Rayne’s Beginning Retraced

Before Rayne was Rayne it was Poupeville, and before it was Poupeville it was Queue Tortue, a settlement which developed near the waterway Bayou Queue de Tortue.

Queue Tortue was a voting precinct of St. Landry Parish in 1852. Because of gaps in the police jury records and the scarcity of early publications it is not possible to determine precisely when the voting poll was established. The first mention of voting at Queue Tortue appeared in the first issue of the Opelousas Courier when the newspaper gave notice of the forthcoming election. The two polling places in the sixth ward of St. Landry Parish were Plaquemine Brulee and Queue Tortue; the voting at Queue Tortue was to take place “at the house of Eugene Valette.”

Queue Tortue has a unique place in the history of southwest Louisiana. The settlement — specifically, the house of Eugene Valette — was the site, on September 3, 1859, of the historic confrontation between the Vigilantes and the anti-Vigilantes, and event which terminated a troubled period of strong feeling and controversy that threatened to plunge the state into its own civil war.

The Vigilantes recruited a small force of armed men; members, sworn to secrecy, met regularly to drill. Committees were organized in five southwest Louisiana parishes: St. Martin, Lafayette, Vermilion, St. Landry and Calcasieu. Many prominent citizens of the area were active in the Vigilantes; Major Aurelien St. Julien was commander-in-chief of all forces; General Alfred Mouton, a West Point graduate later to become the hero of the Battle of Mansfield, was drillmaster; a former Louisiana governor, Alexander Mouton, and another highly respected citizen, Alcee Judice, were among those who took active part.

While the name of the settlement remained Queue Tortue in legal records for many years, inhabitants of the area called it Poupeville, a name it was to carry until the railroad came and the village became Rayne Station. But before Queue Tortue became Poupeville its name was perpetuated in a folk song:

Allons a la Queue Tortue
C’est pour vivre sur le pain perdu

The name Poupeville probably came into usage through colloquial expressions, such as “je vais au magasin de Poupeville” (I am going to Poupeville’s store). A merchant named Jules Poupeville, believed to have been a native of France, came to the area at an undetermined time. He set up his residence and a store on public land. In 1854 he sold the movables on the property to Jean Remy Vion. The movables included two houses, one occupied as a store, the other maintained as a residence; a corncrib, fencing and other improvements; a horse cart and four horses. The movables were described as being “on a piece of public land lying on Bayou Queue de Tortue said to be occupied by the present vendor.” Vion bought 136.62 acres of land in Section 33, Township 9 South Range 2 East from the United States government, which is undoubtedly the “piece of public land” where Poupeville had set up his home and business.

In 1871 the editor of the Courier, accustomed to identifying the village as Queue Tortue, seemed uncertain of the location of Poupeville. In the issue of December 30 he reported: “We learn that a man by the name of Louis Anding was shot and killed at a ball near Poupeville, in the western part of this parish, on the night of the 23rd inst. There is no clue as to who perpetrated the deed, nor were we able to learn the particulars of the affair.”

Father Anthonioz had charge, at different times, of the settlements at Upper Plaquemine Brulee, Queue Tortue, Pointe-aux-Loups, Coulee Trive, Lyon’s Point and Mermentau. He and other Jesuit priests alternated in their work at these mission points. He was put in charge of the Queue Tortue settlement in 1872, and is best known for his work there. His records, kept at St. Joseph Catholic Church of Rayne, begin in 1872. Written in French in his own handwriting, the records show that the first baptism and the first marriage took place on the same date, January 18, 1872. The child baptized was Valerien Dupuis, son of Alexandre Dupuis and Ordalise Blanchard; godparents were Dupre Dugas and Philomene Dupuis. The marriage was between Louis Theogene Richard, son of Jean Richard and Zeloni Piasance, and Celeste Trahant, daughter of Onehmire Trahant and Celeste Curather. Witnesses to the marriage were Jean Boussard, Onezime Melancon and Ambroise Offpower.

When Poupeville post offices were re-established on October 23, 1878, its location was described as “in the northeast section of Section 33, Township 9 South Range 2 East, two miles north of Bayou Queue de

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Tortue.” The official name of the post office was spelled “Pouppeville,” and the population was given as 150.

Dr. William H. Cunningham, at the time in the employ of the railroad company, was the founder of the town. B.W.L. Rayne, also connected with the railroad, was the godfather — the new railroad station was named Rayne.

In July of 1880 Dr. Cunningham bought considerable acreage in the Rayne area from the heirs of Antoine Mouton. He had his holdings in Section 28 surveyed and laid out in town lots by Romain Francis. In November of 1880 he sold lots on Texas Street to J.F. Morris and Numa Chachere for $62.50 per lot. An 80-foot-front lot on Texas Street was sold jointly to Morris and Chachere for $75; W.S. McBride signed as witness to the land sales.