



Gretna Chronicles



Gretna, Louisiana

Volume 36, Issue 9

An Official Publication of the Gretna Historical Society

September, 2026

Wine Tasting 2026 Largest Crowd Ever

The Wine Tasting, California Dreamin' honoring the USA's 250th year anniversary was a huge success with 156 attendees! The five wines and one liqueur chosen by wine enthusiast Joe Miller were all California vintages. Thanks to Wine Pourers Lisa Miller, Cheryl Amacker, Erin Purdue and Christy Drachenberg.

GHS Treasurer Sarah Daigle was responsible for the lovely baskets donated for the raffle, with kudos to the generous donors. Basket winners included Pepper Scheffler, Tracey Champagne, Shannon Gegenheimer, Kat Lyvers, Val Coles, Alice Cloutet and Kathy Bourg who was the lucky winner of two baskets.

Lots of warm and fuzzy feelings about as members sipped and shared the evening with each other!



Tickets are now on sale for both the Sippin' in Style Party on Oct. 2 & the Cemetery Tour on Nov. 14, open to all. For more info, call 504-362-3854.

Fun at the California Dreamin' Wine Tasting!



Welcome New Members

Gail Wilson
Donna Riche'

Welcome Back

Debbie Spera
Jerry & Eileen Daul
Marsha Martin

Cemetery Tour Meeting

The next Cemetery Tour meeting is on Wednesday, Sept. 16, at 6 p.m. at the White House.

CALENDAR AND NEWS

- September 10** @ 6 pm Membership Meeting at St. Joseph Gym
- October 2** @ 6 pm Sippin' in Style Event – Ticketed Event \$75 at the White House with Limited Tickets Available
- October 8** @ 6 pm Birthday Party Barbecue at White House Backyard
- November 12** @ 6 pm Membership Meeting at St. Joseph Gym
- November 14** Hook & Ladder Cemetery Tour – Ticketed Event \$30, which Includes lite meal at Red Maple – you select your tour time

Times Past — Gretna WWII Hero Fondly Remembered

Originally published in the Times-Picayune, September 28, 2015, by M. Helen Williams

Gretna native John Ray Jr. was born on Aug. 15, 1922, to Johnny and Nora Ray, and raised in a small double shotgun at 1119 Lafayette St., a house that still stands today.

He attended Gretna Elementary and Gretna High School where he played football. In January 1942, in his final year, he dropped out of school to join the U.S. Army with basic training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He was stationed at Ft. Benning, Georgia, as a hospital orderly, then with the military police.

The Army began recruiting men for a new elite outfit, Paratrooper Infantry, and Ray heard that paratroopers would be jumping out of airplanes. This sounded crazy to him until they said, "Your pay would increase by \$50 a month." He quickly signed up.

Once he achieved nearly perfect scores on his tests, qualified on the rifle range and completed five jumps, he was allowed to tuck his pants into his boots, a sign he was a paratrooper.

Ray went home on leave when his mother had died. That's when he met the girl next door, Paula, who lived at 1039 Lafayette St.

Paula was only 16 and still in school. Ray began to write regularly to her. At first it was platonic, as he asked about fellow students at Gretna High. Then, he also told her he'd like to take her out when he got a furlough home and they made the most of the time they had while he was home.

At the time he joined the Army, enlistment was only a year. The Pearl Harbor bombing changed that, making him a soldier for the "duration" of the war. In May of 1943, they were married, she was 18 and he was 20. They honeymooned at the Roosevelt Hotel with only one week as husband and wife before he returned to duty.

Ray was assigned to the 82nd Airborne division, 505th Regiment, F company, and was sent to Casablanca, Morocco, for more intensive training. In July 1943, he left Tunisia and landed in Sicily to support Gen. Patton's landing. In December 1943, training began in Northern Ireland for Operation Overlord, D-Day - Normandy. During training for D-Day, Ray became friends with a new replacement, Pvt. Kenneth Russell.

