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HOUMAS HOUSE

Resplendent in its velvety, dark green setting on a dramatic curve in the Mississippi River sits an architectural monarch complete with secrets, mysteries, and legends, as well as a string of owners powerful enough to change history. Once the centerpiece of the wealthiest sugar plantation in the country, the revived Houmas House rests on the east bank of the Sugar Coast, an hour's drive above New Orleans, defying anyone to tell its story without the use of superlatives.

A three-story plantation house in the Louisiana Classical Revival style, with a colonial-era structure in the back, the Houmas House has its roots in the middle of the 18th century. What began as a four-room cottage on the site of an Indian settlement would be expanded by the addition of the 19-room mansion, believed to be the earliest on the River Road to incorporate the colossal masonry columns rising from foundation to roofline.

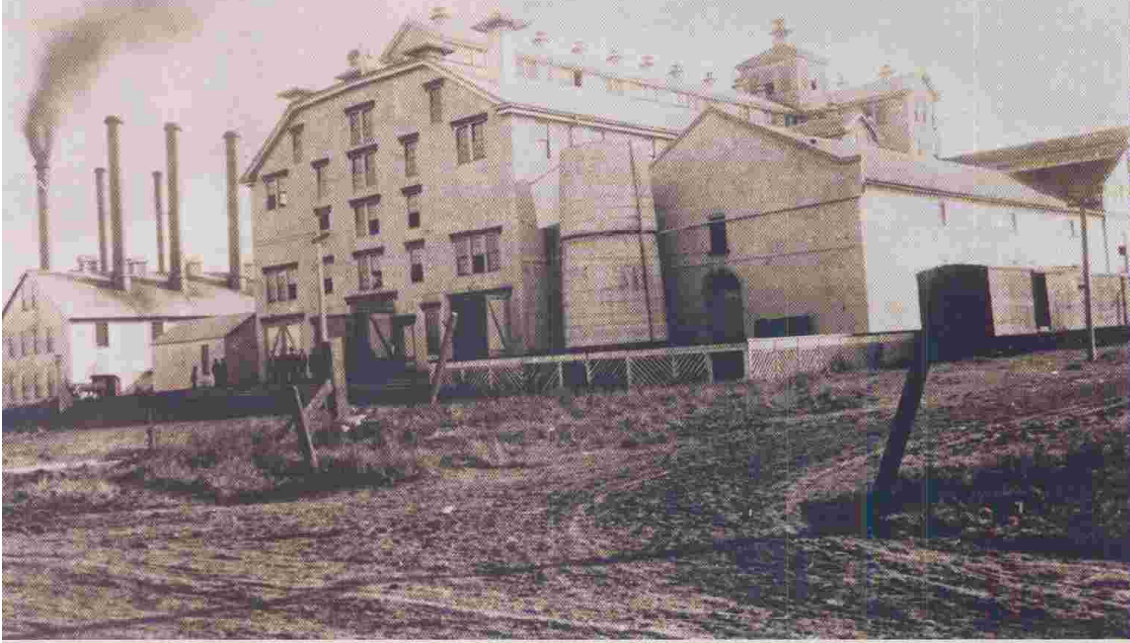
The original occupants of the site, a remnant of the Houmas Indian nation, had settled on the concave rim of a sharp turn in the river near its confluence with Bayou Lafourche. The Spanish government granted the tribe ownership of most of the wedge of land that would become known as the *Isle d'Orleans*, between the Mississippi and the great inland lakes to the north and east. A survey done in 1731 confirms the location of the Houmas Indian village just yards from the present-day home site.

A small group of French colonists lived among the Indians, farming and foresting alongside the established natives. Acadians lived and worked in the region as well, many occupied in harvesting the primeval cypress for shipbuilders. Eventually the settlers petitioned for a parish, which would be approved by the Spanish throne and dedicated to "the Ascension of the Lord."

When the Indians grew uncomfortable with the encroachment of the Acadians, the French, and their more aggressive brothers to the north, they pushed southward, selling their land to two New Orleans businessmen, Alexander Latil and Maurice Conway. That sale of about 3 1/2 miles of river frontage entered the official land records of Louisiana in October 1774, and represents the

by **Cynthia Reece McCaffety**
photographs by **Kerri McCaffety**

Sugar farming and processing was the economic lifeblood of the Houmas House Plantation. Slave labor (far below) and gradual mechanization made the industry thrive. Under the ownership of Col. William Porcher Miles, the plantation grew to its apex in the late 1800's when it was producing a monumental 20 million pounds of sugar each year.



earliest recorded title to the Houmas tract.

