

Mississippi Narratives

Prepared by

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For the State of Mississippi

Louis Joseph Piernas - Harrison

Foreword: Politically prominent negro in Bay St. Louis, in period subsequent to reconstruction, the 80's and 90's. Lives the first street north of Estabrooke St, on north side of street, third house west of Necaize Avenue. It was stated to writer that Louis J. Piernas had repeatedly refused to give an interview to WPA project workers, saying that after having served the government over a long period of years, now that he was old and in need, its agents had refused him Relief. Indeed, her first attempt to contact him resulted in failure, she arriving just in time to see him disappearing down a lane, and to be told by a pert colored neighbor, that "Mr." Piernas was on the way to his "farm" and was too busy to talk to folks. This time she decided to use different tactics and to forego social conventions in order to get him to talk. Through the courtesy of Mr. John H. Lang of Pass Christian, she was allowed to use his name in requesting the interview. Arrived at his tiny but neat three room house, his elderly wife came to the door. The wife was bright creamy color, with pretty long white hair. "May I see your husband?" She said, "Wait, I call him." He soon appeared, a small mulatto in appearance, with gray hair and beard, attired as if to go somewhere.

"Mr. Piernas," she stated, "the government is having us write the life stories of very old colored people, and Mr. John H. Lang of Pass Christian has suggested that your life has been a very interesting one and that perhaps you would tell me about it."

Instantly he was attentive and complaisant and told his [story] courteously and without bitterness. His English was excellent and no attempt will be made to reproduce his slightly French accent.

Yes, Mr. John H. Lang is a very good friend of mine. I have known him all my life. I was born March 11th, 1856, and will be 82 my next birthday. I was born right here in Bay St. Louis, near what is called the

Cowan settlement, but my ancestors were here before the Cowans and had a land grant from the Spanish government. I was born free, and so were all my fore parents. Some of them fought with Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans - we always just called it "Jackson's War."

My first American ancestor was a Spaniard named Piernas, and piernas, means "leg". My father, however, was born in Havana. His parents died, and he came back to his kinfolks over here. My mother's people came from San Domingo, that is where we got the mixed blood. My father's name was also Louis Piernas and we lived right there in the north end of Bay St. Louis, near where the Peerless Factory now stands. My grandmother owned all that land at one time. There was a little settlement of free mulattos there, Piernas, La Bat, Barabino, Lassassare - we all spoke French. We kept ourselves separate from the real negroes, and had our own frolics and dances to which the white folks would come sometimes. We went to church with the white folks at Our Lady of the Gulf Church. I was christened there had my first communion there and was married there.

Father Le Duc, the good priest, had a private school for colored children in the church yard, we all went together, the free mulattos and the ex-slave children. That was in 1868 when I went to school to Father Le Duc. We studied both English and French. Later the school was moved from the Beach to Nécaise Avenue near Estabrooke St. and now there is a big church, school and convent there for the colored. (St. Rose de Lima with 4 yr. accredited high school)

I went to New Orleans when quite young and went to the public schools there, and then to night classes at Straight University, while learning the barber trade. I never did get very far on in school, but I have continued to educate myself all my life. I have always been a great reader, and educated myself through reading.

(What are some of the books you have read?)

Well, among others, I read Gibbons Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, some of Victor Hugo's novels, some of Shakespeare, Longfellow poems, and the like. I cannot see to read much now, so I only keep up with the newspapers. I have given my books away, some to St. Rose's school, some to the public library and other places.

In my younger days I also used to play and organized the Promot Brass Band.

But more important, I organized the first colored Benevolent Association here, 59 years ago, and am the only living charter member. There are now 20 such Associations in Bay St. Louis, and every colored person here, men, women and children belongs to one. The Benefits pay for a doctor and medicine in

sickness, small weekly pensions in distress, and bury the dead. In my Association the dues are 50 cents a month, with \$2.00 additional per year for doctor bills. In this way we are much better off than the poor white people, who often have no way to meet these expenses. Nearly all our people in some way or the other manage to keep up these dues.

Yes, I have a faint remembrance of the Civil War. (Negroes always say Civil War) I was ten years old at the close. One thing I remember very distinctly. A Federal boat went up the Jourdan River - you know I said that we lived near the Beach in north part of Bay St. Louis, and not far from the mouth of the Jourdan. The Yankees were after cattle, they wanted some fresh beef. There were some Confederate cavalry men guarding the Coast. The boat slipped up before they knew it, but they said it should not come out. All of us colored children and grown folks too, got out on the Beach to see what happened. But the Confederates ordered us to get back and into our houses, for they said, "There is going to be a fight when that boat starts out, and you may get killed." But I wanted to see what was going on, so I hid out where I could see. There were four white men hiding in the loft of our house then, hiding from the Confederate officers because they didn't want to go in the army. We always helped them to hide and get away.

