



# The Final Days of Isle Derniere

by Bethany Ewald Bultman

Caught unawares in an era prior to weather forecasts, more than 400 summer vacationers at Louisiana's Isle Derniere were killed or injured by a devastating hurricane in 1856.

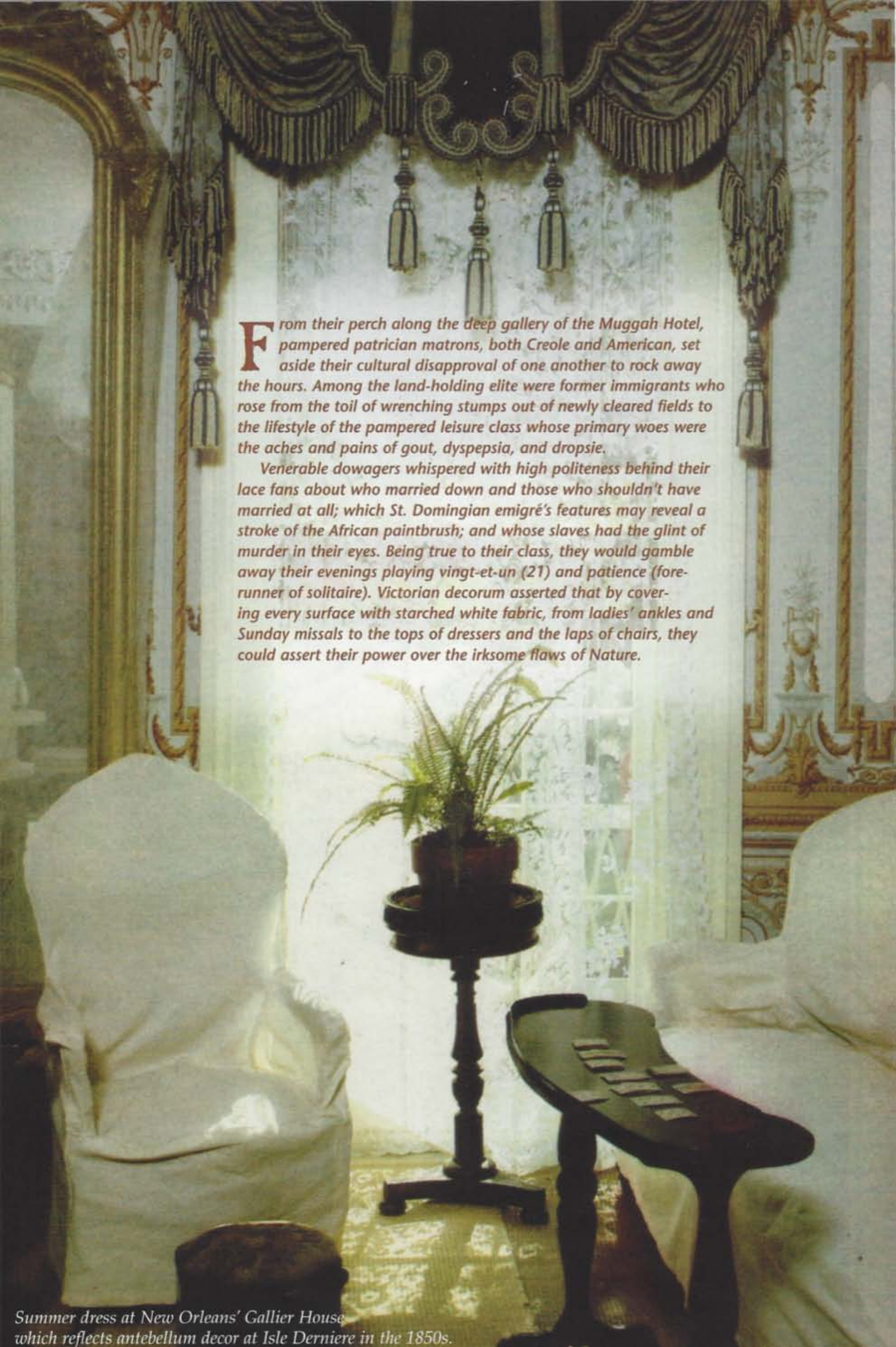
During the summers of the 1850s, Isle Derniere, a barrier island resort just off the coast of Louisiana (also known as Last Island by the Americans), was among the wealthiest communities per capita in the United States. Then by 6 p.m. on August 10, 1856, the antebellum planter class of the Gulf South discovered that crystal chandeliers and damask-covered settees were no buffer against the raw edges of nature. By the time the damnedest hellbender of a hurricane to date had spent its wrath, more than 400 of the resort's guests were dead, mortally wounded or maimed, and the immense loss of property was estimated to be more than \$1 million. In less than three hours, Isle Derniere was reduced to a mere 75 square feet of sand that shriveled the heart with its desolation. For those who survived the ravages of the storm and the ordeal of its brutal aftermath, life would be anything but lighthearted. The shred of beach where they once had skylarked on prancing ponies beneath sun-crested trees was strewn with the mangled corpses of their loved ones, mingled with debris of man's folly and the putrid carcasses of dogs, horses, cattle, and thousands upon thousands of dead birds and fish.

I, for one, never can forget that trespassing on Louisiana's fragile coastline has the sort of dire consequences that alter a family for generations. Even today, almost 150 years after the Isle Derniere hurricane, I live with constant reminders — the portrait of James (1805-1856) and Charley Muggah (1848-1856), two of my thirteen ancestors killed in the devastation; the condolence letters written in August 1856 to Julia Curtis Muggah (my great-great grandmother) by friends who assured the pious Methodist widow that God would return her husband and only son to her; and my flimsy family tree supported by one fatherless baby girl, Margaret Mackey Muggah (pronounced like Mac-auch), my grandmother's mother. My tragic Muggah legacy has led me to spend the past thirty years trying to understand why so many died, and puzzling over why subsequent generations of Louisianans have not heeded the warning to stay away from fragile land where we do not belong.

*'Ye could not know where lie the forms so fair  
No stone is there to show, no tongue to say  
What was; no dirge except the hollow seas  
Mourns o'er the dead of Dernier Ile.'*

~extract from poem published in 1856





**F**rom their perch along the deep gallery of the Muggah Hotel, pampered patrician matrons, both Creole and American, set aside their cultural disapproval of one another to rock away the hours. Among the land-holding elite were former immigrants who rose from the toil of wrenching stumps out of newly cleared fields to the lifestyle of the pampered leisure class whose primary woes were the aches and pains of gout, dyspepsia, and dropsie.

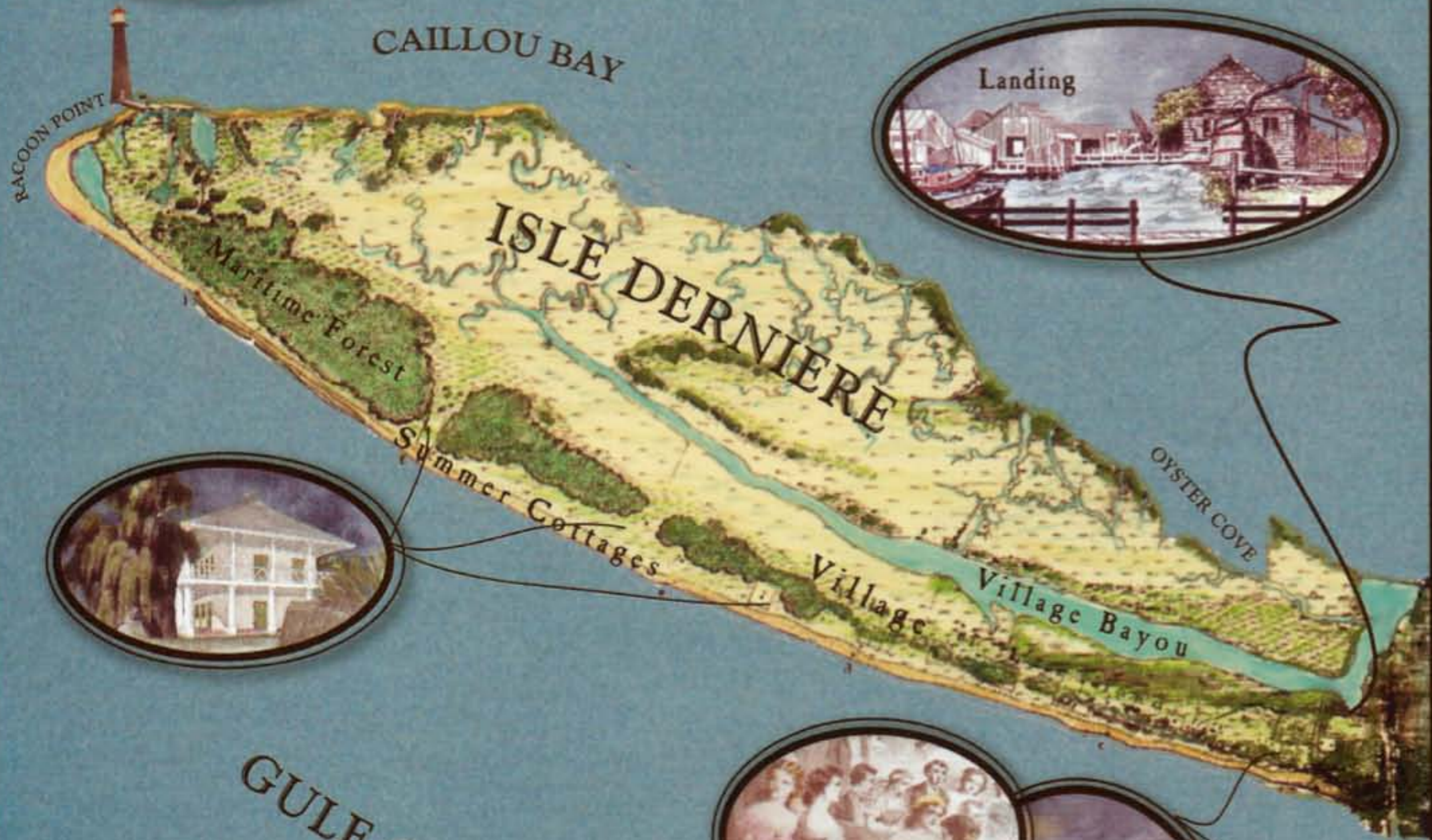
Venerable dowagers whispered with high politeness behind their lace fans about who married down and those who shouldn't have married at all; which St. Domingian emigré's features may reveal a stroke of the African paintbrush; and whose slaves had the glint of murder in their eyes. Being true to their class, they would gamble away their evenings playing vingt-et-un (21) and patience (forerunner of solitaire). Victorian decorum asserted that by covering every surface with starched white fabric, from ladies' ankles and Sunday missals to the tops of dressers and the laps of chairs, they could assert their power over the irksome flaws of Nature.

