

COTTAGE PLANTATION East Baton Rouge Parish

The Cottage was built in 1824 by Colonel Abner Duncan as a wedding gift for his daughter Frances Sophia and her husband, Frederick Daniel Conrad. The Greek Revival mansion was set in a grove of live oaks.

Twelve Doric columns enclosed a brick-paved gallery and supported a wide second story gallery and dormered roof. The lower floor was brick, the upper was wood. The paneled doorway was flanked by fluted columns and sidelights and topped by a fan light. The house had 22 rooms and was considered one of the finest in the Baton Rouge area.

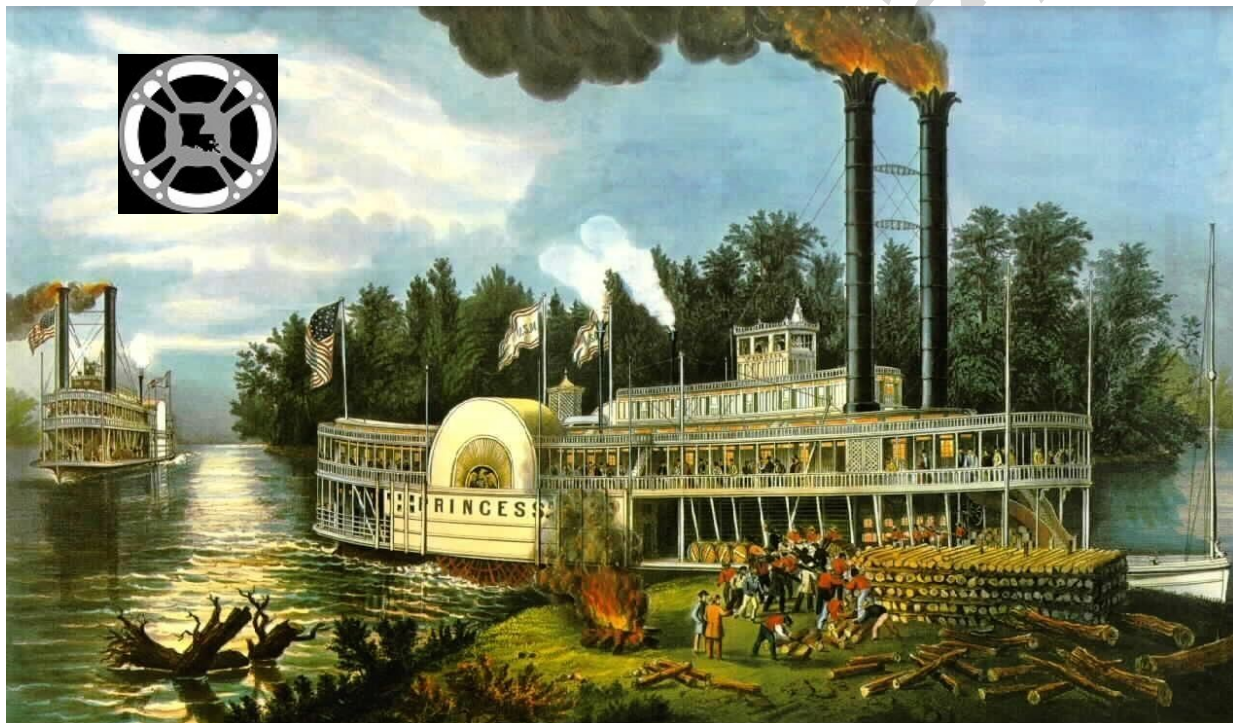


It soon became one of the most successful sugar plantations in the area. By the 1850's, the Conrads were entertaining many rich and powerful guests including such notables as Jefferson Davis, Henry Clay, Zachary Taylor, and the Marquis de Lafayette.

The Conrad family itself had esteemed beginnings, tracing its ancestry to George and Martha Washington. In the years before the Civil War, life was very good at the Cottage. They imported furniture, collected a fortune in jewelry and amassed great wealth.

In the 1850's, another man came to live at the Cottage - a traveling teacher named Angus Holt, who would become the private tutor to the Conrad children and Frederick Conrad's personal secretary. Holt became a part of the Conrad family and lived there happily until war came.

On the foggy Sunday morning of February 27, 1859, the four boilers of the *Princess*, a steam-powered riverboat, exploded near the Cottage, sending bodies and cargo flying in all directions. It was loaded with cotton and passengers bound for Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Conrad had his slaves help the victims to shore, and laid out bed sheets covered in flour on the lawn of the house on which to lay the wounded. The explosion left 70 dead, and many others wounded. The boat and its cargo were a total loss. Human error, failure to maintain safe boiler pressure, was determined to be the cause, and a pall was cast over the 1859 Mardi Gras celebrations.



Life, after the beginning of the Civil War, changed forever. The Union Army took over the Cottage and removed everything that could be found of value, from horses to furniture to jewelry to even the clothing of the children. The troops occupied the plantation and held the family prisoner, being especially brutal with Frederick Conrad and his secretary, Mr. Holt.

After the troops left, the family abandoned the house and it was taken over and used as a hospital for Union soldiers with yellow fever. In the years that followed, this is probably what saved it from being destroyed by vandals. Many had died from the disease in the house and were buried on the grounds. The fear that the sickness lingered kept many people away.

A few years later, Frederick Conrad died in New Orleans and Holt returned to the abandoned Cottage a changed man. He became a recluse, spending all of his time trying to repair the old house for what remained of the Conrad family, most of whom had been his students. He stopped shaving and was seen wandering the grounds of the Cottage with a long, white beard. Many local people avoided him, but they could never forget the wonderful man that he had once been. The neighbors made frequent gifts of food to sustain him while he stayed on at the house.

