Hosting History

Kent House Plantation's site in Alexandria earns it major role in Louisiana Purchase celebration

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Travel editor

In 1803, Thomas Jefferson wrote notes at night by light from candles mounted on a specially designed chair. Napoleon slipped on velvet house shoes as he readied for bed at Versailles. Both were pleased with their decision over the Louisiana Purchase.

In central Louisiana, people usually went to bed soon after dark and rose at dawn to face another day on the frontier.

"This is where it all came together," said Carolyn Breedlove, director of Kent House Plantation. "Kent House and this plantation are the Louisiana Purchase. It's where everyone was jockeying for positions. Slaves, Indians, free blacks, French, Spanish and Americans were all here."

On Friday, Dec. 20, Kent Plantation House in Alexandria, central Louisiana's oldest standing structure, will be the site for the official ceremonies opening the state's yearlong observance of the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase.

The ceremony and reception will be an invitation only event because of security concerns and space limitations. Guests will include members of the counselor corps from New Orleans, state officials and numerous individuals who have been active in planning the statewide celebration.

About 800 people are expected to participate. As the opening ceremony and reception conclude, a public celebration throughout downtown Alexandria and Pineville will start, spotlighting everything from musical entertainment and fireworks to a special performance by Aaron Neville at the riverfront amphitheater.

Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, who oversees the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, will officiate at the opening. "One reason we selected Alexandria is that we wanted to showcase central Louisiana," said Blanco. "Then we looked for one of the most historic places in the region and Kent Plantation House was a natural. It predates the Louisiana Purchase and sits on the original Spanish land grant. We try to tie together the historical aspects of the Louisiana Purchase as much as we can.

Bennett said her office has worked hard to develop the tourism economy in every region of Louisiana. "Part of the result of the Louisiana Purchase celebration will be, huge cultural and educational experience for the people of Louisiana as well as attracting tourists. I think Louisiana's people will see the state in a higher light because we were very important at the time."

"For the opening ceremony, I'm planning to reflect on the important role Louisiana played in the formation of our nation," Thibodeaux said.

During a recent visit to Kent Plantation House, it was easy to understand why central Louisiana held such promise in 1803. In that year Pierre Baillio and his family moved into their new home on Bayou Rapides. One boundary of their land, granted on behalf of the king by the Spanish governor, Baron de Carondelet, is an Indian village on the bayou.

The present house can be dated from a September 1800 letter written by Julien Poydras to Monsieur Baillio, congratulating him on "that certain pose" of being settled in his new home.

On Oct. 1, 1800, Spain ceded the Louisiana Territory to France in the Treaty of Ildefonso. In October of 1802, the Spanish colonial administrator in New Orleans prohibited the deposit of American products in New Orleans for shipment abroad (France has not yet formally taken possession of New Orleans). Jefferson decided to send James Monroe and Robert Livingston to negotiate with France for the purchase of New Orleans and as much of the Floridas as possible.

In April 1803, the American delegates and the French minister Talleyrand settled upon a price of $15 million or about 4 cents an acre. No one knows how much the vast territory is. The United States officially takes possession of the Louisiana Territory on Dec. 20, 1803.

"Turning her face toward the sinking sun," Bredevold said, "I want to think everything west of where we are standing was wilderness."

Americans started moving into the vast territories, and Louisiana quickly took her place in the country's expansion.

The Baillio family sold the property to Robert Hyson in 1842, and he named it Kent Plantation for his birthplace in Kent County, Md. Both Baillios and Hysons married into locally prominent families and there are still descendants in Louisiana.

Through the years, portions of the huge plantation were inherited by Hyson descendants. Part of the land was subdivided as the Kent Addition to the town of Alexandria. From 1948 to 1963, the house was used as a meeting hall by the American Legion. In early 1964 the plantation house was moved a few blocks to its present location, and it still stands facing Bayou Rapides on a portion of Pierre Baillio's original land grant.

A tour of the raised Creole house begins on the ground level where red brick pillars create the foundation. Look closely and you will see the hand-hewn marks on thick wood beams that support the home.

"It's easy to see the bones of the house," said Bredevold as she pointed out the Greek Revival additions, called pavilions designed by Robert Hyson. "The architecture reflects how this American man came and changed the French Creole house," she said.

"Very little in the house is original because most of the furniture was burned during the Great Creole Fire," said Bredevold.

