

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Dynamic Developer

Many New Orleanians of a certain age still recall the catchy jingle sung to the melody of the Hawaiian favorite, "*Alohe 'Oe*" (Farewell to Thee). It started off: "Pass Christian Isles, Pass Christian Isles," and continued to remind the listeners that this eden-like development was a "home vacation paradise". To add to the ditty's familiarity, Elvis sang a beautiful rendition of "*Alohe 'Oe*" in the 1961 movie "Blue Hawaii". Wallace C. Walker & Co., Real Estate, marketed lots there for quite a number of years from a large antique yacht (on dry land), located just off Highway 90 on the Mississippi side of the Bay Bridge.



Old postcard view of the Pass

But Pass Christian and its beautiful "Isles" were much older than Wallace Walker's period of activity. Walker didn't enter the scene until 1946 with the purchase of the defunct Pass Christian Isles Company (formed July, 1926).

The French came to the area in 1699. The name Pass Christian came from that of a nearby deep water pass, which was in turn named for Nicholas *Christian* L'Adnier, a resident of Cat Island in the 1740s. Julia de la Brosse (aka the Widow Asmard) owned and operated a dairy and cattle farm on the Pass Peninsula, also beginning in the 1740s. Following her death circa 1800, Captain Barthélemy Pellerin (in the service of Spain) received a Spanish land grant of the widow's property in 1809. Five years later, Pellerin moved his family to New Orleans and sold almost the entire peninsula (17,084 arpents, or about 14,350 acres) to attorney Edward Livingston for \$7000. That was from monies Livingston was paid by none other than privateer, smuggler and hero of the Battle of New Orleans, Jean Lafitte.

Edward Livingston's widow Louise sold the bulk of the family's holdings in the Pass Peninsula in 1836 to John Henderson, David Hughes and Charles Shipman. In 1904 Elliot and Leland Henderson formed the Mexican Gulf Land Development Corporation and began a series of sales promotions of the areas now known as Henderson Point and Pass Christian Isles. However, a hurricane in 1906, followed by the onset of World War I, disrupted the pace of those endeavors.

In 1908, a new name emerged on the scene. It was in that year that Allen Henry Johnness founded the Johnness Realty and Securities Company, which engaged in a great number of real estate development projects in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.



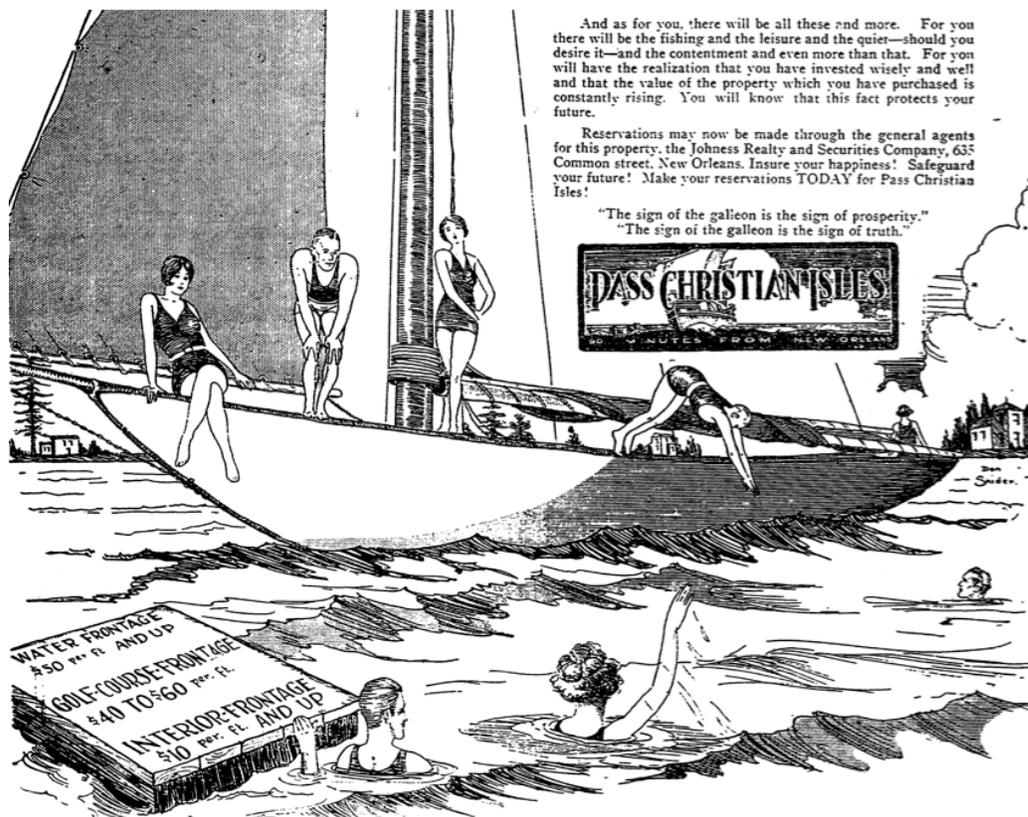
ALLEN H. JOHNNESS SR.