Alexander Latil, who owned one of the largest houses in New Orleans at the time, is thought to have built the original cottage soon after the purchase. The floor plan of the small house remains basically unchanged, with its original arrangement of two rooms down, two up, with an open center hallway, in the French colonial style.

Latil sold his share of the property to his partner, Conway, only a year later. Conway petitioned the Spanish governor to extend the depth of the entire tract far beyond the 40 arpents (roughly 1 1/2 miles) that was the custom for riverfront plantations in the French tradition. The governor granted the request, increasing the original 3,000-plus acres of the tract exponentially north and eastward into the cypress forests of the *Isle d'Orleans*. The indefinite language describing the additional depth—simply “the vacant land” would pit backlands settlers against the riverfront owners for decades until the Supreme Court finally ruled in favor of the small holders in 1884.

Two years after the Louisiana Purchase, in 1805, a controversial Philadelphia merchant of Irish heritage, Daniel Clark, acquired the Houmas

house and land. He was the first to have the foresight and the capital to introduce a new crop — sugar cane — on the land. With his first harvest in 1806, Clark built a sugar mill, one of the earliest in an area that would soon be dubbed the Sugar Coast for its density of cane plantations.

Daniel Clark's contentious personality contributed richly to the myths and legends of the Houmas House. Among other things, he was accused of backing the infamous Aaron Burr in a treasonous scheme to establish a separate country in Louisiana. He wounded Gov. William Claiborne in a duel on the Houmas grounds. And with the beautiful young wife of an absentee French émigré he had a daughter, Myra, who was sent away at birth. The confusion surrounding his estate and Myra's legitimacy resulted in the longest running legal case in the history of the United States. The redoubtable Myra finally won her case, posthumously, in 1884.

After only six years, Clark sold his Houmas holdings to his friend, Revolutionary War hero General Wade Hampton of South Carolina. Hampton's army comrade and future president Andrew Jackson had offered to sell Hampton his picturesque land near the Cumberland River in Tennessee, a place he called the Hermitage. But



Hampton, who already owned property in New Orleans, turned his focus toward the promising new sugar enterprise up the river. Jackson kept his land and expanded it with a historic mansion of his own. Hampton arrived in Louisiana in 1811, two days before the largest slave rebellion in American history.

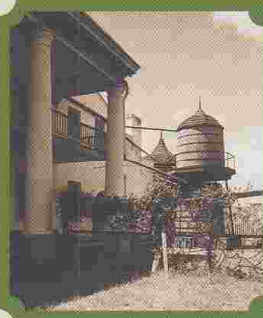
The general immediately joined forces with the planters to aid in the battle. The owner of a plantation downriver from the Houmas land had been attacked and his son killed. The insurgents then headed for New Orleans, armed mostly with cane knives and farm tools, rallying support along the way until they numbered an estimated 500. The government military forces and armed planters subdued the insurrection, suffering some casualties but killing between 60 and 100 of the slaves and leaving severed heads hung aloft along the river as a deterrent.

Retiring again to his rural homestead, Hampton tackled the challenges of sugar. He proceeded to add to the existing acreage, buying here and selling there, while running three cotton plantations in South Carolina and speculating in real estate. Like most of the owners of Houmas House throughout its history, Hampton did not live on the plantation full time. Nevertheless, sometime between 1825 and 1829, he

ordered the construction of a grand mansion in front of the Latil house.

A piece of correspondence from the early 19th century describes Gen. Hampton as "a bridge builder and planter." This allusion could help explain one of Houmas House's hidden wonders: a hand-forged steel cable suspension system that holds the belvedere and roof structure aloft, with no interior weight-bearing walls on the third floor.

Gen. Hampton's success in building his sugar trade brought tall ships directly to his door, enabling him to bypass middlemen in New Orleans. Visitors, all of whom arrived by river, stepped off Hampton's pier and onto an almost mythical path. The original drive from riverfront to house



The 19-room mansion is believed to be the earliest on the River Road to incorporate the colossal masonry columns rising from foundation to roofline.

stretched three times its current length. The Great Flood of 1927 caused the river to change its course, with devastating impact, and then new levee projects in the early 1930s brought bulldozers that ravaged the formal gardens lining the path, described in a parish newspaper as "the most magnificent gardens in Louisiana." Some years later a visiting journalist, William Howard Russell, recorded his impression of the dramatic driveway in *My Diary: North and South*:

"... a carriage gateway, with [white painted fence] up



Parlor furnishings reflect Victorian tastes during the ownership of Oliver Bierne.



