



# Gretna Chronicles



Gretna, Louisiana



Volume 31, Issue 11

An Official Publication of the Gretna Historical Society

December, 2021

## The President Presiding...

By Sylvia Schwarz, GHS

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all. Those who missed our November General Membership meeting, missed a wonderful meeting. It was so good to see everyone. The Memorial Service was truly inspirational. Appreciation was expressed by many of the family members present. Thanks go out to Gigi Bergeron for a beautiful service.

Plans have begun for our annual December Meeting/Christmas party. It will be scaled down from prior years, but Ray Markase has assured us it will be just as entertaining.

Date: December 9

Time: 7:00 p.m.

Place: St. Joseph Complex Gym

Non-perishable food will be collected for the Gretna Food Bank. Bring 5 or more items and be entered for a door prize. Peanut Butter, jelly, beans are the most requested items.

- Elections for the 2022 Board and Officers will take place at our December meeting. The report of the Nominating Committee is as follows:

President	Sylvia T. Schwarz
Vice President	James Rolf
Recording Secretary	Cheryl Amaker
Corresponding Secretary	Lisa LaFrance
Treasurer	Sarah Daigle
Historian and Archivist	Stephanie Dietrich
Parliamentarian	Sue McLetchie
Sergeant-at-Arms	Holly Williams
Board Member at Large	Monica Naquin
Board Member at Large	Ray Markase
Board Member at Large	Chris Ziifle
Board Member at Large	M. Helen Williams

- Gretna's December Calendar is very busy.

**Dec. 4** - Shopping on the Huey, Oktoberfest in December and Ringing in the Arts

**Dec. 5** - Gretna Christmas Tree lighting on Huey P. Long & 6<sup>th</sup> Street

**Dec. 10** - Caroling at the Memorial Arch, 7 p.m.

**Dec. 11** - A Christmas Party for the children of Gretna at St. Joseph Complex Gym, 1 - 3:30 p.m. Come meet St. Nicholas and have your picture taken with him. Plus, face painting, cookie decorating, games, fun and games. All at no charge. It is a Christmas gift to Gretna's children, parents, grandparents and friends.

**Dec. 19** - Living Nativity at 6th St. and Huey Long neutral ground, 6 p.m.

**Dec. 20** - "Caroling in the Garden" at St. Joseph Complex. Sing-a-long in your ugliest Christmas sweater. Light refreshments.

Rest - the week after Christmas. Whew?

- "DO DUES 'CAUSE DUES ARE DUE"

Yes, remember to pay your 2022 dues at the December meeting. Wishing everyone a Happy New Year and one free of Covid!



### WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

Glenn & Delania Griffin  
Brian Gros  
Carolyn Martin

**Times Past —** By Stephanie Dieterich

**The Bell Crevasse**

Soon after settling New Orleans, the earliest residents realized that every spring when the temperatures up North would warm, the melting ice and snow caused the lower Mississippi River to overflow its banks. To solve that problem and control the river, the landowners became responsible for building and maintaining the levee on their property.

Rice, one of the earliest crops, required irrigation, so wooden sluice gates were constructed through the levee to allow for controlled watering. When rice cultivation gave way to sugar, irrigation was no longer necessary and the sluices were removed and levees patched. These patches would become weak spots in the levee where crevasses would often form.

The Bell Crevasse occurred April 11, 1858 on the plantation of John Bell in present day Marrero. It caused the most disastrous flooding on the Westbank reacting as far as Jesuit Bend and Barataria. A weak spot in the levee caused from a sluice repair was the opportunity for the extremely high Mississippi River to gain entrance.

*“Barataria, the residence of the fisherman and hunters, who supplied the market with game and fish, has been converted into a sea. No dry land is left.”*

Water made its way through and the spot widened with might and fury that was totally irreversible. Neighboring planters tried without success to plug the ever-increasing breach without any luck. The gap eventually reached 300 feet across and 22 feet deep. The entire Westbank was under water except for the

immediate riverfront. Spectators came by boat excursions to witness the crevasse. Others seeking thrills stood on the edge of the break. Unfortunately a few were swept away and never seen again.