When Holt finally died, friends went through his many trunks and found huge quantities of books and clothing, along with moldy half-eaten biscuits and portions of meals. Holt had taken to walking about the house at night, reliving the happier times in the house. As he walked, he would munch on biscuits and meat and then throw the uneaten portion into one of his trunks. Holt was buried in a local cemetery.

As the years passed, the Cottage again stood empty. People who lived nearby said it was haunted. No one would go near the house after dark, fearing that Holt's ghost was still there. There were reports of doors opening and slamming by themselves and sightings of apparitions on the grounds. These shadowy figures were often seen, but when investigated, the place was found to be empty.

In 1917, the Cottage was used as the background for the silent film ***Burning the Candle***. According to early film records, this was the first film shot on location in Baton Rouge and is one of the first examples of filmmakers using the plantations of Louisiana to give authenticity to their movies.

In the 1920's, the Conrad family began a restoration of the house. Luckily, thanks to the rumors of ghosts and yellow fever, the house had managed to survive fairly intact throughout the years. In the 1950's, the house was opened to the public and served as a museum to the memory of the Old South. It attracted a great deal of interest and artists came from all over the world to capture the flair of the south before the Civil War.

During this time, the rumors of ghosts still persisted. Some visitors would report the sounds of singing and strange music in the house and on the grounds. It seems that in the heyday of the house, before the war, the Conrads would often entertain their guests by having their slaves sing for them and play music. Now, nearly a century later, the sounds of that music could still be heard at the house, a residual and ghostly echo from another time.

Other visitors reported their own encounters with Mr. Holt. He was said to be seen walking through the house, pulling at his long beard and mumbling to himself. In 1940, one reporter for the *Elks Magazine* even photographed the ghost by accident. He was doing a story about the Cottage and after having his film developed, he noticed the image of an old man looking out the window. He was sure that no one had been there at the time and after showing it the staff members at the house identified the apparition as Mr. Holt!

On a February morning in 1960, the Cottage burned to the ground. The firemen who were on the scene would later report a very strange incident. It seemed that while they were directing water on the house from the side garden, a man appeared in the upper window of the house. The fire fighters directed him to jump, but he never seemed to notice them or the fire that was all around him. The roof suddenly collapsed and the man was gone. After the fire was put out, they sifted the debris, searching for the man's remains but found no body.

There are nothing but ruins now where the Cottage once stood, but visitors to the property still claim to hear the sounds of music and singing there. They also claim to encounter the ghost of Mr. Holt as he wanders about the property.



In addition to ***Burning the Candle***, 1917, two other films featured the Cottage.

***Burning the Candle* - 1917**

American stage and film actors Henry B. Walthall and Mary Charleston came to Baton Rouge to film scenes for ***Burning the Candle***. The film was directed by Harry Beaumont and released through Kleine-Edison-Selig-Essanay. The film projects a powerful lesson on the liquor theme.

The story involves a young southerner who goes to New York to accept a job soon after his married. Once in New York, the former non-drinker finds himself slowly becoming an alcoholic. He loses his job and his young wife returns to her southern home. After becoming a vagabond and losing family and friends, he decides to conquer his demons, regaining his position and his wife.



The Cottage served as the southern home featured in this film.

Cinerama Holiday - 1955

Cinerama Holiday was the second of the Cinerama films. Cinerama is a widescreen process that, originally, simultaneously projected images from three synchronized 35 mm projectors onto a huge, deeply curved screen. The trademarked process was marketed by the Cinerama Corporation. It was the first of a number of novel processes introduced during the 1950s, when the movie industry was reacting to competition from television. Cinerama was presented to the public as a theatrical event, with reserved seating and printed programs, and audience members often dressed in their best attire for the evening.

In this musical travelogue, two real life couples, John and Betty Marsh from Kansas City, and Fred and Beatrice Troller from Zurich, Switzerland, meet at the St. Louis Airport just before embarking on separate vacation adventures. The Marshes are en route to Europe, while the Trollers will simultaneously explore the United States. After several stops in the United States, the Trollers head to New Orleans where they attend a music-filled service at the Second Free Mission Baptist Church, visit the Lafayette Cemetery where they witness a funeral, and attend a music performance by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band at the Absinthe House nightclub. While touring the south, they visit the Cottage. ***Cinerama Holiday*** was directed by Robert Bendick.

Band of Angels – 1957

Based on the best seller written by Robert Penn Warren, the film is set in the south at the time of the Civil War. It focuses on the romance between Hamish Bond, a wealthy New Orleans gentleman and former slave runner, and a Southern plantation heiress, Amantha Starr. When her father dies, Amantha learns that her mother was a slave, making her property of the plantation. At a slave auction, she is purchased by Bond who makes her the mistress of his house. Clark Gable stars as Bond and Yvonne DeCarlo portrays Amantha.



The film, which also stars Sidney Poitier, Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. and Patric Knowles, was directed by Raoul Walsh.

The image below features DiCarlo, Gable and Walsh discussing a scene.



The filmmakers wanted to ensure an authentic feel to the film so it was shot on location at and around Baton Rouge.

The Cottage served as Pointe du Loup, the up-river plantation home of Bond where Amantha becomes house mistress. Ashland Belle Helene Plantation was also featured in the film as Belle Helene, another of Bond's plantation homes. It is from Belle Helene that Bond and Amanthe escape to the West Indies.

To read the real to reel history of 38 Louisiana plantations, get your copy of ***Louisiana Plantations: Real to Reel*** in [the HOB Book Store](#) or on [Amazon](#).

Louisiana Plantations: Real to Reel



Ed and Susan Poole