

Magnificent Houmas House, Complete with Ghosts

by *Lillian Africano* -- Darrow, LA



There are plantations - and then there is Louisiana's Houmas House, a historic sugar plantation where history is served up with a dash of eccentricity and plenty of charm.

It's a place where "Gone with the Wind" is easily imagined, and where Scarlett O'Hara and her fiddle-dee-dee-ing would be right at home.

Although Houmas House, outside of Darrow, La., is open to the public, it's also the home of businessman Kevin Kelly, who bought the place in 2003, fulfilling a lifelong dream of owning an important Louisiana plantation. Also in residence are assorted herons, swans, frogs (real and statues), Gabby the Duck (a refugee from Hurricane Katrina) and, most important, Princess Grace, Kelly's beloved Labrador, who was "wed" in November 2003 to Kelly's other Labrador, King Sam, in a lavish affair that many a bride would envy. (See www.houmashouse.com for photographs of the Royal Wedding.)

My introduction to this stately 19th century Greek Revival mansion south of Baton Rouge came from a brief video, shown in a small screening room off the house's gift shop; it summarized the history of the property, which was first owned by the Houmas Indians, who sold it to Alexander Latil and Maurice Conway in the mid-18th century. Latil built a French Provincial house, which is now Houmas House's rear wing. The present mansion was built in stages, completed in 1828 by Col. John Preston and purchased for \$1 million in 1857 by Irishman John Burnside, who, by the time of the Civil War, was the largest sugar producer in the country. Burnside saved the mansion from the Union armies by declaring himself to be a subject of the British Crown - rather than a loyal son of Dixie.

In the century and a half that followed, Houmas House's fortunes rose and fell until Kelly bought the property and embarked on an extreme makeover; stripping the mansion down to its elegant bones; working with historical documents and blueprints, he brought the antebellum palace to life.

The faux marble exterior was painted a rich ochre, the belvedere that crowns the house was restored, along with all the original features and finishes.



Kelly's next task: creating a setting to showcase the splendor of the mansion. Nature had provided the live oaks, the oldest being some 500 years old. Kevin added 12 acres of gardens that are glorious year-round by giving his staff of 10 gardeners one directive: that he wanted to see something growing every day of the year. As I strolled the meandering pathways, the landscape dazzled with lush tropical plants, ponds, fountains, statuary and the impeccably restored twin garconniere (bachelor's quarters). A walled garden, known as the Hampton Fountain Court is perfumed with magnolias and features a 50-foot-wide water-lily pond that might have been painted by Monet. The pond is graced with a huge fountain that can entertain with a display of colored lights.

Best of all, Kelly was able to purchase many of the items relating to the Sugar Palace's early history, including the 1847 La Tourette map of Louisiana and the Houmas china, as well as 19th century furnishings owned by some of the South's wealthiest families. Alas, Kelly was not able to purchase the original furniture from one of the bedrooms; it is in the White House and not for sale.



During my tour with a guide in period costume, I saw a treasure-trove of antique furniture, Waterford chandeliers, fine art and historical artifacts that offered a glimpse of how a 19th century sugar baron lived. There is a touch of whimsy in the central hallway, where a large mural depicts a sugar cane field; but rather than the heroic lions that are often shown in murals of the period, front and center here are Princess Grace and King Sam.

The magnificent three-story circular stairway is an architectural marvel and the Gentlemen's Parlor is an authentic setting for men of means to discuss business over brandy and cigars. The Ladies' Parlor, with its grand piano and crystal chandelier, has a more genteel atmosphere, suited for the polite gossip of the day.

A tour favorite is the room where Bette Davis stayed during the filming of "Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte." The movie was shot at the plantation in 1963 and also starred Joseph Cotten and Davis's good friend, Olivia de Havilland. Since then Houmas House has been featured in a number of films, including A "Woman Called Moses," starring Cicely Tyson, as well as in commercials, television shows - and even the soap opera, "All My Children."

Since fine dining was part of a 19th century gentleman's life of privilege, the plantation offers award-winning cuisine at Latil's Landing, in the original 18th century wing. With its original beamed ceilings, original wood floors and wood-burning fireplaces, not to mention the French Limoges china (faithfully reproduced from the mansion's original china), Latil's Landing has the ambiance of a much-loved period home, rather an impersonal restaurant. Here, chef Jeremy Langlois creates such sumptuous Nouvelle Louisiane dishes as Chicken and Andouille Gumbo and Lobster and Creole Tomato Risotto.

For less formal dining - say, a fried oyster po'boy - the property's Cafe Burnside is the place. And when visitors crave cool liquid refreshment, the cozy tavern housed in one of the former garconnières can provide a perfect mint julep. The historic water cisterns at the rear of the main house have been converted into handsome wine cellars, where more than 1,000 cases of fine wine are stored.

A fairly recent addition to Houmas House is the wedding pavilion, which Kelly built when his sister wanted to get married. And coming soon: an elegant 88-room bed and breakfast, which Kelly plans to enhance with every comfort available, including an on-site spa. So in the not-too-distant future, it will be possible not only to dine like a sugar baron, but also to enjoy such luxuries that were yet undreamed of in the 19th century.



Like so many historic homes, Houmas House has its share of ghost stories, and for visitors who are interested, the guides are happy to provide tales of sightings. One of the more interesting specters is a dark-eyed little girl wearing a blue dress, whose identity is a mystery. Speculation has it that she may be the ghost daughter of Col. John Preston, who died in 1848 at the age of 7 - or perhaps another Houmas House daughter, this one the child of Col. William P. Miles.

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