



Investigation Summary Report

Joseph Jefferson Mansion (Rip Van Winkle Gardens) New Iberia, LA



HISTORY

Jefferson Island, first of the famous "Five Islands" of south Louisiana, found its origin in prehistory when the enormous pressures of the earth forced a plug of pure rock salt up from a mother bed, five miles below the surface. This elevated several low hills in the coastal marshes.

"Treasure Island" might equally well be its name, for, besides the inexhaustible deposits of salt, there are also mineral deposits of oil, gas, and sulphur. A gentle climate, adequate rainfall and a fertile soil help to produce a gardener's dream thus making possible the abundant and luxuriant floral beauty of the Island. Full advantage has been taken of these valuable natural resources, as well as the rolling terrain, in the creation of twenty acres of gardens on Jefferson Island.

Originally a Spanish land grant, "Orange Island," as it was first known, fell into the hands of a brother-in-law of Jean Lafitte, the notorious pirate and privateer. During the time he was terrorizing the Gulf and-Caribbean areas, Lafitte often sought refuge here, since his shallow-draft pirate boats were able to negotiate Bayou Carlin into beautiful Lake Peigneur, where he could not be followed by Men-of-War. Hence, it is rumored that Lafitte, at various times, buried his booty and treasure here on the Island. Actually, this was partially substantiated in 1923, when a treasure consisting of 3 pots of Spanish, Mexican, French and American gold and silver coins was uncovered by an old Voodoo Doctor named Daynite. Close by the site of this discovery, near the tropical glen stand the magnificent twin Live Oaks known as the Lafitte Oaks.

In 1869, the Island was bought as a hunting and fishing preserve by Joseph Jefferson, the world-famous nineteenth century actor, who immortalized the character Rip Van Winkle in the play of that name by Washington Irving. Jefferson played the role of "Old Rip" in theaters throughout the world, winning fame, fortune, and many illustrious friends. Amongst the latter was President Grover Cleveland, who, together with many other celebrities, visited Jefferson Island on various occasions. Rip Van Winkle Gardens are named in honor of this great actor and the character that he immortalized. Besides acting for 71 of his 76 years, Jefferson was an ardent painter. After his death in 1905, Jefferson's heirs sold the house and land on March 15, 1917 to John Lyle Bayless, Sr. of Anchorage, Kentucky. His heir, J. Lyle Bayless, Jr., began developing formal gardens surrounding the Joseph Jefferson home in the late 1950's. establishing the "Rip Van Winkle Gardens," named for its former actor-owner.

Bayless died in 1985, the foundation that he had endowed and entrusted sold the property in late 1996 to Carolyn Doerle and her husband, Dr. Ron Ray. They set out to revitalize the site by offering many ways for the public to enjoy the tradition that Bayless and the Foundation started years ago. Doerle ran the property from late 1996 until it closed to the public in July of 2001. In October 2003, the gardens were sold to Live Oak Gardens, LTD which operates the nursery next door.

One of the most interesting stories that took place here was in November of 1980. While drilling in Jefferson Island's Lake Peigneur, a rig accidentally pierced one of the caverns of the salt dome mines under the lake. The water from the lake started draining. The drilling rigs and other pieces of equipment were sucked into a massive 50-foot whirlpool and disappeared. Miraculously, no one was killed during the incredible draining of the 11-acre lake, which only took 3 hours!!

In addition, one day while digging through the drained lake, owner Mike Richard discovered the lower jaw bone of a prehistoric Mastodon, along with its tusks. Mike keeps the finds, which also include ancient horse teeth and other bones, in the gift shop on the grounds for the public to view.

The main home itself was built in 1870 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is a charming twenty-two room Southern mansion, with a fourth- story cupola. Jefferson sited it among 350-year old oak trees high atop the salt dome, at an elevation of 75 feet above sea level-almost unheard of in the coastal areas of south Louisiana.

ACTIVITY

There have been many stories of different kinds of activity all around the grounds. Could it be the home owners of previous times, or even the workers that have mined the property over the history of the island, or even the pirates said to have buried treasure on the grounds? It was a

common practice when treasures were buried by pirates, one of their own were killed and buried there as well, to protect the treasure.

As far as recent reports, one of the maids was alone in the kitchen storage room one night. The maid spoke out loud to the supposed little girl who has been seen there. As she did, Styrofoam cups from a dispenser began to shoot out behind her. In addition, a guest claimed to have seen a tall, slender apparition in the guest rooms, which were once the servant quarters. Also in the servant quarters, a house keeper reported that while she was cleaning the rooms, she witness a TV remote literally fly off the desk. Another worker, while cleaning the floors of the main house, heard what she claimed to be a woman crying. During a tour of the home one day, a guest noticed a little girl in the hallway. As she figured she was just a guest who wandered from her parents, the young girl reportedly vanished into the wall! Other reports have been lights turning on and off, locked doors opening, and a male figure being seen in the upstairs windows of the room where Mr. Jefferson would regularly sit and paint. These are just a few of the stories that gave our group the interest to come in and investigate.

INVESTIGATION

We arrived on the beautiful grounds early that evening and were greeted by the gracious owner, Mike Richard. Even though we had visited before, we were still given a tour of the place, enabling us to get a "feel" as to where to set up our equipment. The grounds and home were enormous and it seemed like it all needed to be covered. We decided to go with everything we had: A total of 16 Infrared cameras, running to all 3 of our DVRs.

Setup was quickly complete, so we decided to go "lights out". We broke up into our respectful groups and spread through the grounds. Early that evening, Mark had an odd experience when doing EVP work in the café, which is where objects were reported "flying" off the shelves. As Mark asked questions, he noticed the LED lights on one of his IR cams had died out, yet power was still running to them. It later came back on, not allowing us to record this as 'activity" or a true "experience".

As the investigation went into the early morning hours, no other personal experiences were had. Next, came the daunting task of analyzing the 50+ hours of video and 25+ hours of audio. While Mark went through his photos, he found several interesting ones which you will see below. In addition, on one of our IR cams, we captured what I feel is one of the most interesting light anomalies I have seen. In the visual aspect, it is not the brightest, but the life-like movement is what captured my attention. As you will see below, it is as if the anomaly has a preset track, moving back and forth out of each window, then shooting out of the camera's view.

In conclusion, the home and grounds are amazing! I encourage everyone to visit the Jefferson Mansion/Rip Van Winkle Gardens. Not only for its extreme beauty, immaculate rental quarters, and gracious service, but for its intrigue and illustrious history. Did we collect enough evidence to deem this place "haunted"....probably not, but we guarantee that we will make many more visits to the area until we get a definite answer!