

History of Dog River

by
Henetta D. McClure

originally presented
before the

Mobile Historical Society

May 13, 1942

at the Dog River home of the late

Mrs. D.P. Bestor, Jr.

I have been asked to give a talk on the history of Dog River.

I am not an historian: All that I know about the history of Dog River, I have gleaned in a most sketchy fashion in the last two weeks, so I shall proceed along the lines of Napoleon's definition of history:

"History is a Table D'Agreed Upon"

In the year 1559 Tristan de Luna, Spanish Explorer landed at the mouth of Dog River in a small boat. He explored the river and was impressed with the wild beauty of the landscape, giant cypress, magnolias, pines and oaks. The Dogwood in bloom - the banks covered with the sweet smelling honey suckle and Day Magnolia. The bays and creeks bordered with ferns and the purple water hyacinth, but with all this heavenly beauty there was danger of landing anywhere as the alligators and snakes and dogs belonging to the Indians were guarding this special preserve.

More than one hundred years later (1600) Iberville had made friends with the Indians of this section and had named the river, "Riviere du Chien" (same think from the wild dogs of the Indians or from dog sharks, which swam in the waters of Dog River).

Iberville built a warehouse at Dog River and established a tanning industry where animal skins were tanned and shipped to France via Mobile.

From the time of Iberville until a recent date, the only history we can get of Dog River is of its commercial uses. In the years gone by the river has seen brick kilns - cotton factories, sawmills and once it was a hide out for the Copeland gang. (A gang of desperados who pillaged Mobile).

History tells us that Fort Mergon was built of bricks made at Dog River, and that the famous architect, James, used the same source for his buildings in Mobile. In 1770, there came to these waters the botanist, William Bartram. He came to discover rare and useful productions of nature in the vegetable kingdom and to secure roots and seeds to ship to England. He engaged the help of the native Indians and literally cut his way through the jungles of Dog River.

Bartram afterwards wrote of the wax myrtle found on the banks of the river which affords a scale harder than bees wax and which made candles which burned longer.

The evening prim rose which he found growing in abundance at Dog River, he described as the most brilliant plant in existence with its daily succession of hundreds of petals each over five inches.

He found pines and dark purple lily in abundance. He went into rapids over the cumberland tree, the hack eye, the woodbine, gum elastic, and the giant water lilies. Bartram had an attack of fever while exploring Dog River, and the Indians made him some citronella tea. He drank it and slept for twenty four hours. He woke up well and thought he was in St. James!

Bartram wrote a book about his findings in this part of the country. It was published after the American Revolution and incredible as it may seem, his book does not mention the Revolution.

I think being a botanist and lover of nature, that perhaps to him the Revolution was a mere irrelevancy.

"Wars are fleeting - nature eternal".

We have now skipped along from 1559 from Tristan de Luna, Spanish explorer of Dog River through the Revolution, 1776, a little more than 200 years. History tells us nothing of Dog River having been used for homes by either the Spanish or the French or the English and as far as we know the land was left to the birds, the wild animals and the Indians.

In the year 1839 the land upon which we built our home was granted by the U.S. to Etienne LaLande, and in our title it is written that the land was granted for a residence. The deed speaks of "Bayou Tarriner" as being the boundary line on the west.

In the year 1871 part of this land, known as the La Lande Tract was bought by E. M. Johnson and his wife Augusta Evans. How different the history of Dog River might have been had "Miss Augusta" built here instead of Ashland Place!

There is living here on Dog River a Negro who is a direct descendent of a slave owned by the Evans family. The land upon which this Negro lives was given to his grandfather after the War Between the States. The fourth generation of his Negro family is now growing up on Dog River. They are probably the oldest family in point of residence on the west side. The name is Ephsomb, a fine old Virginia name. Fred, the owner of the place and the father of the children, works for my brother, Paul Danner.

