evolution to geographic modernity addressed the public's need for accessible, navigable roads and allowed travel writers to compose "motor tours" of River Road plantations from New Orleans.

Prior to Louisiana's network of roads, bridges, and highways, nineteenth century travel centered around business purposes and large conventions that depended on railroads for transportation. Expensive railway tickets and cumbersome travel stalled public tourism's development until the 1920s, when accessible automobile ownership revolutionized travel for the American middle class. Automobiles afforded individual autonomy... on the condition of accessible and navigable roads. Extensive networks of safe roads increased visitor numbers, crucial for many states as agricultural and manufacturing industries stalled during the Great Depression. Although the roads were safe for white touring motorists to traverse, the hard physical labor that constructed many roads across the South was anything but safe for chain gang laborers.

Louisiana did not rely upon exclusive chain gang labor for its construction of public roads like its neighbor to the east, Georgia.<sup>58</sup> According to the Dillard History Unit, Governor Huey P. Long wanted “‘negro labor on the roads’... to get starving labor as cheap as he could on the open market.”<sup>59</sup> Long, known for his boisterous personality and populism, began his statewide highway program in 1929, one year into his gubernatorial term. The plan aimed to create 2,750 miles of paved roads and to build bridges statewide. In 1928, Louisiana had only three major bridges and under three hundred miles of paved highways.<sup>60</sup> The program originated as an amendment to the 1921 Louisiana State Constitution and proposed a total cost of \$68,000,000 for the statewide project.<sup>61</sup> Funds for the infrastructure program would be allocated from the state’s gasoline tax of four cents per gallon.<sup>62</sup> Owners of automobiles that traversed the new roads, both tourists and the Louisiana public, paid for them, not the state government or local industries.

Months before Louisianans voted on the proposed amendment, Governor Long considered direct contributions from industries in Louisiana who profited tremendously from the state’s labor force. But Long quickly conceded to political opposition and changed the funding from industrial contributions to the state gasoline tax. A year after his populist campaign rhetoric won him the governorship, Long promised that “during my term in office as Governor I will not undertake... any legislation imposing any form of occupational or license tax on any form of

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<sup>58</sup> Sarah Haley, “Engendering the Chain Gang Economy and the Domestic Carceral Sphere,” in *No Mercy Here*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 157.

<sup>59</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 33), 8-9.

<sup>60</sup> N.G. Dalrymple, “An Analysis of the Governorship of Huey Long,” (Graduate thesis, Ouachita Baptist University, 1968), 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Abbeville Meridional*, Sep 27, 1930.

<sup>62</sup> Dalrymple, “Governor Long,” 50.

manufacturing.”<sup>63</sup> Governor Long abandoned his populist stance to achieve his goal of modernizing Louisiana’s landscape with paved roads, constructed by “starving labor.”

At the outset of Long’s popular road program, anti-Long Democrats claimed that payroll padding, poor construction of roads, and favoritism all threatened the potential good of the road program. But they offered a solution. In April 1930, Senator William C. Boone suggested the state open the contractor bids to public competition through the Louisiana Highway Commission.<sup>64</sup> The first public bids went out six months later. By January of 1931, “scores of contractors” filled the Louisiana Capitol to bid on road construction contracts from the Highway Commission. The Commission awarded 43 road projects in 38 parishes across the state. The January projects planned for 196 miles of concrete paved highways, six major bridges, 74 miles of asphaltting, and 125 miles

of miscellaneous

roadwork.<sup>65</sup> The laborers

employed by contractors

starting in November of

1930 materialized Long’s

dream of a navigable

Louisiana.

Many of the

contracts utilized Black



Figure 3 “Sign of Progress” Advertisement for Gov. Long & LHC Program, 1930.

<sup>63</sup> “Letter from Governor Huey P. Long to the Couch Committee,” (Teaching American History in Louisiana, Huey P. Long Collection, Louisiana Digital Library), July 20, 1929. <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/tahil-hpl%3A212>

<sup>64</sup> *Shreveport Times*, April 13, 1930.

<sup>65</sup> *Clarion-News*, January 8, 1931.

labor, underpaid and underserved during the start of the Great Depression. Private contracts increased the exploitation of Black labor, but to state Democrats, that was vastly more favorable than Long's populism and political favoritism. *The Negro in Louisiana* cites statistics for the increased Black employment during Long's road program. In 1910, the state and private employers hired 1,487 Black men for road construction. By 1930, the figure had more than tripled to 4,937.<sup>66</sup> These statistical figures and Long's political posturing obscured his opinion about Black Louisianans. Historian Glen Jeansonne claims that Long "pretended to help Blacks because it suited his national aspirations... He could not, for example, have constructed highways upon which whites could travel but blacks could not."<sup>67</sup> Long's racism materialized in his acceptance of the Jim Crow status quo, his refusal to raise "the irrelevant political issue" of race during his many campaigns, and his frequent use of disparaging racial language.<sup>68</sup>

Long's posturing as a populist and friend of the [white] everyman served his political goals. The necessary and beneficial road program made Louisiana accessible for citizens and visiting automobilists. However, the success of Long's road program relied upon the established inequalities of race and class that permeated Louisiana and his "populism" did not challenge the state's favoring of business over people. Long erected signs touting his road project as "progress," but his shallow populism failed to build a bridge toward social and political progress.

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<sup>66</sup> The Dillard History Unit, (Chapter 33), 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Glen Jeansonne, "Huey Long and Racism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, No. 3. (Summer 1992): 269.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 266.

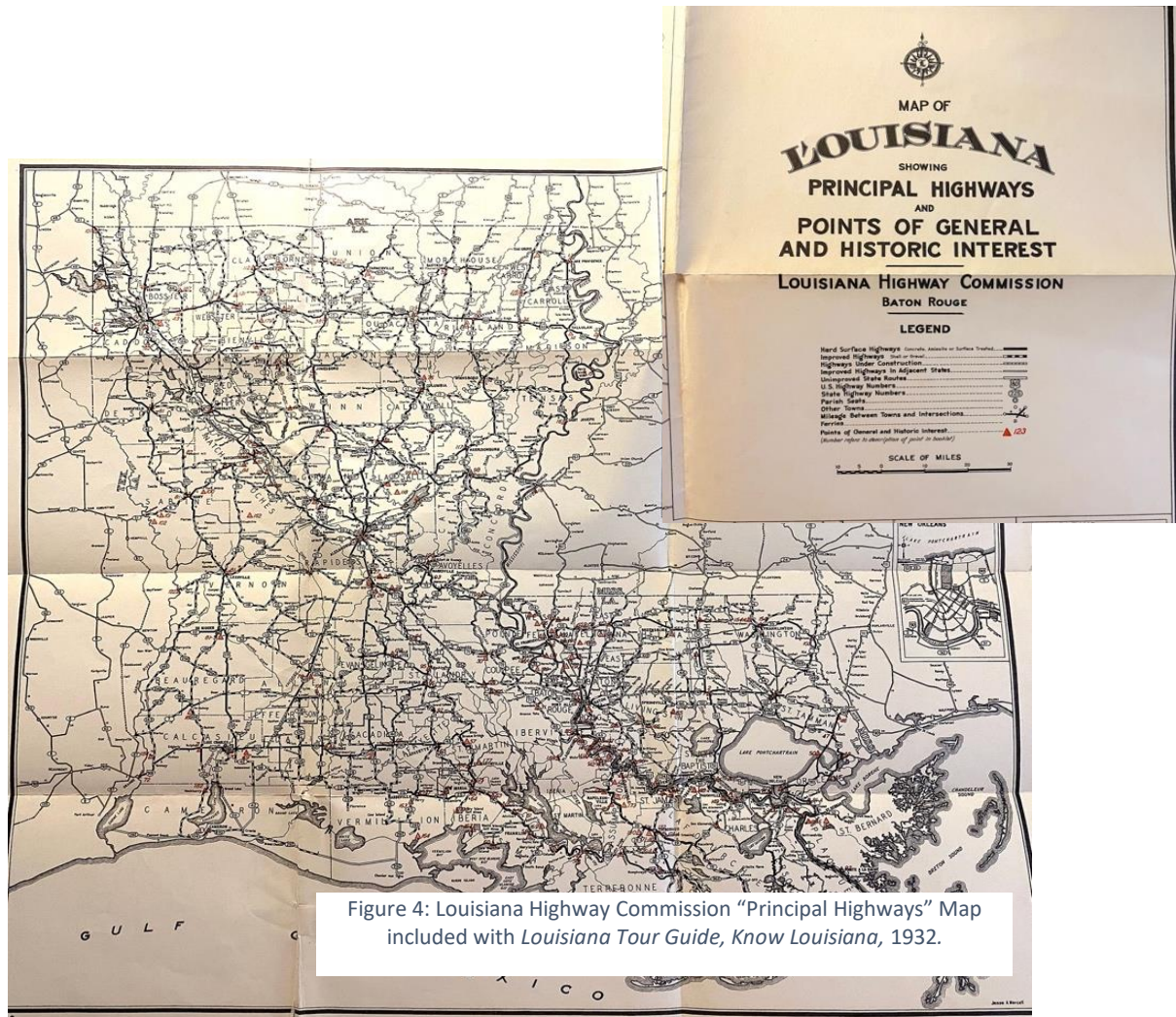


Figure 4: Louisiana Highway Commission "Principal Highways" Map included with *Louisiana Tour Guide, Know Louisiana*, 1932.

To celebrate Governor Long's program, the Louisiana Highway Commission published the booklet *Know Louisiana: a tourist guide to points of general and historic interest* in 1932 with an accompanying state map. The booklet publicized the opening of Louisiana to American tourists and echoed other popular tourism writings:

Louisiana, with her fertile fields, clear skies, caressing breezes, colorful scenes of noted Romances, is reeking with the historical memories of a day past – but never to be forgotten. Here, you will be furnished with the Thrill of Travel, with which only a tour of the Old World might compete. ... Motor along our highways noted

throughout the land. Talk with our inhabitants, some of them descendants of the most colorful historical figures.<sup>69</sup>

The Louisiana Highway Commission's motor tour guide used the state's new modern roads to sell Louisiana's old romance and European Old-World aesthetics to American tourists.

Traversing Louisiana's modern roads would lead the American tourist to romantic antebellum spaces lost in time.

The booklet contains 199 "points of interest" that cross the state, most located along the River Road from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. The Highway Commission booklet also includes one day motor tours from major cities and towns across Louisiana. The high concentration of "points of historic interest" around New Orleans contributed to two different one day motor tours. The Highway Commission included Destrehan Plantation in both motor tours from New Orleans. Destrehan, listed as number 12 out of 199, is described briefly: "The old house, now restored, is the property of the Pan-American Oil Company and is occupied by its officials. D'estrehan is a famous name in Louisiana, the family having come over with Bienville. The house was built in the early part of the last century."<sup>70</sup> Charles Paquet designed and oversaw the construction of the Destrehan Plantation house in the last decade of the eighteenth century, not the early nineteenth. Like Saxon's, the Highway Commission's description focused exclusively on the plantation house while neglecting to mention the company town and refinery. The state agency's description of Destrehan Plantation prioritized the spaces of white Creole elite over the historic and contemporary labor of Louisianans who made those spaces possible. Enslaved labor constructed the Destrehan Plantation house, exploited Louisianan workforces resided in the Destrehan company town and provided the labor to fuel the cars which traversed Louisiana's

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<sup>69</sup> J.G. Ewing, *Louisiana: a Tourist Guide to Points of General and Historic Interest*. (Louisiana Highway Commission, 1932), foreword.

<sup>70</sup> Ewing, *Louisiana*, 14.

new roads, constructed by poor and working-class Louisianans desperate for work during the Great Depression. The Louisiana Highway Commission wished for the public to “know Louisiana...” – the white supremacist, revisionist version of Louisiana.

Tourism materials which focused on legends fostered the development of out-right falsehoods. For example, the stories of Jean Lafitte, prevalent in many writings by Saxon and the Louisiana Writers’ Project, consisted of part history, part legend, and part tourism promotion. Lafitte’s specter first appeared in Saxon’s 1930 *Lafitte the Pirate*. Lafitte’s name has been popular with New Orleanians since his role in assisting General Andrew Jackson’s troops at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. The buccaneer did not leave behind documentary historical evidence himself; the stories collected by Saxon and Project writers consisted of anecdotes at best and complete fabrications at worst.

The year 1945 saw the publication of Harnett T. Kane’s *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana* as well as *Gumbo YaYa*. Both books contained similar tales of the ghost of Jean Lafitte. *Gumbo YaYa* wrote that “the ghost of Jean Lafitte... in one old house, appeared nightly, pointed a bony finger at the tiled flooring. When news of this spread, treasure-hunters dug up the entire lower floor of the house, tile by tile.”<sup>71</sup> Kane’s remarkably similar Lafitte legend located the ghost story at Destrehan Plantation. “[Nicholas Noel Destrehan] entertained the pirates Lafitte at the house; old people say that a buccaneer’s ghost used to march about the rooms in the dark, moaning and pointing at midnight to a certain spot. That, of course, was where the gold was buried.”<sup>72</sup> The stories, although astoundingly similar, were factually irreconcilable. Aside from the paranormal aspect, Pan-American occupied Destrehan Plantation

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<sup>71</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, 275.

<sup>72</sup> Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1945), 135e.



in 1945. The petrochemical executives undoubtedly had little interest in tearing up the tile of the house's lower floor in search of Lafitte's buried treasure. In one sentence, seven pages into the chapter of Lafitte legends, *Gumbo YaYa* admits that "tales of hidden Lafitte treasure increase from year to year, yet, on the other hand, authorities agree that Lafitte was without funds when he departed the Louisiana scene, and that it is decidedly unlikely that he would have left such immense wealth behind."<sup>73</sup> The authors admitted the nonfactual nature of their claims, but buried it deep within a maze of ghosts, legends, pirates, and buried treasure.

Privateering in early nineteenth century Louisiana, contrary to travel writers' fantastical legends, did not involve smuggling gold doubloons. Pirates like Lafitte smuggled human beings, enslaved African Americans illegally kidnapped from the North and transported during the Second Middle Passage or stolen human beings illegally captured in Africa or born to those who had been stolen from Africa. In the period between United States' outlawing of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, many free northern African Americans and enslaved African Americans from the Chesapeake region were "sold South" to the Cotton Kingdom and western territories. Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote in her 1917 account of Louisiana Black history:

Slaves were daily smuggled into the territory by way of Barataria Bay... Jean and Pierre Lafitte, infamous in history for their feats of smuggling and piracy, made capital of the slave trade, and but for their stalwart Africans would have been captured and hung long before Louisiana had suffered from their depredations and the bad reputation they gave her.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Saxon, Dreyer and Tallant, 263.

