



Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

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The grandeur, opulence, and extravagant lifestyle that defined the South during the golden years of the sugar plantations is seeing a magnificent rebirth in Ascension Parish. Houmas House Plantation, the crown jewel of Louisiana's River Road has been restored and revived in a manner that, believe it or not, suggests the amazing possibility that its reputation as the standard bearer of southern hospitality has yet to reach its zenith. The reason for such outlandish optimism lies in a common thread sewn since its early years. The 'Sugar Palace', as it became affectionately known, got to be the icon of the sugar industry because of the brilliance of its leaders. Some of the most astute and shrewd military and commerce personalities of the day, built that reputation one building, one small land acquisition, one family at a time. These great people came from the four corners of the earth to make a new life in Ascension Parish, and they certainly found a land of opportunity'.

One of the earliest major impacts on this property was made by Mr. John Burnside, for whom the nearby river town was named. In 1858 the spirit of Houmas House captured Mr. Burnside's soul and he sold his considerable business holdings in New Orleans to become a planter. He spent \$1,000,000, half the total of the sale of those businesses, and on April 15, he made Houmas Plantation his home.

To be sure, Houmas Plantation at the time when John Burnside took the keys, was indeed already a thriving enterprise. In late February 1811, Brigadier General Wade Hampton purchased the plantation from Daniel Clark for \$300,000. Clark was the first to see the promise of sugar cultivation on the plantation. His keen vision led him to build one of the first sugar mills on this stretch of the Mississippi River. General Hampton, a key figure in the Revolutionary War, where he served with Andrew Jackson, had built great wealth after the war. He was considered the wealthiest man in the south. He promptly ordered his son, Colonel Wade Hampton II to Louisiana to run Houmas. It was a decision that would prove quite wise as the younger Hampton became a skilled business man with a knack for the sugar industry and a true love for Houmas House. Wade II repaired and expanded the house as it evolved into the mansion we know today. Through a combination of all his plantation operations, by 1829 Hampton was recognized as the largest sugar producer in Louisiana. It was the beginning of a legacy that would have Houmas House forever associated with the notion of "The Best".

These early successes notwithstanding, it was the Burnside Era that insured Houmas Plantation's reputation for elegance, success, vision, and unprecedented and unbridled extravagance. It was a lifestyle that John had grown into. He came to America from his homeland of Ireland in 1822 at the age of twelve. He had few clothes, no sophistication, and \$1.25 in his pocket, but came with an Irish will and drive to succeed. He was also quite a smart business man. His chance at success came through the gracious help of his best friend's father, Andrew Beirne. Oliver Beirne and John Burnside made a tremendous fortune in the dry goods business in New Orleans by being one of the few companies to extend long term credit. In 1858 it was clear that yet another brilliant strategist and visionary, John Burnside, was at the helm of Houmas Plantation. By 1860 he was considered one of the wealthiest men in the world and he used his most proud possession to live and express the lifestyle fitting a true Southern gentleman. John Burnside was a fierce business man and attacked the "pursuit of happiness" with that same fervor. His parties, banquets, and balls were attended by cultured planters and businessmen from throughout the South. Many arrived on chartered steamboats to attend the festivities. Guests were never more than an arms length away from a servant passing mint juleps. Other staff members were ordered on hourly trips to Donaldsonville to replenish supplies as needed. No expense was spared from his imagination or his attainment as it related to entertaining and comforting his many guests. Ice, a rare luxury item in most homes was brought in, not just for cooling drinks, but to pour into refreshing baths for his friends. The combination of his business savvy, penchant for enjoying life, and his infatuation with Houmas House, caused Burnside to be known as the "Sugar Prince". Once again, Houmas House was seen and accepted as the best of the best. The legacy established

early on, continued.

As we move ahead almost 150 years, another successful, imaginative, innovative, and Irish businessman takes the reins, bent on recreating, reviving, and even surpassing the festive environment of those golden years on the plantation. Kevin Kelly, himself a self-made business mogul from New Orleans is undeniably cut from the same mold as Burnside. Kelly's lifelong dream of acquiring an important Louisiana plantation was realized when he purchased Houmas House on May 28, 2003. His mission was to restore the property back to the grandeur it knew when it reigned above all and was known throughout the South as The Sugar Palace.

