A Message From Mayor Mike Cooper

Culture, character, community -- straightforward, clear-cut words, each independent of the other. Yet when we unite these three simple words, and blend with Covington Bicentennial, the suggestion of the language becomes significant, defining, expressive -- memorializing our past, resounding our present, and anticipating our future. "Covington Bicentennial -- Culture, Character, Community," the theme chosen by our Bicentennial Committee, illuminates and epitomizes Covington.

Our traditions and customs -- our culture -- began July 4, 1813, when our City was founded by John Wharton Collins. Our spirit and moral fiber -- our character -- are attributes that differentiate and distinguish Covington from other cities. Our people, natives and "come here's" alike, notably contribute to our nature and enduring fortitude. We are a community in the purest definition of the word -- a diverse group of people, living in a common location, who share a common interest; and that interest is Covington. It is all of you, our Covington people, who make up the wonderful and exquisite fabric of our neighborhoods, our families, our community.

Profoundly inspired by my father's service to Covington, Ernest J. Cooper, Mayor (1967-1991), I proudly serve as Mayor today, and humbly carry on the legacy our forefathers have left to us, their children. Joining together in celebration of Covington's Bicentennial is not to be taken lightly, for we must know who we are and where we've been in order to understand our worth today. It is only then, together as a community sharing our attitudes, values, and goals, that we can continue to preserve the environment we have treasured, not only now for our children and grandchildren, but for future generations.

I wholeheartedly encourage all of you to take part in our 200th birthday events and festivities, as they promise to awaken memories of our past and renew historical knowledge; let us together as a community, memorialize, resound, and anticipate Covington through commemoration and celebration of our Bicentennial.

Regards,

Mike Cooper
Mayor
As we celebrate Covington’s 200th birthday, Inside Northside looks back on the journey that has brought us to today. It’s not really hard to do. The town’s rich history is there for everyone to see as you stroll around downtown—or St. John, as the town’s founder called the area.

The names of the town’s fathers live on in our streets: Collins, Gibson and Kirkland streets; Jesse Jones, Penn Mill and Hommer Mill roads, all represent the earliest of families who shaped Covington for generations.

More streets—with unusually Yankee-sounding names like Boston, Columbia, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Temperance—reflect the town’s fathers’ mainly British backgrounds. That the streets are lined with decidedly Southern moss-covered oaks that shade them from decidedly non-New England summers breathes uniqueness into Covington’s history at every turn of a corner.

This special Bicentennial section is not an abbreviated history of Covington chronicling dates and events. Instead, we tried to do what Inside Northside does best. Whenever possible, we cover Covington’s journey by telling stories about its people. A look at the first British-descended “come heres” (everyone began as a “come here”) and those who later gave the town a French flavor 50 years after the French gave up Louisiana. We examine the tough times Covington residents faced during the Civil War, including the “invasion” of Covington. Our story continues with the coming of the railroads, lumber companies and resorts, and the emerging family dynasties that prepared a firm base for the explosive growth that was to come later with the Causeway and bring us to today.

Space and time meant we couldn’t include everything in our Bicentennial section, but past issues of Inside Northside have told many stories about Covington’s history, its people and its institutions. Much of the information and quotes incorporated into this special section are taken from those original articles, especially those by author Ann Gilbert, whom we gratefully acknowledge.

Through the years, we’ve covered arts and entertainment and celebrated many Covington artists whose work has graced our cover; legacies of Walker Percy and the Sidney Fuhrmann and Nikki Barranger family legacies; Playmakers and Mardi Gras and most recently, the St. John Fool’s of Misrule making an old tradition new again in Mr. Wharton’s saintly division. We’ve taken a look back at Covington’s schools and churches, St. Paul’s, St. Scholastica and St. Joseph Abbey and Seminary College, and the history of Covington High School during its own centennial milestone this year.

While the Columbia Street Landing is a quiet oasis now, we urge you to take a walk down Columbia, past Smith’s Hardware, the Frederick Building and the old bank buildings; and past the Masonic Temple to the old landing by the river. Conjure up a scene from the past: you’re standing at a bustling port, with steamships and schooners and tugs and oyster luggers making their way up from Lake Pontchartrain and points beyond. Make way for that oar-cart loaded with cotton headed for the steamer Josie—Covington, your future is calling!

