

**Bienville House
St. Martinville, LA**



HISTORY

The Bonin House (a.k.a. The Bienville House) is a two story frame residence featuring elements of the Greek Revival, Italianate, and Colonial Revival styles. Developed in 3 stages, it achieved most of its present appearance in the early twentieth century. The present single story rear wing appears to be a circa 1950 replacement of an earlier single story rear wing. Other changes include the installation of bathrooms and the sheathing of most of the exterior of the house in vinyl siding. Despite these alterations, the house retains those qualities that establish its architectural significance within the context of St. Martinville.

The Bonin House has a rather complicated architectural history. Its development was determined using an early twentieth century photograph and a large number of extant clues noted in a recent

site inspection by a member of the staff of the Division of Historic Preservation. Evidently the house began as a two story, four bay, Greek Revival town residence in about 1850. The two story front gallery had colossal posts with relatively plain capitals. The first floor consisted of an off center hall with two rooms on each side and a staircase ascending toward the rear to an almost identical plan on the second floor. On both the first and second floors, the hall culminated on the facade with a large opening featuring transoms and side lights.

Noteworthy surviving early features include a large number of door and window surrounds and three aedicule style mantels upstairs. In addition, some of the window surrounds feature decorative panels beneath. Another noteworthy feature from the original period of construction is the set of massive sliphead windows that provide access to the upper gallery.

In about 1875, the house was remodeled in the Italianate style. Large curvaceous brackets were added to the tops of the gallery columns, along the eave of the rear elevation, and along the side gables. Decorative trim was also placed between the gallery columns on both stories. In addition, each of the side gables was fitted with a triple arch window. Finally, richly turned balustrades were added to the upper gallery. Surviving features from this period include the curvaceous brackets on the rear elevation and the side gables, the triple arch window on each side elevation, and evidently the balustrade (see below for balustrade).

In about 1910, the house was again remodeled, this time in the Colonial Revival style. This remodeling was far more extensive than the previous one. The floor plan was made more open, reflecting the taste of the period. On both floors, the front half of the hall was combined with the front room on the north side. This created a new large entrance parlor downstairs and a larger bedroom upstairs. The original staircase was removed. Evidently the parts were reused to construct the present three flight, two landing staircase in the rear northern portion of the house. Three of the rooms downstairs were fitted with standard Colonial Revival mantel/over mantel sets with freestanding columns. The front south room downstairs was fitted with a paneled alcove. In addition, the windows and window openings were replaced in both the downstairs front rooms with the present Colonial Revival window treatment. This consists of a pair of triple windows with long vertical panes in the upper sashes and large single panes below. The house also received a tile roof at this time and a small covered entrance at the rear of the northern side elevation.

ACTIVITY

The home is most notorious for the 1890's murder of the homeowner and one of her daughters. In 1886, the year of the murders, travelers knew this home as the Evangeline Hotel. Innkeeper Isabell Robertson and her two daughters, one an invalid, one a toddler, were home the night the killer broke in. Only the toddler escaped alive. The double murder took place in the area now known as the Evangeline Room.

Former owners reported hearing the older girl, who was bedridden, ring a bell for help. The former owner was quoted by once saying, "They would hear bells ringing in the night." Once previous guest had also reported that small objects moved in the room where the girl died. When the home was being renovated, workers' radios turned on and off without visible cause. Another common activity reported both by neighbors and the previous homeowner is that the interior lights would appear to come on and off on their own.

INVESTIGATION

We were extremely excited to investigate the Bienvenue House, as it had been in the works for nearly a year! Last June, I was contacted by the new owner, Jill Kuhn, who was still living in Seattle, yet purchased the Bienvenue House. Hearing all the stories of paranormal activity, she was very curious to have us offer whatever assistance we could by investigate the historic home.

In a rare case, we were accompanied by four different media groups during this investigation. A special thanks to the Teche News, Times of Acadiana, Acadiana Lifestyle Magazine, and the "UnConventional" television program based out of Opelousas!!

We arrived very early to speak with the various media groups and were immediately greeted by the extremely kind and gracious homeowner, Jill, with a great meal and overnight accommodations. We cannot thank her enough for such hospitality!

Unlike many cases, we were able to really take our time, going through the home to find the most suitable camera placements. Taking base EMF readings, we found many spots of increased EMF energy, which was due to the older wiring in a home; a problem often had when investigating homes of this age.

We finally went "lights out" around 10pm, going through the usual methods of investigating. During the night, no substantial evidence nor experiences were obtained, yet in many cases, this does not mean the night was uneventful. Lots of times, it may not be until we start reviewing evidence, when we actually find questionable activity. I often say this to disappointed client when we leave for the night, with no first hand experiences. Fortunately, this night may have proved to be one of those incidents.

After reviewing the hours of audio and video, we captured several audio clips that are definitely on the questionable side. One particular clip ("Bienvenue Voice"), you will hear a very distinct voice of a young female. What was captured was what sounds like the female saying, "Gette Pas", which is Creole French for "Don't Look". I was very interested when I heard this because I have often conducted EVP work in French, being that before the mid 1950's, French was the primary language of central/southern Louisiana. This is the first case where we actually capture a voice appearing to be in French.

Another interesting clip is while Brandon and I were in the Evangeline Room. You will hear Brandon ask me, "Are you ready to go downstairs?" After I say, "yes", you will hear a whisper saying, "no". The other clips below are all questionable audio clips where we will allow you to make your own conclusions as to what is being said, or whether it is an explainable sound.

Overall, I feel the night was went extremely well. With the possibility of potential paranormal evidence possibly being captured that night, I definitely feel that the Bienvenue House warrants a follow-up investigation in the very near future. Hopefully when we return, we can add even more evidence to what has already been captured. As we have said many times, it takes a lot for us to label an area as "haunted"/"active". We tend to wish to stay on the politically correct side by saying that the home definitely showed proof of questionable events and we plan on returning to only strengthen our findings. Again, thanks to Jill, including attending friends, and the media organizations previously mentioned for such a great and successful outing.