TWILIGHT ON ISLE DERNIERE

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9, 1856



LOUISIANA MAINLAND



GULF OF MEXICO



Back in the late 1840s my Scottish seafaring-turned-sugar planting Muggah ancestors gobbled up the opportunity to develop Isle Derniere, the westernmost island of the 870 kilometer Gulf barrier island chain, as if it was served to them on a silver spoon by the dainty hand of Mother Nature. Isle Derniere was an ephemeral world where pelicans and snowy egrets glided on salubrious breezes over a natural maritime forest. Sparkling lagoons unbroken by tidal inlets, and fifteen miles of "the finest beaches this side of the Bahamas" further complimented the scene. The island, less than 30 miles long and three quarters of a mile at its widest point, was merely a rumple on the landscape, three feet above the Gulf's swells at its loftiest.

"The opportunities for sea bathing are such that few could resist the temptation to profit by them," reported *The Planter's Banner* (Franklin, La.) in 1848. "The beach is smooth, the water is clear and salty, and not over five feet deep, for a distance of two hundred yards from the shore ... It is always cool on account of its being contiguous to the salt water which so uniformly washes its surface; a gentle breeze is always floating across it, and health and vigor seem to be inhaled at every breath by those who visit it." Developers were able to purchase such prime land from the U.S. government for less than \$2 an acre which would afford vacationers a retreat from the stifling heat and

The sugar-white beach was dotted with dozens of cottages, E. Pecot's Boarding House, a race track, a vast public livery stable, the Muggah Billiard House, and an elaborate beach pavilion and casino. On the dock behind the Muggah Hotel stevedores unloaded the voluminous steamer trunks of guests from isolated plantations eager to dazzle their compatriots with the fanciest plumage they could amass. If ever there were clothing to die for, the ladies of Isle Derniere possessed it. These bite-your-tongue Victorian-era damsels were judged on their ability to defy gravity and nature with the body-modifying fashion confectionery wonders of the industrial Age.

humidity of mainland Louisiana. That by 1848 the island still only had accommodations to house 40 visitors cried out for further hotel development. Thus the four Muggah brothers and their partners from St. Mary Parish embarked on their dream of creating the South's most elegant summer resort. And they almost succeeded.

Isle Derniere's great asset was its convenience to plantation country. In those heady years of the Belle Epoch, Louisiana's sugar planters enjoyed an energetic upward mobility achieved from transforming an immense malarial wetland into plantations so fertile that "feathers grew on trees," and by appropriating the sweat-equity of "heathens" to forge their empires. Passing carefree summers at the oasis known in the 1850s as "Louisiana's Deauville" afforded these intrepid gentlemen blessed relief from their concerns about yellow fever and the unrest of their slaves. (By the 1850s slaves outnumbered whites in the south Louisiana by more than ten to one.) On those yawning summer days, planters-turned-anglers spun an abundance of tall tales and reeled in enough flounder, pompano, and red snapper to make them seem plausible. French parasols

shielded the magnolia flesh of their daughters from the rays of the sun as they preened in their voluminous hoop skirts along the resort's promenade. Then each Sunday, they prayed to remain "God's chosen people."

The Isle Derniere developers' get-richer quicker scheme looked even more promising when on February 24, 1856 the New Orleans, Opelousas and Great Western Railway, one of the engineering wonders of the 19th century, began its service linking New Orleans with an island ferry. Locomotives speeding at 40 miles per hour covered the 80 miles from the Algiers Station (across the river from New Orleans) southwestward to the bustling steamboat terminal at Bayou Boeuf (named for the bison that were once plentiful), thirty nautical miles from the resort island.

That final carefree summer the sturdy, semi-tropical vegetation grew as fast as the steamers from the mainland could unload resort guests, and slightly faster than the accommodations to house them. By the time they met their deaths, the Muggah brothers owned a mailpacket steamer, the *Star*, to ferry resort guests back and forth to the mainland, and they had partnered with a consortium of other planters and bankers to triple the size of their Muggah Hotel. Construction was set to begin at the close of the 1856 summer season and be managed by the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans.

This "famed beach [Isle Derniere] teems every evening with young people, composed, sober-faced old pedestrians, beautiful ladies on horseback and couples in carriages whirling along at an astonishing pace along the white flowering crape myrtle-lined shell road," noted *The Delta* in New Orleans (August 20, 1854). "Shooting and riding and boating are the sports in which the ladies most indulge. They are dead shots, and whenever they sally forth with dogs and guns they bag more game in an hour than any two gentlemen on the island could do in double the time. One of these ladies is the most intrepid, graceful and daring rider that I have ever seen. She seems as much in her element on a prancing pony, bounding over logs, rails and fences and bayous, as she does in dancing a quadrille or polka, in either of which she displays that grace and elegance which always distinguish the Creole ladies of Louisiana."

By the second week in August 1856, the cooling gulf breezes were just brisk enough to require the ladies to employ a few extra bejewelled hat pins without fear of ostentation. "Up until that point in my life, I'd maintained that Nature never sets a trap for her children," wrote hurricane survivor Reverend Robert Samuel McAllister (1830-1892) in his article for the *Southern Presbyterian* (April 1891) — penned under the *nom de plume* "Seagrit." We did not know then as we did afterwards that the voice of those waters was solemnly saying to us, 'escape for thy life.'"

In the days leading up to the resort's destruction, few were inclined to leave the island as the cumulus clouds imposed an epic quality on the horizon. In fact, there continued a steady stream of new arrivals eager to enjoy the breezy relief from the full-boil of August in Louisiana. "The summer of 1856 found 400 planters, their families and servants assembled at the Muggah Hotel," recalled Colonel William Whitmell (W.W.) Pugh (1811-1906), the Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives, in his 1880 *Reminiscences of an Old Fogey*. "In a word, the best people of the country were on hand to enjoy themselves. The young



*This modern-day rendering by New Orleans' artist Jim Blanchard depicts the Muggah's new and improved hotel on Isle Derniere. Never realized, construction on their expanded hotel was set to begin at the close of the 1856 summer season. It was to have been the largest resort hotel in North America during the antebellum period with luxuriant accommodations for 1,250 guests, an elaborate 320 by 60 feet formal dining salon, and 1,250 feet of double-decker galleries overlooking the Gulf and the Bay. The structure was to be 40 feet deep, including the width of the galleries, to maximize the breezes. The Muggahs had contracted with the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans to manage the project, and had collected a consortium of eager investors. Ironically the hotel was to have been called the Trade Winds, with funding approved by bankers in New Orleans on the very day the resort washed into the Gulf. courtesy of Jim Blanchard Gallery, New Orleans*

people amused each other, their seniors talked politics, played billiards, and discussed farming in all different phases." The Pugh family's status as "the best people" was so well known that there was a popular riddle making the rounds of the Gulf South — "Why is Bayou LaFourche like the aisle of a church?" Answer: "Because there are Pughs on both sides." W.W. Pugh was part of the family consortium who owned "Allied Plantations," eighteen plantations each with close to 1,000 acres, sprawling across the parishes of Assumption, Terrebonne and LaFourche. By 1860, the "Allied Plantations" annual income is estimated to have been more than six million dollars annually (in today's dollars).

One of the coveted "extra" men visiting the Muggah Hotel from St. Mary Parish was Captain John Barrett Murph(e)y, ancestor of Governor Mike Foster. Another was the 21-year-old Seymour R. Alexander Stewart, eldest son of one of the wealthiest citizens of New Orleans. House parties were all the rage. The Schlatres of Enterprise Plantation in Iberville Parish had 17 guests staying in their home. Next door, Governor Paul



Octave Herbert, (1818-1880), the twelfth governor of Louisiana (elected in 1852), was hosting a large party of friends and family at his summer home. These included the ten-year-old Charles H. Dickenson (namesake of his infamous grandfather slaughtered in an illegal 1806 duel by Andrew Jackson) and his widowed mother, Anna Maria Turner Dickenson of Oak Lawn Plantation on Bayou Grosse Tete. Down the beach, Schlatre's brother-in-law Louis Desobry, Jr., of Plaquemine, was housing more than 20 family members and a dozen or so slaves. All came to enjoy what was eerily presaged in the *Planter's Banner* (September 4, 1852) "... the roar of the dying wave, lulls the heart to peace, quiets the spirit of passion, and leads the creature man to think upon his God ..."

Miles to the east a low pressure system was spinning into hurricane strength. To many of the guests on that Saturday morning, speculation about the impending disturbance in the Gulf seemed merely to be a juicy breakfast morsel. Perhaps they even anticipated the pleasure they'd derive from converting the climatic inconvenience into an entertaining tale of adventure to share with their friends on the mainland.

What visitors to Louisiana's largest coastal community in the 1850s did not suspect was that they would soon be in the most destructive quadrant of the Gulf South's deadliest hurricane (prior to that date). Or that as they savored the madcap euphoria of watching splashing children and darting hermit crabs in the epic surf that a Category 4 hurricane on the 5-point Saffir-Simpson Scale (with wind speeds up to 150 miles per hour, and a tidal surge of 10-15 feet) had embarked on its humanity-cleaving mission.

Without Doppler radar, satellites, or data crunching computers to warn them, the resort guests did not yet realize that they were teetering on the edge of oblivion. "By Friday a breeze sprang up from the N.E., but nothing extraordinary. On Saturday the breeze had increased to a strong gale and the sea was white with foam, and roaring like a waterfall," indicated survivor Michael Schlatre (1818-1900), an Iberville Parish sugar planter. He penned his survival story in 1857 for his bereaved mother-in-law, Minerva Desobry. As he was also the commander of the steamer *Blue Hammock*, Schlatre was familiar with much worse, or so he assumed. After all, many deduced, between May and November, coastal Louisiana was always vulnerable to Gulf hurricanes, "but none could hurt them."

About the same time the grande dames took their Saturday afternoon tea on the veranda of the Muggah Hotel, an inexorably dark canopy of deep purple clouds had affixed itself like an airtight lid atop the resort. Yet preparations for the hotel's ball that night was a more enticing topic than the weather. Later, as ladies wriggled into their ballgowns, they were blithely unaware that rows of corn, pole beans, squash and tomatoes in the island's kitchen gardens were being silently nibbled away by the cyclone's wind-driven tide.