Furnishings from the Oliver Berne era at Houmas House.

and down the road as far as the eye could see...an avenue lined with trees, with branches close set, drooping and overarching a walk paved with red brick, led to the house ...visible at the extremity of the lawn, with clustering flowers, rose, jasmine and creepers, clinging to the pillars supporting the veranda."

Hampton still owned and operated his South Carolina cotton plantations, whose slave population, when added to his Louisiana totals, made him the largest slave owner and the wealthiest man in the South. Gen. Hampton died in South Carolina in 1835, leaving everything to his son.

Young Hampton did not wish to live the life of a Louisiana sugar lord. He chose instead to share the estate with his sisters, both of whom had married men of accomplishment who would jointly manage the thriving operation until the strain of secession politics ended their alliance.

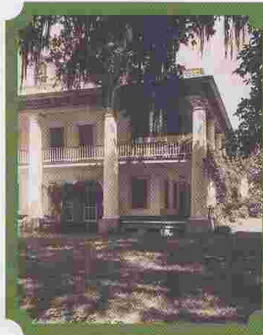
Susan Hampton married John Manning, who went on to become governor of South Carolina after her death. He shared the management of Houmas House and its vast activities with his wife's brother-in-law from 1837 until 1848, while also sharing the house on their winter visits.

Caroline's husband, John Smith Preston, was an intellectual and patron of artists such as the sculptor Hiram Powers. Descriptions of Preston in the published diaries of a young Southern woman bear an uncanny resemblance to the character of Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With the Wind*, and Margaret Mitchell is known to have read the diaries. But Preston was no passive victim of fate. Under his meticulous governance, Houmas House thrived.


The Prestons divided their time between Houmas House and their South Carolina estate, spending their winters on the plantation. They maintained the house extremely well and entertained extensively. The family included a lively and much-loved young daughter who became ill at Houmas House and subsequently died in South Carolina. The Preston family never

returned to Louisiana. They sold their two-thirds of the plantation in 1858 to an Irish-born dry-goods merchant from New Orleans, John Burnside, for \$1 million. It was the largest plantation sale in Louisiana history, up to that point.

If John Preston was Ashley Wilkes, John Burnside was Rhett Butler. The flamboyant bachelor invested in the 300,000-acre plantation just before the Civil War and went



20th Century Fox filmed the Southern gothic melodrama *Hush ... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* in the house in 1963. The legendary Bette Davis actually stayed in the house during part of the filming.



Allegorical statues depicting the four seasons grace the lawn of Houmas House.

“... visible at the extremity of the lawn, with clustering flowers, rose, jasmine and creepers, clinging to the pillars supporting the veranda.”

— from the diary of Howard Russell

on to increase it by the addition of eight neighboring plantations. An 1860 census of the parish noted that Burnside's plantation included 753 slaves, 40 percent more than the next largest, Ashland.

As the war reached into Louisiana and Union bombs began to fly, Burnside's British citizenship saved Houmas House from the destruction that ravaged many of his neighbors and nearly leveled the town of Donaldsonville across the river.

Burnside flew the Union Jack during the early assaults of the war and declared his property exempt from the conflict. Both sides acknowledged his claim and the plantation survived intact.

After the war, Burnside acquired the Mannings' portion of the estate for one-tenth the price he had paid for the rest. With his additions to the massive holdings, he became the leading sugar producer in the country. His tastes ran to thoroughbred race horses and mint juleps over imported ice. A rough-hewn bachelor who never had an heir of his own, he offered rewards to friends and employees who would name sons after him. Many took him up on the offer, resulting in a string of male babies Louisiana with "John Burnside" in their given names.

When Burnside died in 1881, he left his entire estate, which had grown to \$6 million, to his former partner and foster brother, Oliver Beirne. Beirne led a privileged existence as owner of a Virginia mountain resort and had no desire to leave it. He assigned Houmas House to the care of his respected son-in-law, Col. William Porcher Miles.

The intellectual Miles left his post as president of the University of South Carolina to serve Beirne as the Houmas House's manager and continued almost until his death in 1899. With the help of his neighbors and experienced overseers, Miles mastered the challenge of an unexpected career and expanded the property to its high points in size and productivity. Miles built the structure connecting the large house with the colonial cottage.

Col. Miles' children eventually transferred the estate into a corporation in 1892 but kept the mansion in the family until World War I, when sugar production dropped and the descendants left to pursue their own interests. Sugar growing ended at Houmas House in 1913 and wouldn't be revived for two decades.

