Early stakeholders banked on the parish’s commercial growth

By Jessica Goff
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Billeaud Cos. has a big birthday coming up.
The Broussard-based company will celebrate its 100th anniversary Saturday with a party at headquarters on 106 St. Nazaire Road. About 300 people are expected to attend.
The company has evolved in the last century from controlling a sugar-farming empire to becoming a leader in the commercial real estate market in burgeoning south Lafayette Parish. The company also recently broke into the Lafayette office building market.

"Technically, we've been in business since 1872," Charles "Chuck" Billeaud, chairman of the company's board, said. "My great-grandfather started as a wheelwright and a blacksmith."

Pierre Jean Billeaud arrived with his family in Louisiana from France in 1840. He passed down his skills to his youngest son Martial, who started his own forge and blacksmithing shop where the Acadiana Hotel now stands at 1801 Pinhook Road, Charles Billeaud said.

It was land acquired from Martial Billeaud's marriage to Lucile St. Julien. A few stalks of sugar cane there started what would become a plantation of several thousand acres throughout Lafayette Parish.

The Wal-Mart, Home Depot and the Sugarcrest Shopping Center were once all sugar cane property owned by the Billeauds.

"We had a pond back across behind this shopping center right here, and we’d ride horses back there and have parties and all," Charles Billeaud said as he pointed to the businesses off U.S. 90. "Now it's totally different."

In 1914, Martial Billeaud sold the company to his children, which they incorporated into Billeaud Sugar Factory Inc. At one time, the Billeaud Sugar Factory Inc. had about 500 employees working at its sugar mill and 750 to 1,000 field laborers. A few of those workers survive. Billeaud said, and are invited along with their families to the centennial celebration. In 1943, there was a restructuring.
located," Billeaud said. "We began doing some planning and some feasibility studies as far back as the mid-1970s when it was obvious that this was going to transpire."

There are still traces of the Billeaud's sugar plantation. Its home office still operates in the 119-year-old-home where historic records and family memorabilia dating back to the early 20th century remain on display.

"We stayed a step ahead and tried to plan wisely and I think we have," Billeaud said. "We were very fortunate to get into the Lafayette office building market at a very good time when we were able to pick up some buildings at a good price. Lafayette has come back strong and we were able to reap the benefits."

James "Tex" Plumley has been the president of Billeaud Cos. for nearly 30 years. The company broke into the Lafayette office real estate market shortly after he was appointed.

"This company is very unique because it is family-owned, but it's progressive with their land operations and their acquisitioned property," Plumley said. "I think it's been a good mix."

Billeaud said company owners knew more than 30 years ago southern Lafayette Parish would become prime real estate. Now called Billeaud Cos., the business employs just nine employees but is one of south Louisiana's largest office and retail property-management firms. Billeaud owns or manages more than 800,000 square feet of retail and commercial real estate, much of which used to be family farmland.

"Broussard's well situated. It's between Lafayette and New Iberia and even Abbeville, so it's really very strategically located," Billeaud said. "We began doing some planning and some feasibility studies as far back as the mid-1970s when it was obvious that this was going to transpire."

Billeaud said company leaders felt sure they would one day reap benefits in Lafayette Parish, Billeaud said.

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within the company when stakeholders contributed their farmland to a new corporation titled Billeaud Planters Inc.

In 1974, the sugar cane industry took a blow when protective federal legislation ended. Several sugar cane mills reacted by downsizing or closing altogether — including the Billeaud Factory. In 1978, the company reaped its last cane harvest.

Charles Billeaud's father, Charles Henri Billeaud, was the last to run the mill. "He was the last general manager of the sugar mill before we transitioned into a real estate company," Billeaud said. "The stockholders voted in March 1979 to discontinue the mill operations, to sell our mill, which we did, and to piecemeal to other companies and other domestic sugar operations in the vicinity."

But in leaving the cane fields behind, the company set its sights on a new field — commercial real estate business, where company leaders felt sure they would one day reap benefits in Lafayette Parish, Billeaud said.

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The giant, painted mill gears make the home office hard to miss from U.S. 90. "We stayed a step ahead and tried to plan wisely and I think we have," Billeaud said. "We were very fortunate to get into the Lafayette office building market at a very good time when we were able to pick up some buildings at a good price. Lafayette has come back strong and we were able to reap the benefits."

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