Covington

Covington, as are counties in Alabama and Mississippi.

Wharton to Covington

Though only having achieved statehood four years earlier, the practice of Louisiana politics as a spectator sport seemed to be maturing by 1816. Collins and his family controlled most of the land west of the Bogue Falaya between Wharton and Madisonville. Trade with New Orleans across and through area waterways was gaining momentum. That year, one traveler wrote that “Cotton, beef, neat [livestock], pork, hides, dairy cheese, lumber, pitch, tar and lime, and many other articles, including all kinds of poultry” were being shipped to the New Orleans market. All this trade attracted the attention of ambitious men, and rivalries were sure to develop.

In Sesquicentennial in St. Tammany: The Early Years of Covington, Madisonville, Mandeville, & Abita Springs, Louisiana, which historian Adrian D. Schwartz prepared in 1963, he writes, “By the beginning of 1816, there was strong sentiment in village politics to brew strong discontent against the Collins faction.”

When interviewed in 2002, a Collins descendent, Thomas Wharton Collins Jr., suggested some citizens couldn’t stand the thought of being named after British gentry. “Their feelings about the British were not the greatest. Remember, they had just finished fighting them in the Battle of New Orleans.”

In February 1816, a state senator from St. Helena parish, Champness Terry, who also represented St. Tammany, introduced a bill to the legislature to change the name of the town of Wharton to Covington and to provide for a governing body and other items. While he may have been driven by admiration of the general’s service, his action was most probably driven by ill will toward Collins, a political rival. (Terry had also been elected to the West Florida Republic legislature, which Covington had helped end.)

Schwartz reports that a Collins ally, Sen. Kemper, “read a letter from Collins urging that the creation of a board of trustees ... was most desirable, but that he protested against that part of the bill which sought to have the worthy name of Wharton erased from the public dedication he had made, as being frivolous and in violation of his rights as a citizen.”

In response, Terry claimed to have a petition signed by several Wharton residents requesting the change, and the bill passed quickly.

Collins had been ill for some time. Schwartz says that he had never recovered from his service in the Battle of New Orleans and the harsh winter weather that followed. Although having his family’s name removed from his town was a terrible blow to him, Collins must have felt some vindication when the first elections were held in June that year. Four of the five trustees elected included three of his faction and himself. Also, his nephew John Gibson was appointed town secretary.

Collins’ health continued to deteriorate, and he died on Dec. 27, 1817.

Many people rightly assume that the history of Louisiana is tied to the history of French colonialism in America. However, it is wrong to think that of Covington and the other parishes carved out of what was West Florida, over which the French flag never flew.

“Our earliest settlers from 1804 to 1840 were mostly of British background, such as the Collins, Morse, Kirkland, Gibson, Tate, Maples, Broxton and Jones families,” says Perkins. “As Covington grew into its identity as our parish seat of commerce, we began to enjoy and be influenced by an influx of new settlers from France.”

The subject of a French migration to Covington is of great interest to Perkins, who prepared a talk on the subject for Bastille Day celebrations in 2012. “Many French persons emigrated to the United States after 1850,” she says. “Most were economic refugees fleeing the failed French Revolution of 1848. Many of us are aware of the French Revolution of 1789, famous for the storming of the Bastille and the freeing of the political prisoners held there. But what happened in 1848 resulted in the abdication of the last King of France, King Louis Philippe I of the Orleans dynasty, and the establishment of the French Second Republic.”

Perkins notes that in 1851, more than 20,000 French immigrants arrived in the United States, and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War also resulted in increased French immigration. She says, “Many were skilled tradespeople and businessmen and preferred life in urban centers such as New York, New Orleans and Chicago. Some made their way to Covington.”

Our French heritage

A quick search of the 1860 U.S. Census reveals 128 persons residing in St. Tammany who were born in France. Perkins says many left their cultural mark on the Covington area. A few of the notable ones include:

- Jotville Bercegeay, a Frenchman with family in New Orleans who had a pottery on the banks of the Bogue Falaya River in Covington. His business was located on six large city lots at the end of today’s Lee Lane down to the river. Bercegeay also had a store in Covington from 1880-1895 under the name Bercegeay and Kemp. This firm seemed to be a wholesaler of general goods, as are counties in Alabama and Mississippi.

Above: The Bernard Barrere mercantile store ca. 1900. The 1900 U.S. Census indicates Barrere’s father, Joseph, was born in France in 1846. The building has undergone many changes but is still recognizable as the St. Tammany Art Association Art House on Columbia Street.
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such as garden produce, sugar, coffee, live chickens, calico, clothing items, fabric on the bolt and leather goods.