Divided, reduced, and dispersed over the next 15 years, the estate dwindled but the grand house remained in the Miles family until 1940, when Dr. George Crozat



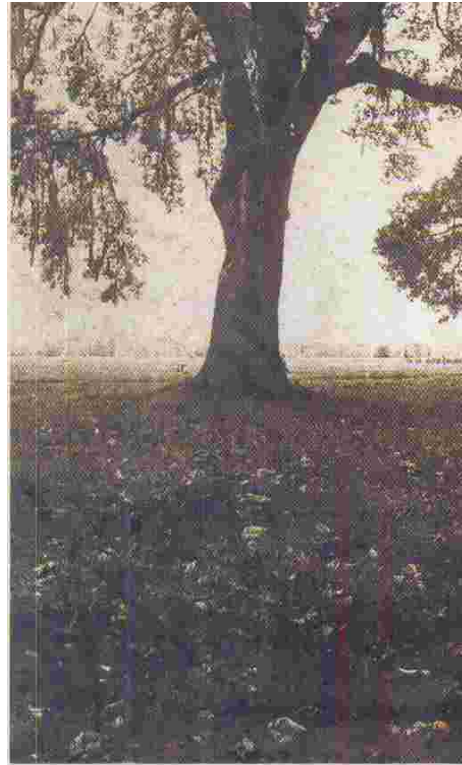
Gen. Wade Hampton considered purchasing the Tennessee land holdings of Andrew Jackson (above) before settling on the Houmas House property.

purchased it with 36 acres of land. A New Orleanian with French roots, Crozat was a prominent orthodontist who made his fortune by devising the invisible brace.

Crozat undertook a remodeling of the house to give it a Federal look, rather than its original Classical or Greek Revival style. He removed the original crown moldings and ceiling medallions, painted interior and exterior surfaces white, removed the widow's walk around the cupola, and replaced the cistern structures at the back corners of the house with the square towers that remain today. An avid gardener, Crozat had most of the outbuildings razed, creating space for a formal garden in the rear of the house. Crozat's heirs opened the estate to tourists in the 1960s.

Filmmakers discovered the romance of Houmas House. Notably, 20th Century Fox filmed the Southern gothic melodrama *Hush ... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* in the house in 1963. The legendary Bette Davis actually stayed in the house during part of the filming. One of the bedrooms contains some of her memorabilia, collected by the current owner.

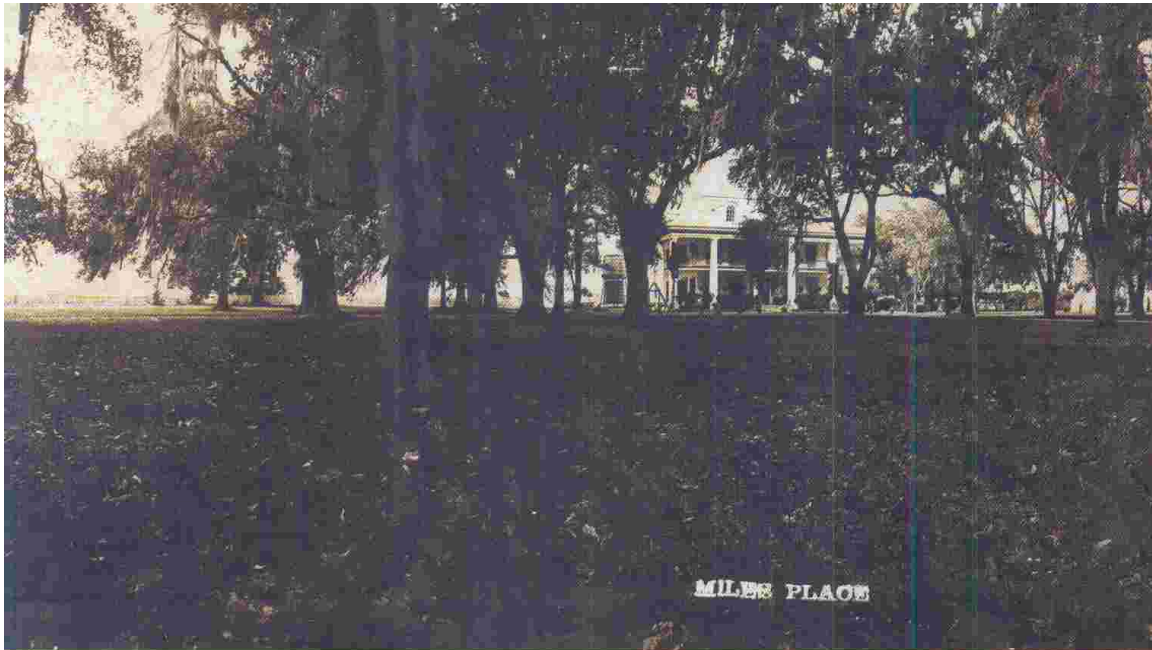
The property went on the market in the spring of 2003, after being emptied of all removable contents in a historic auction. The new owner would be another New Orleans native, this one echoing the Irish ancestry of past owners — Conway, Clark, and Burnside. Businessman