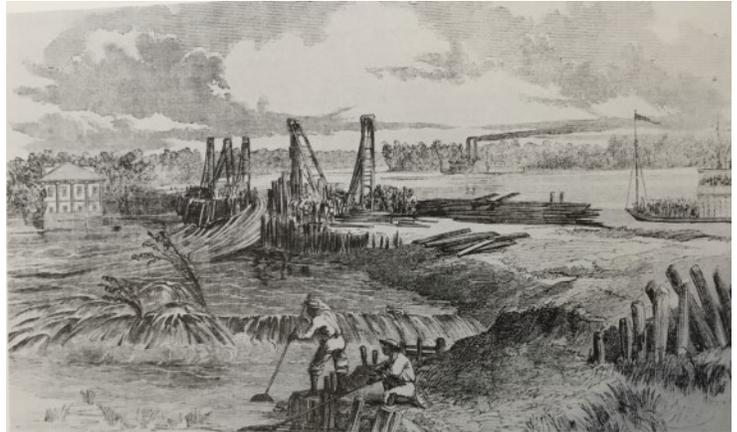
It wasn't until eight months later in December when the river dropped that the breach was able to be closed. The loss of crops and homes was staggering.

According to *The Times Picayune* article of August 5, 1858:

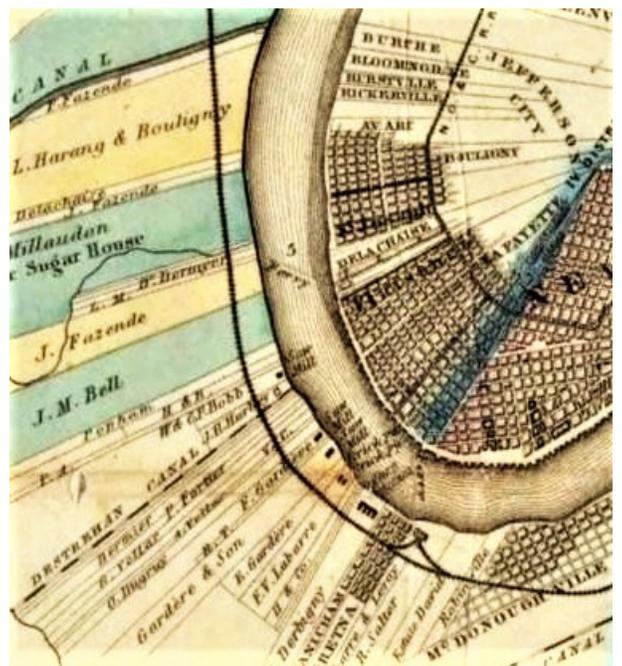
**“THE CITY”**

“The little town of Gretna was peopled by those who owned the property on which they lived. The hoarded earnings of their toil had been expended in creating a

**Continued on Page 3**



This illustration of the Bell Crevasse shows the Bell plantation at left, partly submerged. (From the Special Collections Division, Tulane University Library.)



This vintage map shows the location of the Bell plantation, in blue.

## Times Past

### The Bell Crevasse—Continued

home in this pleasant retreat from the city, and around their little cottages, trees, shrubbery and gardens cast an air of quiet rustic beauty. The crevasse at Bell's plantation soon brought

*“It wasn't until eight months later in December when the river dropped that the breach was able to be closed. The loss of crops and homes was staggering.”*

desolation to a greater part of the town. At this moment the water still stands without any sensible decrease in depth. The result has been that a large number of families have been

compelled to leave their home, the water having invaded their rooms, and left no dry spots on their premises. Gretna, or that which remains above water is very popular. Every place capable of affording shelter is crowded.

“The greater part of town presents the singular spectacle of deserted homes standing in the lake, the

### *Have You Checked Out the GHS Facebook Site Lately?*

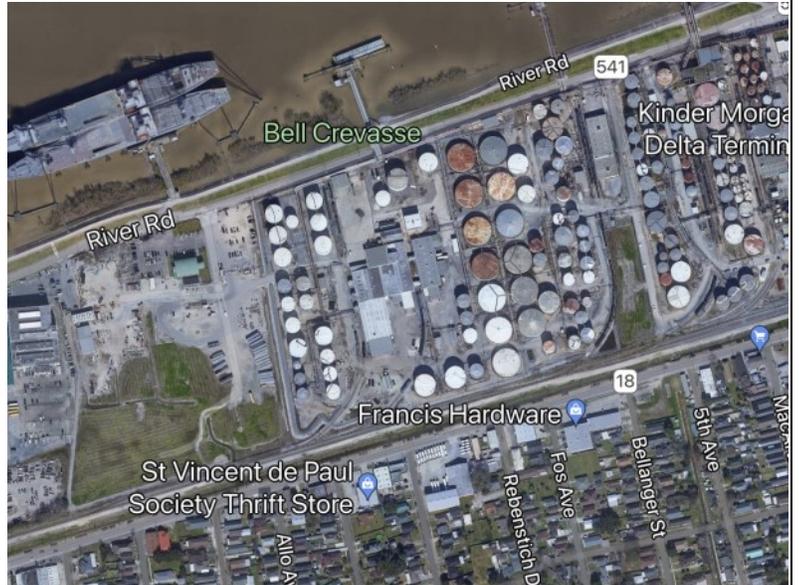
If you haven't looked at the GHS site on Facebook, take a moment to check it out. It has lots of news items and photographs that you will enjoy. Be sure to share the posts with your family and friends.