<sup>74</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana, Part II," *The Journal of Negro History* 2, No. 1. (January 1917): 53.

According to Dunbar-Nelson, Lafitte not only “made capital” from the illegal sale of enslaved African Americans but staffed his crew with “stalwart Africans.” Dunbar-Nelson’s perspective provides a fascinating contrast to New Orleans’ original travel writer Grace King’s 1895 book:

There the blue waters of the bay were ever gay with the sails of incoming and out-going vessels; there the landing-places bustled and swarmed with activity, and capacious warehouses stood ever gorged with merchandise, and the cargoes of slaves multiplied, for the contraband slavers were always the keenest of the patrons of Barataria.<sup>75</sup>

Although many Lafitte stories lack documentary evidence, historical context of an interaction between a pirate and the planter elite like Jean Noel Destrehan served the exclusive purpose of purchasing contraband, kidnapped, illegally enslaved human beings... not burying treasure of gold doubloons. Whether in stories of pirates or plantations, the lens of white supremacy obstructed the truth of Louisiana’s history and people through legends and lies.

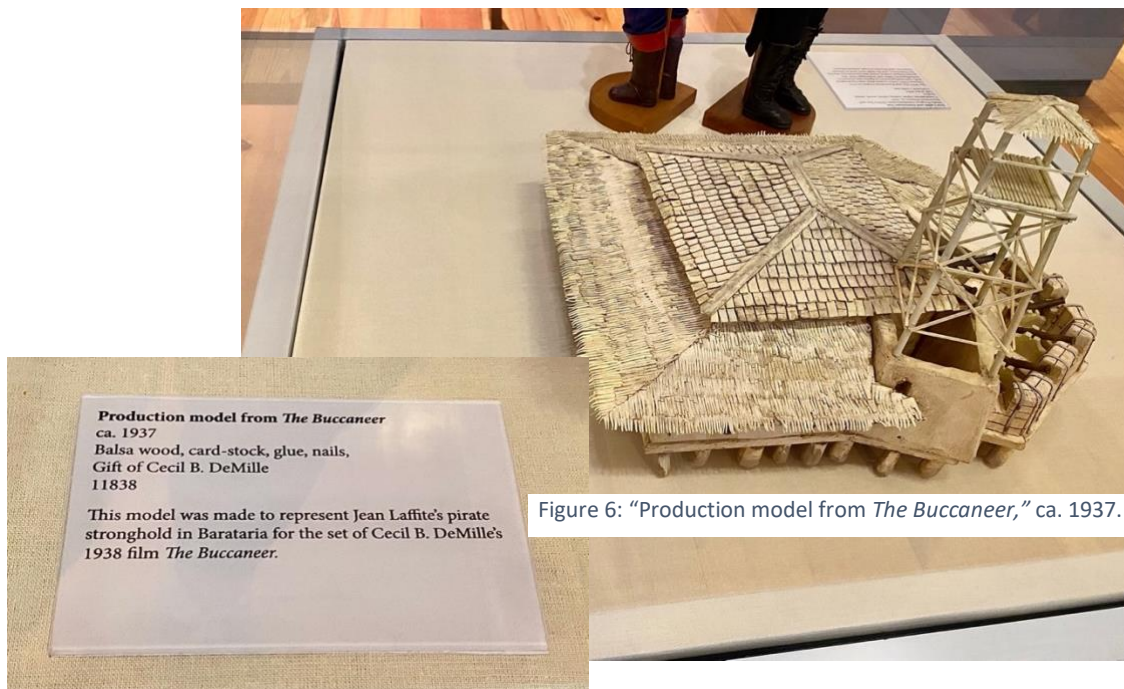


Figure 6: “Production model from *The Buccaneer*,” ca. 1937.

<sup>75</sup> King, 194. Barataria was the name of the island stronghold of Lafitte and his men, off the southern Louisiana coast.

On my visit to New Orleans in December of 2021, I visited the Cabildo, a historic building adjacent to St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square that housed the Louisiana Supreme Court and state prison in the nineteenth century but is now home to the Louisiana State Museum. Adjacent to the 1815 Battle of New Orleans exhibit, ephemera of Jean Lafitte fills an entire room of the Museum's second floor. Posters line the wall next to a looped theatrical trailer for Cecil B. DeMille's 1938 Paramount film *The Buccaneer*, based on Lyle Saxon's 1930 novel, *Lafitte the Pirate*. A scale model of the Barataria set piece was donated to the Museum from DeMille himself. According to legend, Lafitte made his stronghold at Barataria, twenty miles south of New Orleans in the swampy bayou coastline. Saxon's ahistorical legends of Lafitte provided the source material for a Studio Era blockbuster, now immortalized in state-funded public history



Figure 5: Film Poster for *The Buccaneer*, 1938.

institutions. In New Orleans public history spaces, the line between legend and fact is no longer blurred. It is non-existent. The historical context for Lafitte's Barataria Bay stronghold, the smuggling of contraband human beings, is conspicuously absent from the description plaque. The Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo reinforces the connection in the tourist mind, first introduced by King, Kane, and Saxon, that Lafitte and his legends are worthy of preservation, state funding and public attention.

## Conclusion

Throughout the works of Louisiana's white travel writers, historical context is missing. Whether it be the erasure of Lafitte's purpose of interacting with antebellum white Creole planters, not mentioning who designed and constructed elite Creole plantations, why they were built and what surrounded them, or the mischaracterization of Voodoo as a nefarious and exclusively African practice, white travel writers whitewashed many vibrant complexities of Louisianan culture and life, creating fantastical tropes for tourist consumption. Even in the state's construction of geographic modernity, the Louisiana Highway Commission erased the context of Black labor contributions both historically and contemporarily. Roads built through "starving labor" allowed white motorists to traverse the Pelican State and gaze across the lasting facades of antebellum white supremacy.

Many Black writers and historians resisted white supremacist narratives, but New Orleans' public tourism industry reflected the moment in which it was founded. From post-Reconstruction to World War II, the creation of New Orleans' dominant tourism narrative reflected the racial and class inequalities of the Jim Crow South. Writers like Lyle Saxon, Harnett T. Kane, and the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project reconfigured Grace King's 1895 "Lost Cause" version of New Orleans history in the form of a cultural pluralist narrative that in effect, exoticized local customs and peoples, creating two-dimensional caricatures that the white American could read about in their leisure time. Published eighty years ago, the Writers' Project works continue to be represented on the shelf at plantation museums' gift shops, while the Dillard History Unit's *The Negro in Louisiana* remains unpublished. The white privilege and

white supremacy that supported the Jim Crow era creation of New Orleans' public tourism industry continue to permeate the tourist landscape today.

With the privilege of hindsight and continued publication of tourism books we can trace the establishment of River Road plantation house museums like Destrehan. The popular tourism works of the first half of the twentieth century, alongside white controlled local politics and commerce, paved the way for River Road plantation museums to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century. White travel writers, politicians, and government agencies created the tourism industry by preserving white supremacist ideals and transforming Louisiana's landscape for touring motorists. Through this collaboration, white Louisianans sowed the economic, ideological, and geographic seeds necessary for River Road plantation house museums to sprout as sites of nostalgic historical memory. From agriculture to petrochemical, from petrochemical to memory production, plantation museums like Destrehan persist on the physical landscape of southern Louisiana in defiance of economic change and in staunch ideological temerity.

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- Figure 1: Cover page, *Gumbo YaYa: 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Original and Unabridged*. New Orleans, River Road Press., 1945. Scanned by author.
- Figure 2: “Commercial Enterprises in Colored N.O.L.A.” The Crescent City Pictorial, 1926. OCW Taylor Papers, Amistad Research Center.
- Figure 3: “Sign of Progress” Advertisement for Gov. Long & LHC Program, 1930. State Library of Louisiana, Historic Photograph Collection via the Louisiana Digital Library.
- Figure 4: Louisiana Highway Commission “Principal Highways” Map included with Louisiana Tour Guide, *Know Louisiana*, 1932. Photo by author.
- Figure 5: Film poster for *The Buccaneer*, 1938. Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo. Photo by author.
- Figure 6: Production model from *The Buccaneer*, ca. 1937. Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo. Photo by author.

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## Chapter Three

### The Destrehan Plantation Museum: Preservation of Historical Memory and Transformation of White Supremacy on South Louisiana's River Road

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May 2022



The Destrehan Plantation Museum has been open to the public since 1978. Since then, its managing historical society has expanded the Museum's landholdings, added historic structures not original to the site, and begun operations as an event and wedding venue. For those forty-four years, Destrehan Plantation Museum has cultivated, produced, and exported historical memory for public consumption. In December of 2021, I visited Destrehan and brought my knowledge of the site's intricate history with me as I stepped over the threshold of the living history museum.

### Destrehan Plantation Museum, December 2021

Visitors enter the Destrehan Plantation Museum through the Museum's gift shop, a nineteenth century structure not original to the site. A faded sign swings above the entrance: "DESTREHAN PLANTATION STORE." The decision to have Destrehan Plantation Museum's gift shop parade as a company store was both astute and problematic. The connection points to the estate's legacy of exploitation. The company store figured prominently in both the lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the agricultural plantation and the petrochemical employees of Pan-American and Amoco in the



Figure 1: Destrehan Plantation Store. Photos by Author, December 2021.

twentieth century. The gift shop / company store trivializes the landowners' purposeful exploitation of the residential labor force, whether by Creole planters or petrochemical executives. The gift shop today is a space of fun and bright colors. Parasols hang from the ceiling and local artisans' crafts cover the counters awaiting tourists on a day trip out of New Orleans. Acting as one of those tourists on a day trip from the city, I snap the photos of the Museum entrance and climb the creaky wooden stairs.

The old door handle sticks as I shoulder my way inside to the air conditioning. Inside, a Museum employee greets me by name from behind the wide glass display case in the center of the shop floor. The entire Museum staff has been made aware of a student's presence and purpose at the site. The notepad I carry under my arm must have given it away. I introduce myself then pay the admission fees for myself and my family for the one-hour tour. The \$20 adult tickets give access to ten of the original 5100 acres that made up the indigo plantation in 1782. Fencing encircles the Museum's acreage to ensure only paying customers have access to the property.

Tickets in hand, my family and I were quickly greeted by our tour guide, fully dressed in period costuming of a blue antebellum gown, matching shawl, and black lace gloves. We exited the rear of the gift shop, back into the misty and humid South Louisiana air. Our tour guide gathered us under the porch of sharecropper cabins not original to the site. We huddled around a posterboard nailed to the wooden slats: "Men, Women and Children enslaved at Destrehan

Plantation.” The list of over three-hundred names originated from probate inventories of planters and enslavers Robert deLogny,

Jean Noel Destrehan and Stephen

Henderson. The plain black and

white list, seemingly divorced from

emotion, contrasts sharply against

the crisp blue and black lace of our

living history interpreter’s gown

and gloves. The historical imprint

of entire lives, stapled and listed in

black and white print. Entire

generations and communities of

Africans and their descendants

compiled in a list of names, gender,

age, and value in piastres... a list

nailed to a sharecropper cabin alien

to Destrehan Plantation, originating

from a different time and a

different place. The Destrehan Plantation Museum devotes less than ten minutes of the hour tour

to interpretation of the lives of hundreds of individuals and families enslaved by the deLogny,

Destrehan, Henderson and Rost families, opting instead for a plain, black and white poster-board

of names and monetary value. Our tour guide quickly runs through her rehearsed and memorized

**Men, Women, and Children enslaved on Destrehan Plantation**

Slaves included in the 1782 sale of the Plantation by Guillaume Gaignan to Robert de Logny

Name	Class	Origin	Age	Value in Piastres
Antoine	Male	France	25	100
Baptiste	Male	France	20	80
Charles	Male	France	18	60
Denis	Male	France	15	40
Etienne	Male	France	12	30
Francis	Male	France	10	20
George	Male	France	8	15
Henry	Male	France	6	10
James	Male	France	4	5
John	Male	France	3	3
Joseph	Male	France	2	2
Mathias	Male	France	1	1
Philippe	Male	France	0	0
Robert	Male	France	0	0
Thomas	Male	France	0	0
William	Male	France	0	0
Yves	Male	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0
Anna	Female	France	0	0
Barbara	Female	France	0	0
Catherine	Female	France	0	0
Elizabeth	Female	France	0	0
Florence	Female	France	0	0
Genevieve	Female	France	0	0
Helen	Female	France	0	0
Irene	Female	France	0	0
Jessie	Female	France	0	0
Katherine	Female	France	0	0
Louisa	Female	France	0	0
Mary	Female	France	0	0
Nancy	Female	France	0	0
Olivia	Female	France	0	0
Pamela	Female	France	0	0
Rachel	Female	France	0	0
Sarah	Female	France	0	0
Teresa	Female	France	0	0
Virginia	Female	France	0	0
Wendell	Male	France	0	0
Xavier	Male	France	0	0
Yvonne	Female	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0

Slaves included in the Succession of Stephen Henderson

Name	Class	Origin	Age	Value in Piastres
Antoine	Male	France	25	100
Baptiste	Male	France	20	80
Charles	Male	France	18	60
Denis	Male	France	15	40
Etienne	Male	France	12	30
Francis	Male	France	10	20
George	Male	France	8	15
Henry	Male	France	6	10
James	Male	France	4	5
John	Male	France	3	3
Joseph	Male	France	2	2
Mathias	Male	France	1	1
Philippe	Male	France	0	0
Robert	Male	France	0	0
Thomas	Male	France	0	0
William	Male	France	0	0
Yves	Male	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0
Anna	Female	France	0	0
Barbara	Female	France	0	0
Catherine	Female	France	0	0
Elizabeth	Female	France	0	0
Florence	Female	France	0	0
Genevieve	Female	France	0	0
Helen	Female	France	0	0
Irene	Female	France	0	0
Jessie	Female	France	0	0
Katherine	Female	France	0	0
Louisa	Female	France	0	0
Mary	Female	France	0	0
Nancy	Female	France	0	0
Olivia	Female	France	0	0
Pamela	Female	France	0	0
Rachel	Female	France	0	0
Sarah	Female	France	0	0
Teresa	Female	France	0	0
Virginia	Female	France	0	0
Wendell	Male	France	0	0
Xavier	Male	France	0	0
Yvonne	Female	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0

Slaves Purchased by Stephen Henderson from the Estate of Celeste Rabie de Logny, the Widow Jean Noel Destrehan, 1825

Name	Class	Origin	Age	Value in Piastres
Antoine	Male	France	25	100
Baptiste	Male	France	20	80
Charles	Male	France	18	60
Denis	Male	France	15	40
Etienne	Male	France	12	30
Francis	Male	France	10	20
George	Male	France	8	15
Henry	Male	France	6	10
James	Male	France	4	5
John	Male	France	3	3
Joseph	Male	France	2	2
Mathias	Male	France	1	1
Philippe	Male	France	0	0
Robert	Male	France	0	0
Thomas	Male	France	0	0
William	Male	France	0	0
Yves	Male	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0
Anna	Female	France	0	0
Barbara	Female	France	0	0
Catherine	Female	France	0	0
Elizabeth	Female	France	0	0
Florence	Female	France	0	0
Genevieve	Female	France	0	0
Helen	Female	France	0	0
Irene	Female	France	0	0
Jessie	Female	France	0	0
Katherine	Female	France	0	0
Louisa	Female	France	0	0
Mary	Female	France	0	0
Nancy	Female	France	0	0
Olivia	Female	France	0	0
Pamela	Female	France	0	0
Rachel	Female	France	0	0
Sarah	Female	France	0	0
Teresa	Female	France	0	0
Virginia	Female	France	0	0
Wendell	Male	France	0	0
Xavier	Male	France	0	0
Yvonne	Female	France	0	0
Zoe	Female	France	0	0

**Notes and Terminology:**

The U.S. Census Bureau has been unable to identify the names of the enslaved. We have been unable to identify the names of the enslaved. We have been unable to identify the names of the enslaved.

