

# The Greenhouse

By: Morgan Thielen

The Greenhouse was originally built by Alexander Hebert and Clarisse Broussard around 1836. Alexander acquired 6,000 acres on the Mermentau River in the Lowry area, some of it from government patents and others from cash sales. It is one of the oldest houses west of the Atchafalaya, and quite a discovery. The house was most likely built by slaves that Alexander housed in quarters just south of the home site. The house can be considered an Acadian style cottage in design and construction. It was built with poteaux sur sole, or post on sill, and bousillage entre poteaux, which is a combination of mud, Spanish moss, and lime. It has two large fire places, and pillars of split cypress block, which is typical of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Acadian-French design. It is now being restored to its original form by the Lacassane Company.

Alexander and Clarisse had eight children. Their names were Clemence, Melanie, Aladin, Aspazie, Caramalite, Belzire, Desire, and Eloisa. Aladin and Aspazie were twins, one of whom drowned in the nearby river. His body was pulled out by a young slave named Bart who continued to work for Alexander after emancipation until his death after the turn of the century. Another one of the children, Desire, later became the patriarch of the family and increased the family's landholdings. Alexander died in 1865, and Clarisse lived until 1890. The family is listed in the census as "grassers" because they ran cattle across the entire Southwest Louisiana prairie. In 1891, Desire sold his Vacherie consisting of about 8,000 acres to Captain Lowry and his group of Hoosier investors. They attempted to farm rice on a grand scale, but severe flooding ruined all prospects of this being successful. After this failure, the property was then sold to the present day Lacassane Company.

Several other groups occupied the house before the Lacassane Company obtained it. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a group of Franciscan monks inhabited the house, and it supposedly served as a drop-off for bootleggers during the prohibition, and later a brothel. The Unkel family lived in the Greenhouse from 1914-1916 when they were decimated by typhoid and moved. Sibyl Unkel Davis, now a resident of Houston, was born in the house in 1914, and she is providing photographs of the house from this period. Today the Lacassane Company is working hard to restore the Greenhouse to as close to its original form as possible. Chad Thielen and other members of the Lacassane Company have been collecting the history of the Greenhouse through concentrated research.

There are other interesting facts surrounding the Greenhouse that help to understand its past. For example, Jean Lafitte supposedly sold slaves in the area to Jim Bowie who then transported them by land away from the area. Lafitte, under pursuit of federal authorities, deposited three hundred slaves on an island several miles south of the Greenhouse. They all died on the island and the bones are still visible today. Also, the area around the Greenhouse served as a crossing point for cattle that moved along the Lafitte Cut Off and were then sold in Brashear City, now Morgan City.

Desire would loan money to the drivers who promised to repay him on their return trip. One man cheated Desire, and did not repay him. Desire and Bart, the slave who pulled Desire's brother out of the river, rode to Texas and shot the man "stone cold dead." Desire was not prosecuted because he was a man of property and integrity. Another story is that of one of Desire's offspring. The man told his children and wife that he would be leaving for about two years. The day after his departure his horse returned to the Greenhouse without him. A search party was organized, and his body was found on the banks of the Lacassine Bayou with his throat cut ear to ear. The death was ruled a suicide.