

It was on the 24th day of September, 1699, that Sieur d'Iberville sailed with two thirty-gun frigates and two smaller vessels from Rochelle in France on a voyage of discovery to the Mexican Gulf.

He had been commissioned by the French Government to search for the mouth of the Mississippi River and, when found, to take possession of and colonize the country.

After remaining at San Domingo for some time, and having been joined by a fifty gun man-of-war, under Capt. Chateaurant, they sailed northwestward.

Finding the water near the shore very shallow, the large vessels anchored in Ship Island harbor.

The first visit to Cat Island is told thus in the journal of the pilot Chateau:

"On Friday, 27th February, 1699, d'Iberville, de Bienville and 20 men embarked in one of the long boats: de Sauvol, Father Anastasius, Chateau, the pilot, and 20 men embarked in the other, making altogether a force of 51 men, part Canadians and part filibusters, whom we had taken on board at San Domingo and who were to remain in case we found a suitable place for settlement. We were provisioned for twenty days and armed with guns, pistols, sabres and a swivel in each long boat, to defend ourselves against any insult which the natives might offer us in the course of our discoveries. Soon after starting we were obliged to remain over night on an island where we killed several chats-aux-huitres (coons). We called the island Isle aux Chats-aux-huitres. These animals came into our camp at night in great numbers and ate what provisions we had left from our evening meal."

Penicaut, the ship carpenter of the exploring expedition, also kept a journal in which he says:

"We cast anchor in a roadstead between Ship Island and another called Raccoon Island on account of the great number of raccoons found there. This island is about seven leagues long and a quarter of a league wide, and is one league distant from Ship Island. We killed there a prodigious number of wild geese, which are called outardes in this country, and are of a size larger than our geese in France."

It will be seen from the above extracts that the discoverers of the island intended to call it Raccoon Island, but in the course of time Isle aux Chats-aux-huitres was contracted by the creoles into Isle aux Chats.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

James A. Cuevas, grandson of Jean Cuevas of Cat Island War of 1812 fame, related a story handed down to him by his father, Raymond, while sitting as a sightless Confederate Veteran on the porch of "Beauvoir" in 1922 to Zoe Posey.

One day in July, 1820, my grandfather saw a barge run ashore at Goose Point--a southeastern tip of Cat Island.

He waded out and saw two men shoveling sand in order that the boat might get off. They refused assistance or advice. Strange sounds were heard aboard.

My grandfather came ashore and got Mr. Ferris, a man who had participated in the Battle of New Orleans, and who had come to Cat Island to visit my grandfather to whom he was greatly attached.

They boarded the vessel and found the captain chained head and foot to the cabin floor. He could not speak for weakness. They tied up the two men in the boat, took the Captain ashore and put him in a warm, nice bed, and my grandmother fed him weak soup--a tablespoon at a time.

They took the men to Bay St. Louis where they were put in the calaboose from which one escaped, and the other ~~was~~ was hanged after trial by military law.

My grandfather and Mr. Ferris continued on to New Orleans and informed the insurance company of the occurrence. The insurance people sent over and brought the Captain and the boat's cargo of silk to the city. The boat was from France en route to New Orleans laden with silk goods of the greatest value.

Source: "The Times-Picayune" (N.O.) May 7, 1922, Magazine Sec. Pg. 4

Jean Cuevas of "War of 1812" fame on Cat Island, Miss., was the father of many children including Francois, Bridget, Peter, Ferdinand, Du(?)phrasine, Hypolite, Juanita, (and three others whose names it is impossible to decipher).

James A. Cuevas, a ~~grandson~~ grandson of Raymond (or Ramon) and grandson, recalled in 1922 on the porch of "Beauvoir" as a sightless Confederate Veteran, that in 1844 his Grandfather Jean Cuevas gave a great party on Cat Island that lasted for more than a week.

People came from "Old Chimney" (present day Long Beach), Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian and Rotten Bayou -- about six boatloads -- big boats, too.