- Alsatian-born John Munsch owned Live Oak Place just north of town in the vicinity of today's Camp Abbey. He sold Concord red and Herbesmont white wines he made himself, grape jellies and rooted grape vine cuttings.

- Pierre LaCroix established Mulberry Grove north of Covington, where he grew mulberry trees needed for silk worm cultivation. Monsieur Charles Thierry cared for the cocoons at Mulberry Grove and harvested the raw silk.

- Jules B. Maille billed himself as a silk merchant in 1850 and seems to have occupied premises on the corner of New Hampshire and Boston streets. Jules' son, born in 1848, had a career as chief deputy at the St. Tammany Parish Clerk of Court's office by 1880. Silk produced in St. Tammany Parish was proudly displayed at the 1884 World's Fair in New Orleans. Perkins says that silk production became too expensive and ceased in the Covington area by 1885.

Among other Covington-area French immigrants who left their mark are tailor Francis Goarthus, baker Victor Pechon, grocers Bulaha Beaucondray and Clothilde Laborde and hoteliers George Reber and Frederic Jaufroid.

The gift most French settlers brought to Covington was their awareness of culture, style, good eating and celebration. They were dedicated to the development of our town as a place full of joie de vivre," Perkins says. "I believe it was due to the French citizens in Covington that we held the first Mardi Gras celebration in these parts, on February 25, 1879. There was a parade and a romantic ball, illuminated by torches. The young adult children of the families mentioned above served as some of the first Carnival royalty."

The Civil War years were hard on Covington and other northshore communities. St. Tammany Parish was part of a Confederate state. However, Union forces controlled nearby areas, including New Orleans and the Mississippi River. At the end of April 1862, about a year after Louisiana seceded from the United States, the Union captured New Orleans. The Civil War would rage on for three more years and Louisiana—and Covington along with it—struggled through the Reconstruction period until its end in 1877.

Covington and the areas surrounding the town fell victim to both Confederate and Union forces at different times as troops foraged the countryside for supplies. A family's hones, poultry, hogs, cattle and flour were likely to be confiscated without any compensation. At times when farmers were left alone and had surplus crops and livestock, trade with New Orleans, Covington's number one market for supplies, was off-limits because of a Union blockade and a Confederate order prohibiting trade with the enemy.

St. Tammany had voted against Louisiana's secession from the United States, as did St. Helena Parish. However, the men of St. Tammany heeded the call to arms once Louisiana had seceded and the Confederate States of America fired the opening salvos of the war on Fort Sumter in April 1861.

In his very thorough history, St. Tammany Parish, L' Autre Cote Du Lac, Judge Frederick S. Ellis reviews the various companies in which men from the Covington area served. While Miles' Legion was a popular unit, there also were the St. Tammany Regiment of the Louisiana Militia, the St. Tammany Greys, the St. Tammany Artillery and Mandeville Rifles. Names of prominent Covington families are found among these units' leaders—Hosmer, Penn, Baham, Morgan, Sharp, Hennen, Joyner and Cooper, for example. All told, Ellis notes that an estimated 400 St. Tammany men had gone off to war by April 1862.

Covington and St. Tammany saw no major battles during the war. The Union controlled New Orleans and the Mississippi River, along with Lake Pontchartrain and its approaches, without much need to invade St. Tammany. Few Confederate troops were regularly posted in the area, although Ellis mentions Camp Slocum in Covington in October 1862, with three small companies of mounted rangers. Their placement may have been in response to the closest thing
to a Union invasion of St. Tammany, which had occurred during the summer.

The Invasion of Covington
On July 27, 1862, the U.S. Navy ship Grey Cloud entered the Tchefuncte River carrying five companies of the 12th Connecticut Volunteer Regiment. Ellis recounts that as the ship passed Madisonville, it was fired on by Confederate troops and the Grey Cloud responded with artillery fire. The Confederates retreated with no casualties but reported that a woman and child were killed by the shot. The Grey Cloud continued toward Covington to a point where the Confederates had sunk one of their own ships, the Oregon, blocking the river south of the city.

The ship landed and the soldiers marched to Covington. Adrian D. Schwartz relays an eyewitness account. He states the Yankee soldiers were Vermonters, rather than Connecticut, troops. Either way, the New Englanders were by no means aclimatized to a Louisiana July.