Figure 2: "Men, Women, and Children Enslaved on Destrehan Plantation." Photo by Author, December 2021.

script and does not encourage visitors to reflect in the space. Instead, we hustle on to the big house.

I visited Destrehan Plantation Museum on December 20th. For the holiday season, the Museum decorated the interior of the plantation house for “Creole Christmas.” White Creole planters’ Catholic Christmas traditions figured in each room’s interpretation. In the dining room, the table setting displayed a Christmas Réveillon dinner of cold foods consumed after the midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Around the house, balls of fake holly hung from the ceiling, bright red ribbons draped along the bannisters and every room smelt of baking spices. In the main foyer, wicker baskets sat at the foot of the grand dual staircase. The baskets represented the planter’s Christmas gifts to enslaved people at Destrehan. Forks, spoons, and cuts of cloth inside the baskets spoke not to the generosity of the planter, but enslaved Africans and their descendants’ lack of daily necessities, clothing, and utensils. On the bottom floor of the house, the foyer opens to a central dining room flanked on both sides by working spaces: a bricked dry storage room on the right and a food preparation space on the left.

In the storage room, the Museum placed a mannequin figure of Charles Paquet, the architect and designer of the 1787 manor house. A *gens de couleur libres*, Pacquet lived as a free person of color in French colonial Louisiana and likely designed Homeplace, another River Road plantation nearby.<sup>1</sup> Paquet designed the two-story colonial structure with “open galleries on three sides,” a double-pitched roof, brick masonry floors, wood framing, and masonry columns supporting the gallery on the first floor. Paquet also oversaw the building of the house,

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<sup>1</sup> “National Register of Historic Places - Nomination Form.” Destrehan Plantation, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. March 20, 1973.  
<https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/73002132>





Figure 3: Second-Story Interior Room, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

constructed by “six African Americans, at least three of whom” were enslaved at Destrehan.<sup>2</sup> If Paquet played such an important role in the construction of the plantation house, I struggled to understand why he stood in a corner of the bottom floor’s dark storage room. Directly above the storage room on the second floor, the Museum has ripped one room down to the plaster lathes and displays a scale model of the house’s interior construction. Why would Paquet’s mannequin not be placed within the room demonstrating his architectural expertise in constructing the house that still stands 235 years later?

In the interior kitchen / food preparation room to the left of the dining room, we encountered a mannequin figure, Marguerite, hunched over the table. The frame propped in the chair adjacent to the mannequin reads: “MARGUERITE. Born in Louisiana in 1740. Enslaved resident of Destrehan Plantation. Cook and Laundress.” Our tour guide described Marguerite as “sturdy,” referring to her unusually long life and many successful childbirths. A deep feeling of discomfort washed over me as I observed the perpetually hunched stance of the plaster recreation of an actual human being who spent their life in bondage. I wonder if Marguerite would describe

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<sup>2</sup> “National Register of Historic Places - Nomination Form,” March 20, 1973.

herself as “sturdy” or a “resident” of the Destrehan Plantation. No doubt Marguerite’s life involved more than being just a cook and laundress for the D’Estrehan family. She was a mother, but more importantly, a human being denied freedom. Her skilled labor, performed daily, maintained the luxurious and leisurely lives of Destrehan’s Creole planter elite, especially their Christmas traditions. Our tour guide hedged many of her statements when discussing Marguerite, falling short of dedicating her perspective to that of enslaved Africans and their descendants at Destrehan.



Figure 4: Mannequin / Chantourne of Marguerite, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

Our tour guide’s language and the broader interpretation of the site adopted the perspective of the white planter elite. Throughout the tour, the guide used the phrases “the enslaved,” and “human property” consistently to refer to enslaved Africans and their descendants held in bondage at the plantation. Destrehan’s interpreters have made efforts to not refer to Africans and their descendants held in bondage as *slaves*, to avoid equating condition with identity. Our guide used *the enslaved* frequently throughout the tour when referring to daily domestic responsibilities inside the mansion. Our guide also used the term *human property*



which acknowledged the antebellum legal status of enslaved Africans but also reiterated the interpretation's perspective from the white Creole planter elite. By constantly referring to Africans and their descendants as *human property*, Museum staff encourages the visitor to adopt the perspective of the planter elite while standing inside of their leisurely abode, instead of encouraging the visitor to reflect in the uncomfortable emotions of imagining the reality of enslaved peoples' lives.

### Preservation and Transformation

After our tour, my family and I drove around the River Road area of St. Charles Parish. A half mile from the Destrehan Museum, I snapped a photo of a storage tank in the Shell Norco Refinery. The tank displays a collaborative advertisement for Shell and Louisiana tourism: "Creative Energy: The Rhythm of Louisiana." The physical geographies of Louisiana's River Road reveal the conflicts between preservation and transformation: tourism and public history preserve the structures of Creole planters while petrochemical refineries continue to transform and expand their use of land. River Road plantations like Destrehan also exemplify the collaboration between preservation and transformation. The River Road Historical Society consisted of residents who worked for refineries while also conserving the land against further industrial expansion.

Destrehan survives because of the efforts of South Louisianans in the early 1970s to preserve the spaces of white antebellum history. The River Road Historical



Figure 5: "Creative Energy: The Rhythm of Louisiana." Shell Norco Refinery. Photo by Author, December 2021.

Society (RRHS) received Destrehan in a 1971 deed from Amoco after three years of petitions and requests for the structure.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s, historic preservation in New Orleans and the River Road parishes presented a new site for contemporary public discourses about history, race, and power in antebellum Louisiana. The RRHS completed Destrehan's interpretation through a collaboration with local educators Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., local educators who decided the plantation museum's cultural value by adopting popular tourism narratives of legends and fables. Their state-funded educational program, Education Through Historic Preservation, (ETHP) brought public school students into plantation museums for a collaborative and innovate on-site approach to teaching local history. In 1991, *Preservation Magazine* interviewed Cizek and Sensat following their acceptance of Louisiana Landmark Society's Harnett T. Kane Award for their successful program of twelve years.

As we enter the end of the twentieth century, we must make a decision as to the kind of environment we want to leave our children and grandchildren. Do we want only desecrated historic neighborhoods; a River Road only of pollution and petrochemical plants; memories and historic markers of what once was; a few token settings surrounded by belching smoke and no historic context? Or shall we organize our forces and see to it that we create a world that speaks to the best of the past and that looks forward to an even better future.<sup>4</sup>

Cizek's quote begs the question: antebellum plantation houses, the luxurious spaces of violent labor camps, speak "to the best of the past"? The mansions which sat on agricultural labor camps operated by enslaved Africans and their descendants offer a fractional percentage of the antebellum experience, through the lens of enslavers and the immensely privileged. This

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Cizek, John H. Lawrence, Richard Sexton. *Destrehan: The Man, The House, The Legacy*, (Louisiana: River Road Historical Society, 2008), 25.

<sup>4</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr.," *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991): 1-2. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

romanticization of the white Creole elite pervaded the ideology behind plantation house museums and Cizek's own nostalgia for Saxon and Kane's version of Louisiana.<sup>5</sup>

Cizek remarked on the discordant aesthetics of St. Charles and other River Road parishes' old plantations and modern refineries to demonstrate the conflict between economic progress and historic preservation. When Cizek and his partner Sensat organized their forces with the RRHS, they emphasized preserving historic structures for the education of future generations, as well as preserving the aesthetics to best accompany those plantations. To have plantations surrounded by "belching smoke and no context" undermines their goal of a nostalgic escape to the romanticized lives of the antebellum aristocracy.<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, the efforts of historic preservationists aligned with environmentalist goals to preserve South Louisiana's landscapes, although for different purposes. Environmentalists valued the daily lives of residents; the RRHS valued tourists' experiences. The RRHS' transformation of Destrehan into a plantation museum did not pollute the water and air like petrochemical smokestacks, but as sites of public history, they do pollute the atmosphere of social and racial progress.

Spaces of public history present who we were historically, and in the process, reflect who we are contemporarily. Plantations like Destrehan possess the capacity to reconfigure the discourses and tactics of white supremacy through their interpretation. Historical preservation knits the social fabric of the current through its interpretation of the past. Sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham writes, "tourism discourses and practices may undermine some longstanding cultural

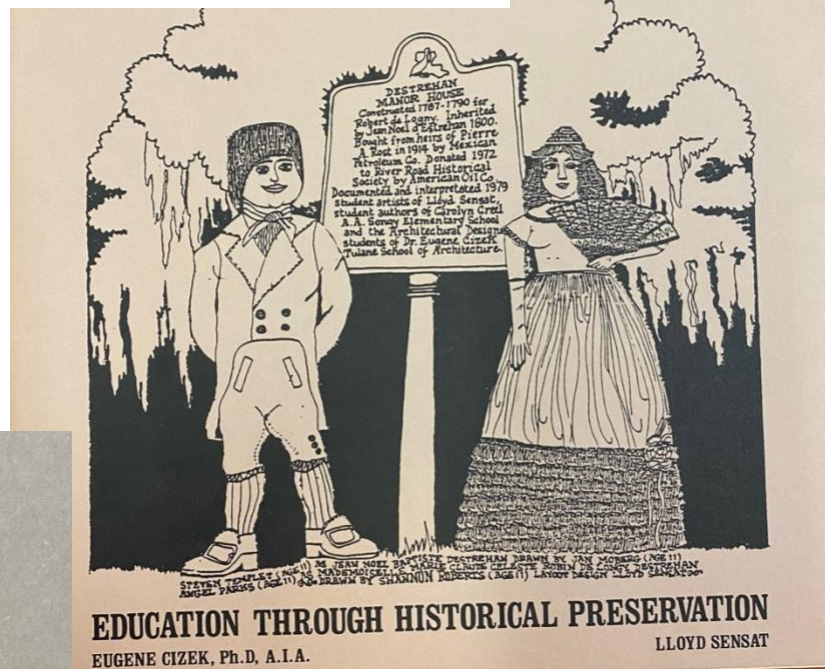
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<sup>5</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Address Given as Joint Recipients of the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award for Preservation / Education," April 7, 1991. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

<sup>6</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr.," *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991): 1-2.

meanings, stabilize and give new meaning to others.”<sup>7</sup> River Road plantation museums stabilized and preserved the historical power of white Creole planters but also gave new meaning to what white supremacist discourses could accomplish in the spaces of white antebellum planters. The decades following the legal destruction of Jim Crow point to the transformation and reconfiguration of white supremacist tactics. White historical societies prioritized white Creole elite perspectives by preserving their mansions, and in the process, provided a space for the evolution of new white supremacist rhetoric. The RRHS and the interpretation done by ETHP made efforts to be inclusive and reflect the multitudes of people involved in Destrehan’s history, but their social liberalism still neglected the contributions and perspectives of Black Louisianans – both historically and contemporarily.

Figure 6: Cover, ETHP Destrehan and Homeplace. 1978. New Orleans Public Library.



dedicated to  
WELHAM  
and the other great  
houses of the River Road  
that have been destroyed  
in the name of progress.

Figure 7: Dedication, ETHP Destrehan and Homeplace. 1978. New Orleans Public Library.

Pictured above is the first printed pamphlet of the Education Through Historic Preservation

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, “Authenticity in Black and White: The Rise of Tourism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture and Race in the Big Easy*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 95.

program, completed at the Destrehan and Homeplace plantations. Cizek and Sensat dedicated the pamphlet to “WELHAM and the other great houses of the River Road that have been destroyed in the name of progress.”<sup>8</sup> According to Cizek, progress, specifically economic progress, presented a direct threat to historic preservation: economic progress destroyed the physical structures of white Creole elite. However, Destrehan was unique in this regard. Instead of demolishing the mansion in the 1910s, Pan American chose to convert its use for refinery management, and in doing so, reconfigured racial and labor hierarchies for its company town. In Cizek’s view, “progress” threatened preservation, but throughout Destrehan’s twentieth century existence, both preservation and transformation defined its survival.

The twentieth century history of Louisiana advanced social and racial progress in the legal dismantling of Jim Crow and economic progress in the ‘petrochemical revolution’ and statewide infrastructure project. During that time, white supremacist discourses adapted and transformed to oppose the various moments of progress, whether the “Lost Cause” of the early century, cultural pluralist tourism writings of the 1930s and 40s, or social organization of the 1970s. By the 1970s, the dominant strain of white supremacy had evolved to match the moment of increased activism, democratic participation, and desegregated public spaces. Social organizations that formed to stall racial progress saw themselves as moderates, not extremists, because of their preference for structural violence instead of personal, material violence.<sup>9</sup>

In South Louisiana, eight white River Road residents formed the River Road Historical Society and transformed the mansion into Destrehan Plantation Museum by preserving the

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene D. Cizek, and Lloyd Sensat Jr. “Address Given as Joint Recipients of the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award for Preservation / Education.” *The Louisiana Landmarks Society*. April 7, 1991.

Cizek’s partner in business and life, Lloyd Sensat, said in their 1991 speech for the Harnett T. Kane Award, “Ironically, when we were hanging the Destrehan Exhibition at Diversity Gallery in the French Quarter, Marathon Oil Company was demolishing the 144-year-old Welham Plantation.”

