

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

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By Damon Veach



Photo by Damon Veach

A LIBRARY'S HISTORY: Sometimes the history of a library offers an insight into the early families of a region or city. Such is the case with the Milton H. Latter Memorial Library on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. Whenever I visit other cities, I try to see what is available for researchers. In many cases, they all have a historical section, or in the case of Latter Library, a Louisiana section. You never know what you might find in these smaller and sometimes private libraries.

First of all, Latter Library is not a library with a huge genealogical collection, but their Louisiana section has many books that I hadn't seen before. You could possibly be overlooking a glimpse into a family history by failing to check out these libraries away from the mainstream of research library classification. This is the case now with the Veach-Foshee Memorial Library Collection in Mansfield, located in DeSoto Parish. Until you see it, you have no idea the massive amount of material on display there. It is one of those collections that sometimes will just jolt you into a realm of research that you hadn't thought possible. On a smaller scale, the

Louisiana books on file at Latter Library may have been a part of someone's personal collection. Always check out every library source no matter how small it might be.

Latter Library is in a building that was once a stately mansion for a noted turn-of-the-century family. In this case, it was an elegant retreat for a silent screen star and a festive center for week-long parties. It now serves the uptown area as a branch of the New Orleans Public Library, which, by the way, has a really great genealogical section.

Even though you might think it was older than 1907, it is relatively new compared to the rest of the historic structures in Orleans Parish. It is set in an entire city square of ground and built by Mr. and Mrs. Mark Isaacs, who were the proprietors of a department store in the city. In addition to the Isaacs, their two daughters and a son, the mansion housed 12 servants, a cow, lots of chickens and dogs, and one of the first automobiles in the city.

The Isaacs commissioned architects Favrot and Livaudais to design the house, and George Glover was chosen to construct the mansion, which a Chicago-based firm decorated. Local craftsmen, Pettit and Boh, hand carved the Flemish-style woodwork of the mantels, and the mirrors and chandeliers were imported from Czechoslovakia. The mahogany for the paneling and staircase came from South America, and local artist, John Geiser, painted the Dutch murals and German mottoes in the Blue Room. The two front rooms have fresco ceilings signed "DeRudder, Paris 1858, imported from France. They originally graced a mansion in the French Quarter. The wall panels of cherry-red damask are from the original Louis XIV French Parlor. Such is the setting for Latter Library as visitors come in the front entrance.

After the death of Mark Isaacs in 1912, the home was purchased by Frank B. Williams. His son, Harry Williams, was a well-known aviator. He was vice-president of the Wedell-Williams Air Service Corporation which built many of the world's fastest planes. Harry married Marguerite Clark in 1918 at the height of her career. He brought his bride to New Orleans to live in the mansion his father bought. Clark gave up her film career, and a picture of her is on display on the stairway going to the second level. The Louisiana section is on this upper level of the home.