### Friday, August 8, 1856

Two gentlemen sailors on Isle Derniere seem to have had misgivings about the approaching gale. On the evening of Friday, August 8, Captain Thomas H. Ellis, son of a wealthy Terrebonne Parish sugar planter, had attended a sailing party aboard the yacht *Atlantic*, a 10-ton bark sailed down from New York. He was about to walk some of his friends back to the Muggah Hotel when the yacht's "Cap't Jimmy" requested a word with Ellis. Cap't Jimmy was anxious about the higher than usual tide, wondering if he shouldn't sail the yacht back across the bay to the mainland. The captain, forty years a sailor, suspected that Isle Derniere would be in grave danger within the next 24 to 48 hours. After treating the yacht's crew a round of drinks, Ellis promised to persuade his friend, Major Nelson,

"Up until that point in my life, I'd maintained that Nature never sets a trap for her children. Now I wonder if She must go to these lengths to break us of our human indolence. Everything about Last Island was ideal, excepting the prime question none of us thought to ask, 'is this place safe?'"

~ Rev. Robert Samuel McAllister

and the ladies traveling with him, to return to the mainland at first light on Saturday. They would board the steamer *Star*, a lumbering old 147-ton vessel, on its bi-weekly trip back across Oyster Bay and Caillou Bay to Brasshear City (Morgan City).

As Ellis and his friends strolled back to the hotel through the moist veil of evening, they noticed that the moist cadence of frogs and cicadas had been silenced. The fringes of the island, once the playground for swarming crustaceans, was being besieged by the tide. As the last smear of sun coated the tip of Isle Derniere on Friday, August 8, an overabundance of seabirds took refuge in the protective cover of the island's dense forest. Even though his lady friends had been intent on attending the Muggah Hotel ball the following night,

Ellis had sufficiently frightened them so that they reluctantly agreed to leave the island. On one condition, though — Ellis had to promise he would accompany them on the *Star* as far as the railroad. So Saturday morning, Ellis, Major Nelson and the ladies boarded the *Star* with Captain

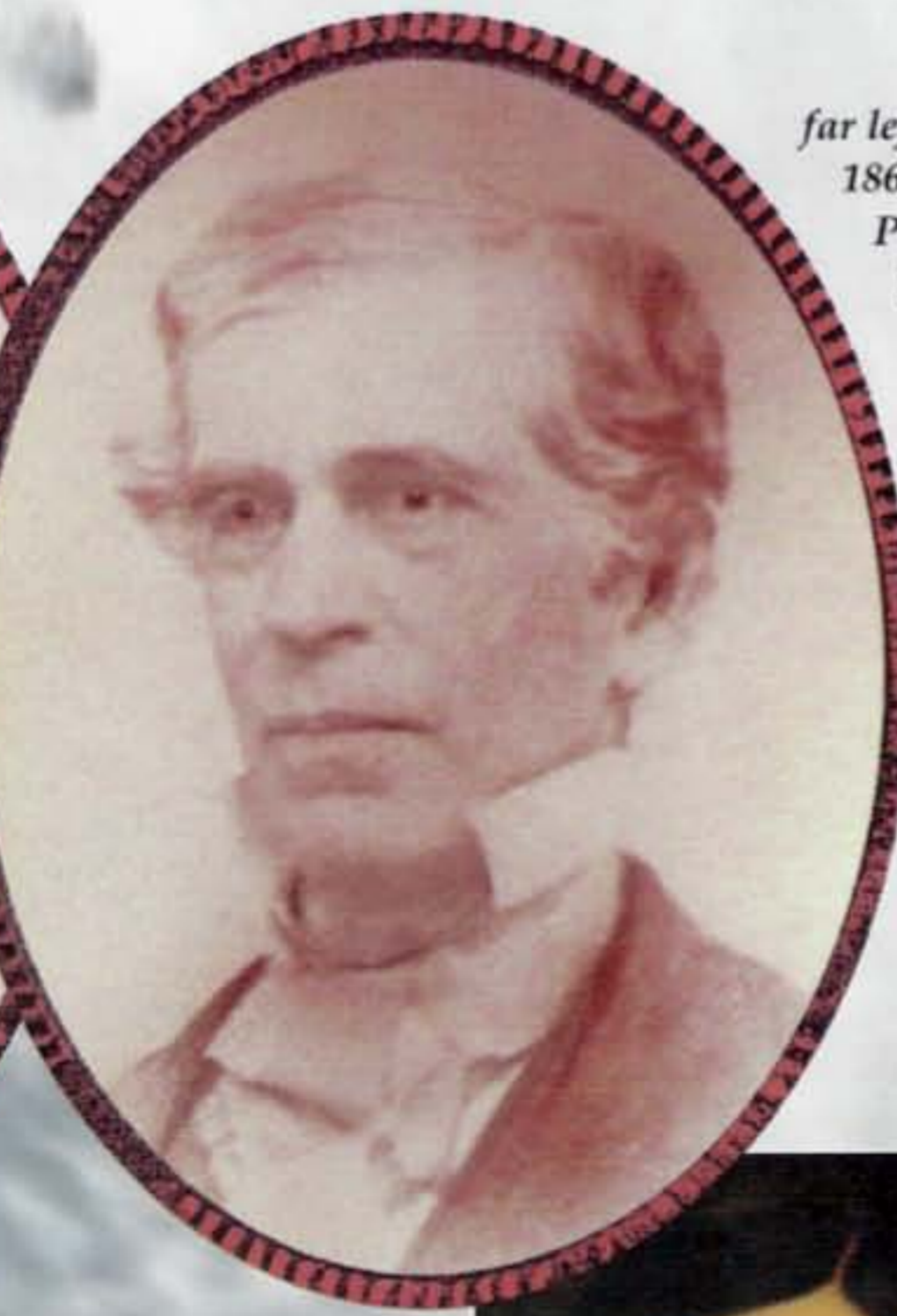


## Victims and Survivors:



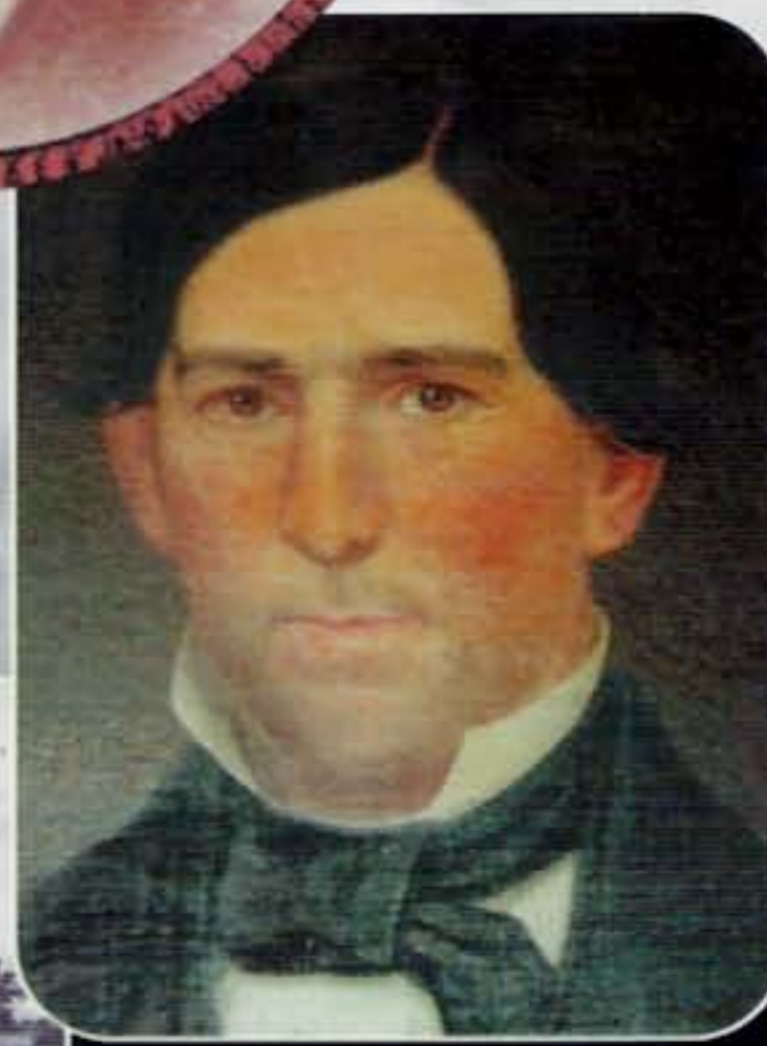
left: *Aspasia Elizabeth Ann Fuselier Frère (1821-1856)*; right: *Frederic Adrien Frère (1818-1865)*. The thirty-five year old Aspasia of St. Mary Parish was the grand niece of Le Clair Fuselier III (1801- 1876), the man who undertook the joyless task of organizing the expedition to search the marsh around Isle Dernière for her body, that of her husband, and their seven-year-old son, Joseph Adrien. Their bodies were never recovered.

There is a monument to Frederic and Aspasia Frère, at the Immaculate Conception Church Cemetery in Charenton, Louisiana which reads "Eternal rest give them Lord." The young couple left five orphaned daughters and one son ranging in age from four months to 14 to be raised by Frederic's half-brother, Joseph Frère" -portraits courtesy of Dr. And Mrs. Thomas Frère Kramer



far left: *Josephine Wilhelmina Nicholls (1820-1868)*; left: *Col. William Whitmel (W.W.) Pugh (1811-1906)*. Col. Pugh and his wife lived at Woodlawn Plantation, a classical columned, three-storied palace on the bayou in Bertie (near Napoleonville) with 14 lavishly furnished bedrooms and unique gas powered chandeliers. From his first marriage Col. Pugh had six children. He and Josephine had seven children after their marriage in 1844. Josephine was noted as bright, well-read, vivacious, and compassionate. -courtesy of the William Littlejohn Martin Collection, Allen J. Ellender Archives, Nicholls State University

right: *James Milne Muggah (c. 1806- 1856) and his son Charley (1848-1856)*. Ancestors of the author, James and his son died with his brothers, sisters-in-law and nieces and nephews. James left his young widow, Julia Curtis, to raise their three daughters and her two step-children. -courtesy of the Muggah descendants, Mr. and Mrs. Karl Raymond Ewald, Jr.



left: *Drawing for the proposed Trade Winds Hotel.* -courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection

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Abraham Smith at the helm. They had an easy run across the bay to Morgan's Railroad (in Morgan City). Unbeknownst to them, this would be the last boat departing Isle Derniere before the resort was wiped off the face of the earth.

Saturday, August 9, 1856

The steamer was set to make a quick turnaround, and be back at Isle Derniere by 10 p.m. Captain Ellis anticipated that he would make it in time to have several hours at the ball. He indicates that on the afternoon of that date, the *Star* had taken on return freight and a load of vacationers eager to begin their island holiday. It was almost dark by the time the *Star* sailed down the Atchafalaya through Four League Bay out into the Caillou Bay. That's when the *Star* encountered difficulty. Back at the Muggah Hotel, Captain Dave Muggah (younger brother of my ancestor, James) reasoned that wine and music would dispel his guests' waves of panic, especially as he noticed that the steamer *Star* had failed to arrive. The affable Capt. Muggah assured them that they were experiencing the worst of the storm. "And if the storm doesn't blow over by the morning, no fear, the steamer *Star* will soon arrive to take you all back to the mainland," he promised.