<sup>9</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 73.

perspective of the white Creole planters, fostering an idyllic and conflict-free narrative of the past that quieted the site's exploitative racial and labor histories. As the new Museum opened its doors to tourists, locals, and public-school children, Cizek and Sensat posited Destrehan's cultural value as the best of Louisiana's past.<sup>10</sup> Plantation museums preserved and reconfigured white supremacy for a new generation but also diminished local refineries' absolute political and economic control over River Road residents. In the 1970s, new plantation house museums resisted industrial expansion that threatened tourists' safety and their romanticized experience at the site, while local environmentalist groups joined with local labor organizations to advocate for residents' health and daily lives.

Like the Shell storage tank advertisement, the original members of the RRHS contributed their "creative energy" to establishing Destrehan as a site of public history. In the early 1970s, white residents organized to preserve Destrehan Plantation as an example of "the best of the past," and in the process, hoped that Museum could bring about new forms of progress for the tourism industry and residents' health. In the process of creating the Destrehan Plantation Museum, the RRHS wittingly or unwittingly, reconfigured white supremacist discourses into institutional narratives and worked to preserve the historical structure and its land that had been degraded by earlier economic "progress." In the 1970s, Destrehan brought the tarnished complexities of its conflict between preservation and transformation into its existence as a museum.

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<sup>10</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr.," *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991).

## Racial Progress in New Orleans & the Evolution of White Supremacy

During the 1960s, organized Black resistance to oppression, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and public-school segregation altered and shifted the racial landscape of South Louisiana. New Orleans' "School Crisis" integrated public schools and in response, many whites fled to river parishes like St. Charles where Destrehan sat vacant from 1958 to 1971. As legal Jim Crow ended, schools integrated, and Black Louisianans accessed the franchise, white flight to suburbs retooled the spaces and strategies of white supremacy for the last decades of the twentieth century. This white flight and rapid suburbanization provided the opportunity for the establishment of the River Road Historical Society and Destrehan Plantation Museum, as white residents looked to preserve the spaces of white antebellum planter aristocracy.

Even prior to 1960s rapid suburbanization, the intricately racialized society of twentieth century South Louisiana influenced its physical geographies. The southern part of the state's Catholicism and Creole cultures contributed to a unique kind of Southern Jim Crow. In the rural and industrial areas surrounding the Crescent City, evidence of rapid industrialization and failed refineries littered the landscape surrounding historically Black communities. In rural-industrial parishes, South Louisianans of different races lived and worked as "intimate strangers" throughout the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Louisianans worked together in refineries, docks, and lumber yards and interacted in public spaces, but segregated schools, churches and neighborhoods reinforced the color line.

The largest shift in Black collective action and organizing in Louisiana came during the crisis of World War II. The draft and labor shortages of World War II provided an avenue for Black advancement that challenged Louisiana's system of social and economic white supremacy.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Mushatt, *Lion's Tale*. 2000. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University Digital Collections. <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A123685>

Black employees filled positions in industries previously exclusive to white employees. Black military service, although segregated, proved African Americans' willingness to serve a nation that did not serve them. Also, by the 1940s, Louisiana's new and expanded statewide infrastructure dealt the final blow to Black rural isolation that stalled organization. The predominantly Black workforce that constructed both local road projects and Governor Long's 1929 initiative paved paths between rural and urban populations, resulting in increased organized resistance statewide.<sup>12</sup>

In the postwar era, direct action in New Orleans increased. Membership in organizations like the NAACP skyrocketed in response to the boycott of four Canal Street retailers for refusing to allow Black women to try on hats in-store.<sup>13</sup> The next year in 1948, Black New Orleanians formed the Louisiana Civil Rights Congress to challenge public transportation segregation.<sup>14</sup> Segregated in 1902, the streetcars served both locals and tourists, a practical service of everyday transportation and iconic tourist attraction.<sup>15</sup> The successful efforts of the Civil Rights Congress and the Congress on Racial Equality desegregated New Orleans' streetcars in 1958.<sup>16</sup>

Events of the 1950s and early 1960s contributed to the growth of rights organizations in New Orleans and across Louisiana. Following the 1953 Baton Rouge and 1955 Montgomery bus boycotts, Black Southerners gathered in New Orleans in February 1957 to announce the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*, (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Hilary McLaughlin-Stonham, "Resistance and Compliance: The Return of Integrated Streetcars," in *From Slavery to Civil Rights: On the Streetcars of New Orleans, 1830s-Present*, (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: NYU Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Vincent, "'Of Such Historical Importance...': The African American Experience in Louisiana," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 50, No. 2. (Spring 2009): 152.



Local college students formed a younger chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in 1960 inspired by the success of other Southern chapters' civil disobedience, direct action, and interracial cooperation.<sup>18</sup>

In partnership with the young members of CORE, the Consumers League of Greater New Orleans (CLGNO) sought to challenge local stores' segregationist hiring practices with sit-ins, pickets, demonstrations, and pamphlet distributions. The 1960 organization of boycotts challenged white-only store employment policies and Louisiana's reactionary state law that redefined "disorderly conduct" to empower police arrests of legal nonviolent demonstrators.<sup>19</sup> CORE and CLGNO organized September 1960 demonstrations where seven CORE members and local college students sat-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter on Canal Street. All were arrested and charged under the new statute of criminal mischief. Undeterred by threats of structural and physical violence, demonstrators continued sit-ins and pickets throughout September. New Orleans police arrested participants at every demonstration.<sup>20</sup>

The Jim Crow "separate but equal" hypocrisy that Black activists sought to dismantle was most profound within public schools. Black schools received less funding, used outdated educational materials, and suffered from severe overcrowding.<sup>21</sup> Two months after the CORE and CLGNO direct action demonstrations on Canal Street, the beginning of New Orleans' "School Crisis" raised the temperature across South Louisiana's already blistering climate. Federal Judge Skelly Wright ruled on August 31, 1960, that November 14<sup>th</sup> would mark the start of local public-school integration. Wright's decision came four years after his 1956 initial ruling

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Raphael Cassimere Jr., "The Canal Street Boycotts," *NOLA Resistance Oral History Project*, The Historic New Orleans Collection. January 28, 2019. <https://www.hnoc.org/research/nola-resistance-oral-history-project>

<sup>19</sup> Fairclough, 271.

<sup>20</sup> *Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1960.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Wieder, "The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960: Causes and Consequences," *Phylon* 48, No. 2 (1987): 124.

that invalidated Louisiana's segregated education laws, following the 1954 *Brown* decision.<sup>22</sup> Judge Wright's adherence to federal court rulings and racial advancement came into conflict with white segregationists and state legislators' dedication to preserve Jim Crow. The conflict resulted in a decade-long "School Crisis."<sup>23</sup> The fight over school integration in Louisiana lasted until 1969, fifteen years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In the fall of 1960, the Orleans Parish School Board chose four African American female students out of 136 applicants to be the first students to integrate Frantz and McDonogh 19 elementary schools. On November 14<sup>th</sup>, the middle of the fall semester, Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost, Gail Etienne, and Ruby Bridges entered previously all-white schools and began the decade long effort to secure young Black students' right to an equal education.<sup>24</sup>

At the start of the 1967 school year, the federal court in New Orleans ordered that all grades start the year integrated. Over six thousand Black students attended newly integrated public schools, but the Orleans Parish School Board transferred only four Black educators.<sup>25</sup> On May 28, 1969, the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans ruled that Orleans Parish must act to abolish every vestige of state-imposed segregation for both students and faculty.<sup>26</sup>

The efforts of New Orleans' Black students, faculty, and activists changed New Orleans' systemic inequalities of public-school segregation, but white New Orleanians also organized social groups to oppose and stall forward momentum. Historian William Chafe describes this form of organized white supremacy as a strategic and "progressive alternative to extremism"

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<sup>22</sup> Wieder, 125 & 127.

*Chicago Defender*, August 31, 1960.

<sup>23</sup> *Chicago Defender*, December 1, 1960.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Raphael Cassimere, "The Canal Street Boycotts," *NOLA Resistance Oral History Project*. Weider, 128.

*Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> *Chicago Defender*, March 11, 1967.

<sup>26</sup> *The Alexandria Town Talk*, May 29, 1969.

exhibited by violent white separatist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>27</sup> Claiming to be moderate, white organizations against racial progress sold themselves to white Southerners as existing between the extremes of the KKK's racial violence and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples' integration.<sup>28</sup> Not progressive in ideology or action, these groups like the Citizen's Council of Greater New Orleans sought to preserve legal white supremacy and most centered their efforts around school segregation. In July of 1963, George L. Singlemann, Secretary of the Citizens' Council, wrote to the City Council urging a denial of Orleans Parish School Board's request for funding to construct a new high school.<sup>29</sup> Singlemann and the Citizens' Council were concerned that "a large integrated public school in proximity close enough to [white] homes [could] devalue their real estate holdings."<sup>30</sup> The Citizens' Council utilized their privileged status as white property owners through collective organizing in an effort to perpetuate white supremacy through segregated and unequal public education. However, the efforts of the Citizens' Council failed, and the new integrated John F. Kennedy High School opened its doors in 1967.

Although white organizations posited themselves as moderate, Black activists and their accomplishments did endure material violence as well as structural violence. Lunch counters, catholic private schools and Tulane University all integrated in 1962, but in the most symbolic and effectual spaces of social progress, municipal government buildings, Black access remained restricted. On October 31, 1963, Reverend Avery Alexander, local civil rights leader and associate of Martin Luther King Jr., staged a sit-in at the New Orleans City Hall basement lunch

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<sup>27</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> McLaughlin-Stonham, "Resistance and Compliance: The Return of Integrated Streetcars," 179.

<sup>30</sup> George L. Singlemann, "Letter to Councilman DiRosa from the Citizens' Council of Greater New Orleans," July 31, 1963. New Orleans Public Library, City Archives, Councilman Joseph DiRosa Papers.

counter, protesting the local government's continued segregation. New Orleans police dragged Alexander out of the basement and up the stairs by his heels, his head banged against each marble step.<sup>31</sup> Local reporters and television cameras captured the violent incident and distributed the horrendous images across local media channels.

Three days later, the City Hall offices of Mayor Victor Shiro and the City Council received a letter from George J. Thomas, doctor and Medical Director of the Flint-Goodridge Hospital, the only hospital to offer medical service to New Orleanians of color. Doctor Thomas advocated for Reverend Alexander, decried the violence that occurred within the walls of the municipal building and suggested that racial progress would serve New Orleans' reputation well - culturally and economically.

October 31, 1963 will go down in history as the day of infamy... for the Negroes of New Orleans. ... No doubt, you fail to realize that the Reverend Avery Alexander is only a symbol of the aspirations and hopes of one-third of our population, which will no longer be denied. History may record that this great opportunity was wasted... Let us avoid strife... through the formation of a strong interracial committee, which can... restore New Orleans to a place of merit in education, science, art, entertainment, industry, culture, sport, Christianity and religion.<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Thomas recognized that New Orleans' inequality and violence against "one-third" of the local population harmed the city's historical legacy and contemporary economy. By the 1960s a significant portion of the city's economy originated in local tourism which relied upon a romantic and idealized version of New Orleans to entice visitors. During Mayor Schiro's terms, local issues of racial discrimination and violence began to undercut that romantic and idealized

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<sup>31</sup> *Louisiana Weekly*, February 10, 2020. <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/remembering-rev-avery-alexander/>

<sup>32</sup> Dr. George J. Thomas Jr., "Letter to Councilman DiRosa," November 2, 1963. New Orleans Public Library, City Archives, Councilman Joseph DiRosa Papers.

fantasy. Tourism profits, private interest investments and federal contracts all declined in New Orleans because of national attention to the Crescent City's "School Crisis."<sup>33</sup>

Doctor Thomas was correct. Louisiana's gradual desegregation of public spaces resulted in increased tourism profits, employment, and participation, especially by Black Louisianans. Hotels, entertainment venues, restaurants, bars, and nightlife integrated their staffs and patrons. Black locals drank cocktails in previously restricted bars and musicians played for integrated audiences. The local Black economy directly contributed to and influenced New Orleans' tourism industry after forty years of exploitation. Integration in the local tourist economy in both production and consumption challenged total economic white supremacy. However, for decades after New Orleans' integration, tourist shops continued to sell caricatured depictions of Black New Orleanians as voluptuous mammies on cookie jars and books like *Little Black Sambo*.<sup>34</sup>

Whites' resistance to racial advancement shifted from the legal to the social and economic sphere. Whites fled from increased Black participation in the most lucrative aspects of the local economy, integrated public spaces, and equal public education. White New Orleanians fled the city in droves, seeking to create their own social sphere outside of intimate and integrated New Orleans. "White flight" accomplished a new form of residential segregation, enforced by white residents' wealth instead of municipalities. White relocation to the surrounding suburbs at such a high rate rapidly increased the Black population percentage within New Orleans. Whereas previously, New Orleans' Creole French and Spanish history and Catholic culture created a uniquely South Louisianan Jim Crow, white flight transformed New

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<sup>33</sup> Fairclough, 282.

<sup>34</sup> Erik Johnson, "Slavery, Tourism, and Memory in New Orleans' 'Plantation Country,'" *Africa Today* 65, No. 4. (Summer 2019): 104.

Taken from Johnson's interview with Kathe Hambrick, Founder of the River Road African American Museum.

Orleans into a traditionally segregated southern city, with a majority-Black population in the city limits and white concentrations in new suburbs.<sup>35</sup>

When whites fled the end of legal Jim Crow and integrated public schools, they brought their ideologies and wealth with them to the river parishes. White resistance to racial progress evolved during the “School Crisis.” Segregationists organized against progress, petitioning municipal bodies to maintain school segregation and picketing integrated schools daily, refusing to enroll their white children.<sup>36</sup> When their efforts failed, many white New Orleanians fled the geographies of increased equality, using their economic privilege to transform white supremacy. Once settled in the river parishes, upper- and middle-class whites contributed their wealth to the expanding suburban sprawl of single-family homes, shopping malls, chain stores, and eventually plantation museums. After renovation and reconstruction, these museums opened to the entire public, but their narratives reflected a narrow perspective — one that was constructed by whites for whites. Publicly accessible plantation museums’ success depended on the preservation of the mansion and lands, as well as the safety of the public who traversed those spaces. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, environmentalism in South Louisiana gained traction and created a local discourse that placed the preservation of the environment in direct conflict with local industrial expansion and exploitation.