The address is @GHSGretnaLA.



**Gretna Historical Society**

@GHSGretnaLA · Community Organization



This modern-day map shows the location of the Bell Crevasse in near the Harvey/Marrero line, which took place in 1858 and spread water across the West Bank.

streets only marked by the lines of the dwelling. Fish gambol in deserted parlors. The minnow, cat and Buffalo disport in the streets. Immense schools of the smaller denizens of the river can be seen everywhere darting along the sidewalk chasing each other among shrubbery, now dying.

“Venice, with its canals and gondolas has always been considered subject for the poet but will destroy much of the romance associated with this city of the sea to take a boat sail along the deserted streets of Gretna. The water from the crevasse has wrought the same destruction in all the villages of the right bank. Nor has the damage been confined to the neighborhood of the river.

“Barataria, the residence of the fisherman and hunters, who supplied the market with game and fish, has been converted into a sea. No dry land is left. The families who for years resided in that neighborhood were compelled to retreat in their skiffs, and had found no place of safety until they reached the riverbank.”

*Gretna Chronicles succeeds the GHS Newsletter and the Gretna Historical Society Newsletter as the official source of news for the general membership of the Gretna Historical Society.*

## ***Gretna Historical Society***

201-209 Lafayette Street  
P.O. Box 115  
Gretna, LA 70054-0115



### ***Gretna Historical Society Museum Complex***

1840s Strehle Family Cottage, 1859 David Crockett  
Volunteer Fire Co. No. 1 Fire Station (now Louisiana Fire  
Museum), 1840s White Family Cottage

## **Gretna Chronicles Staff**

M. Helen Williams, Editor  
*To submit articles, call Helen at 504.450.8481  
(or e-mail [mhw500@cox.net](mailto:mhw500@cox.net))*

### **ABOUT THE GHS AND HOW TO JOIN**

The Gretna Historical Society was founded in Gretna, Louisiana, in 1969, by Lloyd E. Gomez (insurance man, volunteer firefighter, and community activist), who descended from Gretna pioneers, German immigrants Claudius and Catherine Nuss Strehle. The Society's articles of incorporation were drafted by Gretna attorney Everette F. Gauthreaux and signed in his law office on October 26, 1969. Today, the GHS operates the Gretna Historical Society Museum Complex at the corner of Lafayette Street at Second. It consists of three 19th century Creole cottages, a blacksmith shop, and the Louisiana Fire Museum. The GHS also owns and maintains the caboose and train depot on Huey P. Long Avenue at Fourth Street.

There are no requirements for membership in the GHS, other than the timely payment of annual membership dues of \$20 per person. Monthly meetings are held at the St. Joseph's Auditorium at 7th and Newton Streets on the second Thursday of every month at 7:00 p.m. Guests and prospective members are always welcome to attend the meetings.

The society's newsletter, *Gretna Chronicles*, is published monthly and mailed or emailed to all members.

## **Gretna Chronicles**

is published for the members and friends of the  
**Gretna Historical Society**  
P.O. Box 115, Gretna, LA 70054-0115  
Phone: 504.362.3854  
Email: [directoroffacilities@gretnahistoricalsociety.org](mailto:directoroffacilities@gretnahistoricalsociety.org)

- Sylvia Schwarz .....President
- James Rolf.....Vice-President
- Allison Livingston.....Recording Secretary
- M. Helen Williams.....Corresponding Secretary
- Sarah Daigle.....Treasurer
- Stephanie Dieterich.....Historian
- Monica Naquin .....Archivist
- Sue McLetchie.....Parliamentarian
- Judy LeBlanc.....Director of Facilities
- Holly Williams.....Sergeant-at-Arms
- Ray Markase.....Program Chairman
- Garland Gaspard.....1st Board Member-at-Large
- Chris Ziifle.....2nd Board Member-at-Large