As a complement to this special section, we have gathered into an e-book collection the many articles about Covington and its people from the pages of Inside Northside. We sincerely thank all of the writers whose stories are included. The e-book is available via a link on our website, insidenorthside.com.

Not much has changed since Walker Percy, Covington’s most well-known literary resident, wrote down his feelings about his adopted hometown back in 1980 when the city was a mere 167 years old.

There’s always been something appealing about this stretch of land along the Bogue Falaya—whether it’s the pine trees and ozone (if not the crawfish and Dixie beer), or the gently flowing stream that became a superhighway of commerce.

The beginning

Native Americans were the first human inhabitants to appreciate the uniqueness of the area; their legacy lives through their descendants and through the names of area landmarks. “Bogue Falaya,” for example, is “long river; ” “Tchefuncte” is the Choctaw word for “chirpsapin,” a small oak tree.

The first European settlers arrived on the banks of the Bogue Falaya when the water, pine trees and ozone were actually a part of the Kingdom of Spain. The land between the Pearl and Mississippi rivers was never French territory (although it was, for a time, British) and not part of Louisiana until 1810.

Jacques Dreux is famously the first “come here” owner of the land that was to become Covington, taking possession in 1800 of a 40-arpent Spanish land grant at the head of navigation of the Bogue Falaya.

“Jacques Dreux was my great-great-great-grandtante,” former mayor Keith Villere says. “He was the one who sold the land to the founder of Covington, John Wharton Collins.” Stories like Villere’s are not uncommon in Covington. All over the community, one meets people whose relatives settled here a long, long time ago.

John Wharton Collins, Covington’s founder, came to Louisiana in 1810 to join his brother William, who had staked out 600 acres on the northshore below the Badon Plantation on the Tchefuncte River. Sisters of the two brothers married Robert and Henry Badon, whose mother, Catherine, had acquired 1,600 acres through a Spanish land grant in 1785.

On May 16, 1813, John Collins purchased Dreux’s property for $2,500, using $2,000 that was the dowry of his wife, Mary. Inscribed on the map presented to Parish Judge James Tate was “The Division of St. John of Wharton, founded on July 4, 1813, is humbly dedicated to the late Thomas Jefferson.” Collins named the town Wharton after his grandfather. When Collins approached the legislature for a charter in 1816, it was granted, but the name of the town was changed to Covington in honor of a hero of the War of 1812.

Collins named the divisions of his town after relatives, but tacked the word “saint” after each: St. Mary, St. Ann, St. Thomas, St. George, St. William, St. Albert and St. John, whose mother, Catherine, had acquired 1,600 acres through a Spanish land grant in 1785.

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which is downtown Covington. He gave his streets names such as Temperance, Economy and Industry; some remain, but others have been erased from the town map.

Collins was not to enjoy his town for very long. In 1817, he died in New Orleans at age 35, when his son was 6 years old. Collins was buried on land later donated by his widow for use as a cemetery, which is across the street from the City Hall.

Early movers and shakers

St. Tammany Parish Clerk of Court archivist Robin Leckbee Perkins is not only the custodian of many documents regarding Covington's earliest days, she is a keen student of area history. She talks about the families of the movers and shakers like Jesse R. Jones, William Bagley, Obadiah Kirkland and James Hosmer, whose industry planted the seeds for Covington to become a center of commerce.

"Collins had the plan, but he wasn't able to bring the settlement to fruition," says Perkins. "That would have been Jones, Bagley, Elijah Terrel and Hezekiah Thompson. They were young, more the age of Bernard de Marigny, who was born in 1785. These were Bernard's contemporaries. In fact, he knew William Bagley very well. Bernard de Marigny and Bagley were using Bagley's ships to move cargo off Marigny's Fontainebleau Plantation."

Perkins says so much is known about the area's earliest days because many of Bagley's meticulous business records survive. The Clerk of Court also has many records filed in conjunction with actions brought by and against various businesses, as well as succession records.

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William Bagley, one of Obadiah's sons, was the clerk of court for many years. The Jones and Kirkland families had the town sewed up, as far as I can tell." Perkins wonders.

In addition to his law practice, Jones founded a brickyard, one of many that eventually sprang up in the area. Bricks and lumber were hot commodities in the 19th century, as New Orleans experienced phenomenal growth.