Great preparations were made. Dr. Guardia, who knew more about cooking than anybody in all that country, supervised the cooking of all the meats. The chickens were bled and stuffed with oysters and baked as were the geese, ducks, pigs--everything was stuffed with fine seasoning.

Two tables were always ready: one with heavy food and the other with all kinds of liquors, cakes, ~~and~~ candies and fine things. There was one hundred pounds of candy, gum drops filled with liquor, rock and stick candy--these were the only candies made then; pound cake, tea-cakes, cakes covered with chocolate, all fine, fine.

Well, they danced and danced. Back-step, front-step, fandango, reel, cotillion, waltz, polka, two-step polka. They danced by fiddle and when one set of musicians were tired others took their places.

There was everything to drink--yes, whisky, too--plenty of it, but nobody got drunk. They were used to it.

The party lasted eight days--and nights, too--for they danced sometimes all night. They did not sleep much for they were having a grand time. They ate and ate, and it could have lasted eight days more for there was enough food for it.

Expensive? Why, no. Sugar cost $1\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound; meat, all kinds, $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents; flour \$2.50 and \$2.75 a barrel--there were two kinds, fine and superfine, and this last cost more. Candy was $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound. We had everything on the island so there was little to buy. Besides, my grandfather was rich--rich--not what people call rich now, maybe, but very rich for that day.

He raised stock--cows, horses, everything on the island. Butchers came to the island from New Orleans and bought cattle by the boatload. He raised all kinds of vegetables, especially potatoes, which he sent to the city, as well as fish and oysters. Oh, yes, he made a great deal of money.

Source: "The Times-Picayune" (N.O.) May 7, 1922, Magazine sec. Pg. 4
as told to Zoe Posey.

The Great Sand Hill at the eastern end of Cat Island consists of three distinct cones, the highest of which is at present (1871) seventy feet high.

It is a conspicuous land mark, and with the sun shining on it can be seen at a great distance. The prevailing winds being east in this neighborhood, the entire hill is slowly traveling in a western and southwestern direction. A casual reader would scarcely credit the distance that this immense mass of sand moves westwardly in the course of one year.

From 1847 to 1855 the entire hill traveled, according to observations made by Coast Survey parties, over fifty yards to the west. During that time the summit was used as an astronomical station, but there was continual trouble about securing a permanent foundation for the instruments. A heavy granite block was placed at the bottom of a long square box of wood, sunk vertically into the sand, and still this box would several times become entirely denuded and topple over.

Assistant J. E. Hilgard, attached to the Coast Survey Office, and in charge of its business around this Gulf coast, came to the conclusion that the "star of empire" was not the only one that "takes its westward way," but that the great sand hill was trying its hand at that game also.

A correspondent of a New Orleans paper says:

"I saw the trees on Cat Island, and the hemispherical summit of a snow-white mound near its eastern extremity. Its form, color and vast size, towering high above the pine trees on the island, astonished me. I had never seen or heard of it before. An old resident on the Coast informed me that it was a huge sand hill; that it was about one hundred feet high when he first visited it sixty years ago but that the winds had removed it, until it is not now more than sixty feet perpendicular, and nearly half of it has been scattered over the Island. I engaged a group of 'old salts' into an animated discussion in regard to its formation. One argued that it was spewed up by an earthquake; others contended that the storm waves rolling in from Ship Island and the Chandeleurs have made it. One old seaman concluded that it had "made itself." I give no opinion about it, and will not until I can visit it. It is a very remarkable pile of sand and there is enough of it snow white to make a beautiful cement for all the plaster that a hundred such cities as New Orleans will ever need."

-- Frank Heiderhoff

Ducks, geese and all other kinds of wild water fowl are found at almost all seasons in abundance on Cat Island, but, of course, particularly so in winter. They feed on sea-grass and false rice; while the marionettes, bexis and several other kinds of ducks live also upon shell-fish, shrimps, small fish, etc. Those that feed on fish are not considered as good eating as the granivorous ones, as their diet imparts an oily flavor to their flesh.