Twenty miles away the passengers aboard the *Star* finished dinner despite the steady roll of the boat. Afterwards, Tom Ellis and a few of the other gentlemen sat down to pass the remainder of the voyage enjoying their brandy and playing cards. But several hours later Ellis determined from the erratic motion of the boat that something was terribly wrong. The lights of Isle Derniere should have been visible hours before. A walk on the lower deck confirmed Ellis's concern. A fierce northeastern wind had forced the *Star* far off course. She was in danger of being blown out into the raging storm at sea.

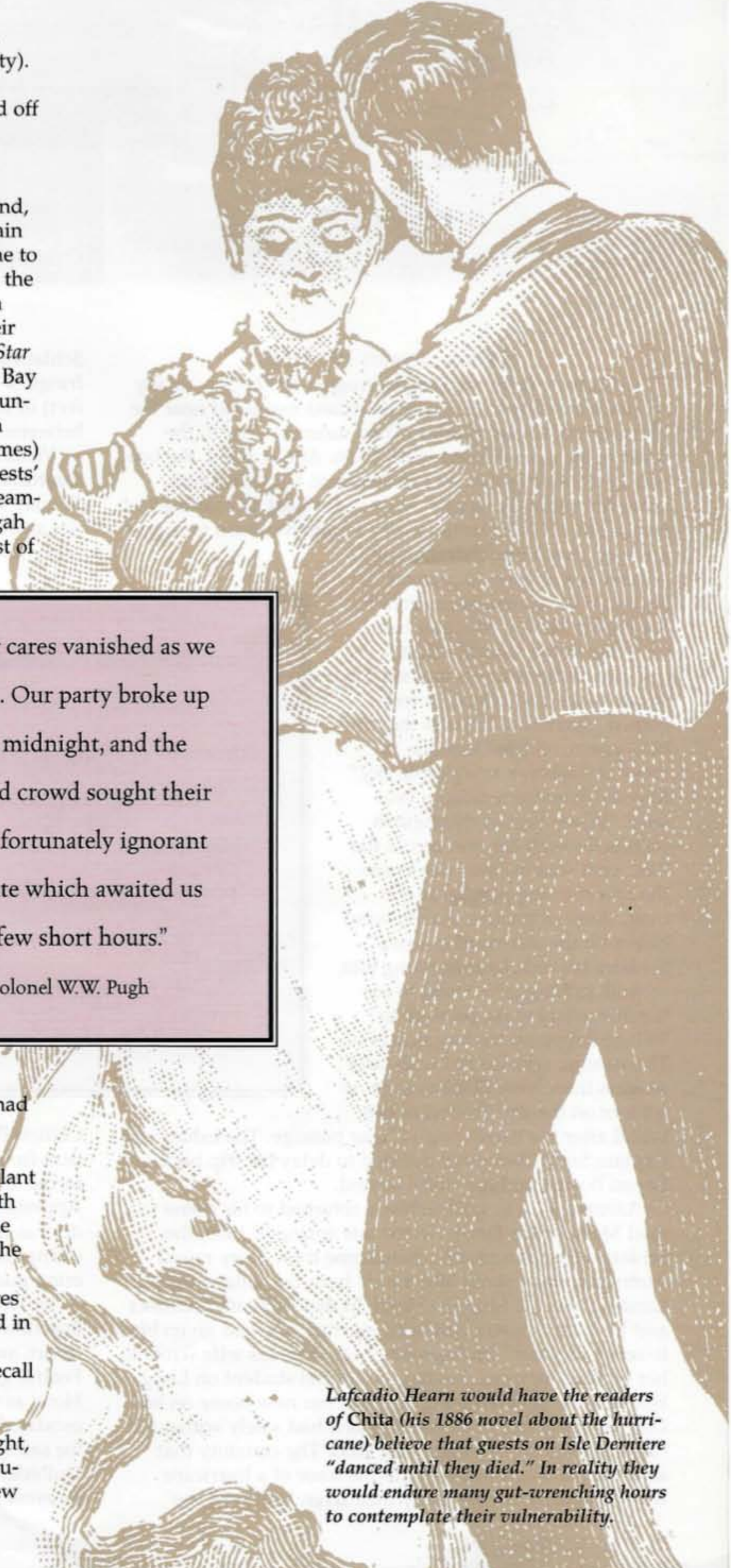
Ellis advised Capt. Abe Smith, "as good and gallant a man as ever trod the deck of a steamboat, but with no experience with outside navigation" to head due north toward the shore immediately "carrying all the steam she could stand."

Across the bay at the Muggah Hotel "all our cares vanished as we danced," Col. W.W. Pugh described in his memoirs. "Little were we thinking of the sad changes which a few hours would bring about. I recall with sadness the skill and taste of the old German, whose violin furnished the exquisite music, which charmed so many. Our party broke up after midnight, and the exhausted crowd sought their couches fortunately ignorant of the fate which awaited us in a few short hours."

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~ Colonel W.W. Pugh

*Lafcadio Hearn would have the readers of Chita (his 1886 novel about the hurricane) believe that guests on Isle Derniere "danced until they died." In reality they would endure many gut-wrenching hours to contemplate their vulnerability.*







The Star was a 147-ton vessel, that had been built in Ohio in the 1840s, and revamped by the Muggahs for passenger service to the island. It was owned by Alfred Stevens and John and James Muggah. After the hurricane, St. Mary Parish records indicate that the captain of the Texas purchased the machinery of the Star. In September 1856 the Texas was able to salvage a cargo of mattresses and furniture the Star had been carrying to the Muggah brothers' hotel. (Star replica created from historical accounts.)

### Sunday, August 10, 1856

Just before dawn on Sunday, August 10, the *Star* finally made it safely back to the Louisiana mainland near the mouth of Grand Caillou. They steamed close to the coast as the storm closed in on them. At this point, the boat was 12 hours overdue on Isle Derniere. Captain Smith, however, valiantly refused to dock the boat, determined to rescue any on Isle Derniere who sought to return to higher ground. Assuming that the weather system was soon to pass on, Smith set his course once again for the harbor behind Muggah Hotel.

A few hours later, the first glimpse of the lanterns and smokestacks of the *Star* offered a welcomed glimmer of hope to the troubled guests on Isle Derniere. "I rose at daybreak to a purple sky," Michael Schlatre recalled a year later. "When I could distinguish objects through the rain across the bay, what was my surprise to see the *Star* running parallel to the main shore of the island with wind heavy on the starboard quarter."

Schlatre braved cloud-splitting rain to walk to Muggah's Hotel to see the *Star* safely make passage to Village Bayou on the bay side of it. The steamer was loaded with passengers from New Orleans eager to get foot on the dry ground of the island after the harrowing 14 hour passage. The exhausted Captain Smith, however, decided to delay his trip back to Bayou Boeuf until the storm abated.

Assured all was well, Schlatre returned to his home to read Mass for his family. In the late spring of 1855, the Schlatres had purchased a handsome three-story raised summer cottage about half a mile from the Village Bayou landing and the Muggah Hotel. In the ten years Lodoiska and Michael Schlatre had been married, she had given birth to seven children. On September 16, 1855, his wife wrote to her brother, Edward Desobry, a medical student on Long Island, New York assuring him that her new home on Isle Derniere gave her great comfort as it had safely withstood a severe storm on August 29, 1855. The certainty that architecture was a pediment to the force of a hurricane would regrettably cost many their lives. Little did the

Schlatres suspect that Isle Derniere had been on the outer fringe of a Category 3 storm (winds 111-130, surge 9-12 feet) in 1855 (which made landfall in Plaquemine Parish between Port Sulphur and Empire).

Victorian ladies and gentlemen of the Gulf South were creatures of decorum and ritual. Come rain or shine, Sunday dinner was served promptly at one o'clock to families attired in their Sunday finery. As the rain fell in torrents, few suspected as they sliced their roast chickens that

this would be their last meal.

Nevertheless Schlatre would reflect, "I had the greatest confidence in the strength of our houses. I made light of the fears of my cousins next door [French-born, Iberville Parish sugar planter, Thomas Mille (1800-1856) and his wife, Pauline Dupuy (1808-1856)] who constantly sent over to ask if we were in danger from the squall."

Reality took them by surprise. Within a few hours, the worst antebellum hurricane would move from rumor to legend, changing the lives of generations to come. Death announced itself in impalpable wet scents. Imagine a mammoth bulldozer from the northeast pushing a wall of water from

Caillou Bay into the resorts' drawing rooms. Ornamental frou-frous shattered to the floor as monstrous billows forced their way into every manmade crevice.

Apprehensive guests crammed into the second floor corridors as the structures began to weave and groan. Gusts extinguished the chandeliers and candles, casting the cowering guests into heart-stopping darkness.

By two o'clock the first floors of all the buildings were overflowing as the storm surge from the Gulf gutted the resort, and blinding rain smothered them from above. Fearful guests fled to a large room upstairs at the Muggah Hotel as the water rose on the lower floor. Still the storm escalated, "the bar room was recommended as preferable for safety; so thither they therefore all went," Dr. Alfred DuPerier (1820-1904) of New Iberia described to *The Picayune* on August 14, 1856. "The hotel withstood the force

"If only we had been martyrs, at least we could have been conscious of dying for adherence to some great principle. But alas, not one of us was at a post of duty to mankind. Not a soul on this island had any business here."

~ Rev. Robert Samuel McAllister

Harper's Weekly depiction of Isle Dernière's destruction, 1856.

-courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection



of the elements admirably, being the last to be seized off and going only by piecemeal." Guests were forced into the deafening storm as the upper floor of the hotel was pulverized by the wind.

Dr. Thomas Frère Kramer is descended from several of the survivors. He recounted a story that after the hotel began collapsing, guests formed a human chain, passing persons, arm-to-arm to the shelter of the *Star*. The last person in the chain was a slave girl, lost as the hotel gave way. Dr. Lisle and W.D. Winter of West Baton Rouge had recently disembarked from the *Star* when they found themselves caught in the collapse of the Muggah Hotel. They were saved when they rode out the waves in terrapin pens behind the hotel.

At three o'clock, Michael Schlatre's slaves reported that their house had blown down. "As this was but a weak structure I thought nothing of it," Schlatre reasoned. "But, half an hour later I saw my kitchen near doubled and blown right up to our dwelling. The air was darkened and filled with sand and water, the wind howling the like of which I had never heard."

