Search for first sheriff uncovers long, sad story

KAPLAN — The Villejoins of Vermilion Parish knew there was a story behind their name. But they knew only pieces of that tale.

The first sheriff of Lafayette Parish was said to have been a Villejoin. But the Villejoins didn’t know much about him. And there was supposed to be some connection between that sheriff and Haiti. Again, the nature of the connection wasn’t clear.

“Everybody said this had happened,” said J.D. Villejoin, 70, who lives outside Kaplan.

With wife Mary, “But there was no proof until I was able to go into the sheriff’s office in Lafayette.”

That was in 1984. Villejoin received permission to look in the archives.

There it was: an official document dated Oct. 6, 1824, the year after the Legislature lopped off the western portion of St. Martin Parish to form Lafayette Parish. The document was signed “G. Villejoin, Sheriff.”

And that was just the start of the story. The story of Gregoire Villejoin, his family name, which isn’t really his family name, is spelled three or four different ways — is a story about the early days of Lafayette. But it’s also about ethnic cleansing, world war and the hardships endured by refugees.

One more thing: The Villejoins of Kaplan may be descended from French nobility. “I don’t suppose that’ll do me any good at the bank,” J.D. Villejoin said.

Colonial administrators

According to research by J.D. Villejoin at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s Louisiana Room, and duplicat-
Gregoire Villejoin, as a small area outside Blois. Together, those things could add up to noble birth for the Rousseaus. According to Cormier, the title was passed along to the oldest son for a few generations.

In one document, the baptismal certificate for his second son, Gregoire Villejoin signed his name "Gregoire Rousseau Villejoin," keeping the name associated with the title but dropping the "de."

The Rousseaus, or Villejoins, were also military men. In the days before the Seven Years War, Gregoire's great-grandfather was sent to Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, part of Acadie. His son, Gregoire's grandfather, became the commandant of ile de St. Jean on Prince Edward Island.

Gregoire's grandfather, who won the war with the British, died on the voyage to Prince Edward Island. Gregoire's great-grandfather, to France. Swelled Ille de St. Jean's population during the War, Gregoire's great-grandfather, to France. Gregoire was born there and stayed there. But not Gregoire.

Gregoire was affluent enough to afford slaves of his own. He still had nine at the time of his death. In 1823, the Legislature approved the creation of Lafayette Parish, which then included what is now Vermilion Parish, too. In September 1824, Gregoire's name turns up as a witness on the document by which Jean Mouton, who had already given the land on which St. John the Evangelist Church was built, donated more land as a home for Vermilionville.

The 1824 document that J.D. Villejoin found in the courthouse archive appears to be a jury summons. Interestingly enough, it's written in English, not French. By then, Gregoire was sheriff. He would have been appointed by Gov. Henry Johnson.

In 1832, a second appointment expanded Villejoin's powers to include tax collection. Gregoire would have been sheriff at a time when Lafayette was bustling. Between 1830, the first Census year after Lafayette Parish was formed, and 1840, Lafayette Parish grew from about 5,600 people to about 7,800. Slaves made up about 40 percent of the parish's population. Cattle and sugar cane were among the main products, and the Vermilion remained important as a trade artery.

Leaving Lafayette

In 1834, J.D. Villejoin said, Gregoire wrote to notify a local judge that his domicile was no longer in Lafayette Parish.