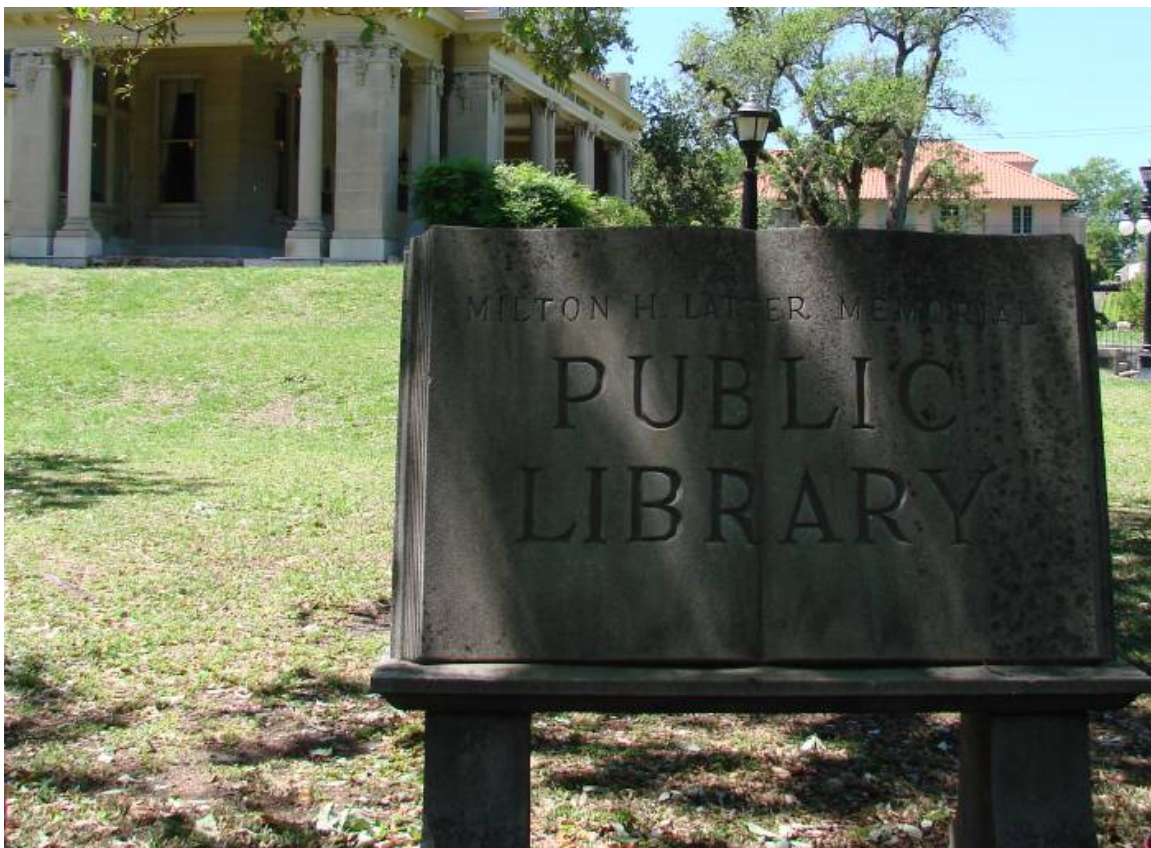
Harry Williams died in a plane crash in 1936, and three years later, Marguerite move to New York to live with her sister. She died in 1940 at the age of 53.

The mansion was then sold to Robert S. Eddy, a local horse racing man. He owned the Fairmont Track in St. Louis and others around the country. He was also the owner of a furniture store off Canal Street, and he filled the house with magnificent furnishings and Oriental rugs. His family included his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. His granddaughter was born in the house. The Eddy family

held week-long parties for their friends during the racing season, but after the death of Mrs Eddy, the family stayed in the house for a time. The health of their granddaughter prompted them to move to Florida.

Then the Latter family enters the picture. Mr. and Mrs. Harry Latter bought the home in 1948. Their desire was to turn the mansion into a public library as a memorial to their son, Milton, who lost his life at Okinawa during World War II. They purchased the house for \$100,000 and donated \$25,000 for alterations. The city of New Orleans spent an additional \$15,000 converting it into a unique facility at that time and especially in United States library history. The city formally dedicated the building on October 31, 1948 making the Latter's dream a reality.

By the 1980s, the library was showing signs of serious wear, and it was closed for restoration and renovation. The Latter family again came forth with assistance. Shirley Latter Kaufman gave the city a significant amount and the rest of the needed funds were raised through a bond issue. Architect Samuel Wilson renovated the mansion. Under Kaufman's direction, Allen House of Louisville, Kentucky decorated the renovated building. The library re-opened in July of 1985.



Today the building exists not only as an information and education center, but it stands as a reminder of an elegant and gracious past on St. Charles Avenue. Even now in 2011, the building is again showing its age. It is a loving and fitting

memorial to Milton H. Latter and the generosity of his family. Latter Library now is dependent on the generosity of others to take care of the needed work on the building. Inside the front door is a plexiglass box for those who wish to contribute in some small way to the preservation of this New Orleans treasure.

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IN MEMORY: Evelyn Martindale Thom was not only a preservationist but a good friend over the years to me and many others. She will be remembered for her years of work in various projects including preservation of the old Highland Cemetery, work with Magnolia Mound, and, of course, the old Florence Coffey House on Main Street where she and her late husband Dr. James Thom lived for twenty five years. I was saddened to hear of her death, and I recall so many pleasant hours dining in the patio garden or helping her with plants. One of the last correspondences I had from her was several years ago right before they sold the Main Street property. She was thinking of me while admiring all the red spider lilies that I planted for her when I lived next door. The blooms had made their appearance in the pots and flower bed around the magnolia tree. When they returned each year from their summers in North Carolina, she always remembered to bring me gifts for watching their property. It is with fond memories of other days, other times that I remember her now.

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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.