

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

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By Damon Veach

CANARY ISLANDERS: The Canary Islanders Heritage Society has set their 2011 monthly meetings for the second Saturday of each month. Their first meeting this year was held last Saturday at 11 a.m. at the Louisiana State Archives on Essen Lane in Baton Rouge.

After the annual report was given, their speaker for this meeting was introduced. It was Bobby Freyou, Public Lands Records Manager for the Louisiana State Land Office, Division of Administration. Freyou's discussion was on historical land title records and the general vicinity west of the Mississippi River near Donaldsonville in Ascension and Assumption parishes.

At their November meeting, new officers were elected, and these were Layne Lindsly (president), Alisa Janney (vice-president), Karen Lambert (secretary), Steve Estopinal (treasurer), and board members Rogers Serpas, Fr. Gerald Lefebvre, and Kathy Brumfield. Dues in the society remain at \$15.00 per person, and these can be mailed to the society at 6166 Breeze Point Dr., Gonzales, LA 70737. Outgoing officers were thanked for their work during 2010.

An effort will be made to see that all members are reminded of the monthly meetings, and it is the goal of the society to continue sharing information, knowledge, and customs of Canary Islands immigrants and their influence on Louisiana and American history.

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SEMINAR SCHEDULED: The Mississippi Genealogical Society will hold its annual Genealogical Seminar on Saturday, January 22, 2011 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Canton Multipurpose Building in Canton, Mississippi. The cost of the seminar is \$50.00 and includes a box lunch. Checks need to be made out to the society and mailed to MGS President Sharon Nettles, 26 Wimbledon Drive, Jackson, MS 39211. Her e-mail address is scnet16@aol.com.

This year's speaker is Lloyd deWitt Bockstruck, a National Genealogical Society Fellow since 1992 and a recipient of the Award of Merit from the NGS. He was the Librarian for the Dallas Public Library for 36 years. Some of the topics for the seminar include the Quakers, migrations in the Colonial Era, manuscript collections and periodicals, and migrations from Transappalachia to the West Bank of the Mississippi, 1763-1850. There will be time for question and answer sessions after each topic is presented.

Book vendors will be available with several states offering genealogical and historical books. The fee is \$12.50 and payable to the MGS and sent to Nettles. There is limited physical space for this seminar, so reservations are important. Walk-ins are welcome, but they may not get lunches or seats. For more information on the seminar, contact Mary Landin at landinmc@aol.com.

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MYSTERY BELL: Morris Raphael of New Iberia has come up with another interesting and important article about the Civil War. He is one of Louisiana's top historians, and he has plans to release his 14th book in April.

Raphael's latest article has sparked new interest in the bell said to be rescued from the Confederate Gunboat Diana. For him, this started back in the early 1940s when he met Pres Gates who told him great stories over coffee at Rousseau's Coffee Shop on Main Street in Franklin. Raphael was a member of the U.S. Corps of Engineers and stationed there at the time.

Gates told him about the Gunboat Diana, which was sunk in Bayou Teche along the Franklin waterfront during the Civil War. He had informed Raphael that St. Mary's Episcopal Church needed a bell so his grandfather, Alfred Gates, who was one of the church founders, had the bell taken from Diana and erected in the church's belfry.

Further research into the history of this bell casts a shadow on whether it is the original Diana bell or another one. The mystery is explained by Raphael in this fascinating look at a piece of history dating to the 1860s. It all appeared in the Daily Iberian in New Iberia, Louisiana recently, and you can go online and call up Mystery Bell on the internet to see how a date could possibly cast doubt on such a valued object of antiquity.

No one can tell a story like this as well as Morris Raphael. He has proven his worth in written accomplishments over the years, and this article is just one of the more recent ones that he has provided his fans who have admired his literary excellence over the years. The Mystery Bell is a fascinating story.