### Environmental Justice in South Louisiana

Destrehan’s vacancy from 1958 to 1971 encouraged white residents from the river parishes and new transplants from New Orleans to reimagine the use and purpose of the old

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<sup>35</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Rogers, 72.

plantation house. As white historical societies preserved plantation homes and, in the process, reconfigured white supremacist discourses for the post-Civil Rights Era, they also preserved the land on which plantations sat. The peculiarity of South Louisiana's River Road provided a unique opportunity for the historic preservation of elite Creole structures to advocate for contemporary residents and resist local industry's exploitation of the environment.

In the latter half of the century, plantation museums opened to the public and furthered the complicated industrial makeup of the River Road. South Louisiana's twentieth century evolution of capital and the expansion of petrochemical industries proceeded unchecked for decades. When white residents flooded the river parishes and founded historical societies, their dedication to preserve antebellum plantations' value was multifaceted. Plantations' social value served white supremacist purposes, but the economic value of plantation lands depended on its accessibility and safety for tourists. In the 1970s and 1980s, historic preservationist groups complicated the dynamic conflict between activist organizations and polluting industries.

Local industries' pervasive environmental degradation began with their establishment in the early twentieth century, but academic and activist attention to the quickly degrading livelihoods of South Louisianans began after another period of industrial expansion on the River Road. In the postwar period of economic growth from 1947 to 1967 Louisiana's petroleum and chemical plants rose from 172 to 255.<sup>37</sup> Residents' quality of life deteriorated further during this period, and garnered national attention. In 1956, the United States Geological Survey stated that the industrial pollution in the New Orleans area was an "ever present danger."<sup>38</sup> That danger worsened throughout the coming decades.

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<sup>37</sup> Craig E. Colten, "Too Much of a Good Thing: Industrial Pollution in the Lower Mississippi River," in *Transforming New Orleans & Its Environs*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 143.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

Water quality deterioration presented itself as one of the first signals that decades of industrial runoff threatened residents' lives and health. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, River Road residents swam in the Mississippi River, drew river water to wash clothes and local churches held baptisms in the river. But by the early 1970s, multiple studies proved the river's toxicity to local communities' health.<sup>39</sup> One such study conducted by the Environmental Defense Fund on Lower Mississippi River drinking water found high concentrations of pollutants known to be dangerous to human health.<sup>40</sup> Then in 1971, the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration traced poor water quality, fish kills, and oily taste in local fish to petrochemical industries in the Lower Mississippi Valley.<sup>41</sup> In response to these studies, refineries occupying river-adjacent land constructed fences and barriers along the levees to prevent public access to the river. The Mississippi River had sustained the cultures, religions, and economies of South Louisiana for centuries, but the petrochemical industry's apathy toward local populations effectively ceased the community's access to their historic lifeblood.

As refineries restricted public access, the community collaborated with labor organizations to fight back against the pervasive exploitation of workers, residents, and their environment. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, or OCAW, led the region's organized resistance to industrial pollution. OCAW of South Louisiana, Local 4-620, blew the whistle on the massive global chemical corporation BASF for their continued dumping of chlorine into the Mississippi River in February 1970.<sup>42</sup> OCAW's actions in the 1970s and 80s show that the priorities of organized labor had evolved from the bread and

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<sup>39</sup> Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "Ol' Man River or Cancer Alley?" in *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Colten, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 13.



better issues of the 1950s (wages and hours) to arguing for the health of the worker and the community.<sup>43</sup> The climax of the conflict between OCAW and BASF came in June 1984 when BASF locked out 370 OCAW workers at its Geismar plant following the company's refusal to compromise with Local 4-620 about its subcontracting.<sup>44</sup> OCAW workers struck, formed picket lines in front of the plant, and looked to the community for alliances.

The collaboration between labor and community provided avenues for locals to push back against industrial exploitation in work and daily lives. During the five-year long lockout, various Louisiana environmental groups formed in collaboration with OCAW. Louisiana Workers Against Toxic Chemical Hazards (Louisiana WATCH) formed to advocate for the state's massive petrochemical workforce's health outside of just BASF.<sup>45</sup> Geismar's Clean Air & Water Group and the Louisiana Coalition for Tax Justice also formed during the BASF lockout.<sup>46</sup> Louisiana's grassroots environmentalists attracted the attention of larger national groups: Greenpeace, Sierra Club, and the National Toxics Campaign all sent representatives and researchers to South Louisiana.<sup>47</sup> A joint study between the Sierra Club's resources and OCAW's activism found that "76 million pounds of chemicals had been dumped into the Mississippi River by 15 area plants in one year."<sup>48</sup> Also during the 1980s lockout, residents led by Amos Favorite and OCAW founded the African American environmentalist group, Ascension

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<sup>43</sup> Merrill Singer, "Down Cancer Alley: The Lived Experience of Health and Environmental Suffering in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 25, No. 2. (June 2011): 148.

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Isaac, "Bhopal on the Bayou," *The Multinational Monitor* 11. No. 1 & 2. (January – February 1990). <https://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1990/01/lines.html>

<sup>45</sup> Richard Leonard and Zack Nauth, "Beating BASF: OCAW Busts Union-Buster," *Labor Research Review* 1. No. 16, (1990): 41. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/102558>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Markowitz and Rosner, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard and Nauth, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 43.

Parish Residents Against Toxic Pollution.<sup>49</sup> Favorite, a school integration activist from Ascension Parish, had crosses burned in his front yard in response to his activism, and was no stranger to tactics of intimidation to stall progress.<sup>50</sup>

Part of OCAW's efforts to encourage local organization had a lasting effect on public perception of the River Road parishes of South Louisiana. During the lockout, OCAW's public relations campaign financed and erected billboards in Ascension Parish warning motorists that they were passing through the "Gateway to Cancer Alley."<sup>51</sup> OCAW members took the fight to the public through billboards and community organizations. By mounting a public relations campaign, Local 6-420 reduced the economic and political power of BASF, forcing them to acknowledge OCAW's demands and rehire the workers with better contracts than ever before.<sup>52</sup> The efforts of OCAW and groups like Ascension Parish Residents increased local and national attention that attracted researchers from across the country to "Cancer Alley."

Researchers not affiliated with national environmentalist organizations made their way to South Louisiana to conduct studies and determine the level of risk to residents and workers. Dr. Marise Gottlieb, an epidemiologist and general family medicine physician from the East Coast, conducted a study in 1981 that determined South Louisiana residents who drank Mississippi River water had a 2.1 greater chance of developing rectal cancer.<sup>53</sup> Her findings also determined that the highest rates existed in the parishes downstream from multiple polluters and closer to

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<sup>49</sup> Leonard and Nauth, 43.

Singer, "Down Cancer Alley," 148.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>52</sup> Isaac, "Bhopal on the Bayou."

<sup>53</sup> "Dr. Marise S. Gottlieb MD," *U.S. News and World Report*. Accessed April 10, 2022.

<https://health.usnews.com/doctors/marise-gottlieb-606627>

Singer, 146.

New Orleans, like St. Charles.<sup>54</sup> Gottlieb's second study in 1982 found that living within one mile of a chemical plant led to a 4.5 times higher chance of developing lung cancer.<sup>55</sup> According to researcher Merrill Singer, Gottlieb "terminated her research when she began to fear she might be harmed by those who do not want stricter regulation of industry."<sup>56</sup> Louisiana industries' power and intimidation compelled Dr. Gottlieb to cease her research and prevented many community members from joining environmentalist organizations to begin with.

As environmentalist discourses permeated South Louisiana's public consciousness, industrial "big men" retooled their economic and political power to resist environmental preservation. "Organizing was frightening for many of the people," Singer writes. "This industry is economically very powerful in Louisiana. The communities' needs are great, and their resources are few. Often it forces them to accept the companies' money and sing to their tune."<sup>57</sup> Singer's April and May 2010 qualitative study demonstrates the continued intimidation, pressure, and coercive control that local industries apply to River Road residents. Singer interviewed residents from Ascension Parish, a 70% African American community. Singer's study asked Black residents about their perspectives regarding industrial pollution and the cost-benefit analysis they compute in their daily lives. The most frequent responses from interviewees reflected an "acceptance of risk as a tradeoff for access to a job."<sup>58</sup> Singer completed his study over twenty years after the BASF lockout, OCAW's billboards, and Dr. Gottlieb's studies, revealing the continued pervasive influence of polluting industries over the lives of River Road residents.

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<sup>54</sup> Singer, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 157.

Respondents to Singer's 2010 study described the complex factors of life on the River Road that contribute to health risks. High rates of asthma result from not just chemical pollution, but agricultural pollution too. "Burning the shucks" is the annual cycling of sugar fields after being cut. This process produces carbon, tars, liquids, carbon monoxide, and particulates, some under 2.5mm, small enough to enter the lungs and create chronic respiratory issues.<sup>59</sup> Singer decided to focus his study on Black residents because of their statistically higher probability in developing chronic health issues, including cancer, compared to white residents.<sup>60</sup>

The inequalities of economic well-being and physical well-being continued from the past into present South Louisiana. The statistical disparity of increased Black illness can be traced historically to the purposeful establishment of chemical industries in the backyards of Black neighborhoods. Reverend Benjamin Chavis Jr. defines environmental racism as polluting industries' *deliberate* racial discrimination through the targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the dispersal of life-threatening and life-altering pollutants.<sup>61</sup> During the late 1970s and 1980s, local and national environmentalist groups organized to reframe the River Road as "Cancer Alley" in the public's mind, an idea that threatened to decrease tourist traffic. If tourists thought their visits to plantation museums meant a gamble on their personal health, they might be unlikely to roll those dice. Throughout this period, new plantation museums recognized that environmentalism, without explicitly using the term, would assist the survival of colonial and antebellum plantations.

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<sup>59</sup> Singer, 146.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>61</sup> Pamela Waldron-Moore, Anthony McKinney, Ariel Howard, and Amanda Brown, "A Question of Social Justice: The Case of Louisiana Communities and their Struggle for Environmental Sustainability," *Race, Gender & Class* 14, No. ¾. (2007): 157.

No matter the topic at hand, South Louisiana cannot be divorced from its sordid history regarding race. The racist actions of industrial executives in the early twentieth century continue to harm generations of River Road residents, disproportionately more Black than white. During the conflict between environmentalist organizations and local industries of the late 1970s and 1980s, historic preservationist groups consolidated their efforts to preserve plantation house museums – another distinct legacy of South Louisiana’s racial capitalism. Two of the River Road Historical Society’s original eight members spent their careers in local refineries and the petrochemical industry, further complicating the relationship between refineries, plantation museums, and environmental preservation.

The president and founder of RRHS, Ella Wayne Gaupp, contributed to community efforts to improve local quality of life and preserve the agricultural aesthetic that best accompanied plantations like Destrehan. In a June 2002 article in *L’Observateur*, Leonard Gray described Gaupp as a “historical activist, genealogist, [and] community activist.” Gaupp opposed a proposal for barge mooring facilities in the small riverfront distance between Destrehan and Ormond plantations on the west bank of the Mississippi River. Gaupp fought “tooth and nail to preserve the historical ambience of the area and keep it quiet and secure for residents.”<sup>62</sup> Preventing the barge mooring facilities served two purposes: to better the lives of St. Charles Parish residents and to preserve the land as a romanticized aesthetic accompaniment to the Destrehan plantation house. Gaupp recognized both and used environmentalist rhetoric to argue her point: “There should be some law that allows the people some protection.”<sup>63</sup>

Environmentalism in South Louisiana exploded in the 1970s and 1980s after decades of exploitation to the land and labor forces reached a boiling point. Local refineries sought to

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<sup>62</sup> Leonard Gray, *L’Observateur*, June 19, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Leonard Gray, *L’Observateur*, June 19, 2002.

preserve the existing oppression of land and labor which prioritized their profits over safety and long-term health of the community. In response, labor organizations reconfigured their efforts to resist exploitation by collaborating with the community and mounting public relations campaigns. Black environmentalist groups like the Ascension Parish Residents Against Toxic Pollution adopted the tactics and rhetoric of the previous decades' Civil Rights groups to resist economic oppression instead of state oppression.

The introduction of historical societies' plantation museums complicated this economic history of race and labor by introducing a formal tourism economy to the River Road's "Cancer Alley." In their best interest to preserve the land's agricultural aesthetic, historical societies resisted further industrial expansion and in effect, aligned with environmentalist efforts. However, plantation museums like Destrehan did not challenge the social histories of inequalities; instead, reconfiguring white supremacy into the institutional narratives and site interpretation.

### The River Road Historical Society

The River Road Historical Society's ownership of Destrehan preserved white control over the plantation while transforming its use and purpose. After decades as a petrochemical refinery and twelve years of vacancy, the RRHS opened the plantation house's front doors to the public for the first time. As a site of public history, the Society's members contributed their resources of wealth, time, and ideology to preserve the Destrehan plantation house as an institution with an educational purpose.

Historic preservation with an educational purpose demonstrates the evolved tactics which preserved white supremacy in the antebellum plantations along the River Road. Historical Societies and nonprofit organizations of white middle-class River Road residents established

themselves as educational institutions immediately following the “School Crisis” and white flight to suburbs. In February 1969, the same year that the “School Crisis” concluded, the RRHS submitted Form 1023 to the Internal Revenue Service to attain nonprofit status as a 501(c)(3) educational organization.<sup>64</sup> The RRHS’ stated their purpose as preserving Destrehan Plantation for the education of the local community and visiting tourists.

Ella Wayne Gaupp formed the Society, led as its president, and ushered the Destrehan Plantation Museum into existence. Born in Oxford, Mississippi, Gaupp grew up in an antebellum plantation home later converted to a bed and breakfast. After relocating to South Louisiana, Gaupp contributed her life efforts to preserving Destrehan Plantation and other local nonprofit organizations aimed at environmental issues and child abuse. As president of the RRHS, Gaupp led the initiative to contact American Oil Company and request the property be deeded to the new historical society. June Murray and husband Paul, local architects, assisted Gaupp in the initial efforts to restore the old mansion. Immediately after obtaining the property on December 17, 1971, the Society boarded up broken windows while Amoco donated funds to install a new roof and cleared the overgrown grounds.<sup>65</sup>

The RRHS’ ownership of the plantation transformed white middle-class economic power into the ideological power to construct a historical narrative. The RRHS renovated Destrehan thanks to its connection to architecture firms and real-estate development. Founding members Paul and June Murray established Murray Architects in 1957 and later opened Murrayhill Realty in St. Charles Parish. The Murray’s real estate development companies built and contributed to thirteen suburban residential developments before June’s death in 2017.<sup>66</sup> Through Murray

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<sup>64</sup> ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer. “River Road Historical Society.” Accessed October 14, 2021.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/720762390>

<sup>65</sup> *L’Observateur*, June 19, 2002.

<sup>66</sup> *Times Picayune*, May 8, 2017.

