

In LeBeau House's Ashes, a Lesson in *Carpe Diem*

Richard Campanella Contributing Writer, NOLA.com / Times-Picayune November 25, 2013

In the wee hours of November 22, one of the lesser-known but grandest historical treasures of greater New Orleans disappeared from the cityscape. The LeBeau House, the last large unrestored antebellum plantation mansion within metropolitan limits, caught fire under highly suspicious circumstances and was reduced to ashes before sunrise.

Earlier this year, I took my Tulane architecture students inside this striking Arabi landmark. We were joined by Chris Haines of the Arlene and Joseph Meraux Charitable Foundation (which owned the building), pioneer preservation architect Gene Cizek, and St. Bernard historian Bill Hyland, whose resounding baritone and imposing presence -- he's a direct descendent of the famed Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville -- seem to summon the past.

Our hosts guided us through the darkened interior of the ten-thousand-square-foot circa-1854 mansion. We gingerly ascended the precarious staircases into the attic and onto the roof, even into its prominent cupola.

We saw the house's Creole-style brick-between-post interior walls and America-style center hall, a rare fusion for so late in the antebellum era.

We viewed a room full of cast-iron railings from when the house was a country residence in the late 1800s, and armored peepholes from when it was a not-so-secret gambling club in the early 1900s.

We saw the damage of a 1980s fire, and inspected the stabilization work done in 2004, which fortified the building against a half-dozen subsequent hurricanes. From the rooftop, we enjoyed rarely seen vistas of historic Arabi abutting the Mississippi River, with the downtown skyline to our right and the sprawling Domino's sugar refinery to our left. Swirling mid-winter clouds and a setting sun made for an unforgettable experience, one now denied future generations.

The students wrote reflective essays on their visit. Some proposed restoring the house into a living history museum, with exhibits on slavery and sugar cane cultivation. Others saw it as an opportunity to showcase St. Bernard Parish history and tell stories too often left out of the urban New Orleans narrative.

Still others viewed LeBeau as a marquee stop on a cultural heritage trail linking downtown with Hopedale and Delacroix in the eastern marshes, along with the Lower Ninth Ward, Bayou Bienvenue, Jackson Barracks, Chalmette Battlefield, St. Bernard State Park, and the Islenos Museum.

Imagine a historic mansion, nearly as large as Oak Alley in Vacherie or Houmas House in Burnside, only ten times closer to the city and surrounded by an abundance of diverse attractions. The students marveled that this opportunity had not been seized upon long ago, and at least one, a native daughter of St. Bernard Parish, contemplated making it her mission.

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No more.

If a lesson may be rescued from LeBeau's ruins, perhaps it should be *carpe diem*.

Nearly every historically aware person who knew of this building had a sense of its exceptional nature, and its gross under-appreciation and utilization. We also recognized that it was vulnerable to any number of threats. Yet we did not seize the moment and save it.

We knew that it would be a costly undertaking to restore—at least \$5 million for the basic renovation, much more for the envisioned complex—and that it was not our call to make. The foundation that owned LeBeau, we were told, had other priorities for the social needs of the parish, and had at least stabilized the structure at a cost of \$1 million. It too failed to seize the moment.

As for leaders and authorities, they could well point to the ongoing effort of St. Bernard to recover from having been the single most devastated parish or county in the nation (99.9 percent flooded), even as its oil-stained coastal fringes continue to fray into the sea. Thus, they too did not seize the moment.

None of us did, myself included. And we all seemed to have “good” reasons.

Missed opportunities come with costs. To a remarkable degree, the identity and economy of our region rest on the aged timbers and piers of our historical structures. If you don't believe this, try and imagine what metro New Orleans would be like today had the French Quarter been razed a century ago, as was routinely suggested, and had not the success of its preservation inspired the restoration of thousands of other old buildings citywide.

Without large-scale historic preservation, our largest source of employment—tourism—never would have germinated. The sense of exoticism instilled by legions of local-color writers would have dissipated. Culinary and musical traditions would have been deprived a space for paying customers.

Lacking a structural basis, our social memory would have faded, and New Orleans might have ended up with a civic character little different than that of Mobile or Galveston.

Instead, individuals, organizations, and local government seized the moment before it became too late, starting in the 1920s and continuing in the present.

As stewards of this historical legacy, we all stand as beneficiaries today.

If you go out to 7200 Bienvenue Street in Arabi, you'll see what happens when that moment is missed. What could have become a cornerstone of St. Bernard Parish's collective memory is instead a smoldering pile of cinders.

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LeBeau Plantation House, Arabi, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana,
built in 1854-1857; destroyed by arsons on November 22, 2013



LeBeau Plantation House on February 26, 2013; photo by Prof. Richard Campanella, richcampanella.com



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