When the men in the Yankee boat had slaughtered all the beef they wanted, they started out. The Confederates hidden behind bushes, began to fire on them and the Yankees fired back with big guns, so there was a little battle. Soon the Confederates began to run and never stopped till they got across the county to Gainesville on Pearl River. You know Gainesville used to be the county seat, but the courthouse burned in 1853 with all the records, and afterward it was changed to Shieldsboro (now Bay St. Louis.)

(What do you think of the Yankees coming in and taking your cattle and destroying things?)

They took my grandmother's cattle with the rest, but the Yankees had to eat, and it was war. You know Sherman said, "War is hell," and it's that way in China and Spain today.

My mother was Adele La Bat, she was born here. My father was a brick layer by trade, he laid the foundations of Our Lady of the Gulf Church, and of the old Jackson House which burned at Gulfside (Negro Protestant Educational Center at Waveland). They called it the "Jackson House", but President Andrew Jackson never had anything to do with it - it was some other Jackson.

My first work as a child was with my uncle in the oyster business, but after I learned the barber trade in New Orleans, I came back here and set up a shop. This was in 1877.

I never saw anything of the Kluklux clan in my life, they didn't bother around here. What I know of them is through reading.

I think Judge Hugo Black is all right and that he will hold his seat. I think that he has proved that he is a friend to all religions and colors. I'm sure that he will be fair to Catholics and negroes.

I have held several offices in my life time. The first was when I was appointed a member of the Bay St. Louis School Board. We had separate schools for white and colored then, but at that time in towns, the Board had to consist of three members, two white and one colored to represent the colored schools. Now in towns, all Board members are white, but the country color schools have colored trustees. I served on the Board with Col. Posey, and Capt. J. V. Toulme.

After that I was elected secretary and auditor of Bay St. Louis 1884-86, I think. Then I was Supervisor for Beat 5, Hancock County which includes the town of Bay St. Louis, two terms of 4 years each. I ran against some of the most prominent citizens, one an ex-Confederate soldier. There were the two parties at the time, Democrat and Republican, but I was elected on a coalition ticket, composed of some from both parties. I forget the exact years, without going to my records.

I was appointed post master of Bay St. Louis under Benj. Harrison, and altogether served under five presidents, being out for short times while Cleveland and Wilson were presidents. The post office was only 4th class when I was appointed, but I soon worked it up to third-class. (It is second now.)

I have been Chairman of the Republican Party in this county for 40 years and have voted in every general election. I may not live to see it, but I believe the time will come, when colored Democrats, will be allowed to vote in the Democratic primaries. I am a Republican, but if a man wants to be a Democrat, that is his right.

The last election was so one sided and now there are divisions in the Democratic party. I think perhaps by 1940 there will be a new party, composed of dissatisfied Democrats, most of the Republicans and other elements.

This man Lewis has it in his head to be President. I feel that he is a very dangerous man, and in a place of power would turn out to be another Hitler.

(Would you mind telling me whether the offices you held, yielded you enough to provide for your old age?)

They did not. I am right now receiving State Assistance. When I was in office emoluments were not what they are now. As postmaster, I had to employ three clerks, and the government paid only one. Salary for the other two had to come out of my pocket. When all expenses were paid, I had little left. I own this little house, and a good sized truck patch, where I raise vegetables. I only get \$4.00 a month Old Age Assistance. Louisiana does much better. It does seem that with her sales tax and other taxes, Mississippi could do better for her old people and her schools. There is too much wrangling going on. If Harrison and Bilbo would stop scrapping and work together, they might get us in better shape.

He showed me through the tiny house, with its three tiny rooms one behind the other. Rather shabby rugs and matting covered the floors, chairs and dressers were quite worn. The wife was at a sewing machine in the middle room, working with some dainty summer material, probably a dress for some neighbor.

In the front room was beautiful four poster bed with canopy. Piernas said that he had bought it in the early days of his marriage, and that many people had tried to buy it from him but that he did not intend to sell it.

Leaving, he gave the writer a cordial invitation to return, and said he would be glad to give any further information.