As a Real Estate developer and preservationist in New Orleans, Kevin learned of a passion within. He had served on the board and several committees charged with the preservation of some of New Orleans' most treasured landmarks. He specialized in the metamorphosis of vacated and neglected warehouse space, turning these into profitable, useful, modernized buildings of commerce. His gift for the business was his vision for potential in these old outdated buildings and his ability to see coming trends and the resulting urban business needs for them. He also restored his home on St. Charles, a five year project that was so successful and magnificent that it resulted in a barrage of requests from people to rent the property for parties and large social galas. Those requests led to the idea of looking for a property to renovate for the purpose of renting out for parties and tours. His answer was Houmas House. In order to oversee every aspect of the project, as is his nature, (a trait he points to as a large reason for his success in business) Kevin moved into the house during renovation, with no real thoughts of any kind of restaurant.

"I planned to build a pavilion for banquets and to affiliate with someone to supply the food and beverage needs of functions held here. My thought originally was that guests who planned to use the property would be responsible to handle all the details of their own functions. Eventually though, I knew I had a singular vision of what Southern hospitality meant, the kind of environment that Houmas House had set the standard for. I decided to turn Houmas House Plantation into a true luxury resort. The first step was to establish a food and beverage operation worthy of the plantation's historical reputation."

It was by chance and good fortune, perhaps even fate and destiny, that Kevin collaborated with one of the South's most dynamic and promising young chefs. Jeremy Langlois has created the magic of yesteryear with his creative culinary masterpieces in Latil's Landing, the restaurant housed in the mansion.

At the ripe old age of 27, Jeremy Langlois is one of the South's most decorated and accomplished young chefs. Starting from humble beginnings, he has pursued his passion to learn with an incredible drive and determination to become the best. He started in the business almost by accident. "My brother Jason worked at White Oak Plantation for Chef John Folse," Jeremy recalls. "I can remember starting there the day after my sixteenth birthday. I just needed some kind of summer job so I became their dishwasher. I also did other odd jobs like chopping wood and helping set up banquets, but it was the kitchen that captured my imagination. I just thought the environment was so cool. Guys were running around with fire and big knives and at sixteen it seemed very exciting and fun. Whenever I finished my assigned tasks I would migrate to the kitchen and ask them to let me help. I learned to cut onions, then other vegetables, and gradually they let me arrange small platters and things like that. It was a slow progression but I got a thorough indoctrination in the workings of a commercial kitchen. Before then, I had never cooked anything. Soon I was allowed to clock in thirty minutes early every day so I could help in the kitchen. Eventually I moved in there full time."

Jeremy's initiative and self-starting personality soon caught the eye of John Folse. Chef Folse appreciated Jeremy's interest and drive, and he was quick to recognize that Jeremy had a real knack for the business and so took him under his wing. Jeremy did not waste this tremendous opportunity. As he says, "John Folse gave me the chance to learn the business in slow, deliberate, and incremental steps. That approach has served me well in my career advancement and I feel comfortable in attacking every new project in that manner. I owe a great deal of my success to the tutoring and direction I received from John and I am forever grateful to him for the many things he taught me about every phase of the business. He is even responsible for my scholastic education as well having sent me to his culinary institute at Nichols State University. I can not express to you how appreciative I am for the personal touch he had in shaping my career so far."

Jeremy moved from White Oak to Lafitte's Landing, John's restaurant located at the foot of the Sunshine Bridge where he learned the intricacies of each station in the kitchen. "I was attending culinary school at the time but my true education was coming from working in that very busy kitchen." He worked hard and progressed, moving up to Sous Chef by age twenty-one. "I loved the business and what I was doing, but at that young age I really wasn't focused on the future or what my path would be." Then, at the age of twenty-two, his dedication and talent was again rewarded by Chef Folse, when Jeremy was offered the job of Executive Chef for Lafitte's Landing at Bittersweet Plantation. While under his leadership, the restaurant became recognized as one of the top restaurants in Louisiana and the nation. At the time of Lafitte's closing in 2004, Jeremy was talented, accomplished, and ready for a new challenge. Fate once again smiled on him as he was soon to find what he considers the chance of a lifetime, his dream job, and a relationship with a true

business partner. "My whole approach to what I do has changed.