Michael Schlatre was now seized with foreboding. The wind was so strong it threatened to pull off their skin. Schlatre instructed Lodoiska to place everyone under the beds in case their home was blown from its foundations. "My little son Louis [his eldest son who would have been ten at the time] had been ill and began crying with fear that my wife or I would leave him," Schlatre wrote. "I stood alone on the floor. My wife, our seven children and the servants and their children were all under the beds. Within seconds, a gust of wind from the northeaster sent the east gable of my house hurling down on top of the beds. I ordered all into the servants' room to safety."

Those who had remained aboard the *Star* felt it being ricocheted off the swollen waves as it began to drag toward the crest of the flooded island into the Gulf. Tom Ellis warned Captain Smith that in a short time the cabin would be blown overboard. He felt it was imperative to move all the passengers into the stinking cargo hull beneath. Captain Abraham Smith ordered everything above the *Star*'s gunwales to be destroyed — the fine cabins, the ornate rails, the furniture, all torn away, transforming the ship from a means of escape to the last hope of refuge.



The word hurricane was adopted by 16th-century Spanish explorers from the name of the Caribbean Indians' storm-god, Huracan. Hernando de Soto had originally christened the Gulf of Mexico Espiritu Santo, Bay of the Holy Ghost. That is where the island's vacationers found themselves, adrift and begging for mercy. The August 1856 cyclone had a rapid diagonal course with one destination in mind, the barrier island's antebellum resort. In the open Gulf, its winds were gusting up to 170 mph and generating swells of up to 45 feet by the time it slammed into the island's most vulnerable target, the Muggah Hotel, conveniently located between the Gulf and the Village Bayou.

By studying the barometric readings of ships that were in the Gulf at the time, and by reading historic newspaper weather recaps, climatologists of today can tell a great deal about 1856's Hurricane No. 1 (as it is officially known). Louisiana's climatologist, John M. Grymes III, has been studying Gulf coastal hurricanes for more than fifteen years.

"Frankly this storm moved faster than any boats that could have warned the islanders," he notes. This storm was simple as hurricanes go, no circuitous curlicues in its path or diversionary changes of course, no lofty African pedigree, just a homegrown killer coming of age off the western tip of the Florida Keys."

# Victims and Survivors:

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**left: Marcelite Blanchard Foley (1809-1881).** As the Muggah Hotel began to sway in the wind, the 47-year-old Marcelite Blanchard Foley tied her 53-year-old husband, Arthur Morgan (A.M.) Foley (1803-1858), an Assumption Parish sugar planter, to a large wooden plank to insure that they could remain together "in life or in death." The Foleys had come to the summer resort

so that A.M. could convalesce from the stroke that had paralyzed one side of his body. They were staying at the Muggah Hotel with their daughter, Mary Henrietta Foley (1828-1856) Beatty; their grandchildren, son-in-law, John Charlton Beatty; Mr. Foley's sister, Mrs. Arthur (Anastasia Foley) Crozier, and family friends, the Pughs.

During the hellacious ordeal of witnessing the deaths of his grandchildren, his daughter and son-in-law, and his sister, and his own helplessness to combat the storm, the anguished Mr. Foley lost all will to live. Marcelite, a devout Catholic, found her faith strengthened by her struggles to save the life of her beloved husband. Little did the Foleys suspect that the waves would carry them more than forty miles into the inhospitable mainland marsh. Marcelite tied one of her scant undergarments to the highest branch of a tree she could reach, then she prayed for salvation.

Marcelite never gave up hope during the ten days the couple was tormented by mosquitoes, hunger and thirst. "What more is God supposed to do?" she asked her husband. "He answered our prayers and saved us, didn't he?" The Foleys were finally discovered by fishermen from Bayou de Large on August 21, 1856. Family legend has it that A.M. embraced his wife's faith, later donating land for several schools and a church. -courtesy of Robert M. Pugh, Esq.

**Above center: Althea Labauve Mille (1836-1856)**

Colored enhanced image from original portrait reproduced in the Times-Picayune, June 10, 1923.) The 20-year-old Althea, her husband, Homer (1833-1856, brother of Emma), and their baby, all of Iberville Parish, were killed in the hurricane.

The widow Anna Maria Turner Dickenson (1814-1886) was staying with Governor Herbert, in what was considered the sturdiest house on the island. The widow Dickenson's 10-year-old son, Charles H. Dickenson (1846-1898) watched anxiously from the leeward side of the house as the waters obliterated Herbert's garden. Without warning, a door flew open, literally sucking the stunned boy beneath an avalanche of water. Fortunately young Charles became lodged against the governor's gate post. His mother and her sister, Mrs. Leftwich, sprang after the child, but they were helpless in the waves as they hung on to the gate themselves. Each of the ladies had all of their clothing shredded by the wind and carried off by the

**right: Michael Schlatre (ca. 1817-1900).** Michael Schlatre and his son, Paulus, were painted in this portrait after the 1856 hurricane.

(Color-enhanced image from original portrait reproduced in the Baton Rouge State Times, August 9, 1961.)

In 1857, the year after the storm, Schlatre married Mary Jane Kleinpeter, of a prominent Louisiana-German family from Cotes des Allemands. His fractured leg, untreated after the storm, caused him to limp for the rest of his life. On January 18, 1859, in thanksgiving for

their rescue from Isle Derniere, Michael Hebert and his neighbor, Michael Schlatre, Jr., donated land and the buildings to the Sisters of the Holy Cross for St. Basil's Academy in Plaquemine, Louisiana. In exchange, the congregation agreed to say "one mass weekly, forever" for the families of the two men who perished in the storm.

Michael Schlatre fathered seven more children (in addition to the seven lost in the hurricane). On September 4, 1900, the month and year of a deadly hurricane hit Galveston, Texas, Schlatre died peacefully in his sleep. He is buried in Plaquemine.

**left: The Reverend Robert**

**Samuel McAllister (1830-1892).** After the hurricane, Reverend McAllister continued to serve the Louisiana Presbytery in churches in Thibodaux and Shreveport until 1861. In 1862 he made a missionary tour of the South on which he traveled more than 2000 miles in a buggy. In 1870, while serving as the minister of the church in Liberty, Mississippi he married Catherine J. Smiley, daughter of the deacon of the Bethany Church. The couple had six daughters and one son. -courtesy of McAllister descendants, Mr. and Mrs. R. Sam McAllister

swirling, turgid water. About all they could do was prevent the boy's head from sinking. Then Tom Shallowhorne, Governor Herbert's elderly slave, came to their rescue. With a long rope tied around his waist, he struggled to drag the women and the boy back to safety. Shallowhorne finally conducted them to a portion of the house lodged against the cistern. There Shallowhorne, "a soul truly noble, flung a shutter about their heads to shield them from falling timbers and flying debris," reported the *Franklin Journal*. And thus they spent the night with another of the Herbert guests, Mr. Hart, holding the youngest Dickenson child in the air as the waves broke above their heads and the force of the rain literally took their breath away.

Then came the heart-stopping calm as the tempest gathered strength for its final rampage. As the hurricane's eye traversed the island, Tom Ellis accessed the plight of those on board the *Star*. Where the hotel once stood, he was horrified to discover that waves were now breaking across the land. Not one house or building could be seen in any direction. Fifty yards off the starboard, 30 to 40 badly injured people huddled together. After much struggle, Ellis and the mates were able to lift each of these people down into the hull. After 20 minutes, the calm was shattered as the storm attacked the island with renewed vengeance from the southwest.

Those still clinging to life on Isle Derniere would have heard the heart-stopping roar of the sky-blocking tidal wave before it buried them. It was about four o'clock when the wind suddenly shifted. (Meteorologists of today explain that in a 24 hour period an average Category 4-5 hurricane generates enough energy to supply power to the entire U.S. for three months.) Ellis watched in horror as horse and buggies filled with anguished occupants were hurled into the surging waves. Then the Gulf waves, each weighing thousands of tons, began to relentlessly batter the drowning island throughout the endless night.

To some, encountering the uncompromising wrath of Nature from this vulnerable sliver of the universe would challenge their faith in a higher

power, others found it renewed theirs. But the fact that they had been struck by the fist of God escaped no one. "If only we had been martyrs," McAllister prayed "at least we could have been conscious of dying for adherence to some great principle. But alas, not one of us was at a post of duty to mankind. Not a soul on this island had any business here."

As Col. W.W. Pugh and his wife and children were flushed from their shelter behind what remained of the Muggah Hotel dining room, they were able to grab the remains of a large burst cistern. "A ferocious gust of wind was followed by a tremendous cry of agony," wrote Pugh.

"Then darkness and lashing of winds. To the risk of being washed off was added the danger of immediate death from planks hurled through the air in all directions. I witnessed one of the Muggah brothers, who owned the hotel, meet his end in this manner."

Terrified guests were carried off by the ruthless wind as if they were feathers, only to be hurled into the sea to sink like anvils. Each solitary soul (who were not aboard the *Star*) was gasping and rolling in the indomitable Gulf as they were drawn toward the inevitable ease of death. Of those who defied the odds, the hero Henry Turero, the "puny" sixteen year-old son of Francis Truero, is often mentioned for saving his half-sister, Henriette Boudreaux. Though the boy had been seriously wounded by a stingray, three times Henriette was separated from his arms, and each time the young man dove after her. The motherly dedication of Mrs. Toffier of Bayou Goula in Iberville Parish

was also remarkable. As she, her mother and brother hung on to a piece of timber adrift in the storm, her tiny baby began to vomit blood. Even though the baby became unconscious, and assumed dead, the weak and injured Mrs. Toffier continued to shield her lifeless infant from the waves. Her mother and brother implored her to let go of the baby so that she wouldn't lose her grip on the floating debris. She refused, continuing to expel milk from her breast into the comatose baby's mouth all night. Amazingly, both mother and baby survived.

"My wife, Josephine, lifted Thomas, our three-year-old son, over her head," Col. Pugh wrote. "The nurse held up Loula, our baby daughter. Finding the nurse frantic with fear, Josephine took Loula in her arms, charging the nurse to get a firm grip on Thomas's little hand. We were startled to hear a childish voice ring out over the violent crack of thunder and lightning and the roar of the wind. 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...' It was the last thing we heard before an avalanche of water overtook us. You see, it was the only prayer the little lad knew. Just then a terrific wave rushed over us bearing Loula from Josephine's arms, while Thomas and his nurse vanished into the sea."

At the same time, Thomas Mille's home began to break apart. "We were gathered in one room, all our family and servants except my father's servant, Richard." Emma Mille,

his sheltered eighteen-year-old daughter on her first trip to the resort, still recalled more than fifty years after the storm: "Then there came a tremendous crash like a cannon blast. I found myself borne into midair. A portion of the house fell on my head ... I grabbed onto the timber that had struck me. Althea [her sister-in-law], holding her sick baby, swept by me. She was shouting, 'don't crush my baby,' as they were pulled under the waves, never to be seen again by me in this lifetime."