Three Trunkmen, Egere, Muller and Porter lived on the west side of Dog River for many years. All have now died. It is said that they settled here in Alabama because of the climate and also that the soil was suitable for growing grapes by which they hoped to support themselves by making and selling wine. The Egere's were born in Virginia. There is an ancient colored woman living in the home of Mr. Muller. She is said to have been his housekeeper, her name is Clara. She says she is "Creole" which in Mobile means "nearly white". There are fine scuppernon vines on the property of Egere and Muller, and if you have never picked and eaten the juice of a sun ripened brown scuppernon, when you don't know how delicious the scuppernon can be.

In the early 1900's, Mr. Henry Tacon, a French resident of Mobile, married Nicholas de Reune, daughter of the Baron De R of Paris, France. Mr. Tacon had Mr. George Rogers, Mobile architect, draw the plans for a house to be built on Dog River for his beautiful Parisian bride. This house was the first house of any distinction built on the river.

The Henry Tacon's have had a home on Dog River for some years and in recent times they discovered a hick lined tunnel on their place. So far they do not know how it got there or for what purpose it was built.

Today the William Hunters, the Paul Danvers, the Barry Lyons, the Perrin Restors, Jr., the J. L. Badstubs, the J. M. McKeays, the Robert Bacon, Mrs. George Cook, R. W. Taylor, Jr., Robert Whiting, the Clarence McCharrs, the Steward Barnays — all own homes on the west side of Dog River.

About 25 years ago Mr. Dan Tisler came to Mobile from St. Louis. He bought some land on Dog River and built a place and named it "Dan de Lion Lodge". It was a forerunner of our modern night clubs. (Later to become the home of Denton) One day I was invited

there to have lunch with a group of friends. After lunch Mr. Tisher came out on the lawn where we were and said "This is the garden spot of Mobile, but the Mobile people don't know it". I wish Mr. Tisher could be here today to see how Mobile people have caught his vision of "Dog River as being the "Garden Spot of Mobile".

Beautiful gardens and pleasant homes have taken the place where once the wild dogs and the Indians roamed. Children swim safely in the waters once dangerous because of dog sharks and alligators.

"What will future historians write of our generation of Dog River home owners? The cultivation of azaleas, camellia, cape jasmine, hydrangeas and the planting of avenues of live oaks. I hope some writer will write that for those who lived all the year round at Dog River there was an ever increasing joy in the beauties of nature. "Fall, with its gorgeous colors and the beauty of the sun on the face of the river on a cold winter day when the river shines with more sparkle than the train of any carnival queen, and it is hard to keep ones mind on a book for looking. Then the exquisite Spring miracle with the white flowers of dog wood and the beauty of the fringe tree, the tender green of the river reeds and ferns thickly studded with purple iris - the air sweet with the fragrance of the honeysuckle and bay magnolia and swamp lilies -- the singing of many birds and towards evening the steadily incessant choruses of frogs to lull one into sweet sleep while whispering thankfully--

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth His handiwork"

(Psalm 19:1

Mobile's Dog River:

A Peaceful Paradise

That's Rich in History

by

Inogen Syge Tullton

Suburban PEOPLE Correspondent

December 13, 1984

the shack supported by wooden blocks at the water's edge. What a far cry from today's clubhouse with its long, screened porches and oversized stone fireplace in the living room.

A story of Dog River would not be complete without mentioning the name of Capt. Peter Alha, one of Alha's early Mardi Gras kings, who built a hunting and fishing camp on a picturesque point of land in a wide part of the river. He later donated the site to his friends as the Alha Hunting and Fishing Club.

This club, noted for not serving alcoholic beverages anywhere in the clubhouse or on the grounds, was—and still is—a family club, where motorboats and sailboats are moored and where children spend the day swimming and canoeing and older teenagers go sailing in the moonlight.

In the 1930s, the club was a great place for Sunday dinners, when Mrs. Littlegreen, the caretaker, and Lillie, the cook, excelled in serving fried chicken, homemade rolls and fresh peach (hand-cranked) ice cream.

Young people were always safe at the Alha Club, whether day or night.