I love this place and I'm determined to return it to its rightful place as the best, most enjoyable and memorable experience for every guest who visits us," Jeremy said.

Kevin Kelly had changed his original scheme regarding the food and beverage operation at The Sugar Palace. He would now look to make the dining experience there as memorable and thrilling as any in the south. In fact, the standards for this part of his operation had been set and developed over more than a century and a half of splendor and spectacle in the fine art of Southern hospitality and entertaining. Together, Kevin and Jeremy have the skill, talent, determination, and desire to become the South's new "Party Kings".

Their plan is demanding and dynamic. When completed, and they are attacking that plan in earnest, there is no doubt that Houmas House will again hold her rightful place as the standard bearer of Southern grace and decadent indulgence. Together they are turning the Sugar Palace into a modern day luxury resort. Kevin told the story of his vision of the future of this great Ascension Parish property. "We will create an all inclusive destination facility. I see Houmas as the central location for individuals, couples, or larger groups to come to in order to escape into an environment of festivities and diversion like those of days gone by. One will be able to stay at the plantation, enveloped in the cloak of luxury in the coming 88 room Bed & Breakfast now being constructed."

When completed, guests of the B&B will be surrounded and engulfed with every comfort and privilege imaginable. Each room is to be customized in its design and appointments. Kelly plans to scour the antique houses of Europe to create an individual motif for every single room. He will create a singular feeling of uniqueness for every guest, every time they visit the property. Spectacular works of art and lavish baths will adorn oversized state rooms with 12 foot ceilings and grandiose furnishings. Day trips to visit other plantations as well as other ostentatious tourist destinations in south Louisiana will culminate in highly anticipated evenings of food, fun, and frolic upon their return to the old dame. A restaurant seating about 250 people will be included in the B&B. A variety of banquet pavilions will service the needs of groups of many sizes. Guest groups of 150, 250, or even 400 will have plush facilities to enjoy customized menus and party plans designed specifically for and with their own ideas. Planters Hall is a magnificent structure with the capacity for parties of up to 1000 guests. Jeremy stated, "We do not have a banquet portfolio or brochure. Each and every party is painstakingly tailored and customized to meet the desires and propensities of its hosts. We invoke our expertise, imagination, and innovation to bring their dreams to reality, just as it's been done here for so many decades."

"I approach the development of properties in a different way from most people," said Kevin. "All the different parts of this facility will be relative to one another allowing us to retain the integrity of the plantation. The guest rooms will have the feel of life in the mansion, not that of a hotel room. We will also include a full service spa in that building. Our target market is also "neighbor friendly" in that it will not impact local businesses in any negative manner. We will attract an upscale, romantic, luxury getaway clientele which will in actuality bring more tourism dollars to local businesses. The parish has been quite receptive to our plan and our vision. We are very thankful for their support and cooperation."

Nearly a century and a half ago, a wildly successful businessman of Irish decent left the site of his indisputable conquests in New Orleans, to heed the call of his soul. That call came from the magnificent spirit of Houmas House Plantation. He used his considerable business and personal individualism to create an environment of human enjoyment and zest for life not seen in Ascension Parish before or since. Today another well achieved Irishman from New Orleans has answered that same call of the wild. It is transparently clear that Kevin Kelly plans to, and therefore will, exceed the incredibly high standards of excellence that Houmas House has come to represent throughout its existence. He has devoted his persona, imagination, intellect, and exceptional vision to bring Houmas back to its rightful place atop the world of luxury accommodations and entertainment. He has surrounded himself with skilled and talented individuals who share his passion for the property and for serving its visitors. Now Kevin Kelly and Chef Jeremy Langlois stand poised to make their mark on the history of Louisiana plantations. They are surely destined to create a legacy that will forever have them remembered as "The Party Kings of the Sugar Palace".