*Generations after the hurricane, James Muggah's granddaughter (and the author's grandmother), Cecil Muggah Gwyther (bottom row, holding the camera) traveled to Niagra Falls, New York, on July 4, 1906 with her college classmates from Silliman College. Friends included Helen, Maggie and Katelle (Tully) McAllister, daughters of Rev. R.S. McAllister. It was the McAllister girls who convinced Cecil to move to "high ground" in Mississippi after graduation.*

*-courtesy of Bethany Ewald Bultman*

Emma Mille was haunted for the rest of her life by the cataclysm she faced. "After our house gave away, there was no human voice. I drifted in that black swell all night clinging to the very piece of the house that had fallen on my head. Logs struck against me with the force of battering rams. It was then I heard Althea call, 'Mamma. Look at Mamma.' And there was my mother standing on wreckage. Someone was throwing her a rope. This was my imagination, of course. A vision. For I was paralyzed and totally alone in the gulf. You may think it strange, but I felt no fear. It never occurred to me that any of us could be killed. It was then I fell asleep with my face and chest on that piece of timber," Emma would later tell reporters.

As the *Raz de maree* struck, the young preacher McAllister found himself stranded with eleven other trembling guests in a boarding house more than a mile from the Muggah Hotel. "What was to be done?" McAllister lamented. "This is an appalling question when the mind has almost reached the conclusion nothing can be done. Our group in the boarding house assembled in the hall at a point equidistant from its outlets. Then, with a thunderous bang, our roof was carried aloft. The law of gravity itself was super-

eded. Everything in motion went horizontal. Roofless houses began first to slide, then were cast adrift. Bending, cowering we gazed into each other's tormented faces. Such a picture this planet has

Working with vicious precession the *Raz de maree*, a 30 foot tidal wave, ripped apart every structure in its path. Within seconds, 70 foot trees bowed their heads to earth. An entire maritime forest was upturned and the resort was lost beneath the swollen, angry tumult.

rarely presented since the days of Noah." The boarding house residents crawled over a man-made levee to where a children's whirligig stood. They could see even through the high sea and winds that its shaft was firmly planted in the earth. A whirligig resembles a cross between an up-ended windmill and monkey bars.)

"To anyone looking from afar, we must have appeared to be a dozen overgrown monkeys balanced on a submerged pole," McAllister wrote. Dear friends, it was to be a prolonged battle for life."

The Schlatre family were far from the *Star* and the whirligig, contemplating the inevitability of a watery grave. As Michael Schlatre had become badly injured by flying debris, Lodoiska and Thomas Mille said an Act of Contrition. "From my injuries I accepted that I would be the first to die," Schlatre conceded. "Were you ever this near death, dearest reader? My children [seven] flocked around their father, some crying, some quiet, my wife facing the Gulf, the negro women crying, old Hannah with the baby sitting close to me."

Schlatre found himself watching helplessly as the entire roof of his house crushed Lodoiska. "My little girl [most probably the three-year-old Francis Harriet] gave a scream and jumped and caught me around the neck and held fast, as if to choke the life out of me," Schlatre recalled. "Pell mell we rolled over and over, drinking the hated fluid amidst all sorts of floating timbers with the dear child still fastened to me when I thought (for reader I could think) that I must finally be near gone. As death overtook me, I put my hands to those of the dear one to break her hold. Being relieved I arose to the surface. God only knows what became of the child." Schlatre came up for air only to witness Old Hannah and the little faces of

three of his four sons sinking forever. Schlatre lost his wife, seven children, and six slaves.

After the *raz de maree* rolled over the island, another Iberville Parish resident, Henrietta Palmire Lauve Cropper, the 46-year old widowed mother of three, ordered her children (Euphemie Cecilia, Ernest Thomas and Charles) and her slaves to "grasp hands for dear life." They clung to their house until it blew asunder, then they grabbed remnants of the old kitchen until it too broke apart. Just as Mrs. Cropper was about to give up all hope, a skiff blew their way. Mrs. Cropper floated her group to a place



Harper's Weekly, *Isle Derniere Hurricane*, 1856. -courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection

she reasoned to be the shallowest water. While Henrietta was one of the wealthiest ladies in Louisiana, she was no stranger to hardship. Just the year before her husband, Norbert Cropper, had committed suicide on his way home from Isle Derniere. Now she was in the battle of her life. That's when she instructed everyone to remove their shoes and to dig their toes deep into the sand. As the waves broke above their heads, Henrietta Cropper reminded them to keep hold of one another, to face the waves, and all bow

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Oyster label courtesy of Muggah descendants Mr. and Mrs. Karl Raymond Ewald, Jr.

## Today's Enfeebled Isles Dernieres

It is hard to fathom that the trash-strewn beaches of today's desolate Isles Dernieres must function as Nature's Star Wars' Defense System for Louisiana's coast. This flimsy chain of islands protects America's most valuable wetland eco-system and its lucrative petrochemical, sugar and seafood industries (the spawning waters of 40 percent of the nation's fisheries are in Louisiana waters) against the erosive energy of Nature's wrath. Hurricane damage to the Louisiana coast is now of national concern due to the fact that more than 25 percent of domestic and imported oil in the United States flows through our vulnerable wetlands. These mere shards of sand also safeguard "the fertile crescent of American culture" — the cradle of jazz, of Cajun and zydeco music, and Creole and Cajun cuisines — from obliteration by the Gulf of Mexico.

"Today, the residents of coastal Louisiana are actually as vulnerable as the Isle Derniere vacationers were in 1856," explains Dr. Shea Penland, noted Braunstein Professor of Geology at the University of New Orleans, director of the Pontchartrain Institute, and the salty guru of Louisiana's Gulf-coastal geology. "Yet the Isles Dernieres' barrier island system is the vital first line of defense in storms for Louisiana's coastline, especially given the projected rate of sea level rise due to global climate changes." At the same time, scientists warn that by the year 2100, not only could the Isles Dernieres be swallowed by the Gulf of Mexico, but vulnerable areas of Lafourche and Terrebonne Parish, such as Grand Isle, Cocodrie, and Montegut may be submerged. Experts

Even with the buffer of Louisiana's barrier islands, Louisiana's coastline is North America's Achilles' heel, two-stepping off the edge of the continent into the Gulf of Mexico:

- We now realize that the Louisiana coastline is not so much a place, as a process. Between 1930-1990, the Mississippi River Delta (the largest and most economically profitable in the nation) lost more than 1,000 square miles (one million acres) of land, the equivalent of the land-mass of New Jersey.

- Louisiana's coastline evaporates more with each passing hour. The ephemeral geological framework of the Isles Dernieres and the abandoned deltas of the Mississippi River plain experience the highest rate of erosion in the United States. Currently, 40 percent of all coastal wetlands in the United States are located in Louisiana, and 80 percent of all wetland loss in our nation occurs along our coast. Put another way, its the same as having a dozen football fields every day, 365 days a year, gobbled by the Gulf of Mexico.

fear that New Orleans could be the next area washed away if ongoing land loss is not arrested by aggressive barrier island and wetland restoration.

Man's footprints are all over this cataclysmic coastal erosion crisis. It was in Louisiana's isolated Gulf coastal parishes, forged from the youngest land in North America, where many American fortunes were made by those willing to risk their lives to tame our wetlands. Since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States has exploited coastal Louisiana's resources to enhance the country's economy. The same 19th-century sugar barons who would die in the tragic 1856 hurricane had inadvertently set the egregious erosion process in motion by draining and leveeing wetlands to create their agricultural dynasties. The post Civil War carpetbagging timber aristocracy further compromised our state's evanescent coastal parishes by clear-cutting ancient cypress forests. After World War I, powerful oil companies greatly accelerated barrier island and wetland destruction in the process of satisfying American's lust for black gold. By dredging more than 6,000 zigzagging miles of canals to access drilling locations, lay pipelines and maintain wellheads for more than 30,000 coastal oil and gas wells in Louisiana, oil companies drastically altered the fragile fabric of the barrier islands and natural marsh hydrology. The direct result has been the loss of more than 240,000 acres of Louisiana's wetlands (the equivalent of 380 square miles.)

The Isles Dernieres were acquired between 1900-1915 by one of a myriad land companies owned by Edward Wisner, the slightly misguided visionary of marshland reclamation. On the other hand, upon Wisner's death in 1915, his bequests to the city of New Orleans and Charity Hospital made him one of the greatest philanthropists in the state of Louisiana. (The Wisner Trust has produced more than \$30 million for Louisiana since 1991, and conserves more than 35,000 acres of Louisiana's most precious wetlands.) Unfortunately, the Isles Dernieres do not benefit from

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left: After the 1856 hurricane, Isle Derniere was permanently chopped into a necklace of skinny little islands known as the Isles Dernieres). Devastating erosion has further taken its toll in subsequent years.

in unison so that they would not be washed out to sea as the fierce waves broke over them. Between each wave they gasped another breath to hold. And thus they endured the hours and hours under attack from blowing timber, felled trees, torrents of rain, lightning and the seething ocean.

### Monday, August 11, 1856

The day dawned on Isle Derniere with a pale, late summer pink opalescence, growing steamier as beblooded survivors sought in vain for points of reference. Of the 100 houses on the island, only a shred of Mr. Bethel's remained to indicate they had ever existed. There was no road, no shade and not even a shadow, only prurient silence broken by the sound of festering insects on the bodies of dead and injured alike. Ladies who just hours before had taken pains with the volume of their calculated curls now appeared as if they'd escaped from Hell while the devil's back was turned. There was one cow, a horse, a few sheep, and less than two hundred vanquished people. Whether they had been year-round island residents, the inhabitants of humble fishing camps, resort staff, musicians, slaves or masters on Saturday night, now they struggled together. A few sailing boats and the dank hull of the *Star*, wedged fast and deep in the earth, stood in place of the Muggah Hotel. The famished survivors crept into "this duplicate of Jeremiah's dungeon," jammed with an immense quantity of mud, the dripping of commercial product and other filth, the accumulation of many years. Within minutes they found their tender, exposed flesh becoming a banquet for the mosquitoes and flies.

