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Trip to antebellum plantation turns out to be a learning experience for all Teaching Your Child

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Houmas House Plantation is a 23-room mansion in Darrow, La., along the Mississippi River. The mansion was owned by sugar cane baron John Burnside during the antebellum South. (Credit: Courtesy of Houmas House Plantation /)

Every year or two, we visit my husband's family in Louisiana.

Each time we go, I've suggested that we tour a Southern plantation. In previous years, that would have meant finding a baby-sitter. Because our children are 9 and 13 now, they were old enough to appreciate the tales our tour guide shared about the antebellum (pre-Civil War) South.

Traditions, history and unfamiliar customs seemed to play out before our eyes as we moved from room to room in the Houmas House Plantation.

This 23-room mansion situated along the Mississippi River in Darrow, La., is about a half hour's drive from Baton Rouge, Louisiana's capital city.

We were glad to have finally made it to a plantation, and on this trip we felt fortunate to have even arrived in the Pelican State. Our summer trip to Louisiana didn't exactly begin or end the way we had planned because of modern-day transportation.

At Houmas House, we learned that plantations were akin to self-contained communities. Stops along the Mississippi River were listed not by town but by plantation. We learned that most of these grand mansions along the river were not painted white. Rather, the exteriors were embellished with pastels to give the appearance of Mediterranean villas.

Maps indicated plantations as landmarks, typically listing them by owners' names. This became a concern in the years leading up to the Civil War. If a map fell into Union hands, it would reveal the location of the wealthiest Confederate sympathizers. As a result, many antebellum maps of Southern states were destroyed.

It was surprising then that a 1847 census map by LaTourette was found in the Houmas House attic in the 1980s. The map had been hidden under floor boards, which were being removed during a renovation.

Perhaps John Burnside, who had purchased Houmas House in the 1850s, realized the historical value of such a document and decided to hide the map, rather than destroy it.

Known as the Sugar Prince of Louisiana, Burnside had sugar cane holdings that eventually grew to 300,000 acres.

The sugar baron era was a time of unusual customs that often accompanied excessive wealth.



An interior view of Houmas House Plantation, a 23-room mansion in Darrow, La., along the Mississippi River. The mansion was owned by sugar cane baron John Burnside before the Civil War.

(Credit: Courtesy of Houmas House Plantation /)



Lisa Prejean (Credit: File Photo /)

Men were expected to lead the way up a staircase. A man could not follow a lady unless she was his wife. Ladies needed to lift their dresses above their ankles so they would not trip over the hem. But if a man saw the ankles of a lady who was not his wife, they would be married by the following morning. If that lady was already married, her husband would challenge the ankle-viewer to a duel — with pistols — the next day.

A set of these dueling pistols were on display in a case in the gentlemen's parlor. In the 1800s, ladies were not allowed in this room. Men would smoke, drink, gamble and talk politics — all activities that were off-limits to women.

The furniture in the gentlemen's parlor was covered with leather so it would not be damaged by smoking or spilled drinks. This custom led to leather furniture being associated with masculinity.

Men probably wanted to get the most out of their lives. Most only survived into their 40s.

Women had an even tougher lot. If a woman made it past her mid-20s, she was very fortunate. Many women died in childbirth. One of the Houmas House bedrooms contains a birthing bed. This resembles a day bed, but has sleigh-like ends.

People married young. Among the plantation set, a garçonnière — bachelor's quarters — was provided for young men once they reached the age of 14 or 15. A boy was expected to live under a separate roof from the rest of his family. This was especially important if a teen boy had a younger sister who would have female guests spend the night. If unmarried teens spent the night under the same roof, it was considered improper, and they would be forced to marry the next day.

Because young mothers died so often, men often remarried. It would not be unusual for a man to have had several wives who died in childbirth.

According to our guide at Houmas House, people were much smaller in the mid-1800s. The average woman was about 4 foot 11 inches tall and the average man was around 5 foot 5 inches tall — heights that were significant to our family because our 9-year-old is about 4 foot 11, and our 13-year-old is taller than 5 foot 5.

My husband and I would have been considered giants. Our visit made me long for the horse-and-buggy days when transportation was reliable as long as the oat bag was full.

Or as long as the river was flowing.

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