The body of Martin Begnaud was wrapped mummy-like in calico cloth. His hands and feet were bound with rope. The cloth and bed linen were drenched in blood. Darker bursts of red supplied the calico— the places where a sharp triangular object had pierced the body. More than 50 such crimson flowers followed the path of his slit throat like a necklace of rosary beads. Several thousand dollars were missing from the safe.

That this happened in April, 1896 in Scott (then called Scott Station for its ties to the railroad that gave the village birth) tells us at least two things: brutality and greed aren't modern inventions, a great book can be born of the foulest deeds.

William Arceneaux's No Spark of Malice (LSU Press), detailing the murder of Scott Station shopkeeper Begnaud, the subsequent investigation, trial and execution of his convicted killers, is a thoroughly engrossing read, and it's a palpably local tale. Begnaud and his killers are buried in St. John Cemetery, a half mile from this newspaper's office.

Arceneaux, who holds a doctoral degree in history, lives in Baton Rouge and serves as president of the Louisiana Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. He was born in Lafayette and reared in Scott. Martin Begnaud was his great-uncle.

"It's not often a person can write a book about his people, his family, his village, and get it published," Arceneaux said in a recent telephone interview. "I was very pleased to do that."

Arceneaux began work on Spark in 1994 after the death of his mother, Regina Begnaud Arceneaux, a niece of Martin Begnaud's.

"This is an event that happened in the history of the Begnaud family, which is my family," said Arceneaux, also the author of Acadian General, Alfred Mouton and the Civil War. The historian grew up with the grim tale as part of Begnaud family lore. "I had always been interested in it, and my mother had encouraged me to look into it and I never did. When she died I figured I'd do it."

The author has already declined an offer from the cable network Showtime to option the rights to the story for a future movie production. He's content for now to let the book tell the story. And what a story it tells.

The killer always returns...

Begnaud's murder electrified all of South Louisiana. The New Orleans dailies were all over the story, and Lafayette Parish Sheriff John Broussard felt the pressure to make a quick arrest. Lynch mobs promised swift justice if the system didn't do its job.

Within weeks, two suspects — Gustave Balin and Hank Benton — were arrested and charged with Begnaud's killing. To avoid a sure lynching, Broussard transferred the prisoners to the jail in New Orleans, further feeding the Crescent City's frenzy of yellow journalism.

But Balin and Benton were innocent. Begnaud's real killers, based on detailed confessions, were two orphaned French brothers, Ernest and Alexis Blanc. The siblings had arrived in Scott Station two years before, securing work on a nearby plantation for pauper's wages. Motive? They were educated and affable, and became frequent and welcome fixtures in Begnaud's store. Opportunity?

The problem was, the brothers Blanc departed Scott Station right after Begnaud's funeral, long before anyone began to suspect their guilt.

Yet the Blancs returned to Lafayette Parish, were arrested,
arranged, tried and finally hanged in the town square. Arceneaux attributes the Blanc brothers' return in part to the old adage about criminals always returning to the scene of the crime, theorizing that since the brothers had squandered the windfall from the first murder, they had come to rob again. The Blanches, as an aside, were fascinated by the pulp exploits of Jesse James, and they later claimed that stories of adventure and wealth in the Wild West had been a major impetus in their leaving France for the New World.

There's much more to the story, though, as Arceneaux found out in his research, which included trips to France to discover as much as he could about the mysterious Blanc brothers, who may not have been brothers at all.

Putting flesh on the bones

"The big compelling thing to me with the oral rendition of the story as it was passed down in my family over the course of a hundred years," the author recalled, "was that so much had been forgotten. What came down to me was a skeleton outline."

The story that Arceneaux heard as a child was a simple one of murder, arrest, trial, conviction and execution. Left out was the false arrest of Balin and Benton (and the egregious civil rights violations they suffered in the aftermath), the Blanc brothers' departure and return, the brothers' celebrity in New Orleans as they awaited trail, and virtually all the details, which are clouded even now, about the identity of Martin Begnaud's killers.

"I realized more than ever," Arceneaux admitted, "that had I not written this book, this story would have been wiped from memory."

But the story remains, and it is to the 19th century what the Baby Lindbergh or O.J. Simpson cases were to the 20th. Few writers could invent the murder of Martin Begnaud, and few historians could dissect it with such meticulous devotion.

And while the case stands as a punctuation mark in Lafayette's legal history, Arceneaux thinks he probably isn't finished with the story yet. Questions linger.

Alexis and Ernest Blanc (top photos, from left) remain shadowy figures. During their stay in the jail in New Orleans while awaiting trial, the brothers became well-known figures in the press, granting frequent interviews and even writing a detailed account of their life and crime which was later published in pamphlet form. Sheriff Ili Broussard (bottom right) went to pains to protect the suspects from lynch mobs infuriated by the indignity of having a prominent citizen of the parish, Martin Begnaud (bottom left), so brutally murdered.
regarding the Blanc brothers. Were they really orphans? Were they even brothers?

During their final days, the condemned men took all the steps available within Roman Catholic doctrine to ensure their salvation, and after their hanging they were given a Christian burial — with the caveats reserved for executed murderers. They were laid to rest one atop the other in an unmarked grave — not far from the tomb of the prosperous merchant who would be their victim.

Arceneaux and others think they know where the brothers Blanc lay. A ground radar scan at the suspected site shows something buried there. But officials with the cathedral have refused requests to exhume the bodies (for carbon dating and DNA testing to help determine the murderers' relationship and possible family ties in France).

The author said she hopes that some day I’ll be able to find these guys — who they were, where they came from. I may never do it. Someone else may do it. Maybe it’ll never get done.