



The Journal of Central Louisiana History and Preservation

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF CENTRAL LOUISIANA

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Queries from our readers

This is a new column for our Journal where readers can write in with questions of a historical or preservation nature and we (the editors) will try to get an answer to the question(s). If not, maybe a reader can and will let us know so we can all share the answer.

From Darren Green: *I would like to have a discussion with you one day about a grave located at our Kiwanis Camp in Tioga. It is marked by a substantial obelisk so the person obviously had some money or connections. The occupant is William Waters who died in 1860. I did find that there was a steamboat captain of that same name and era but I don't know if they are the same.*

According to the *Find A Grave* site, a William Waters was born in Mason County, Kentucky in 1816 and died on November 22, 1868 and now has a tombstone at the old Rapides Cemetery. An undated newspaper article reads in part: "The remains of the 11 members of the Waters

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Inscription for Williams Waters and wife at Rapides Cemetery

family were disinterred and brought to the Rapides cemetery in Pineville last week for burial." Maybe one of our readers can share more information about this interesting family.

Questions? Email theHACL@suddenlink.net



Tioga Commissary photograph by Michael Wynne

Preserving Our Tioga Heritage

By Michael Wynne, reprinted from Cenla Focus Magazine November 2017

Considered now to be in the top ten of the most endangered of the important historic sites in Louisiana, the **Tioga Commissary Building** is also one of the rarest buildings of its type that still survives in all of the south: an old-fashioned sawmill commissary store. To see this amazing building in person and to walk down the gallery on its old creaking boards can almost bring a person back to the Victorian 19th century, back to when the general store served also as the city hall, post office, train station, butcher shop, farmer's market, the local news center, community meeting place, and so much more. This giant building, a well-worn historic treasure, quietly sits in what was once the old sawmill community of Tioga, only a few miles from the bustling cities of Alexandria and Pineville. This, the oldest commercial building on the Pineville side of the Red River, could not be duplicated at any cost today as it was lovingly constructed from the original virgin pine trees forest that the first settlers to central Louisiana found when they arrived here by wagon.

Well, let's tell the commissary's tale from the beginning. While the first bricks were being laid in the streets of Alexandria in 1880, the Iron Mountain Railroad came to central Louisiana. Julius Levin (who gave the original name to the Tioga community) built a sawmill beside the railroad tracks.

Preserving Our Tioga Heritage

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In 1905, Stephen "Sword" Lee bought the sawmill from Levin and built the commissary building to serve all of his mill workers and the residents of that area. In 1947, Rudolph Merritt bought the store and ran it for many years until his retirement.

Back then, the commissary stood in the center of the community. Jimmie Nell Adams Lewis who was born and raised in Tioga, said of the commissary, "It was the Wal-Mart of its day; it had everything!" The commissary was the only place that you could buy sewing fabric, work clothes for the mill, over-the-counter drugs, cosmetics, canned goods, fresh produce, meats, horse feed, hay and fencing. Ice cost 5 cents for a 10 pound block for your home ice box. Most importantly, the original store complex held the post office and a train depot (later destroyed by a hurricane) so all goods and

communication coming in and going out of the Tioga area had to cross over the commissary's elevated business counter where the cashier could overlook the store, and also the community's activities. "As a child, I used to bring in my mother's grocery list and the cashier would get everything on the list and place it in a box for me", Jimmie Nell said, "I would charge the groceries and my dad who worked at the mill

would pay the bill on pay day. When you walked in the store, you could smell the saw dust that was used to clean the floor. It was the community visiting place where you visited with everyone and could hear all of the community's gossip."

Alas, the commissary has fallen on hard times. After its use as a flea market and army surplus store, it first became one of the great rural state museums and reflected the culture and history of all of central Louisiana. But the museum closed due to costly roof repairs and foundation problems and the ownership of the commissary building is in the process of being returned to the people of Rapides parish by the state for the building's restoration and possibly a revised usage. "We are so blessed in this area to have such a historic landmark to serve as a reminder of our past." Jimmie Nell said, "Few towns in America have such a magnificent structure and we need to save and preserve it for our children and grandchildren to show them our heritage."

But the only question now is whether or not the people of central Louisiana will step up to save this irreplaceable link to our past.



**Jimmie Nell Adams Lewis
standing before the Tioga
Heritage Park and Museum sign**
Photograph by Michael Wynne



Gloria Hearn photograph submitted by Michael Wynne

Gloria Hearn, Preservationist

By Michael Wynne

One of the things that I find most interesting of the great people of CENLA is that no matter what activity they are involved with during their life, they can make it a success. Gloria Hearn and her late honorable husband, George Hearn, are good representatives of my belief. They quietly made contributions during their lives that left an indelible mark on bettering our CENLA community. This article will focus particularly here on Gloria's vast contributions to our community.