In summer the Island is encircled by vast numbers of pelicans. Their flesh is not used as food because it is too spongy and too rank to be valued for anything but the oil which is made from it. The oil is looked upon as a very valuable one for medicinal and mechanical purposes. At the end of April young squab pelicans can be obtained in great numbers.

May and June are the months in which the large sea-turtles are caught while laying their eggs in the sand on the beach. The long, narrow, desolate sand spit of Goose Point is a favorite resort for them. The turtle is watched when it comes on shore at night and merely tumbled over on its back where it lies perfectly helpless until its captors have time to knock it on the head and carry it off.

We have frequently seen here the largest sized eagles that can be found in the Southern States. They build their nests among the branches of the highest pines and seem to be very bold and fearless.

Around the sand hills are thousands of the tracks of raccoons who seem to people the Island apparently in countless multitudes. (1871) They are seldom seen by day, being of a nocturnal habit, and can only be roused from their lairs in the marshes and grass tufts with the assistance of a good dog.

The only quadruped on the Island, beside the universal and all-pervasive raccoon, is the mink. They can be occasionally seen among the palmetto clumps on Middle Spit.

A walk on the south beach is interesting to the lover of nature in solitude. The sand is as hard as incipient marble and wave after wave casts up the treasures of the deep--the tinted shell. Sea gulls and pelicans circle around and above the white-capped billows, while on land the interesting little sand crab, dashing frantically along on his stilit-like legs, furnishes unceasing amusement.

All the waters adjacent to the Island teem with oysters. They are found in inexhaustible beds on all sides of it. These gathered in South Bayou rival the far-famed oysters of parataria in size and flavor. A great many small craft are engaged in carrying them to New Orleans where they are preferred by many epicures to those from other localities.

Fishing can, of course, be carried on to perfection, and craft of all kinds come here to ensnare the finny tribes.

In their proper season, the Mullet is very abundant. Immense schools of them can be seen churning up the water in all directions on each pleasant autumn day, and all through winter and spring, incessantly pursued by their fierce enemies, the Shark, Porpoise and Redfish. It is very entertaining to watch the peculiar style in which these predatory animals get their meal of Mullet. The Shark, with the sharp end of his dorsal fin only cleaving the water like a knife, will quietly but quickly glide into the midst of the school, and giving a well directed blow with his tremendous tail, stun and fling forward about a dozen of his victims, and at the same moment, turning his head and opening his formidable jaw, will dexterously catch them as his tail flings them forward.

The Porpoise, with a few dashing leaps toward the thickest of the flying and terrified host, rushes through the shoal with his capacious maw wide open, and usually gets it full at each trial. The Redfish usually contents himself with one--some straggler lagging behind.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

Source: "The New Orleans Times" - Sunday, June 4, 1871

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CAT ISLAND

MOSQUITOES & STICKERS

Cat Island would indeed be the abode of unalloyed pleasure if the cup of enjoyment were not seasoned with a large drop of poison in the shape of mosquitoes.

In the Summer months, particularly when the breezes are lulled, they are almost unendurable. Common mosquito netting seems to be no protection against them. The oystermen and fishermen frequenting these waters in mosquito time, use heavy calico or domestics for their bars. And even then they have to be very carefully secured around the lower edges to keep the torments from working their way in.

Among the minor plagues that the casual visitor has to encounter may be mentioned the "chouc-poulon" or "sticker," and the prickly pear. Both densely cover many of the oak ridges. They make locomotion unpleasant unless the feet are protected by a good pair of boots.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

Source: "The New Orleans Times" - Sunday, June 4, 1871

Whatever the constituent ingredients of the soil may be, there is something in the atmosphere, some peculiar principle in the air and soil combined, which forces vegetation to the utmost degree of luxuriance.