and preservationist Kevin Kelly fulfilled a longstanding dream when he purchased Houmas House for \$2.95 million and immediately began focusing his considerable energy and resources on restoring the estate to his conception of its original lavish ambience.

First, Kelly updated the electrical, plumbing, and air conditioning systems, and added a sprinkler system, to guard against a fire like the one that destroyed the Tezcuco House, just downriver from the Houmas. He and artist/historian Jim Blanchard conducted exhaustive research before selecting wall coverings, floor treatments, furnishings, and fixtures appropriate to the heyday of the house.

For the exterior finish, for example, Blanchard's research revealed that Southern planters admired the marble façades of Mediterranean villas and often had them replicated in faux finishes. Since none of the original plaster finish remained, a color search was impossible. However, records did survive about Burnside's New Orleans mansion, and Blanchard adapted the warm ochre tones from that house for the Houmas.



Stepping into the big central hallway, visitors encounter a view from the middle of a cane field, with all the natural flora and fauna. Artist Craig Black of Burnside, overseer at Houmas House for the past 27 years, painted the mural, which is similar in spirit to one described by a visitor to nearby Linwood Plantation in 1849, except that the Linwood mural depicted a jungle scene, with lions. In lieu of lions, the Houmas mural features two dogs — Kelly’s Dutch Labradors, Princess Grace Kelly and King Sam.

Hanging in front of the mural on one side is an 1848 census map of Louisiana that was found rolled up in the attic. An ancient leather hobby horse upstairs belonged to the Miles children. Throughout the house, furniture by Mallard, Belter, Meeks, Lee, and McCracken represents the finest Louisiana craftsmanship of the 19th century.

Kelly’s vision for Houmas House includes 12 acres of gardens as well as extensive working outbuildings that produce real goods, such as Houmas House rum. A massive barn that will serve as a visitor’s center takes shape from ancient building elements picked up as far away as Cairo, and beyond the barn, a greenhouse, antique shop, and restaurant/tavern are in various stages of planning and construction.

A strong sense of symmetry prevails in the house and grounds, starting with the matching *garçonnières*. The interior of one of the iconic twin retreats is being transformed into a miniature tavern where visitors can enjoy their own mint juleps and other libations. A *parterre* garden to the rear of the house is a study in symmetry and features a majestic fountain lit from below.

By design, visitors today recreate the spirit of an arrival at the antebellum Houmas House when they are guided around the front of the lawn, past the *allée* of 200-year-old

During the latter half of the 19th century, Houmas House was overseen by Col. William Porcher Miles, son-in-law of owner Oliver Biene.

oaks that survived the river’s 1927 rampage. The gardens, in some areas still immature, feature camellias, crepe myrtles, antique roses, azaleas, irises, and water lilies in a plan that incorporates lagoons, bridges, and intimate picnic areas.

Restoring the Houmas House to a particular period is not Kevin Kelly’s goal. Rather he wants to give it life by making it a home rather than a museum. As a home, albeit one that relishes its history and welcomes visitors to share it, the house will continue to evolve with the current owner’s character and personality.

William Howard Russell, the journalist who traveled the world for the London *Times*, was a Dubliner who attended Trinity College and began his career there. In describing his visit to Houmas House in 1863, he alluded to the house’s “Irish” look. He provided no specific points, but his observation highlights the irony that another Irish-American owner has chosen to escort the venerable Sugar Palace into its next incarnation. **LCV**

The mother-daughter team of writer Cynthia Reece McCaffety and Kerri McCaffety have worked together on two books, The Majesty of St. Charles Avenue and Masking and Madness: Mardi Gras in New Orleans, both published by Pelican Press of Gretna, Louisiana.

Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, located in Darrow, Louisiana, is open daily, 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Closed only on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. For more information, call (504) 891-9494; www.houmashouse.com.