A native of the Greenwood community in Caddo Parish, Gloria Williams Hearn has always lead a remarkable life. Her father, whom she describes as an entrepreneur, was a farmer, cattleman, owned a farm equipment company and store, and was President of the Caddo Parish Police Jury. "If something needed to be done, he did it," Gloria proudly says of her father's diverse work. Gloria, the 8th of 12 children, was very proud of her mother also. Even with having to raise and teach 12 children, her mother also served as a member of the parish school board.

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Gloria Hearn, Preservationist

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"We were taught responsibility," Gloria says, "And we all had a job to do in our home. I consider it a blessing to have learned responsibility and good citizenship early in my life from my parents."

Two things Gloria remembers of her youth: She never had her own bicycle was one thing. But more importantly, she always loved school and could hardly wait to go to school each day. She was so talented in school that she was sometimes called upon while still in school to be a substitute teacher!

With education degrees at La. Tech and LSU (the latter a Master's degree), Gloria taught at various schools for over a dozen years, including as the director of the First Baptist Church preschool here in Pineville. She also served as a consultant for students having trouble in school. But her talents reached to much higher levels. She served as President or Vice President of many important education boards including serving as the President of the American Association of University Women. Her leadership in education would eventually lead her to two invitations to visit the White House and meeting both Presidents' Carter and Reagan. During her long and busy education career, she married in 1956 to George, a minister, professor at Louisiana College and a psychologist. They were the parents of 2 children, 3 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

Regarding historic preservation, Gloria was invited early on to serve on the board of directors of the Historical Association of Central Louisiana (HACL). She brought George on the board who later served as the President. Gloria and George helped organize the board as it now stands and hosted many important HACL functions. They set up local tours of homes and organized the annual "Peggy Bolton Lecture Series." Gloria also worked and helped financially contribute to the historic Rapides Cemetery association in Pineville. Regarding preservation, Gloria says, "We are a product of our heritage. Our heritage tells us who we are and what we are. Our past tells us about our future."

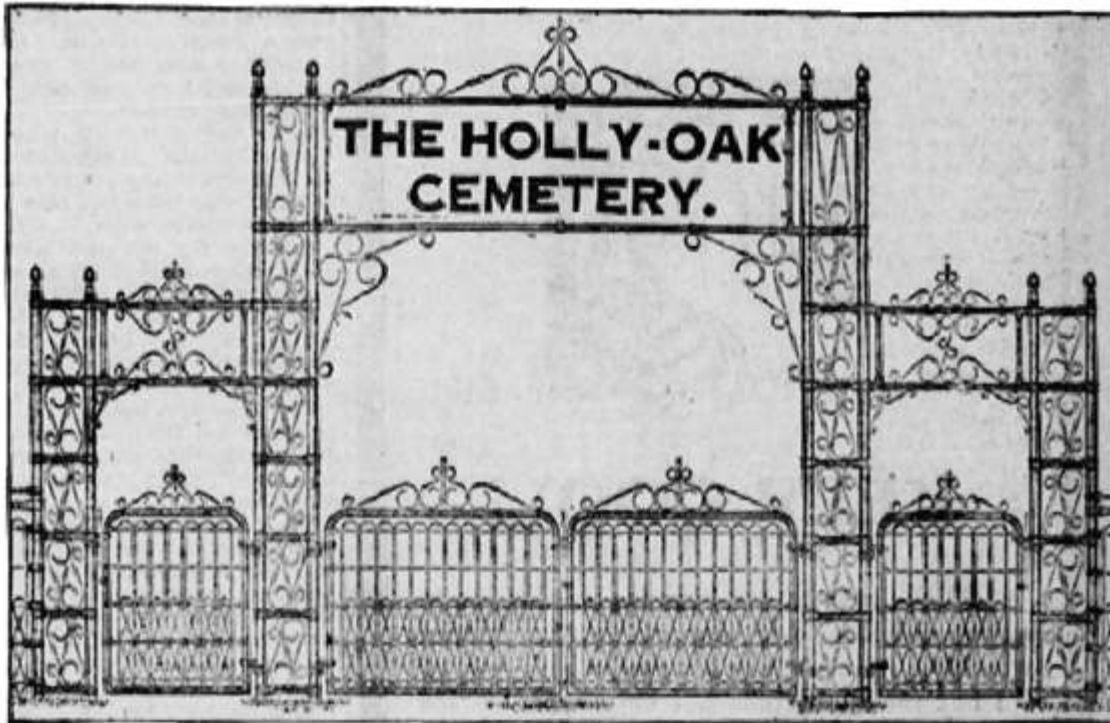
Gloria's 1923 Pineville home, a National Register and state historic landmark, was saved and restored by Gloria and George. It is the only major example of a classical revival house in the area and serves as a model for what is proper historic home restoration for others considering doing that. "I think it is important for people to keep learning and keep active in their communities." Gloria Williams Hearn is a true role model and inspiration for all of us working in historic preservation.