The Red Cross arranged a reunion between John Ray and his brother, Stanley Ray, whom he had not seen in four years. Their reunion was reported in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* in January 1944.

Tensions rose until June 5, when the word came to go, but due to poor weather conditions, General Eisenhower delayed the invasion. Early in the morning on June 6, they were loaded on to C-47 transports and took off for France. The 82nd Airborne was tasked with taking two bridges outside the town of Ste. Mere-Eglise, a critical crossroad. Approaching the French coastline, the transports encountered a heavy cloud bank and heavy anti-aircraft fire. Confusion reigned. Some of the planes went off course due to the cloud bank, while other pilots gave the green light for the troops to jump too early fearing the planes would be hit by the anti-aircraft fire.

Simultaneously, a building in Ste. Mere-Eglise caught fire alerting the town's people who formed a bucket brigade. The Germans occupying the town heard the planes and saw the paratroopers dropped from the sky. It was "a turkey shoot" as the paratroopers were helpless. Most were shot before landing, others as they landed.

Ken Russell was caught on a cross on the roof of the church and John Steele was caught on one of the spires of the church, both hanging there helplessly. Ray brushed the roof and landed on his feet in the street behind the church. Simultaneously, a German soldier appeared from around the corner and took aim at Russell and Steele. The German saw Ray struggling to get out of his parachute and shot him in the stomach several times. Although mortally wounded, Ray was still able to fire his 45mm pistol and kill the German. Russell and Steele were saved.

Eventually Russell freed himself, thought Ray was dead, and escaped. Steele hung from the spire and played dead for several hours, as depicted in the movie "The Longest Day" until the Germans took him prisoner. Eventually he escaped also.

The Ray family was told he was wounded but in September, the family was told he died of his wounds on June 7.

Russell and Steele met later and decided the first one to see Ray's family after the war would tell Paula Ray how her husband had saved their lives. It was 1998 before she finally found out what John Ray had done.

In 1998, Paula took out John's letters, which she kept in a cedar chest, untouched for over 50 years and reread them. All of the emotions she felt from that time came flooding back to her.

Nora Ray, John's sister read Stephan E. Ambrose's book, "D-Day: The Climatic Battle of World War Two" and learned what had happened to her older brother in the war. She called Paula, now Mrs. Guidry, and told her the news. Paula finally knew that John had died a hero saving the lives of two of his men. In 2000, she spoke to Russell by phone. He was overjoyed to speak with her. She later went to Normandy with him, stood where John was shot and visited John's grave in the American Military Cemetery. Bending down, pressing her lips and touching the cross that bore his name, she uttered the words, "You were supposed to come back to me. Now I've come to you."



John Ray Jr.

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

is published for the members and friends of GHS

M. Helen Williams, Editor

To submit articles, call Helen at 504.450.8481

(or e-mail 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 \$30 per person. Monthly meetings are held at the St. Joseph Complex Gym at 7th and Newton Streets on the second Thursday of every month at 6:00 p.m. The society's newsletter, *Gretna Chronicles*, is published monthly and mailed or emailed to all members.

Gretna Historical Society

<https://www.gretnahistoricalsociety.org/>

P.O. Box 115, Gretna, LA 70054-0115

Phone: 504.362.3854

Email: directoroffacilities@gretnahistoricalsociety.org

Facebook: @GHSGretnaLA

Val Coles.....President

Blaine Daigle.....Vice President

Jeannie Radosta.....Recording Secretary

Holly Williams.....Corresponding Secretary

Sarah Daigle.....Treasurer

**Stephanie Dieterich and Lisa LaFrance.....Historians/
Archivists**

Judy LeBlanc.....Sergeant-at-Arms

M. Helen Williams.....Board Member-Publicity

Paul Coles.....Board Member-Program Director

Dwight Maness.....Board Member

Rene Poche.....Board Member