In the daytime, Mrs. Littlegreen would wake them out of swimming if the weather turned chilly. The boys and girls would warm up by her wood stove in the kitchen and munch on Milky Ways and hot dogs.

In the evenings, if teenagers lingered too long after dark, the floodlights would suddenly turn on, and Mrs. Littlegreen would say, "It's getting late. Time to go on home." It is a wonder any teenage romance flourished in those days!

Mrs. Littlegreen was a "legend in her own time" and was loved by children and parents alike.

A recently published book tells of the famous outlaw James Copeland, a robber and killer who—with his gang—terrorized the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast during the 1950's.

Before his hanging in Mississippi, Copeland confessed that he would hide his loot on Dog River and then go back for it later, escaping sometimes dressed as a woman.

We don't know how he crossed the river, but at that time there was said to be a ferry near the mouth of the river. It is known that he was finally captured in the vicinity of Dog River.

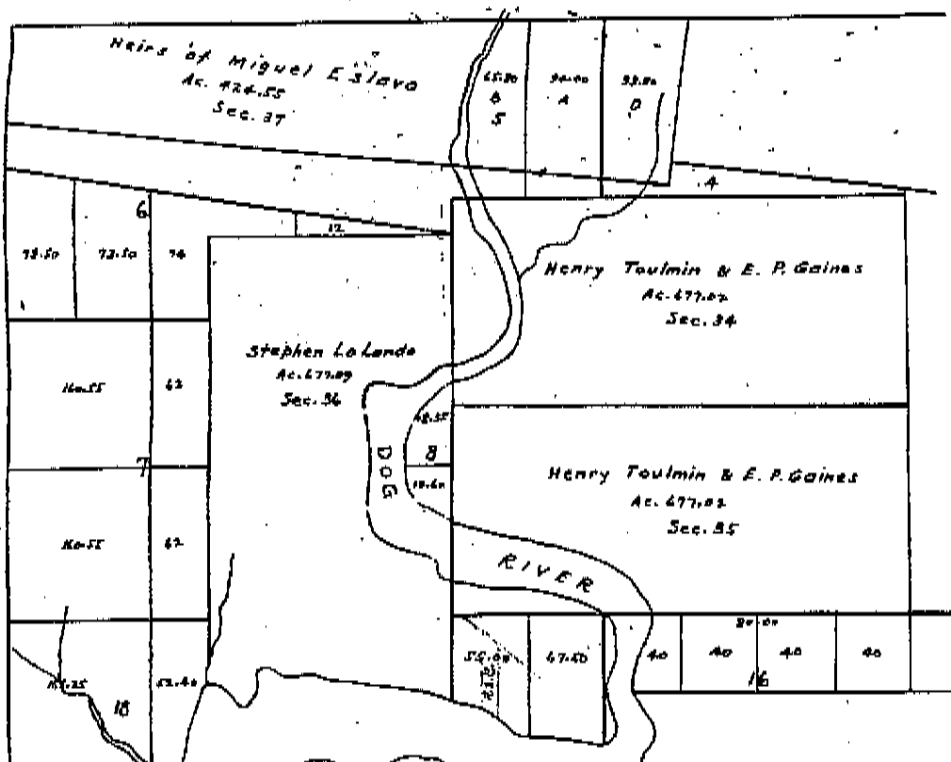
The Copeland Gang was said to have been made up of a number of people—some prominent in that day.

Dog River is a tidewater—a river where salt water comes in from the bay. Yet its upper reaches are fed by fresh streams from Cottage Hill and Spring Hill.

The life style of those who live on the river ranges from cutting grass and working on boats to entertaining with silver and crystal; from gardening to picnics on the wharf.

But, whatever the approach one takes to reach the river—Narco Road, Veneta Road, Stallingers Island, Riviere du Chen Road, Spanish Point, Riverside, River Forest or Scenic Drive, one thing is certain: Dog River is a world all its own.

Plat No. 1



Copy of a portion of a Government Township plat of Township 5 South, Range 1 West, contained in the office of the Title Insurance Company. This plat is dated May 19, 1846.