National Register historical marker



Gloria Hearn residence in Pineville



Drawing from a Holly-Oak Cemetery advertisement

Holly-Oak Cemetery

By Paul Price

In the November 13, 1923 edition of the Alexandria, LA Town Talk, a most unlikely new business venture was announced: two Caucasian men from Alexandria decided to create “a new colored cemetery...on the Marksville gravel road about a half mile east of Louisiana College” in Pineville. Today the “Marksville gravel road” is paved and is called Melrose Street within the city limits of Pineville, before it becomes Louisiana Highway 107 or the Old Marksville Highway farther east.

The new venture was named Holly-Oak Cemetery in view of their ideas to plant alternating holly and oak trees down the center of two twenty-foot wide driveways. While the cemetery still abides today at the end of Holly Oak Street, just a short distance from its intersection with Melrose Street, the trees which inspired its name are nowhere to be found.

At the time of the announcement, John R. Senseney was a sixty-two year old employee at the Town Talk, while at age fifty-five, James A. Williams was manager of the Kelly Undertaking establishment. Senseney apparently felt that his connection with the Town Talk would enable him to vigorously publicize their venture, and Williams was certainly in a position to promote the cemetery to his colored clients and acquaintances.

The announcement stated that “colored people would have to find another location, as both of the old cemeteries in Pineville have long since been taxed to their utmost capacity.” While not entirely true, that statement’s veracity could not easily be tested.

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Holly-Oak Cemetery

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After all, Pineville had become the site of most local burials since at least 1780. Due to its higher elevation, Pineville avoided the potential for flooding on the lower side of Red River in Alexandria.

It eventually required three separate land purchases in 1919 and 1921 from E. J. Barrett totaling \$800 in cash, all within the Barrett Subdivision of the Hooper Lands to allow Senseney to acquire ten contiguous lots therein. From there, Senseney and Williams began to organize and illustrate their ideas and create a marketing strategy.

With the help of the Town Talk article, the men put forth a grand vision: they divided the cemetery into squares, each measuring 24 feet by 24 feet with a four-foot walkway all around. "The price of the squares or for single graves will be within reach of the poorest, and will be sold on terms so that the payments can be made covering a period of several years," so the announcement read. Interestingly, many of the squares can still be seen at the cemetery today, with concrete curbs surrounding them.

Also proposed was an elaborate iron fence along the front with massive brick columns forming the gate-posts. They even published a drawing of the fence (*see drawing on page 6*), minus the brick columns, in the Town Talk to encourage patronage. A special section of the cemetery was set aside for members of the St. James Memorial Catholic Church (colored) of Alexandria. It reportedly was surrounded by a hedge of Armour River privet.

After the initial announcement, the participation of James A. Williams was never again mentioned. He died in 1942 and was buried in the Rapides Cemetery in Pineville.

Like many other businesses, Holly-Oak Cemetery suffered financially when the Great Depression arrived in 1929. Although desperate attempts were made to keep the establishment going, in 1933 the cemetery property was ultimately sold at Rapides Parish sheriff sale to Home Building & Loan Association for \$500.00. Fortunately, John Senseney was able to purchase the property again in 1937, this time for \$1,500.00.

Ben Constant was hired as sexton, or cemetery caretaker, and lived in a cottage on the cemetery property provided for that purpose. The sexton maintained the cemetery grounds and assisted with arrangements for burials and funerals.

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Monument of Louis Berry, local civil rights activist at Holly-Oak Cemetery in Pineville

Holly-Oak Cemetery

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Because the cemetery records have not been located, we have nothing by which to judge whether Holly-Oak Cemetery thrived as a business or not. John Senseney retained ownership of it until his death in 1944, after which he was buried at Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Pineville. His wife, Nellie Boyce Senseney, inherited the cemetery and eventually sold it in 1946.

In the year 1963, Georgia Marie Johnson and Milton Gills, Jr., both African American single persons, bought the cemetery for \$250.00. Both Johnson and Gills are now deceased, and their families still retain ownership of the cemetery. Approximately forty-percent of the cemetery is overgrown at this writing with only unpaid volunteers to maintain the grounds and monuments.