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MUSEUM GHOST: Ghostly tales and unexplained happenings are always fascinating subjects, and some even involve genealogical collections. As many of you know, I have donated my entire research collection of valuable reference books to the DeSoto Parish Historical Society in Mansfield, Louisiana. This group and site for the location of the Veach-Foshee Memorial Library Collection was suggested by the late historian and preservationist Bobby Deblieu of Natchitoches, a former mayor there and later an official with the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism.

I was pleased it worked out this way because I wanted to give something important back to my home parish, and the DeSoto Parish Historical Society was the right choice for my research library. (If you refer back to the third column during the first year of this column series, you will find the dedication of the historic site and the library which belongs to the society but on display in the Mansfield Female College Museum.)

In the meantime, I learned more about the Mansfield Female College Museum, where the library is located. When I first heard the story of a ghost there, I didn't think too much about it, but I've done research on haunted buildings before and have heard many stories about other places with "a presence" involved including my own historic home in the Spanish Town section of Baton Rouge. I even had an assignment to report on the ghost or presence in a historic structure in Washington, D.C., and, of course, Louisiana has many such unexplained happenings.

The first mention of the ghost in the library at the museum made me sit up and take notice. I had heard in one of their meetings I attended about this "occurrence." The museum director was alone in the building, admitting only those who ring the doorbell for entrance. The noise was heard, and she immediately went to see what had fallen to cause the noise. After searching out all the display rooms, she decided to enter the library which is adjacent to her office and closed off most of the time except when researchers are there.

When she entered the library, she found a complete shelf of books scattered on the floor. Nothing else was disturbed, but she had to re-shelf all of them by checking out the library codes and putting them back in order. That was the first reference of a presence I had heard about the museum, and it is said to maybe be the ghost of Peg Leg Pete. I started doing a little research on my own. In one of the Civil War rooms, there is a hook used to remove bodies from the battlefield and a wooden leg used as a prosthesis and displayed along with other hospital items.

Other people who have visited the museum have experienced strange happenings and feelings of extreme cold in the hospital exhibit room, and there are constant noises throughout the building. Being an old structure, most of these noises are accepted as a part of the structure itself, but it is a widely held belief of a presence here, especially by those who have witnessed lights coming on after being turned off, noises in vacant hallways, and doors closing unexpectedly. Then the library books became a topic of discussion, which prompted me to just ask why the story was "made up." At least that is what I thought when I first heard about the books. I was assured by the museum director that it was something that actually happened when she was alone in the building.

It was then that I needed to check out the books on that particular shelf. The red book in the very middle of the shelf caught my eye, and I pulled it out to find the title to be "Voices of the Past." One chapter seemed interesting, and when I went to

search for page 65, I found that I had opened it right to that page. I thought it was interesting, even a little strange and unexpected, but I returned the book to the shelf and decided to return to other discussions about the museum and my future donations.

Just for the record, Peg Leg Pete is said to be a Confederate soldier whose leg was amputated in the aftermath of the Battle of Mansfield. He died from this and is said to be in the building looking for his leg. Other ghostly tales are also told. On June 16, 1880, the president of the college was murdered, and the story of why this happened is in itself an interesting (and actual) occurrence. Student enrollment dropped after this scandal, and it was several years later before another president could build up the number of students attending the school. However, even during his term as president of the school, his time there was marred by the deaths of his daughter, son, son-in-law, and every member of the school's Board of Managers.

All buildings have stories about them. Whether you believe these or not is up to you. I just know that if my books end up on the floor again, I'll just have to sit down and have a nice chat with old Peg Leg Pete. In the meantime, the collection continues to grow and offers the public one of the largest research collections in the Ark-La-Tex.

The museum is located behind the Methodist Church at 101 Monroe Street, downtown Mansfield.

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FREE SERVICE: Correspondence to this column should be directed to Damon Veach, Cajuns, Creoles, Pirates and Planters, 709 Bungalow Lane, Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5337. The e-mail address is ancestorslaveach@cox.net. Queries and book reviews are printed as space permits, and you are encouraged to take advantage of this free service. Claitor's Publishing can serve as a distributor for self-published genealogy titles. Go to their homepage for details on how you can obtain this excellent service.