Architects, the RRHS relied upon the same capitalist venture, construction and development, that facilitated the rapid suburbanization of St. Charles Parish to renovate a dilapidated antebellum plantation house for educational and preservationist purposes.

Other founding board members of the RRHS included Rodney Cambre, a life-long employee of the Shell Norco Refinery; A.J. Bordelon, New Orleans Dentist; Betty LaNasa Haydel, local volunteer and philanthropist; Henry Boudin, construction manager; Arlene Friloux, local volunteer and philanthropist; Henry Friloux Jr., mechanical engineer; and Ralph Miller, attorney, lobbyist, and Louisiana state representative for twenty-two years.<sup>67</sup> Most of the men and women who founded RRHS had professional and social connections to other nonprofit organizations, but none were historians, public historians, or educators.

Original members Rodney Cambre and Ralph Miller best demonstrate the Society's complex relationship with industry. As an employee at Shell Norco Refinery, Cambre earned his living like many other residents of St. Charles Parish. Like the respondents in Singer's 2010 study, Cambre likely calculated a cost-benefit analysis regarding his employment. Refinery work provided steady wages and ample opportunity for educated or skilled white men like him. However, unlike the African American respondents to Singer's study, Cambre spent his free time preserving a site of profound racial violence. While Cambre's career served the local refineries — what Cizek would refer to as economic “progress” — his time outside of work served the preservation of historic structures and the land they occupied, preventing further intrusion of that economic “progress.”

Among all the founding members of the RRHS, Ralph Miller possessed the most impressive resume. Miller served as a state representative from 1968 to 1990, then as a lobbyist

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<sup>67</sup> *Times Picayune*, March 26, 2011. *The Advocate*, Oct 23, 2017. *The Advocate* Nov 2, 2018. *St. Charles Herald Guide*, Feb 21, 2007. *Albuquerque Journal*, Jun 14, 1964. *The Advocate*, April 1, 2017.



for Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association as well as the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce.<sup>68</sup> Miller's career in government and lobbying directly contributed to institutions which had perpetuated political white supremacy in the state of Louisiana for generations. Miller entered state office after the legal dismantling of Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement. His lobbying career advocated for the economic "progress" of local industry and capitalist development, but he contributed his free time and connections to preserve the spaces, perspectives, and land of the antebellum white Creole elite.

The RRHS' connections to local organizations and civic bodies provided opportunities to reach their goal of opening to the public by raising funds and fostering community outreach. The RRHS raised \$10,000 in the fall of 1971 when they first acquired the property. Soon after, the Society secured a \$50,000 grant from "a state preservationist agency." The Historical Society generated funds through its annual fall festival, heritage festival, and "making the house one of the most popular tourist attractions in the state."<sup>69</sup> The RRHS held the first fall festival at the site in 1971, before Amoco officially deeded Destrehan to the Society. The next year, local newspapers advertised the festival. Although the plantation house still sat in disrepair, the Society held many festival activities outside from noon to midnight like an "open air dance and beauty pageant." The Society also held "a concert and fashion show... an art show and sale, a country store, flea market, raffles, bingo, game booths, food and refreshments and a booth for the sale of doubloons, cast for the event."<sup>70</sup> Doubloons, often associated with piracy, alluded to the legend of Jean Lafitte and his buried treasure somewhere on the grounds of Destrehan. The Historical Society was willing to step outside of history into local legends for the purpose of

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<sup>68</sup> *The Advocate*, April 1, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> *L'Observateur*, June 19, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> *Richmond Beacon-News*, November 11, 1972.

raising funds to restore the Creole plantation house. In 1974, the New Orleans Arts and Crafts Council produced and directed Destrehan's fall festival, introducing craft and artisanry demonstrations to the fund-raising booths and activities. For the 1974 fall festival's theme, the RRHS chose "'Plantation Days,' and all of the exhibitors will be in suitable attire."<sup>71</sup> From the outset, the RRHS encouraged antebellum costuming and established Destrehan as a living history museum.

The tradition of antebellum dress, craft and artisanal demonstrations began in the Museum's early years but has since been removed from the fall festival for a separate event each spring. The Museum's "Heritage Day," is specifically tailored to local school children and their families. Artisans and historic craft specialists, dressed in antebellum attire, set up demonstration booths across the grounds at Destrehan for one day each spring. Blacksmithing, leatherworking, and shoemaking, crafts historically done by enslaved skilled artisans on plantations are displayed by a majority white artisans under non-original-to-the-site structures. A photo on Destrehan's website shows white women in hoopskirts and white men in double-breasted suits and top hats interact with St. Charles parish school children.<sup>72</sup> A large part of "Heritage Day" is when Civil War reenactors fire cannons and old weaponry, "*both* North and South," a Museum staff member was sure to clarify to me when she described the event.<sup>73</sup>

Outside of its fundraising initiatives and annual events in the early 1970s, the RRHS took advantage of the recent nationwide effort at historic preservation. The 1966 National Historic Preservation Act established the National Register of Historic Places, which began listing

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<sup>71</sup> *Crowley Post-Signal*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>72</sup> Destrehan Plantation Museum, "Events: Heritage Day," Accessed March 11, 2022.  
<https://www.destrehanplantation.org/events/heritage-day>

<sup>73</sup> Conversation with Destrehan staff member, December 20, 2021.

historic structures in 1969. In 1972, the RRHS submitted a National Register Historic Places Nomination Form to the National Park Service. The form required a category and written description of the site's historic significance. The Society checked the boxes for Agriculture, Architecture, and Industry; the Statement of Significance listed Creole landowners and architectural features, additions, and renovations of the mansion.<sup>74</sup> The short statement conveyed the limited information that the RRHS possessed about the plantation and relied upon the bare facts of the site, local property records, and Paul Murray's architectural expertise. The statement did touch on the land's productive history and its long connection to Louisianan capitalism: "The house was erected when indigo was still the principal plantation crop in Louisiana. The plantation then became an important sugar producing one in the nineteenth century and the house served as a facility of a major oil company for a number of years in the twentieth century when Louisiana began the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy."<sup>75</sup> At the Destrehan Plantation Museum today, only one acknowledgement of the site's existence as a refinery remains on



Figure 8: Amoco Sign, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

<sup>74</sup> "National Register of Historic Places - Nomination Form." Destrehan Plantation, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. March 20, 1973.

<https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/73002132>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



Figure 9: National Register of Historic Places Plaque at Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

display for visitors. The cast iron sign contains the Amoco logo and reads, “this historic house and site donated by Amoco Oil Company.”

The National Park Service added Destrehan to its National Register in 1973. Federal validation of a historic site increases its likelihood of survival, its visitors, and the grants available for historic preservation. However, as historian Melissa Cooper

points out, “federally recognized historic sites did not address local social and economic issues caused by the site’s continued existence or provide resources for current inhabitants.”<sup>76</sup>

Plantation museums like Destrehan preserved the inequalities of historic South Louisiana for an educational institution tailored to both locals and tourists. According to Eileen Julien, who grew up in South Louisiana as many of these museums opened to the public, “I’m not sure that I was aware of plantation tours growing up. ...it would’ve been like saying ‘Let’s go to Mars’ to think that Black people from New Orleans could go to the plantation and get a tour... It was for whites.”<sup>77</sup> Cooper’s quote points out that not only were Black families disinterested in visiting plantation museums, but Black residents were no longer employed by the refineries who once occupied the plantations. Plantation house museums not only evolved white supremacy with their institutional ideologies but removed occupational opportunities for Black working-class residents. Whites staffed the museum, white tourists and locals made up the core demographic of

<sup>76</sup> Melissa L. Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 205.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, “Slavery, Tourism, and Memory in New Orleans’ ‘Plantation Country,’” 103.

the patrons. In effect, plantation museums' physical spaces, institutional narratives, and economic harm transformed racial inequalities for the post-Civil Rights era.

The River Road Historical Society opened Destrehan Plantation Museum in the late 1970s, when local communities challenged issues of racial inequality, environmental injustice, and rampant poverty. While some social and political organizations sought to advance the economic and environmental conditions of South Louisianans, historical preservationist societies like the RRHS both organized to preserve a version of antebellum white Creole life and in the process, challenge industry's dominance that had perpetuated the region's inequalities for generations. Plantation museums, historic sites of violence and exploitation, also served as contemporary sites of resistance to industrial domination; after all, a plantation house museum is a more environmentally sustainable use of the land compared to refineries. Although the plantation does not pollute South Louisiana's environment like refineries, Destrehan's biased historical interpretation polluted the social discourse of progress and decreased employment opportunities for Black River Road residents.

From 1971 to 1978, the RRHS obtained the property, restored the house, raised considerable funds, and secured federal recognition. Their next goal was to expand the site's interpretation outside of land deeds and probate records. The Society required detailed site interpretation to provide visitors with intriguing and memorable tours. The stated purpose, to provide historical education, meshed with local educators Cizek and Sensat's groundbreaking program that brought children out of the classroom and into the plantation.

### Cizek and Sensat's Education Through Historic Preservation

The same year that Destrehan Plantation Museum opened to the public, the RRHS approached two educators from New Orleans, Eugene Cizek and Lloyd Sensat, to undertake the interpretation of the Museum. Cizek, a Fulbright Scholar with multiple graduate degrees, taught at the Tulane School of Architecture for nearly forty years and led the department from 1997 to 2011.<sup>78</sup> Cizek's partner in life and business, Lloyd Sensat Jr., held a master's degree from Louisiana State University, and taught art classes at A. A. Songy Elementary School in St. Charles Parish.<sup>79</sup> Outside of their careers, both men participated in historic preservation and tourism as members of the River Road Historical Society and the Louisiana Landmarks Society. After Sensat retired from teaching public school, he gave walking tours around the French Quarter until his death in 2011.<sup>80</sup>

Their love for New Orleans, its culture, and its tourist narrative, influenced their professional careers and especially their program, Education Through Historic Preservation. ETHP's interpretation of historic structures focused on the architectural qualities of the plantation house, Cizek's specialty. By focusing on the plantation house's architecture, ETHP centered the site interpretation, and therefore its cultural / historical value, on the Creole spaces of luxury and leisure. Cizek's 1991 quote about plantation homes being "the best of the past" demonstrated a likely unintentional but pervasive evolution of white supremacy through the preservation of elite white Creole spaces and perspectives. The ETHP program and its effects were complicated: the innovative program encouraged students to exercise their imagination and

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<sup>78</sup> "Eugene D. Cizek," Author's page for *The Pitot House*, Pelican Publishing Company.

<https://pelicanpub.com/products.php?cat=1680>

<sup>79</sup> John Pope, "Teacher and tour guide Lloyd Sensat dies at age 66." *Times-Picayune*, February 23, 2011.

[https://www.nola.com/news/education/article\\_a997e2bb-f3ab-5531-a9ce-3abe620043d9.html](https://www.nola.com/news/education/article_a997e2bb-f3ab-5531-a9ce-3abe620043d9.html)

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

fostered interest in local history, but that process adopted decades-old cultural pluralist tourism narratives that prolonged and institutionalized legends and historical fiction. The educational aspect of Cizek and Sensat's program, intentionally or not, passed down racist historical perspectives to the next generation.

During the 1970s, new River Road plantation museums began offering field trips for local schools to increase visitor traffic outside of New Orleans' peak tourist season in early spring. School children from recently integrated public schools visited new plantation museums on field trips. Although plantation museums invited both Black and white children into their institutions, Black students did not see their history represented in the plantations' narrative that emphasized Creole planters.

Cizek and Sensat founded the Education Through Historic Preservation (ETHP) program during the 1978-1979 school year. Their innovative approach to history and art brought children out of the classroom to learn about local history. ETHP connected Sensat's elementary school children and Cizek's graduate students to facilitate interpretation of South Louisiana's River Road plantations. Cizek and Sensat chose the Destrehan and Homeplace plantations for the first ETHP program. Through the students' work and the research undertaken by Cizek and Sensat, Destrehan's docents began to include more detailed information on their tours about the people who contributed to Destrehan's history and telling tales of ghosts and pirates.

The 1978-79 program at Destrehan produced a booklet of advertisement and publicity material for Education Through Historic Preservation, for future schools to adopt Cizek and

Sensat's program tailored to Gifted and Talented students of late elementary or junior high age.

The 1978-79 promotional materials listed the program's initiatives:<sup>81</sup>

- Goal #1: Adopt a Landmark
- Goal #2: Documentation & Interpretation
- Goal #3: Interaction of Elementary & College Students
- Goal #4: Role Playing
- Goal #5: Exhibitions
- Goal #6: Evaluation

Once a specific historic location and a public-school class agreed to the project, "Documentation and Interpretation" began. "Working with old diaries, taped interviews and architectural documents, Sensat has developed a curriculum which he hopes will make students aware of the significance of historically important buildings."<sup>82</sup> Sensat did not include further information regarding specific evidentiary contribution to their interpretative efforts, but later recounted the first of their fifteen-year program:<sup>83</sup>

Destrehan Manor, probably constructed by the same master builder as Homeplace, became the focus for the 1978-79 school year. As a public museum owned and managed by the River Road Historical Society, Destrehan did not have an old and wise [man] as the living link to the past who helped the young students understand their place in the continuum of history. To compensate for this loss, the elementary students researched and emulated through role playing historic eighteenth and nineteenth-century personalities who were directly related to life at Destrehan.<sup>84</sup>

The oral histories of family descendants of the white Creole planters informed ETHP's interpretation of Homeplace Plantation, but without that "living link" for Destrehan, Cizek and

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<sup>81</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Education Through Historic Preservation Promotional Materials: Destrehan and Homeplace," 1978-79. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> *Downtown Picayune*, August 30, 1992. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

<sup>84</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Address Given as Joint Recipients of the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award for Preservation / Education," April 7, 1991.



Sensat improvised. Using the land deeds and probate records, Cizek and Sensat wove in historical context and role playing to give the “personalities” more detail and depth.

The work done during the EHP program formed the Museum’s interpretation for decades to come. Cizek and Sensat relied upon established local tourism themes and historical context to supplement the scarcity of documentary materials, and Cizek’s architectural specialty contributed to a focus on the features of the mansion house. EHP used popular tourism narratives like Jean Lafitte to supplement their interpretation that also served to keep elementary students engaged. With few documentary sources, Cizek and Sensat’s interpretation adopted content that favored romanticization and fascination of the structures of white Creole elite. In effect, their interpretation idealized the plantation home as a historic site of leisure and a contemporary site of escapism, instead of the core of an agricultural labor camp.