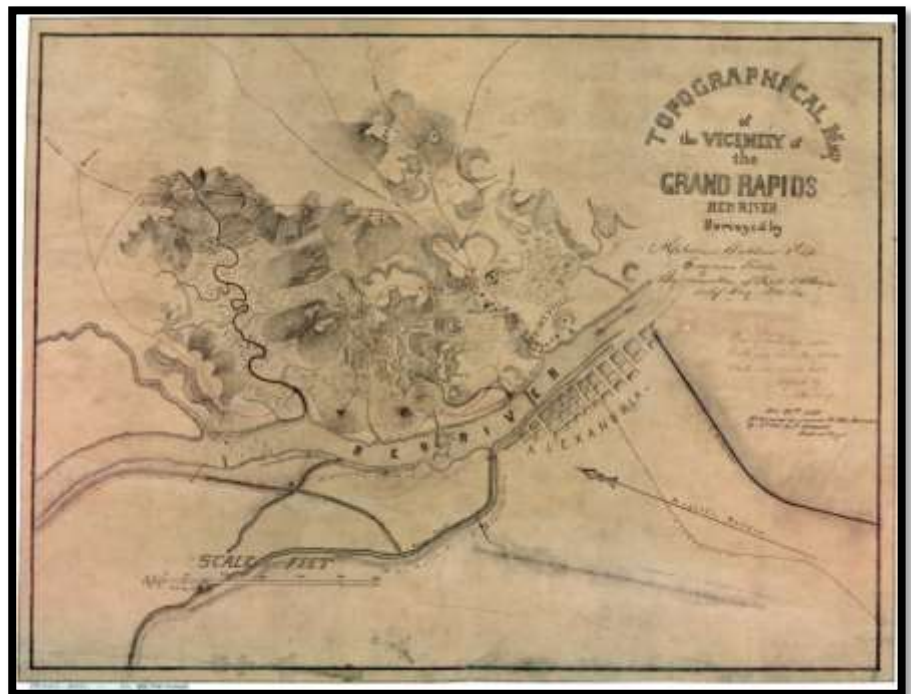
Origins of Donahue Ferry Road

By Paul Price

Somewhere in the Manuscripts Department of the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, there is a Confederate Civil War era map which holds great importance for central Louisiana. The map is part of the Gilmer Civil War Maps Collection which now comprises a total of 161 in all, and is available for both viewing and downloading online (*see the internet link at the end of this Journal*).

The map itself (*see the image at right*) is drawn on a sheet of paper measuring 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches by 22 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches using black, red and brown inks. Bearing the date of December 24, 1864, it was both surveyed and signed by Alphonse Buhlow, 1st Lt. Engineer Troops at the direction of Capt. D. F. Boyd, Chief Engineer, District of West Louisiana.

Today, we recognize Lt. Buhlow, whose name is forever connected with Fort Buhlow in Pineville, built in 1864 and supervised by Lt. Buhlow himself. We also acknowledge David French Boyd, who was an instructor at the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy in Pineville before the start of the Civil War.



**Topographical Map of the Vicinity of the
Grand Rapids Red River**

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Origins of Donahue Ferry Road

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Afterwards, Boyd became superintendent of what is now Louisiana State University. The site of the seminary is shown on the map at the upper left along Claiborne Road, now U.S Highway 71 or Shreveport Highway.

Perhaps the map's most amazing feature is the one most unexpected: one of the roads leading north from Pineville is labelled "Donahu's Ferry, Little River." Long-time Pineville residents have used that same road for generations. They have always referred to it as Donahue Ferry Road, and the old-timers have always known that it led in a generally northeast direction to a ferry at Little River. But no one suspected it had been called by the same name since as far back as 1864, and besides, who was Donahue, and where exactly was the ferry?

When Mike Tudor first saw the map several years ago, he began to study it, and when he saw the reference to Donahue Ferry Road, he immediately recognized that it "may well be one of the oldest named roads in Rapides Parish." And, if that were true, it was deserving of an historical marker. He had long experience working with the state authorities getting historical markers in the past, so Mike reached out to Dr. Henry O. Robertson, Professor of History at Louisiana College in Pineville. Mike knew that an academic consultant was needed for the historical marker quest, and Dr. Robertson immediately agreed to assist us.

The place we wished to find was along one of several well-travelled migration routes leading west from Natchez, Mississippi. Thousands of families made the arduous journey westward in search of opportunities both in Louisiana and in Texas. The ferry site for which we searched had likely been in use since colonial times. In those days, Little River had several ferry sites along its length before it flowed southward into the enormous Catahoula Lake. In 1929 the Louisiana Department of Highways built a bridge across Little River, and all those ferries fell into disuse.