Pat Bacot, LSU art history professor, served as a consultant on interior furnishings that reflect Federal and American Empire styles. One room is an antiques room filled with documents andContinued on Page 16.

The back gallery of Kent Plantation House overlooks outbuildings, including the outside kitchen, dating from 1820, where volunteers prepare meals in the large open hearth.
memorabilia from Hynson descendants. A boy's bedroom contains a rope bed and a child's chair thought to have been built by Pierre Baillio Sr.

The dining room features a reproduction hand-painted floor cloth and a massive sideboard and a hand-pulled pumpah (fan) above the table originally from New Orleans. The parlor contains Sheraton pieces and a rare Japanned settee. The Federal mantle was originally from Magnolia Plantation in Natchitoches Parish.

From the parlor, step through one of the house's original doorways into the girls' room furnished with a four poster bed made in Washington, La., and an inlaid cherry-and-cypress armoire made in Opelousas. Of special interest is an 1834 sampler worked in delicate and precise stitches by a 12-year-old girl, Mary Ann Hill.

One side addition to the house contains the library where family members gathered to read, play cards and play the piano. An 1828 map displayed on a wall is French and shows the Louisiana Purchase.

The other addition contains the master bedroom with a mahogany four poster bed and a prie-dieu designed for private prayer.

After our tour, we walked behind the house to the outside kitchen, dating from 1820, where volunteers Bess Hansel and Nancy Baker, were cooking a hearty lunch in the open hearth. Members of the Kent Plantation house board, the women cook on Wednesdays when school tours visit the site. We joined their delicious "feast" of roast chicken, vegetable soup, root vegetables (carrots and turnips), cabbage and cornbread—all cooked in the hearth.

The party continues inside the kitchen where the site's complex of outbuildings includes a barn and a double pen slave cabin, a brick-between-post structure, built with a wood floor.

A special exhibition, A World of Change: Central Louisiana and the Nation, 1800-1810, will be housed in one of the outbuildings and will open Friday, Dec. 20. It will include a map, letters and numerous documents relating to the Louisiana Purchase.

Time to celebrate

The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial opening will re-capture the mingling of cultures that marked the early 1800s.

Nearly 100 re-enactors from throughout the region, wearing period dress, will portray French, Spanish, Native Americans and Americans at the time of the Purchase. "It will be as if people walked out of history to be here," said Bredlove. "Some will camp throughout the region, wearing peri-

The Native American dance group Kostinii and the period dance group River Road Performance Society will perform. A Pineville multi-church choir will present early spirituals.

Songs documented to have been played within Louisiana in 1803 will be played and sung by Donna and Neal Wilkinson of Baton Rouge.

As a uniformed color guard from Louisiana's Office of State Parks presents period flags, the French and Spanish national anthems and "Hail Columbia," which predated "The Star-Spangled Banner," will be performed.

Guests will be invited to stroll the grounds, watch a blacksmith at work and taste gumbo made by open-hearth cooks in the kitchen.

The party continues

Following the official ceremony, officials and guests will be shuttled to downtown Alexandria. The route along MacArthur Drive to Fourth Street will be lined with luminarias. Visitors and residents alike will join the public festivities beginning at 5:30 p.m.

St. Francis Xavier Cathedral will host a choir from Acadia Parish that will sing carols in French and Spanish. Emmanuel Baptist Church will host Louisiana College's Theatre Department giving a performance of Three Cents on Acre, a review about the Louisiana Purchase.

Photo from the Louisiana Office of Tourism

The River Oaks Center in Alexandria will be open for its annual porch sale during opening day festivities at the Louisiana Purchase celebration, Friday, Dec. 20.

Holiday Inn Convention Center will host the Red River Dance Company with mini-performances of The Nutcracker. The Alexandria City Hall will act as a stage for performances from the First United Methodist Church Children's Choir, The Family Playhouse and the Cenla Big Band.

Hands-on children's activities will be sponsored by various regional organizations. Visitors can meander about food booths and gift booths in the Third Street area.

The River Oaks Center will be open for its annual porch sale. The Rapids Parish Library and the Arna Bontemps African American Museum plan storytelling sessions and readings.

The lighted boat parade on the Red River starts at 7:30 p.m., and the free concert by Aaron Neville in the Red River Amphitheater begins at 8 p.m.

Downtown Alexandria's celebration will conclude at 9 p.m. with choreographed fireworks and the inaugural lighting of the Jackson Street Bridge.

For information, call the Alexandria/Pineville Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-551-9546 or 318-443-1617.