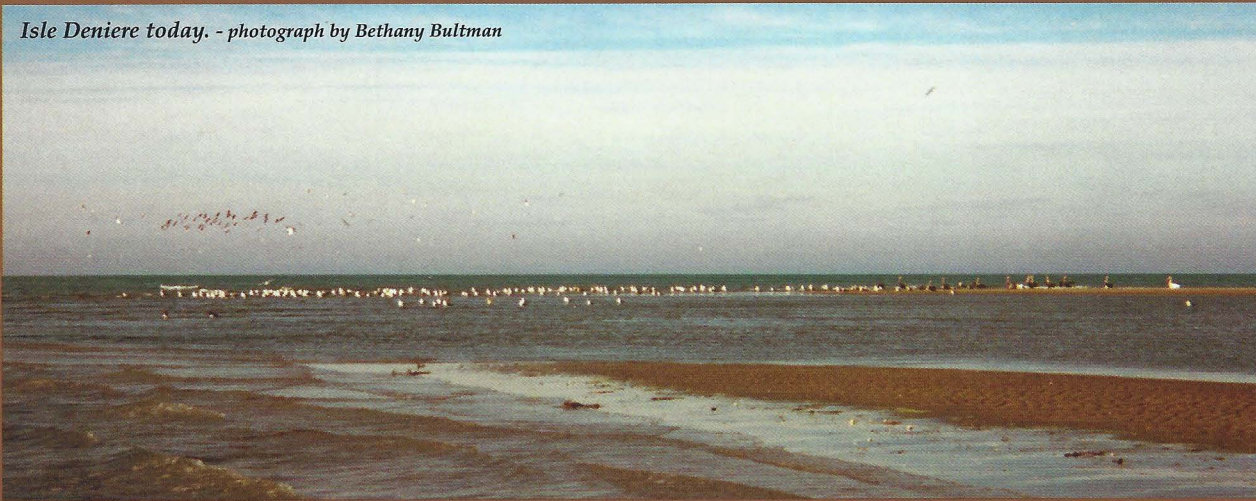
Annie Read reported to *The Delta* in August 1856 that

And more affecting still, there was the form of a sweet babe even yet embraced by the stiff and bloodless arms of a mother."

It was Thomas Ellis who chanced upon the upturned cistern where Col. W.W. and Josephine Nicholls Pugh, her maiden sister, Martha Craufourd (Matty) Nicholls, and four Pugh children were despondent over the fate of Thomas, whom they had not seen since the day before. Pugh's hair and beard were matted with blood and salt water. In his arms he cradled the body of his 17-month-old daughter, Louisa Drake, affectionately called Loula.

The Pughs were overjoyed to find one of Dr. Beattie's slaves on the *Star* when they arrived. The Pughs had been staying at the hotel with Dr. John Carlton Beattie (1808-1856, Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court), his wife, Mary Foley Beattie, and their two children from Bayou Lafourche. As the Muggah Hotel had begun to shutter in the storm, Beattie's coachman held on to one of his master's children. The slave implored the Beatties to follow him to higher ground. When Beattie refused, the determined servant pleaded to be allowed to take at least one child to safety. Beattie was adamant, he ordered the slave to put his child down. That's when the slave fled the hotel. While the Beattie family all perished, the slave was able to save a child. During his escape he managed to pluck the Pugh's three-year-old son, Thomas, [Dr. Thomas Bryan Pugh, 1853-1952] from the waves. "I have often wished to thank that man, for without his act of heroism I wouldn't be here" mused one of Thomas's descendants. "But no one mentioned his name." All that W.W. Pugh reveals is that he gave the slave a gold watch which he later proudly exhibit-

Isle Deniere today. - photograph by Bethany Bultman



"terror, grief and exposure had done the work of years; men of robust health and youthful appearance looked old and inundated; lovely, fascinating women were almost entirely bereft of youth and beauty; locks that rivaled the raven's wings were frosted with the snow of years; children forgot their joyous prattle, and put on the seriousness of mature age."

As the storm waned, Reverend R. S. McAllister planned to seek shelter at the Muggah Hotel. His worst fears were realized when they saw "the jewelled and lily hand of a woman protruding from the sand." He soon noticed "the regular features of a beautiful girl, who had, no doubt, but a few hours before, blushed at the praise of her loveliness.

ed when he served as a Reconstruction Era politician.

The young Creole maiden, Emma Mille, awoke on the sand, naked and badly injured, and surrounded by the maelstrom of the dying and the dead entangled in heaps of debris. When some "ragged negroes" tried to help her, modesty got the better of safety and the dazed Emma motioned them away. Fortunately these slaves, the ones Emma wouldn't let near her, recognized her as Thomas Mille's daughter. They found Richard, her father's manservant, in the hull of the *Star*. Richard was hurt and weak, but he carried Emma back to the boat so that she could receive medical attention. Dr. Alfred du Perier sewed up the big gash in Emma Mille's head and another on her left side. It

was then that Emma learned the worst — her brother, Homer (1833-1856), his wife, Althee Labauve (1836-1856), and their baby were dead. Their guest from New Orleans, Mrs. Roumage and her maid, and both of her beloved parents were also lost.

For the survivors there was more suffering in store, however. The afterclaps continued to rock the island, rain slacked only at intervals, and the sea lashed about so angrily that no vessel could come to their aid for days. It was then that pirates swarmed over the island to pick through the carnage. A letter from Bayou Boeuf printed in *The Picayune* on August 21, 1856 describes the looting: "Last Island has been infested by a band of wreckers who have overlooked no nook or corner of the island in their search for plunder. No corpse is found, but you see the trace of knife about the pockets of victims, and a total absence of all jewelry or other valuables ... a lady reports that while she was on the wreck of the *Star*, the pirates came around the island in their little boats from retreats among the bayous. They were seen to drag the corpses from the water, rob them, tearing studs from the shirt bosoms of men and ripping the earrings from the ears of ladies. One was actually seen to push the head of a person repeatedly down into the water, as if trying to take from him the speck of life remaining, previous to robbing him. When some of the rascals attempted to get on board the wreck [of the *Star*] where we were hiding, the Captain [Smith] prevented them."

**Tuesday, August 12, 1856**  
 By Tuesday, those on Isle Derniere had figured out that no one on the mainland knew of their plight. Resort guest John Davis, from New Orleans, secured shelter for his wife in the wreck of the *Star* before braving the churning seas in his small sailboat to find help. Davis arrived at the Brashear City Hotel before dawn reporting that Isle Derniere had been "swept away by a storm." Expresses were immediately dispatched in all directions to announce the calamity and the crippled condition of the survivors.

The victims were of aristocratic families whose blood thickened at the mere hint of dishonor. By August 19,

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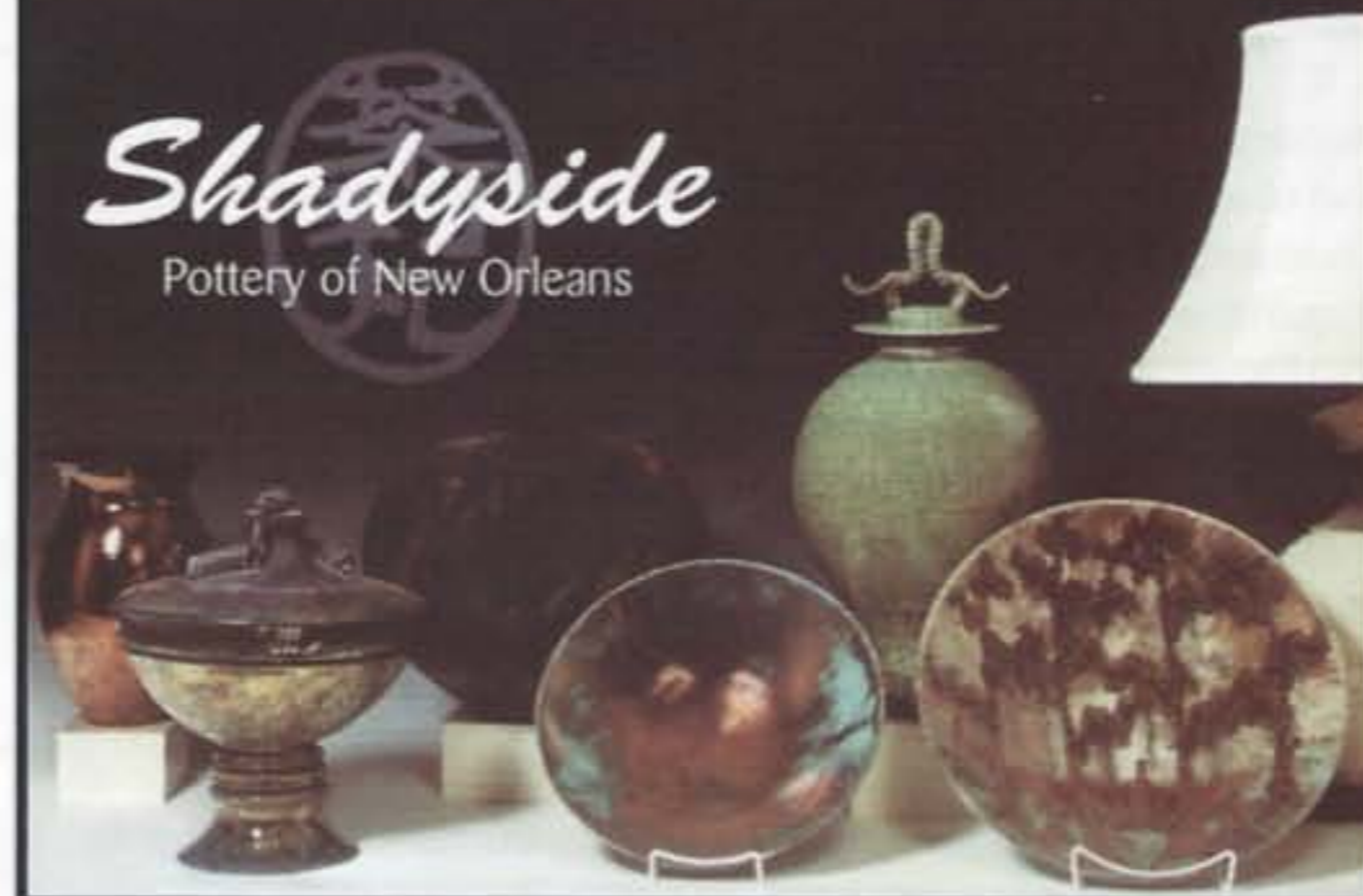
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straightening their hair, which quite was fashionable at the time these songs were recorded. (There is a fascinating, detailed discussion of hair processing in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.) By the late '60s this hair-do was scorned as a pitiful, self-denigrating attempt to imitate white people, and the "Afro" or "natural" hair-style emerged as a potent symbol of cultural, racial, and political pride.

Two other reissues explore a similar synthesis of regional and mainstream music. *Virginia Roots: The 1929 Richmond Sessions* (Outhouse) is a lively and diverse compilation of Anglo-American and African-American folk and folk-rooted styles, originally commissioned as commercial recordings. The most striking performances are by several black vocal quartets. Eastern Virginia, especially the Norfolk area, was a hotbed for male quartets that made dramatic use of contrasting lead voices; during the 1930s, Norfolk's Golden Gate Quartet rose to national prominence. (In a noteworthy Louisiana connection, this group also accompanied Leadbelly on several recordings.) The quartet style is typically associated with gospel music, although it profoundly influenced secular R&B, after World War II. But *Virginia Roots* reveals that this style was equally effective on low-down blues, as heard on "What's The Matter Now?" by the Monarch Jazz/Jubilee Quartet of Norfolk.