With the obstruction in the Tchefuncte discovered, the march to Covington was taken up on foot and the town was occupied. The only civilian officer present was John Eads Smith, a merchant whose home still survives in Rutland near New Hampshire Street. As Coroner he was acting as Sheriff for the Parish and from here the Blue Coats learned that the Confederates were concentrating on the Tchefuncte bank to cut off their return to the Lake. The Vermonters, in heavy woolen uniforms, then marched through Columbia Street with the Stars and Stripes as far as the bridgehead on Gibson Street, returned, and ordered that all Confederate insignia should be brought down including the flag that floated over Coroner Smith's residence. This was complied with.

This writer recalls the statement from Miss Susie Kentzel, one of the daughters of Mr. Smith, who said as a girl she served drinking water from their home well to the thirsty Yankee soldiers before their forced march back to Madisonville. As a result of the rapid pace under which they were ordered, two men collapsed and died from sunstroke.

The Invasion of Covington was thus a brief one, causing not much of a stir except in the memories of a few citizens and a notation in the local history books.

Nonetheless, while Covington remained free from enemy occupation, its citizens paid a heavy price as their economy, tied inextricably to the local history books.

Return of Registered Enemies To Dixie
We steered due north, right across Lake Pontchartain, and, entering the small Tchefuncte River or Bayou, got up to the little village called Madisonville about noon. Here we saw the Stars and Bars flying, and the place in command of Lieutenant M. Cassety. Madisonville is very picturesque, the shore being covered with fine live-oak trees, whose enormous gnarled trunks and twisted roots look as if they have been defying the storms of centuries.

Hardships of War
Many families were left without support as husbands, sons and brothers joined the Confederate army. It fell on the police jury to distribute funds to the soldiers' dependants, with the state setting aside $5 million for this purpose. Ellis notes that dependent wives, fathers and mothers were to receive $10 per month; children, brothers and sisters under 12 and other dependants were allotted $5 per month.

The St. Tammany Parish Clerk of Court's archives contain some poignant documents from this period. Records were kept of these disbursements, and lists from the various wards of the parish survive in the clerk's files. Covington was part of Ward 3. In part, the list states:

Mrs. Emile Lauret four children. Jos. aged eleven years, John Baptist ten years, Anastole seven and Clara five. Has two sons being in the army. Victor Lauret, Co. C. Miles' Legion and Emile Laurent, Capt. Bridaux Company. $30.00

Several other entries for the 3rd Ward follow. At the end, the list is attested to: "Total amount due 3rd ward $250.00 a month. P. A. Cousin Mr. F. J. 3rd Ward." A few more entries list family members serving under Capt. Bridaux. It is likely, however, that the reference is to Capt. Breckow, who Ellis says led a company of rangers.

The Wanderer
One of the most fascinating documents in the St. Tammany Clerk of Court's archives is a copy of a Covington newspaper, The Wanderer, dated March 26, 1864. It was published by M. J. Scott and its editor was James Bowie.

That particular edition of the paper illustrates the frustration that many must have felt during the war in Covington. Other than one advertisement, the front page of the one-sheet paper is taken up by an anonymous editorial entitled "How to End the War in Six Months" by "a New Orleans refugee." It is a lengthy screed detailing the economic complaints many in the South must have felt towards the North, before and during the war.

One item details a Union excursion into St. Tammany:

A Yankee gunboat took a look into the mouth of the river at Madisonville the past week. She shied off and took deep water as her safest locality.

While such enemy incursions must have been frightening for residents up and down the river, the next item related to the economic hardship they faced from the military.

Miles' cavalry, formerly Miles' Legion, paid this part of the country a visit this past week, gathering up the command, conscripting all of the available age, recruiting, etc. We are sorry to say the impression left behind is none to the credit of the command.
however, they may have been acting under orders; and in that case, are excusable. A more persecuted people never existed, than those of St. Tammany.

The sole advertisement on the paper's front page would, one would think, have brought a breath of life into the downtrodden town. Placed by C. G. Cousins, the ad states in very bold print that:

It is with great pleasure that I announce to the public the largest stock of Dry Goods that has been in Covington since the war, for which I will receive COUNTRY PRODUCE such as Corn, Chickens, Bacon, Lard, Turkeys, Ducks, Geese, Sheep Beef Hogs, Eggs and CONFEDERATE MONEY.