Even the naked sand beach is clothed nearly everywhere with Bermuda grass. The pure white sand, which seems destitute of any ~~veget~~ vegetable principle whatever, is covered in many places with a dense jungle of juicy and rank foliage.

It has been demonstrated by late agricultural researches that sand may predominate in a soil to the extent of ninety per cent, and still that soil may produce a luxuriant vegetation. And on Cat Island may be found an emphatically luxuriant vegetation. The palmetto, particularly, grows to an immense size, as well as the coco or nut grass.

About half way between the Great Sand Hill and the Lighthouse on the northern side of the Island are the remains of the old Cuevas home, still surrounded by the wreck of a formerly splendid orchard of oranges, lemons, figs, plums, etc.

Oyster reefs stretch out in all directions in front of the old home and fish of all kinds sport in the adjoining waters, while the surrounding land bears evidences of former cultivation and fertility. But the only time we visited the place, on a balmy May morning, while not a breeze was stirring the leaves of the forest, we were so tortured by dense swarms of mosquitoes that we were compelled to beat a hasty retreat.

On the very beach, where you might expect the water to be brackish, it gurgles up into a "barrel well" sweet, clear and tasteless

At the foot of the great Sand Hills particularly the sweetness of the water at the depth of a foot cannot be excelled on the main land even.

Water is readily obtained anywhere on the Island by digging a few feet and sinking a barrel. It seems to be rendered sweet and fresh by filtration through the beach sands, which contain more clayey matter than one would give them credit for at first sight.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

The lordly Live Oak, standing on a lonely island, spreading its far-reaching arms over three-fourths of an acre (? MJS), draped in its gray garb of melancholy--the ever swaying moss--is the commanding feature of island landscape. It is seldom found more than twenty-five miles from salt water (MJS questions), or north of the 35th degree of latitude. It is a noble tree surpassed by few in beauty of form, magnificence of proportions, or pleasing aspect. Its leaves remain on the branches throughout the whole year, until the young ones of the next season push them off. It is, therefore, never bare for a single moment and fully merits its botanical appellation of *Quercus Sempervirens*. Most of the trees are thickly overhung with the funereal Spanish moss, which, if it were not an air plant, might be supposed to prey upon the vital sap of these trees and cut out their substance, for many of them are of a stunted and scrubby growth, and many of them are dying out and rapidly decaying. (1871)

Ah, but the pines !. There stand the quiet multitude, each like the shadow of the one beside it--upright, fixed, spectral, as troops of ghosts standing on the walls of Hades--not knowing each other, and still whispering to each other forever. Standing there in solemn silence, majestic columns of the great temple that the Omnipotent has built for himself, looking down reflectively into the mirrored deep that chants the hymns of the universe.

On Lighthouse Spit in many neighborhoods the pines grow to a large size, while in others again they are rather dwarfed and average only 35 to 45 feet in height and about six inches in circumference. There are evidences of "turpentine orchards" having been in successful operation here at some former period.

~~Yopon~~
Yopon (*ilex cassine*) in the form of low, dense thickets, overrun the main portion of Lighthouse Spit. It is a short tangled shrub with small evergreen leaves and red berries. In many places it forms an almost impenetrable thicket. Its leaves can be used as a tea almost equal to the celebrated Paraguay tea. Both are a species of holly.

The well known common Coast Palmetto, or latanier, disputes with the Yopon the mastery of the undergrowth. The roots--heavy, clumsy, unsightly masses--cover the ground in many localities completely. The Indians cut these roots into brick-like pieces and sell them in the markets for scrubbing brushes. The large, fanlike leaves can be used as a very good covering for the roofs of cabins and camps and are manufactured into splendid fans.