Among many other great performances, *Virginia Roots* also features some exquisite harmonica work by Blues Birdhead, and fine country fiddling by The Salem Highballers. The two-CD set is extensively annotated, and illustrated with historic photos and documents. Producer Ron T. Curry has assembled an informative and enjoyable labor of love that comes highly recommended.

Guitarist and singer Dave Van Ronk, who died in 2002, was a mainstay of the '60s folk revival. Van Ronk represented a rowdy, ebullient side of this movement — as opposed to the more ethereal approach of artists such as Joan Baez — and his spirited renditions of blues classics helped many aging blues originators enjoy resurgent careers on the festival circuit. *Two Sides of Dave Van Ronk* (Fantasy) emphasizes his blues/jazz repertoire, with accompaniment by a New Orleans jazz band on six songs. Fifteen other cuts with guitar accompaniment showcase Van Ronk's raspy, soulful and infinitely expressively singing. He will be sorely missed.

—Ben Sandmel is a New Orleans-based freelance writer and folklorist. He is writing a book about New Orleans R&B legend Ernie K-Doe.

## Isle Derniere *(continued from page 91)*

eight of the looters had been returned to Isle Derniere to stand trial on board the *Texas*. The ship's log indicates the day was spent with the jury of 12 prominent St. Mary Parish men trying the Spaniards, Portuguese and Swiss pirates. During the proceedings information was elicited from one of the culprits which led to the recovery of the body of Mrs. Homer Mille [Emma's sister-in-law, Althea], whose body they had robbed. Two pirates were found guilty and executed on the extreme west end of the island, half an hour before sunrise on August 20, 1856.

As the other survivors on the island were returning home, Michael Schlatre, with his leg badly broken and his belly filled with salt water, and his cousin, Thomas Mille, (Emma's father), were still clinging to a window sill, 12 feet long by 8 feet wide, and being pinched by land crabs, four miles up in the desolate mainland marsh. Schlatre recounts their ongoing torment: "A burning thirst began to devour us. In our agony we longed for a piece of ice they were using so prodigally in Plaquemine. It rained constantly. It soon occurred to me that we could drink the rain water. I put my tongue out to let the drops fall on its parched surface. Thomas Mille was now crying in agony for water. I ripped my fine Sunday shirt to catch water. I wrung it and twisted it, sucked it many times. Heavens how good that water tasted!"

The intermittent rain, thunder and lightning did not cease until Thursday morning, August 14. It wasn't until August 15, five days after the storm, that Michael Schlatre finally dragged his makeshift raft back to the shore where he glimpsed a white speck on the water. With racing heart he gathered up all rags in sight to use to make a signal flag. He and Thomas Mille were finally rescued by fishermen. Emma's father, Thomas Mille, died a few days later at the home of the owner of the schooner who saved them.

Dr. Du Perrier, a 32-year old widower with a seven-year-old daughter, brought his bereaved patient, Emma Mille, back to his mother's home in New Iberia to recuperate. The couple would marry scarcely four months after the storm, on December 8, 1856. Emma and Alfred lived joyously together in his home in New Iberia until Alfred's death on March 23, 1904. Emma and Alfred had five children. At her death at the age of 98, on April 13, 1936, she was remembered for her gentle heart and her skill as a spirited ragtime pianist.

It was through the eloquent words of some of the survivors that their kinsmen experienced the physics of powerlessness, occurring only when truth parts company with myth. Louisianians learned that a hurricane could breach the gauzy assurance of wealth, that Nature was unimpressed by the gentry's "superior" negotiating skills, and that their indulgent universe could be submerged. Yet, on October 1, 1893, less than fifty years after the Isle Derniere disaster, more than 1,600 people would die when another deadly hurricane ravaged Cheniere Caminada, a prosperous fishing and agricultural community on a peninsula near Grand Isle. Ironically, some of its victims had survived the 1856 hurricane. It makes you wonder doesn't it, what more Nature can do to warn us away from coastal settlements? Today more than half of Louisiana's population lives more than one foot below sea level, which is about the length of your average loaf of bread. Every so often, when I gaze up at the calm faces in the portrait of my ancestors, James and Charley Muggah, I hear them whisper to me, "We have all the time in the world, but you don't." **LCV**

It was through the eloquent words of some of the survivors that their kinsmen experienced the physics of powerlessness, occurring only when truth parts company with myth.

*Bethany Bultman is an award-winning ethno-cultural documentarian, journalist and the author of five books, including The Compass Guide to New Orleans (Random House) and Redneck Heaven (Bantam/Doubleday/Dell).*

Harris, and clarify the origin of "lawn jockeys" and how they indirectly pay homage to early African-American horsemen.

Natchez, the kind of city that has "a deeper history than others," according to the authors, is described in all of its prosperity, lawlessness, and early 19th-century glamour. It was there that Aaron Burr was first arrested for treason, and the authors do justice to the byzantine tale of his route to Natchez.

They follow up with the story of the steamboat *New Orleans*. On its historic voyage from Pittsburgh in 1811, it survived the catastrophic New Madrid Fault Earthquake and its aftermath, including the new snags and sandbars "scattered in bewildering new patterns." The *New Orleans'* miraculous appearance in Natchez marked the era of steamboat transportation, and Natchez became a commercial hub for the lower Mississippi.

The authors bring to life "Under-The-Hill Natchez," the once-tawdry, now touristy enclave of former roughneck river-front saloons. They create a combination of travelogue and history that many readers will find engaging. This book doesn't purport to be a scholarly work, and their blend of first-person reportage and historical highlights echoes the kind of writing that makes *National Geographic* magazine so readable.

Sam Abell's photographs are as beautiful and well-chosen as one would expect

from *National Geographic*, although few photographs directly document the authors' own travels on the Mississippi. Of special note are gorgeous aerial photographs of the mouth of the river that demonstrate the tenuous link between earth and water. The photographic research seems to have been extensive, but a few choices are odd, especially a full-page illustration from a 1929 edition of Longfellow's *Evangeline* with stiffly-posed Acadian lovers. And for some reason, the artistic work of John James Audubon is represented by just one small rendering of woodpeckers. Additionally, many of the photographs and illustrations appear pages after their subjects are mentioned in the text.

Quibbling aside, the photographs, illustrations and maps demonstrate the same sweeping vision of the Mississippi as the text. Most powerful are the self-contained photographic essays that follow each chapter. For example, the flooding river is portrayed in a series of photographs from 1927 to 2001, showing water rising over farmland, railroads, graveyards, and even the Davenport, Iowa baseball park — each photograph a stirring reminder of the power that lurks so close to river towns.

The superb collection of maps throughout the book documents such diverse topics as the entire Drainage Basin of the Mississippi and the movements of renegade slaves. A dreamily-beautiful 19th cen-

tury panorama of the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio takes in territory from Little Rock to Memphis and beyond.

Although the text doesn't identify who wrote particular sections, each writer's voice is distinct. Ambrose's writing style is dense and fast-paced, more concerned with rapid-fire facts and pithy stories than lyrical prose. His rush of anecdotes does not always follow logically; his enthusiasm bubbles from one instance to the next. Readers may find this jarring, but the rich accumulation of details does make for an interesting, if slightly dizzying read. Ambrose's "sprint" contrasts with Brinkley's "guided tour." His sections are more carefully worded with smoother transitions, melding cultural overview, social trends, and historical facts. Unfortunately there are no clear divisions of the text beyond the chapters themselves.

*The Mississippi and the Making of A Nation* is an antidote to the quaintness that often goes along with stereotypical notions of "lazy river life." Concrete levees, cruise ships, modern steel paddlewheelers, and 30-second views of the river as one crosses it on a giant bridge distance one from the raw power of the muddy torrent. Ambrose and Brinkley reacquaint us with both the Mississippi's romance and its peril.

—Thomas Uskali is a freelance writer who resides in New Orleans.

## Enfeebled Isles (continued from page 89)

the Wisner legacy. Through curious transactions between 1917-1925, orchestrated by former associates and advisors to Edward Wisner, these barrier islands ended up in the hands of the Border Research Corporation in Maryland. By 1927 Border Research was known as The Louisiana Land and Exploration Company (LL&E), our state's first, largest and most powerful independent energy company. Today, due to a corporate merger in 1997, Louisiana's Isles Dernieres are owned by the Houston-based Burlington Resources Inc. (BRI), the nation's third largest holder of domestic oil and gas reserves (after Exxon and Amoco).

The lush solitude of coastal Louisiana had lived on borrowed time until restoration efforts began in 1990. Then Coastal Wetland Protection and Restoration Act of 1990 — nicknamed the Breaux Act, after its champion, Louisiana Senator John Breaux — created a federal trust fund of \$40-60 million a year for preserving Louisiana's coast and barrier islands. This gave Louisiana's scientists the horsepower they needed to craft solutions to save the coastal parishes.

On August 26, for the six hours between midnight and dawn, winds gusting up to 120 mph and waves near shore surging well in excess of 20 feet mangled these islands. By the time Andrew moved on shore, it had stripped 160 feet from the Isles Dernieres' beaches and devoured miles of Louisiana's coastline.

Ironically, Andrew proved to be the effective "lobbyist" coastal

geologists needed to insure that the Isles Dernieres weren't "gone with the wind" by the end of the 21st century. An innovative consortium of federal and state agencies, supported by local academic advisors like Dr. Penland, added sediment and vegetation to recreate beaches with 5 to 8-foot dunes built to infuse life into the tattered remnants of Louisiana's barrier islands. In 1998, Burlington Resources, Inc., leased the Isles Dernieres to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries as a wildlife management area. Twenty-four million dollars and thousands of man hours later, it became evident that there was a fighting chance that the Isles Dernieres' life expectancy had increased from obliteration by 2010 by two to three decades.

As Dr. Penland concludes, "The damage the barrier islands sustained during the two fall 2002 storms illustrate that we must mount a far more aggressive commitment to expand the restoration efforts of Louisiana's barrier islands. We also have to understand that we're going to have to repair these islands repeatedly. And most crucial, we have less than a year before the next hurricane season to re-fortify Louisiana's natural defenses."

While we grieve for lives lost in the 1856 hurricane as if the Isle Derniere resort were the Atlantis of the antebellum South, many Louisiana scientists and engineers heed the fall storms of 2002 as a harbingers of the dangers facing Louisiana's coastal parishes. "The question is not if we can afford to save the Isles Dernieres," argues Dr. Penland. "What we have to ask is if the United States can afford the consequences of not preserving them."

—Bethany Ewald Bultman