Officials hope old plantation can be saved

BY STEVEN WARD
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DONALDSONVILLE — A once-thriving sugar plantation home built in the early 1800s alongside historic River Road is being lashed and bruised by the passage of time and Louisiana’s volatile climate.

State and Ascension Parish tourism officials are trying to save Germania Plantation — hidden away behind weeds, brush and vines off River Road between Donaldsonville and White Castle — before it is lost forever.

Although Germania looks today like a 1,000-acre jungle scattered with archaic, termite-ravaged buildings and barns, Ascension Tourist Commission Director Angela Falgoust and Secretary Phillip Jones of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism call the plantation a “treasure” for visitors and residents of the state.
This is why people come here to Louisiana, and it's being lost,” Falgoust said to state government and tourism officials before taking them on a walking tour of the plantation grounds Thursday.

Jones told the crowd that plantation homes such as Germania are part of Louisiana’s heritage, but if measures are not taken to preserve landmarks such as Germania, history will be lost.

The horrified dissipators Germania Plantation is one of Louisiana’s list of the 10 most endangered historic sites in the state. Others include St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and Conerly Plantation in Bayou Rapides near Alexandria.

Today, the Germania Plantation house, its outbuildings and surrounding acreage are inhabited mainly by ants, wasps and rattlesnakes.

Douglas Hayward Sr., 73, who owns the plantation, is a descendant of the man who bought the house originally in 1867, German immigrant John Reuss.

“My mother and I were the last people to live here and that was in 1981,” Hayward said Thursday while telling stories about the plantation and his great-grandfather, John Reuss.

The main house of the plantation was built in the 1800s by French-speaking owners as a raised Acadian-style cottage. Reuss then bought it and had the home remodeled while he and his wife took a trip to Germany.

“He had these renovations done, and then my great-grandmother came back from Germany, and you ruined my nice, old cottage. My great-grandfather thought he was doing a good thing,” Hayward laughed.

Reuss had the home enlarged into a Victorian Eastlake house in which the architecture is an odd mixture of Victorian and Gothic Revival, a style usually reserved for churches.

Now the roof of the main house has collapsed, while weather and vandalism has left the rear of the house in need of reconstruction.

The plantation has 20 outbuildings in addition to the main house, including a combination kitchen and visitors house where traveling salesmen would stay while passing through Ascension Parish, a carriage barn, stable, blacksmith shop, sugar mill, overseer’s house, seven cabins, a store and a sugar mill.

Gas Guichard Jr., a Donaldsonville entrepreneur who restores old plantation houses, said it would take a lot of money to restore Germania, but it is impossible to guess exactly how much until the entire site is inspected and inventoried.

“I can tell you that I am working on an Oak Alley replica right now in Breville Parish, and that will take five years and $11 million. That’s just three houses. This place has I don’t know how many outer areas,” Guichard said.

Dennis Eilers, chief landscape architect with the Louisiana Office of State Parks, said he and other tourism officials will have to meet again and discuss what they saw Thursday to decide if any state money could be used to help restore the Germania for historical preservation purposes.

“It’s a very long process. First, we need to consider if that is something we want to preserve,” Eilers said.

Ascension tourism director Falgoust said she and Secretary Jones have discussed setting up a nonprofit foundation that would charge fees for tours of Germania’s grounds in their present condition.

Then, after some money is raised, state and parish tourism officials could shop around for partnerships able to financially contribute to restoring and renovating the plantation, Falgoust said.

For more, please see Ascension Parish Tourism’s website at http://www.ascension-tourism.com

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