Spanish Moss which is not a moss, as its name imports, but bears a regular small greenish flower and belongs to the same order with the pineapple, has recently (1871) become an important article of commerce, as a substitute for horse hair in the manufacture of mattresses. After the outer covering of the flexible stem has been rotted off by exposure in the open air, there remains a black, hair like bundle of fibres, which has all the strength and elasticity of horse hair. It is exclusively a product of the Southern States and its growth and collection ought to be fostered. It draws its nourishment from the atmosphere and neither exhausts the soil nor injures the tree on which it grows.

Source: "The New Orleans Times" - Sunday, June 4, 1871

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CAT ISLAND
CIVIL WAR LUMBER & CHARCOAL
for the Union

When in 1862 New Orleans fell into the hands of the Federal forces, the supply of sawed lumber and charcoal soon became low, as the city was cut off from all its usual sources of supply.

The Quartermaster's Department, however, was equal to the emergency and established a colony of negroes in an eligible location at South Bayou on Cat Island for the purpose of carrying on the sawing of lumber and the burning of charcoal.

Shortly after the commencement of this enterprise, a crowd of Confederates stole over at nights in skiffs and row boats and played havoc with the poor "niggers."

After this catastrophe, a company of infantry was sent from New Orleans for the protection of the menaced settlement. Barracks were built and a large flag-staff erected in front of the officers' headquarters from which proudly fluttered the stars and stripes.

Feeling now secure against any more surprise parties, a large steam saw mill was erected and the smoke from a thousand coal-kiins arose everlastingly to heaven. The destruction of timber, both live-oak and pine, went on quite rapidly and many places on the Island, formerly densely wooded, now present (1871) more the appearance of an open park.

The houses of the laborers were clustered together in two settlements, the larger of which presented the appearance of a regular town. Their ruins are now (1871) fast crumbling into dust. Only the substantial frame of the big mill still stands defying the corroding tooth of time.

When we first visited the island after the close of the war, these settlements had just been evacuated a few days previously. We found in front of the parade ground a life-sized image of a uniformed man painted on a large board, evidently intended and used as a target for the muskets of the garrison. It was pierced in innumerable places with the bullets of the successful marksmen. Over the head of the figure was inscribed, "Jeff. Davis."

We have since then met some of the darkeys who worked in those saw mills and at charcoal burning during the eventful years of the war. They told us that they lived well, had plenty of fish and oysters, but suffered terribly from the attacks of mosquitoes and sand-flies, which made, at particular seasons, life almost unbearable.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

Source: "The New Orleans Times", Sunday June 4, 1871

CAT -- PASS CHRISTIAN - PASS MARIAN

1839 to 1861

Hurricane of September 15, 1860

The Light Tower on Cat Island was built about 1839 in the same year that the one at Pass Christian was erected. The first keeper was a Mr. Riley who did not live long. He died of small-pox contracted during a visit to the main land.

He was succeeded by Mr. Ramon Cuevas, Jr., who took both Riley's lighthouse and widow, and was keeper ~~of it~~ at the time the war broke out.

Mr. Cuevas, during his extended stay on the island from 1841 to 1860 surrounded himself with all the comforts of a country house. He raised large numbers of cattle, hogs and chickens. With the aid of manure he also raised good vegetables in his gardens--much better and luxuriant than the sandy soil would at first warrant to hope for. Running a sail boat at stated days to the neighboring coast with a load of butter, vegetables, pickled oysters, dried fish, and in winter, game and fowl, he managed to amass quite a competency and lived in comfortable circumstances.

On the 15th of September, 1860, a storm swept over the island from the southwest that raised the water in a very short time to an unprecedented height. The residence of the Lightkeeper, Mr. Ramon Cuevas, was inundated and seriously damaged. He saved himself and his family only by a hasty flight. The whole island, with the exception of some oak ridges, was overflowed.

The Light Tower at the extreme western spit of the island was rendered useless in 1861 and the apparatus taken away by order of General Twiggs.

It had its light fixed at 51 feet above high water and was visible for 12 nautical miles.