My stock comprises, in part, Mourning Calico, Calico of all pat, Alpacas, Flannel, Sewing Thread, Shoe Thread, Ribbons, Toilet Soap, Matches, Sogars, Smoking Tobacco, Chewing Tobacco, Pins, Combs, Buttons, Corsets, Skirts, Playing Cards, Pipes, Candies, Coffee, Letter Paper, Drop Shot, Varnish, Gentleman's, Ladies' and Misses' Shoes...

Ending the list of items he has available, Cousins says to those who may who may have been thirsting for refreshment during those tough times, "And Whiskey without end."

Although Gen. Lee surrendered his army to Gen. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865, the Civil War did not end in Louisiana until Shreveport area-based Gen. Kirby Smith, one of the last Confederates to surrender, did so on May 26, 1865.

After the war

Upon the end of the war, a committee of parish leaders met at the courthouse in Covington in August 1865. Led by Alfred Hennen, the group included Covingtonians James Hosmer (Judge Jesse R. Jones' grandson) and William Bagley. They issued a series of resolutions to be forwarded to the newly-appointed provisional governor Wells, recognizing his authority, the rights of the newly-freed African-Americans and the presidency of Andrew Johnson.

Ellis notes that carpetbagger rule, when Northern outsiders entered into local and state government and businesses, was the most corrupt era of Louisiana politics, depressing the state's economy. Census data indicates the number of brickmakers, carpenters, hotel keepers and sailors in St. Tammany decreased after the war.

When full independence from Federal control took place in 1878 and the railroads arrived in the 1880s, recovery and growth followed for Covington.

An abundance of raw materials made the Covington area attractive. The earliest settlers, including Jesse Jones, had taken advantage of clay deposits found throughout St. Tammany and began making bricks, a commodity always in demand for a growing region.

Ellis notes that in the days before the railroads came into the area, brickyards were by necessity located near waterways. A major brickyard was founded post-Reconstruction by Gabriel "Gilb" Parker along the Abita River near where it meets the Bogue Falaya.

Parker, Ellis says, must have been an exceptional person to achieve what he did during those times. He quotes the St. Tammany Farmer, which reported Parker was born and raised a slave and became the owner of a fine farm growing cotton and rice and a brickyard in the Abita River, and two schooners. Parker's property was eventually acquired by the Alexius family and is now the area where the Tulane Primate Center is now located.

Parker's story is only one example of the many changes that were in store for Covington as it moved into the 20th century.
Much of the Covington we know today—the downtown buildings and many of the charming homes along live-oak lined streets—is the legacy of the commercial boom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The coming of the railroads and the rapid increase in schooner and steamer traffic at the town’s boat landing provided an impetus for growth.

This was also the time when Covington and neighboring Abita Springs began to enjoy a reputation as great places to visit. Resorts sprang up as visitors came to enjoy breathing the famous “ozone” air and drinking in the reputedly very pure water from area springs and artesian wells.

Arts and education blossomed. Many churches and schools were built. The monks arrived and founded the settlement of St. Benedict; their home, St. Joseph Abbey; and St. Joseph Seminary College. St. Paul’s, St. Scholastica and St. Peter’s schools were formed. The roots of public education took hold as C. J. Schoen and Covington High schools were built. (Covington High School hits its own centennial milestone in 2013.)

Covington’s first theaters appeared in the early 1900s, and the town began earning a friendly reputation among artists everywhere.

Landings come alive

From the days it was first settled until the 1930s, schooners and steamers journeyed up the Bogue Falaya to Covington’s Old Landing at the end of Jahncke Street and to the landing at the foot of Columbia Street. Covington was a busy port as ships hauled out cargo and hauled in dry goods and groceries—and, most importantly, transported people.

The area around Covington produced raw materials that fed the ever-growing city of New Orleans, where bricks, lime for mortar, and sand and lumber were needed for building. St. Tammany-made products went into many historic buildings on the southshore, including the St. Louis Cathedral. The area produced another category of goods, pine products—tar, pitch and rosin—that were in high demand as naval supplies. As the call for these materials increased on the southshore, so did the number of vessels needed to transport them.

As might be expected, the more compelling accounts of travels across Lake Pontchartrain 1886 remind us what the journey from the southshore to Covington was like back in the days before the Causeway. Pat Clanton shares a letter her grandmother, Mary Emelia McManus, called Amy, wrote to her family recalling her trip across the lake on the Camellia. Amy’s must have been a familiar story, as thousands of visitors, along with thousands of tons of cargo, were loaded and unloaded at the foot of Columbia Street during the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

When we entered the beautiful Tchefuncte I was delighted beyond expression and sighed for a brush and..."