Moreover, since the Civil War, much of our area has changed, and while Donahue Ferry Road still exists today, it no longer reaches Little River. The problem began with the military construction of Camp Beauregard in 1917 in preparation for WWI, and the later construction of Camp Livingston in 1940 in anticipation of WWII. All the roads within those camps and those leading into and out of them obliterated the once-direct route from Pineville to Little River.

Nevertheless, Mike Tudor made an educated guess that the most likely site of the ferry was at a place formerly called Lonnie's Landing near Bob, LA in Grant Parish. So our search began in that area, and ultimately, his guess proved to be correct.

Little River originally formed the boundary between two of the oldest parishes in Louisiana: what was then Catahoula Parish to the northeast and Rapides to the southwest.



**Former ferry site at
Lonnie's Landing
in Grant Parish**

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Origins of Donahue Ferry Road

(continued from page 9)

However, in 1869, the southwest bank of Little River along the former Catahoula-Rapides boundary was allotted to the newly formed Grant Parish. A further complication developed when the northeast bank of Little River along the same former boundary was allotted to the newly formed LaSalle Parish. As a result, records pertaining to the former ferry property could rest in any of those four parishes.

Dr. Robertson, knowing full well all of the above, boldly suggested starting the search of conveyance or property transfer records at the courthouse in Harrisonburg, LA, the parish seat of Catahoula Parish. Why? Because the 1860 U.S. Federal Census for Catahoula Parish enumerated a sixty-year old “W. Donahoe” with a wife and children in the Piney Woods District of the parish. He believed it was remotely possible that this “W. Donahoe” person *might* turn out to be the person who lent his name to Donahue Ferry.

But first, there was the records search. The Catahoula Parish Clerk of Court has all of the records of the parish dating back to 1805, but I had no idea of *when* or even *if* Mr. W. Donahoe may have purchased land in Catahoula Parish. And, even if he had, I *still* needed to connect him somehow to the ferry site

After one and a half days of searching, I was able to find the conveyance which recorded the purchase of “William Dunahoo” for *both* sides of Little River at the ferry site. Having found that document, we shared it with Dr. Robertson who pronounced it “good proof”, connecting the man with a similar-sounding name to both the ferry site and the road leading to it.

Still wanting to see the ferry site today from both sides of Little River, Mike Tudor and I made an expedition to the former Lonnie’s Landing on the southwest bank of Little River, now in Grant Parish and afterwards to the opposite bank of Little River, now in LaSalle Parish. Whoever named Little River must have done so by comparison with our nearby Red River, which always was and still is wider. But as you can see for yourself in the photographs, despite its name, Little River is most certainly not little. No wonder they needed a ferry there!

Months later on March 5, 2020 an historical marker was erected at the intersection of Donahue Ferry Road and Military Highway (*see photograph above*), the same place where Donahue Ferry Road witnessed its early beginnings.



Former ferry site in LaSalle Parish



Donahue Ferry Road historical marker

ATTENTION READERS

Please consider becoming a member of the
Historical Association of Central Louisiana.

The Historical Association of Central Louisiana is a partnership of members who share a common interest in preserving our local history for future generations.

Mission: HACL strives to advance the preservation, appreciation, and understanding of things of historical value in the central Louisiana community.

Visit our website for details on becoming a member:
theHACL.org

Sources:

Map used at top of page 1: *“Sketch of the Two Breakwaters above Alexandria in Red River Constructed by Lieut. Col. Bailey U.S.A”*

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3992r.cw0241000/?r=0.118,0.216,0.447,0.267,0>

Preserving Our Tioga Heritage: Personal interview of the author with Jimmie Nell Adams Lewis, 2017

Gloria Hearn, Preservationist: Personal interview of the author with Gloria Hearn, 2020

Holly-Oak Cemetery: Numerous articles from the Alexandria, LA *Town Talk* newspaper, including but not limited to:

Tuesday, November 13, 1923 edition, page 8

Thursday, November 22, 1923 edition, page 12

Tuesday, November 29, 1927 edition, page 11

Numerous personal visits by the author to Holly-Oak Cemetery

Origins of Donahue Ferry Road: “Topographical Map of the Vicinity of the Grand Rapids Red River” <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/gilmer/id/39/rec/8>

Personal meetings of the author with Mike Tudor and Dr. Henry O. Robertson, Professor of History at Louisiana College in Pineville, LA.

Records of Catahoula Parish Clerk of Court, Harrisonburg, LA