At Present (1871) the old Light Tower is quite dilapidated, the station discontinued. Indeed, it has become useless, Pass Marian Lighthouse having taken its place.

-- Frank Heiderhoff

Source: "The New Orleans Times" Sunday June 4, 1871

Of the series of islands lying off the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Cat Island is by far the most intriguing and has provided the setting for some of the most colorful incidents of Mississippi Gulf Coast history.

Cat 29

It was so named in 1699 by a French exploring party, who had never seen raccoons before and mistakenly thought the curious creatures peering at them from the trees were cats.

In the two and a half centuries since it was first christened and recorded by d'Iberville's expedition as "Isle Aux Chats", it has casually welcomed and "waved" goodbye to pirates, English redcoats, rum runners, World War II army dogs, and generations of lumbermen, fishermen, and hunters and trappers. All of them came and went for various reasons, all leaving the island the still uninhabited natural paradise it is today. Cat Island is now privately owned and its only permanent resident is Joe Reed, the present caretaker.

THE HERO OF CAT ISLAND

Cat Island became the backdrop for the man who played an important role in the winning of the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815 by General Jackson's outnumbered and hastily collected army.

Jean Couevas and his family were the only inhabitants on Cat Island when the British anchored at neighboring Ship Island to attack New Orleans with the greatest amphibious invasion force ever launched by a foreign foe against American soil. It was Jean's stubborn courage in a moment of decision that helped save us from losing not only the Battle of New Orleans, but with it the entire half of our present nation, then still known as the Louisiana Purchase.

Back in the 1780's, Juan de Couevas of Biloxi received a Spanish Land grant giving him title to the entire western half of Cat Island. When the family took possession, Jean was about 20 years old. They began raising cattle on Cat Island and soon Couevas beef was in demand all along the Coast from New Orleans to Mobile. By the time the British arrived at the neighboring Ship Island in December of 1814, the Couevas family on Cat Island was one of the wealthiest along the Coast and Jean was a middle aged habitant with a grown family of his own.

The British with 10,000 troops to feed soon discovered the nearby existence of the Couevas cattle on Cat Island and sent a foraging detail to commandeer them. Trying to protect his cattle, Jean was shot in the leg and was taken prisoner. However, when the British discovered the local prominence of the Couevas family and the possibilities of this Frenchman, who undoubtedly owed no allegiance to the new United States, they promptly administered to his wound. Then they offered him his freedom, full compensation for the cattle, complete protection for all Couevas property and future favors when their occupation was complete. All he had to do was instruct their pilots how to negotiate the safest and shortest water route to New Orleans. To their astonishment Jean did refuse. And so it was that in the crowded cabin of a man-o-war, the British invasion suffered its first defeat to a lone enemy who was not even an American.

When the British - shattered and beaten - came back to their base at Ship Island, they released Jean Couevas before sailing home, obviously not realizing how this one man resistance had contributed to their defeat.

THEN THERE WERE THE PIRATES.

Between 1804 and 1815, Jean Lafitte and his pirates looted ships and laughed at the law for 10 years. They were finally pardoned for all their previous crimes of piracy, actual or accused, by a grateful U. S. government in recognition of their patriotism and fighting prowess in that famous battle.

TODAY

Just a half century ago, in 1911, Cat Island came into the possession of the Boddie family for the first time. Nathan V. Boddie, grandfather of Nathan V. Boddie of Gulfport and his sister, Mrs. Herbert Buffington, Jr., of Canton, Ga., who now own it; the Island passed out of the Boddie family twice. First it was sold to Senator Money, and then to Governor Lee M. Russell of Mississippi - who let the island default back to the Boddies. The Governor refused an offer of a million dollars for Cat Island from a man named Fisher, a promoter who later, as second choice developed Miami Beach.

The government took over Cat Island in World War II. The Seabees practised landing craft maneuvers. North Point was a bombing practice range for the Air Force, and the