Covington fed that growth, Perkins says, becoming a bustling commercial port with warehouses, hotels and taverns. The warehouses often held bricks being readied for shipment. The ox lots in the downtown area are another relic of the time. They were the "parking lots" for bringing bricks, lumber, pitch and tar by ox team into town.

William Bagley was the shipping magnate of Covington in his day, running a fleet of steamboats. An interesting note by historian Adrian D. Schwartz is that Bagley also ran the local moonshine still. Schwartz says that Bagley, who raised livestock, "protected his herds against intrusion by St. Tammany brown bears by baiting them with wild honey spiked with the product of his bricks, lumber, pitch and tar by ox team into town."

But it is interesting that Mary Jane grew up to marry a Hosmer and became one of the matriarchs of this other important Covington family. The Hosmer house on the hill became the site of St. Joseph Abbey," recounts Perkins. "Obadiah Kirkland ran the big tavern and hotel down at Old Landing when he came to Covington in 1819. The Kirklands were a very colorful family, and he was quite a character himself. Obadiah's sons were involved in politics, probably due in large part to their brother-in-law, Jesse Jones. In addition to being an attorney, Jesse was also a judge."

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who's in a name?

A TALE OFTEN TOLD in various histories of Covington has more than a strong whiff of urban legend about it. Supposedly, the city was named when Jesse Jones spied a barrel of Kentucky whiskey that was stamped “Covington” and decided it, rather than the British noble Wharton family, should be honored by having his home town named after it.

More likely, the town was named in honor of Gen. Leonard Covington, often cited simply as “a hero of the War of 1812.” While a wave of patriotism following the end of the war in 1815 found many new communities throughout U.S. frontier territories being named after various war heroes, why did the settlers along the Rogue Falaya pick Gen. Covington?

It turns out that prior to Covington’s service in the War of 1812, he spent quite a bit of time in Louisiana and, it would be safe to assume, in the area that would become the city of Covington.

His connection with the town that would bear his name goes back at least to Dec. 7, 1810, and the end of the West Florida Rebellion. The area that would become Wharton, and then Covington, was still known as the Barrio of Burk Falaya. It, along with the rest of what would become the Florida parishes—St. Tammany, Washington, Tangipahoa, Livingston, East and West Feliciana and East Baton Rouge parishes—were part of an independent nation, the West Florida Republic.

Formed a mere 74 days earlier from territory formerly held by the Spanish, and before that, the British, the infant republic was “adopted,” so to speak, as U.S. territory by proclamation of President James Madison. Madison ordered Gen. W.C.C. Claiborne to take possession of it as part of the Louisiana Territory, finally settling the awkward question of whether the West Florida territory had been included in the Louisiana Purchase seven years earlier.

Covington, a colonel at the time, was a Maryland native and a former U.S. Congressman from that state. When Claiborne left Washington, D.C., with his marching orders from the president, he headed to Washington, Miss., and Fort Adams (both near Natchez), where he, with 300 troops and two artillery pieces, was called upon to proceed toward Baton Rouge. After some posturing and grumbling on their part, in the face of Covington’s force, the West Florida Republic leadership agreed to be subsumed into the United States, and Claiborne ordered the single-star Bonnie Blue flag be struck down and the 15-star Stars and Stripes raised.

A Covington Road

In 1977, Powell A. Casey documented the history of the military roads and camps near Madisonville and Covington in the St. Tammany Historical Society Gazette. Casey noted that in the year after Col. Covington led his forces to the capitulation of Baton Rouge, he was tasked with building a road, which was identified on some maps as “Gen. Wilkinson’s Road.” The army ordered the road to be built from Baton Rouge to Fort Stoddert near Mobile, Ala. Col. Covington was in charge of its construction, which lasted from 1811 to 1812.

A Hero’s Demise

While John Wharton Collins dedicated the Town of Wharton on July 4, 1813, the War of 1812 was raging along the United States frontier with Canada. Col. Covington was promoted to Brigadier General on August 1, 1813. He was sent to Sackett’s Harbor on Lake Erie in New York. In November, his troops participated in one of the last attempts by the United States to invade Canada. Covington was wounded at the Battle of Crysler Fields on the 11th and died Nov. 14.

In his report on the matter, Secretary of War John Armstrong stated, “It is due to his rank, his work and his services that I should make particular mention of Brigadier General Covington, who received a mortal wound through the body while animating his men and leading them to the charge. He fell where he fought, at the head of his men, and survived but two days.”