When Cizek and Sensat lacked documentary evidence and oral histories, the program turned to creative writing projects, illustrations, and “Goal #4: Role Playing.” Students donned costumes and role played as people associated with Destrehan’s history. The students dressed as historic “personalities,” gave a presentation as that person, and had their photos taken.<sup>85</sup> Their photographs appear halfway through the EHP 1978-79 publicity booklet. Young white girls in

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<sup>85</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., “Education Through Historic Preservation Promotional Materials: Destrehan and Homeplace,” 1978-79.

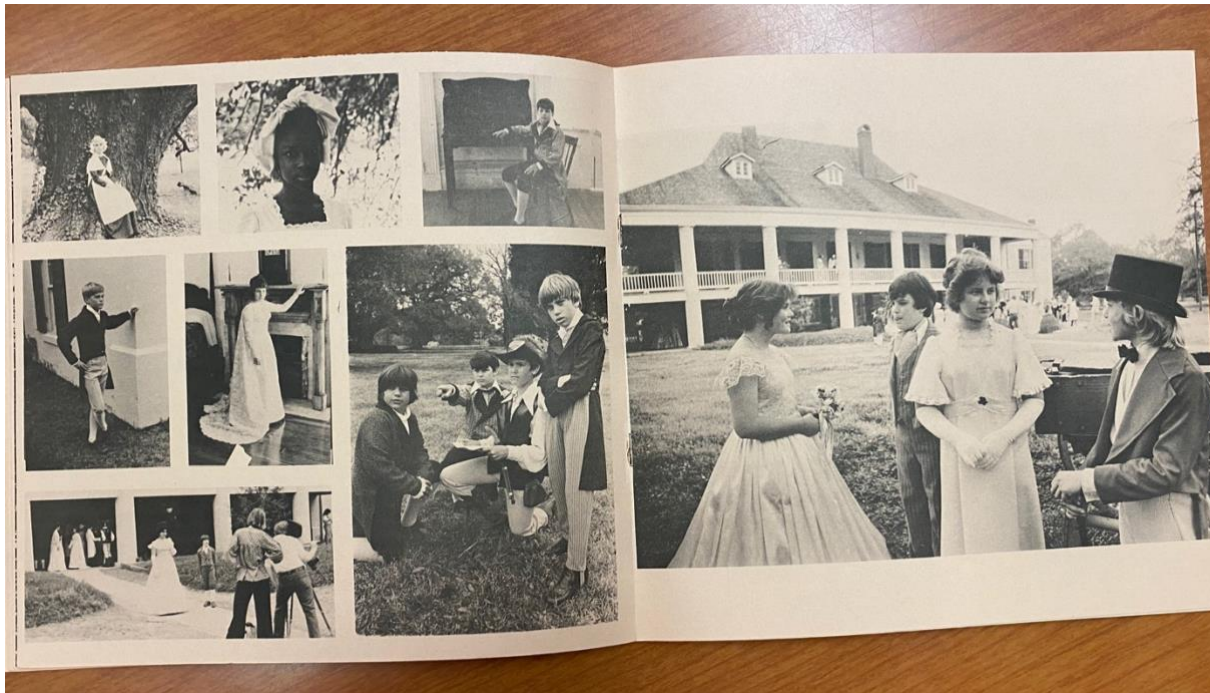


Figure 10: Photos in ETHP Destrehan and Homeplace booklet. 1978. New Orleans Public Library.

Romantic and Antebellum gowns chat with young white boys in double-breasted suits sporting canes in the front lawn of Destrehan Plantation. A group of young white boys kneel and pose by an oak tree, one of them dressed as Jean Lafitte, indicating the program's use of local legend to supplement historical fact. The sole Black student pictured, a young girl, stands stoic and reserved, her head wrapped in a tignon, a head wrap mandated by law that women of color wore during the colonial and antebellum periods. Although the rest of her costume is cropped out of the photo, it appears simple and plain compared to the hoopskirts and tiaras of the white girls. What did she speak of in her presentation? Who was she role-playing as? Did her "personality" have a name? Or was she a nameless, faceless "slave"? In her photo, she forces a tight smile that speaks volumes. As Eileen Julien remembered, these spaces were "for whites," but through programs like Education Through Historic Preservation, public-school children of all races entered plantations that purposefully or not, passed white supremacy on to the next generation.



Figure 11: "Mex Pet et al," ETHP Destrehan, 1983-84.  
New Orleans Public Library.

Cizek and Sensat adopted many of their historical perspectives from Saxon and Kane's fictionalized tourism narratives of the 1930s and 40s. ETHP returned to Destrehan Plantation in the 1983-84 school year, this time producing a detailed booklet to demonstrate the students' work in connection with the Museum. In the booklet, Cizek and Sensat dedicated only one page to Destrehan's twentieth-century existence as a petrochemical refinery. In "Mexican Petroleum et al," Cizek and Sensat cite the descriptions

of the main house in Lyle Saxon's 1929 *Old Louisiana* and Harnett T. Kane's 1945 *Plantation Parade*.<sup>86</sup> An entire half-century of Destrehan's history barely received recognition. In the brief recognition it did receive, Cizek and Sensat favored Saxon and Kane's description of the appearance of the mansion during refinery ownership. The workforce of Destrehan Refinery or the existence of an entire company town as the origin of the town of Destrehan went unmentioned. Even when detailing the very recent history, their architectural and tourist focus relied upon biased works written to encourage fascination in an exotic and bygone version of South Louisiana.

The interpretation of Destrehan Plantation reflected the perspective of white preservationists' and interpreters' idea of potential audiences: white tourists seeking fascination and escapism to a nostalgic period of rigid white supremacy. Destrehan is an ideal example of what Historian Fitzhugh Brundage refers to as "memory theaters." Brundage claims that "the

<sup>86</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr. "Education Through Historic Preservation 7: Destrehan Manor." 1983-84. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10Aac4rIYal8X-rNRerPu7csa1uFkrFKn/view?usp=sharing>

tourist South became a stage on which southerners presented the South both as they wanted to see it and as they imagined tourists wanted to experience it.”<sup>87</sup> Cizek and Sensat interpreted the value of Destrehan Plantation for what white middle-class locals and tourists wished to hear, see, and experience. Although the sites opened to the entirety of the Louisiana public, the ideologies which informed their historical value reflected a continued but reconfigured version of white supremacy. The many interpretation projects completed by the ETHP program at River Road plantations preserved white Creole perspectives and transformed the use of plantation homes into educational sites.

In November of 1981, Cizek and Sensat received the Honor Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation at the 35<sup>th</sup> National Preservation Conference in New Orleans.<sup>88</sup> The award honored Cizek and Sensat’s innovative approach to historic preservation through interaction between local public-school students and Tulane architecture students. Local newspapers transcribed the presentation of the award: “On visits to the plantation, Sensat’s pupils were paired off with Cizek’s architecture students who pointed out construction details and explained building techniques” to their young partners. Sensat’s grade-school students undertook “photography, drawing and painting” to illustrate “what they learned about craftsmanship and materials.”<sup>89</sup> The Education Through Historic Preservation program favored historic architectural practices and features while minimizing the intricate social histories of Louisiana’s past that laid the ideological foundation for plantation’s existence. Louisiana derived from many cultures, tiered racial systems, and its long history of enslavement which began the French colony in 1682. 200 years later, the plantations, agricultural sites of labor exploitation,

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<sup>87</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage, “Exhibiting Southernness in a New Century,” in *Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 184.

<sup>88</sup> *Alexandria Town Talk*, November 4, 1981.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

captivity, and violence, received awards and grants from state and federal agencies to document and preserve Louisiana's origins, often divorced from historical context.

Later in their careers, Cizek and Sensat received the Louisiana Landmarks Society's Harnett T. Kane Award for historic preservation in 1991. Kane's legendary and fictionalized narratives popularized in his 1930s and 1940s tourism books motivated and inspired Sensat and Cizek's careers. At their 1991 acceptance speech, Cizek said, "Harnett Kane was a friend and mentor of mine... Harnett believed in the preservation of old and good customs as well as old houses. I remember my sister's enthusiasm for Mr. Kane's book *Plantation Parade* and her sharing it with me. I was fascinated by its stories and photographs of this exotic country in which we lived, Louisiana."<sup>90</sup> Cizek's motivation for historic preservation began with Kane's *Plantation Parade*, its emphasis on the lifeways and romance of Louisiana's white Creole planters. Even his words, "this exotic country," reflect the tourism narrative that illustrates Louisiana as un-American and outside of American culture. No doubt Cizek remembered Kane's description of Destrehan in *Plantation Parade* during its operation as a petrochemical refinery:

Destrehan has been saved, though all about it is changed. Petroleum has supplanted sugar as the source of its upkeep; the land belongs to an oil company, and tankers spot the fields on which cane once sprouted. ... Much has been done to protect and improve the house – too much. Awkward screens crisscross the front, spoiling the façade; trellises hide it in places. Yet in its main sections it is undamaged, and someday the excrescences may be removed.<sup>91</sup>

Cizek's contribution to Kane's legacy, and the larger legacy of New Orleans' historic preservation and tourism, transformed Destrehan into a publicly accessible site of cultural memory. The restoration work of Murray Architects and the RRHS had indeed, excised the

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<sup>90</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Address Given as Joint Recipients of the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award for Preservation / Education," April 7, 1991.

<sup>91</sup> Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1945), 138.

physical excrescences from the plantation's facade, but Cizek's interpretation of Destrehan preserved the excrescences of tourism writers' romanticized white Creole planters.

ETHP's two collaborative projects with Destrehan in 1978-79 and 1983-84 produced the River Road Historical Society's institutional narrative used by the Museum for decades. Following her visit to Destrehan Plantation Museum in the mid-2000s, historian Jennifer Eichstedt details the strange introductory video to the plantation tour: "The video... uses the device of having the plantation 'speak for itself' – that is, it is given a female voice that talks in the first person." The female voice "tells of her rise to grandeur and her importance in the political life of the early South." Eichstedt remembers the video's mention of Union control during and after the Civil War, something barely mentioned on the current tour. "I was under the control of the Freedman's Bureau, an agency that helped the newly freed slaves. Here families stay while they learned their trades."

After the Destrehan Refinery shuttered the plantation house and abandoned the site, the female voice remembered that "for the next twelve years I suffered horribly from neglect... vandals broke in and built fires on my brick floors to warm

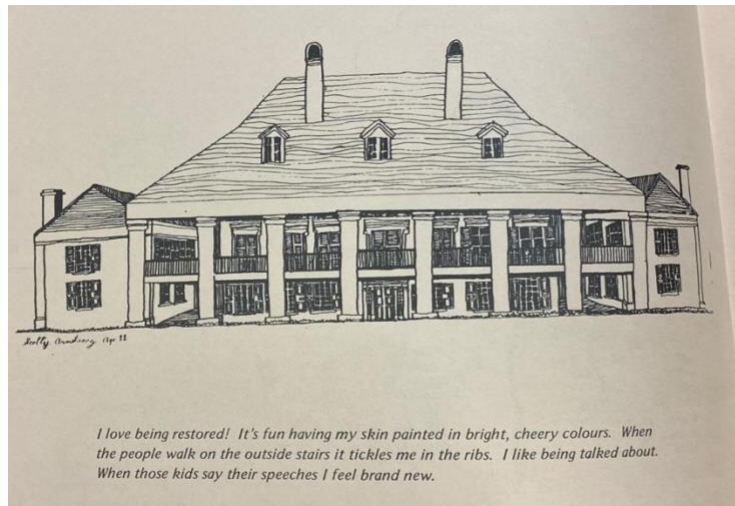


Figure 12: ETHP Destrehan and Homeplace. 1978. New Orleans Public Library.

their food.”<sup>92</sup> The strange first-person female-voiced introductory video originated with Cizek and Sensat's site interpretation. In the first Education Through Historic Preservation booklet of 1978-79, the caption beneath a student illustration of the plantation house reads: "I love being

<sup>92</sup> Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 211-13.



restored! It's fun having my skin painted in bright, cheery colors. When the people walk on the outside stairs it tickles me in the ribs. I like being talked about. When those kids say their speeches I feel brand new."<sup>93</sup> This narrative device of having the museum "speak for itself" likely points to Sensat's contribution to the interpretation, as he worked with grade school students. In effect, Destrehan's original interpretation was created with children in mind but presented to adults and families.

Destrehan Plantation Museum's interpretation has been updated since the original work done by Cizek, Sensat, and their students. The introductory first-person video is no longer used, and the Museum has acquired other historic structures for the site, expanding the tour to include sharecropper cabins. The interpretive focus remains on the white Creole planters and their spaces of luxury but does include brief and shallow discussions of enslaved Africans and their descendants who lived at the site. Some artifacts of ETHP's interpretation remain in the Museum today. In the acceptance speech for the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award, Cizek recalled that "a very special outcome" of the 1983-84 program "was the design and construction of chantournes, free standing life size sculptural forms... During the 1984 World's Fair, the chantournes became permanent installations interpreting the history of the manor."<sup>94</sup> Indeed, for thirty-seven years, the chantournes have remained a permanent installation in



Figure 13: Mannequin / Chantourne of Charles Paquet, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Education Through Historic Preservation Promotional Materials: Destrehan and Homeplace," 1978-79.

<sup>94</sup> Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr., "Address Given as Joint Recipients of the 1991 Harnett T. Kane Award for Preservation / Education," April 7, 1991.

Destrehan's interpretation. The student program of Education Through Historic Preservation created the mannequins still in use by the River Road Historical Society inside the house museum. Three mannequins stood in the Museum during my visit in December 2021:

Marguerite, the "sturdy" enslaved woman perpetually hunched over the table; Charles Paquet, the architect and builder of the plantation house kept in the corner of the storage room; and the plantation's namesake, Jean Noel Destrehan, propped up at his desk.<sup>95</sup> The stoic, lifeless "sculptural forms" contrast starkly from Destrehan Plantation Museum's description as a "living history museum."

White interpreters in antebellum costumes and a narrative focus on the physical spaces of white Creole luxury perpetuate the institution's white-washed historical favoring of Louisiana's small number of landed elites. Today, Destrehan Plantation Museum offers an "Unheard Voices Tour," led by Dianne 'Gumbo Marie' Honore, available one day a week for \$28 per adult, \$8 more than their "Plantation Tour," offered every hour, every day, by costumed white female docents.<sup>96</sup> The "Unheard Voices Tour" demonstrates the River Road Historical Society's effort toward a more inclusive narrative but the once-weekly tour falls short of dismantling the Museum's favoritism toward white Creole luxury by white interpreters and preservationists.



Figure 14: Mannequin / Chantourne of Jean Noel D'Estrehan. Modlin, 162.

<sup>95</sup> [PHOTO] E. Arnold Modlin Jr., "Representing Slavery at Plantation-House Museums in the U.S. South: A Dynamic Spatial Process." University of Virginia. (March 2008): 162.

<sup>96</sup> Destrehan Plantation Museum, "Tours: Unheard Voices Tour." Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.destrehanplantation.org/plan-your-visit/unheard-voices-of-the-german-coast>



## Conclusion

Although Eugene Cizek's quote from his 1991 interview pits economic progress as the enemy to historic preservation, I have argued that the relationship between the two is far more complex when it comes to Destrehan Plantation's twentieth century existence. The evolution of white supremacist tactics and discourses present a crucial aspect to the establishment of River Road plantation museums in the decade following the destruction of Jim Crow segregation. Black Louisianans' activism and collective action that accomplished integration of public schools and public spaces influenced political action in the 1970s and 1980s. Segregationists created groups to stall racial progress and positioned themselves as a moderate alternative to the pervasive violence and terror of groups like the KKK.<sup>97</sup> After segregation ended, Black organization, political involvement, and participation in the tourist economy as producers and consumers increased. In resistance to progress, white New Orleanians fled to the river parishes, transforming the physical geographies into suburbs that resembled other Southern segregated cities.<sup>98</sup> White supremacy evolved to match the moment of increased democratic participation and desegregated public spaces in the 1970s and 80s; it moved from legal and state enforcement to organizational and institutional practices.

During the late 1970s and 80s, as more tourists visited the river parishes for new plantation museums, environmentalist organizations preserved the "creative energy" of Black liberation movements from the previous decades to better the daily lives of residents. The BASF 1980s lockout of OCAW refinery workers provided an opportunity for labor to unite with the local community and erect billboards that complicated the public's perception of South Louisiana from that of antebellum plantations to that of human health risks. The founding of

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<sup>97</sup> Chafe, 73.

<sup>98</sup> Rogers, 76.

plantation museums like Destrehan also diminished local industries' absolute political and economic control over local communities. In the 1970s, new plantation house museums resisted industrial dominance as a way to preserve their economic and historic value to visiting tourists, and in so doing, adopted land preservationist initiatives. Since the original 1971 land deed, Destrehan Plantation Museum has secured additional acreages to stave off industrial expansion and preserve an agricultural aesthetic around the mansion.<sup>99</sup> Whether environmentalist organizations, labor unions, or white historical societies, the culture of activism and collective action used the public discourse to advance a particular social issue. However, the well-being of River Road residents continues to align itself along racial and labor hierarchies. Through physical health and economic inequalities, racial disparities in lived experiences continue to flow through the generations of river parish residents.

The River Road Historical Society's efforts in establishing the Destrehan Plantation Museum brought about new forms of progress for local tourism but retooled racial and labor hierarchies by excluding Black participation in founding and interpreting the site. White residents transformed their privilege and economic power into the institutional power to construct a historical narrative and determine a historical site's cultural value. After its twelve years of vacancy, the River Road Historical Society's transformation of Destrehan produced brand new products of manufactured cultural memory. As interpreters of the Museum, Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd Sensat Jr. preserved the perspective of the white Creole planters by assigning Destrehan's cultural value as "the best" of Louisiana's past.<sup>100</sup> In their interpretation of the historical value of Destrehan Plantation, the RRHS and the ETHP program, wittingly or

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<sup>99</sup> Conversation with Destrehan Museum staff member, December 20, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr." *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991): 1-2. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

unwittingly, reconfigured white supremacist discourses into lasting institutional narratives.

Destrehan's original interpretation supplemented little documentary evidence with local legends from writers Lyle Saxon and Harnett T. Kane, creating a "memory theater" designed for white tourist audiences.

The continued existence of plantation museums along Louisiana's River Road speaks to the region's complex histories of preserving the past but reconfiguring it for a productive purpose. The interpretation of these spaces has expanded and evolved since their founding to remain relevant in the social discourses of racial progress, but much of the core interpretation maintains the preservation of white Creole elite perspectives. Plantation museums blur the line between historic preservation and ideological preservation, providing an institutional space to relay historical white supremacy through the lens of contemporary racial discourses. Every institution of public history contains a level of biased interpretation; it is the product of a scholar's perspective, their specialty, and the visitor they imagine walking through the museum. Institutions like Destrehan invite the questions: what is the effect of plantation museums' continued existence on current and future generations of South Louisianans? Do these sites of "heritage tourism" provide a valuable viewpoint to contemporary discourses of race and inequality? Is there an interpretation of these spaces that truly could speak to "the best" of Louisiana's past?

...

After our tour concluded on the breezy upstairs gallery, I met with a Destrehan Museum staff member. After introductions, I asked her about the outbuildings not original to the site. As she pointed each one out to me, my mind drifted to the legends of Lafitte's buried treasure at the

site. I asked point-blank, “So, what do you think about Jean Lafitte and his treasure? Is it real?”

The staff member turned to face me with an expression that suggested she had not been asked that in a very long time. She paused a moment, smiled, then said, “the legends help with increasing tourism interest, but the Museum only gives factual historical interpretation on its tours.”

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#### Photographs and Images

Figure 1: Destrehan Plantation Store. Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 2: "Men, Women, and Children Enslaved on Destrehan Plantation." Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 3: Second-Story Interior Room, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 4: Mannequin / Chantourne of Marguerite, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 5: Creative Energy: The Rhythm of Louisiana." Shell Norco Refinery. Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 6: Cover, ETHP Destrehan and Homeplace. 1978. New Orleans Public Library.

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Figure 8: Amoco Sign, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author. December 2021.

Figure 9: National Register of Historic Places Plaque at Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

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Figure 13: Mannequin / Chantourne of Charles Paquet, Destrehan Plantation Museum. Photo by Author, December 2021.

Figure 14: Mannequin / Chantourne of Jean Noel D'Estrehan. Arnold E. Modlin, "Representing Slavery at Plantation-House Museums in the U.S. South," 162.

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Conclusion

Past, Present, and Future

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White supremacy did not reappear at Destrehan with its transformation into a public history site in the 1970s. White supremacy figured in every phase of the plantation's existence. As an agricultural labor camp where enslaved laborers, and later sharecroppers and tenant farmers harvested sugarcane, then as a petrochemical refinery and company town, and finally as a plantation museum, Destrehan's owners adopted and reconfigured racial hierarchies to serve Destrehan's operations and production. In the 20th century, as Destrehan's use evolved for modern purposes, white supremacy evolved to reflect changing discourses of race and equality.

In Chapter One, I argued that racial hierarchies shaped the exploitation of labor in Destrehan Refinery and its company town. Destrehan's existence as a petrochemical refinery and company town relied upon the inherited systems of white supremacy that petrochemical companies adopted for their modern purposes. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Pan-American Petroleum reconfigured the dependency of the late nineteenth century agricultural tenancy and sharecropping in the form of the company town to serve the needs of a modern refinery. To establish and maintain their refinery, and their profits, Pan-Am exploited both land and labor. Meanwhile, the slow evolution of organized labor in Gulf Coast refineries maintained the Jim Crow system of white supremacy by maintaining segregated unions but increased workers' agency and resistance to pervasive exploitation.

In Chapter Two, I traced the Museum's roots past the geographic boundary of the plantation itself. I argued that twentieth century travel writers provide context for the establishment of New Orleans' public tourism and the white supremacist ideologies that constituted its formation, leading to plantation house museums in the following decades. Local travel writing reached its peak during the crisis of the Great Depression with the Federal Writers' Project and their guidebooks that provided Americans, even those who could not travel, an

escape to exotic New Orleans. Travel books of the 1930s and 40s reflected the evolution of racial discourses that moved past assimilation but still reified South Louisianans as characters easily consumed by white readers. White Americans read Lyle Saxon's books, imagining him chauffeuring them up and down the River Road, gawking at old plantation houses still privately owned; imagining themselves inside the heavenly interior of white Creole luxury while suppressing the hellish context of why and how those houses existed. A few decades after Saxon and the Writers' Project, the public no longer had to imagine as they stepped into new plantation museums.

In Chapter Three, I argued that the River Road Historical Society transformed the old, abandoned mansion into a public history site by determining its value as "the best" of Louisiana's past and adopting the narratives of Louisiana's 1930s and 40s travel writers.<sup>1</sup> As a site of historical preservation, Destrehan Plantation Museum depended on the preservation of the land, aligning itself with contemporary resistance against industrial domination. At the same time, the Museum's initial interpretation completed by Eugene D. Cizek, Lloyd Sensat Jr., and their students, favored the creation of nostalgia over the recreation of historical accuracy. By adopting the legends and fables of Louisiana's white travel writers, the crafters of the Museum's interpretation erased the true complexities of race and class at the site, and completely negated the plantation's twentieth century history. Destrehan's initial interpretation rendered the valuable conversations that could be had by considering all historical perspectives unfeasible, therefore stagnating potential progress.

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<sup>1</sup> "1991 Harnett T. Kane Award to Eugene D. Cizek and Lloyd L. Sensat, Jr.," *Preservation Magazine* 33, No. 1. (June 1991): 1-2. New Orleans Public Library, Manuscripts Collection, Education Through Historic Preservation.

During my visit to Destrehan, I walked around the plantation grounds with a member of the Museum staff, asking questions about the site's recent history not covered on the tour. We passed by weathered, old, and grey wooden outbuildings, then came upon the mule barn, Destrehan's wedding venue. Casting my eyes to the tree lined rear of the property, I asked about the Museum's current plot size. She informed me that today, the Museum occupies somewhere between 25 and 27 acres.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the original agricultural plantation's 5000 acres, it seems insignificant, but the River Road Historical Society has acquired 21 acres since the original land deed in 1971, which is quite an accomplishment in industrial South Louisiana.

The rest of that original plot of land is currently used for various purposes. Interestingly, the Destrehan Plantation Museum is not the only site of public history and education housed on the original acreage of the French colonial plantation. The East Branch of the St. Charles Parish Library occupies the land immediately west of the Museum's fencing. To the east, a suburban neighborhood of large single-family homes sits with their backyards facing the grounds, the wooden fence toppled by Hurricane Ida's category four winds in August of 2021.

Behind the mule barn wedding venue, a large grassy field sits empty. The staff member points out that space to me and I see the tips of rooftops peeking out behind the old trees. She tells me that when that land was purchased by a local developer for a new subdivision, land clearing crews struck old Pan-Am / Amoco pipes underneath the ground. "You could smell the gas," she remembered as her nose curled upward at the memory. "It was strong for a few days."<sup>3</sup>

When one experiences the River Road's discordant aesthetics of heavy industry, antebellum plantations, and suburban developments, it is hard to know where to look. A simple two-lane road guides drivers along both banks of the Mississippi River, and each side possesses

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with staff member at Destrehan Plantation Museum, December 20, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with staff member at Destrehan Plantation Museum, December 20, 2021.

plantation museums. Destrehan sits on the east bank; the very popular Whitney Museum sits across the river to the west. The Whitney Museum has received scholarly and public attention for its complete reimagining of an antebellum plantation's historical and cultural value. Instead of seeing the past from the perspective of white Creole planters, visitors to Whitney Plantation experience the site through the eyes of enslaved Africans and their descendants held captive at the agricultural labor camp.<sup>4</sup>

The introduction of inventive and diverse narratives like those used by the Whitney Museum has forced other River Road plantation museums to address their interpretations and expand their offerings. When I brought up the Whitney Plantation to the Destrehan staff member I spoke with, her eyes darted off and her tone dropped to a whisper. She told me that she has heard several times from Black visitors at Destrehan that they are hesitant to patronize Whitney Plantation for fear of supporting a white owner who continues to profit off the system or legacy of enslavement. I did not doubt that she had heard such opinions from visitors. Plantations are extremely controversial sites, no matter what institutional narrative they present or who owns them. John Cummings, a retired New Orleans attorney, purchased and funded the creation of Whitney Plantation Museum, but left the position of Director in 2019. Since it opened to the public, Whitney has maintained a staff of mostly Black docents.<sup>5</sup> Destrehan Plantation Museum continues to be owned by the River Road Historical Society, a majority white organization, and

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<sup>4</sup> For scholarly work regarding Whitney Plantation, see:

Jessica K. Rapson, "Refining Memory: Sugar, oil and plantation tourism on Louisiana's River Road" *Memory Studies* 13, No. 4. (2020): 752-766. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018766384>

Michelle D. Commander, "Plantation Counternarratives: Disrupting Master Accounts in Contemporary Cultural Production," *The Journal of American Culture* 41, No. 1. (March 2018): 28-44.

Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel (Whitney Plantation)*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Clint Smith, "An Open Book, Up Under the Sky: Whitney Plantation," in *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*. (New York: Little and Brown, 2021).

operated by a majority white staff whose interpretation continues to reflect the perspective of enslavers – even down to their costumes.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting on the staff member's reaction to the Whitney Museum, her seeming refusal to consider the value of that institution's rethinking of plantations' historical interpretation, reminded me of Amoco's old pipes. The pervasive nature of white supremacy emerges when struck, just like old pipes beneath the ground. The old gas from Destrehan's refinery days spilled into the soil, reminding us that today, the inequalities we face and seek to extricate ourselves from, saturate the historic soil on which we walk. The generations before us laid those pipes and there they remained, waiting to be struck only to pour out their rancid contents. The staff member's story provides new meaning to the Louisiana Highway Commission's 1932 *Know Louisiana* tour guide foreword: "Louisiana, with her fertile fields, clear skies, caressing breezes, colorful scenes of noted Romances, is reeking with the historical memories of a day past – but never to be forgotten."<sup>7</sup> South Louisiana's past literally reeked when the rancid gas pipes seeped through the soil at Destrehan, permeating the present with toxicities of years past.

South Louisiana's history, with all its complexities, triumphs, and tragedies, lay beneath the feet of museum visitors as they traverse the landscape of the present. Whether old pipes, treasure chests of gold doubloons, or the bones of our ancestors, the past awaits its discovery in the now. Perhaps that is the true value of Destrehan Plantation, not a monument to white Creole luxury, but a reminder of past injustices that we can learn from to improve our future. Ella Wayne Gaupp was correct when she said, "the past, present, and future are all tied together."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer: River Road Historical Society, 990 Tax Form, 2019.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/720762390>

<sup>7</sup> J.G. Ewing, *Louisiana: a Tourist Guide to Points of General and Historic Interest*. (Louisiana Highway Commission, 1932), foreword.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Gray, *L'Observateur*, June 19, 2002. <https://www.lobserveur.com/2002/06/19/good-examples-gaupp-appreciates-history/>

All three meet and merge in the gas-soaked soil, plaster walls, and cultural value of Destrehan Plantation.



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