Allen H. Johnness, Sr., and his birthplace, Mount Airey Plantation

Allen Henry Johness, Sr., was born April 10, 1887, at Mount Airey Plantation in St. James Parish, Louisiana. He was a direct descendant of the planter, Pierre Chenet, who is credited with first transforming the local tobacco (in 1824) by means of the technique of pressure fermentation into what is now known as Perique tobacco. This St. James Parish crop has a stronger, spicier and earthier aroma than regular tobacco. Mount Airey Plantation was originally owned by Henry Fontenot, and later by Joseph LeBourgeois, who named the home after having once attended college in Mount Airy, North Carolina (Andy Griffith's home town and the basis for the fictional Mayberry). The Mount Airey house in St. James was destroyed in a 1944 fire.

Pierre Chenet's granddaughter, Coralie Decareau, married Celestin Poché in February, 1819, and the Poché family has been actively involved in the cultivation and processing of Perique tobacco to this day.



June 17, 1926, "Isles" ad in the Picayune with 1920 bathing suits

While still in his youth, Allen Johness moved with his family to New Orleans, where he was a student at Chenet Institute, a high school operated by his relatives. He later attended Tulane University. He would go on to serve as a state legislator and author the Louisiana Real Estate Licensing Act. In addition to marketing Pass Christian Isles in the 1920s, as evidenced by the attractive ads above (and below), Johness specialized in land reclamation and subdivision development in East Jefferson Parish, where various old plantation tracts were

purchased and subdivided into areas that are today well-known and long-established communities.



PASS CHRISTIAN ISLES

90 MINUTES FROM NEW ORLEANS

Winding tranquilly through the 1400 acres of Pass Christian Isles, bringing the Gulf, calmed and subdued, to touch even the "inland" properties, miles of streams will give to the home-owner there not only all the advantages afforded by creeks or rivers but also an outlet to the larger possibilities of the Gulf itself.

In these streams will Pass Christian Isles' yachts, motorboats and schooners be moored. In them will be safeguarded the boats you will use for fishing. And gliding smoothly in the cooling shadows will be your canoes.

You will walk a few yards from your door, out onto your little pier. Are you going fishing? If so there are a score of possibilities. You can take the larger of your boats and go out in Bay St. Louis, around the point to the Gulf, or, if you want quiet and lazy lounging you can take the canoe, or a rowboat, and paddle up, under that overhanging oak, where it is shady peaceful and where the trout are striking constantly.

Would you prefer just to drift and dabble? If so the canoe would probably be better. And, if you have on your bathing suit, there will be scores of pools, if you prefer not to dive in from your landing.

Of course this is just one of the minor phases of the development, to be executed at the cost of a fortune, which has been mapped out and planned by the Commission of architects, landscape architects and engineers, appointed by the Pass Christian-Chicago Land Company, owners of the property. This Company has declared its determination to make Pass Christian Isles the leading residential, recreational and sporting resort on the entire Gulf Coast. It can be done—easily. The natural advantages of Pass Christian Isles are too great for it to be anything else.

In the first place it is on the railroad and is only 90 minutes from New Orleans by the railroad. The new bridge across the Bay of St. Louis, over which will run the Old Spanish Trail, ends on the property and there is a two-mile frontage leading up to it. Then, there are the miles of frontage on Bay St. Louis, the inland waterways, the golf course, designed especially for owners of Pass Christian Isles land. Next, Henderson Point, on which Pass Christian Isles is located, is noted throughout the United States for its wonderful fishing of all kinds, from tarpon to trout. The bathing beach shelves easily to swimming depth, of clear water, very near the shore. There will be tennis, riding, swimming, bathing, golf, sailing, fishing, dancing—everything for sport or amusement.

Then there is another thing. The prices! They are the lowest on the Coast. Water frontage costs \$30 a front foot and up. Golf course frontage is priced from \$40 to \$60. And interior property may be had for from \$10 a front foot up. Why pay more? Why delay?

* Reservations May Be Made Now!
MAKE YOURS TODAY!

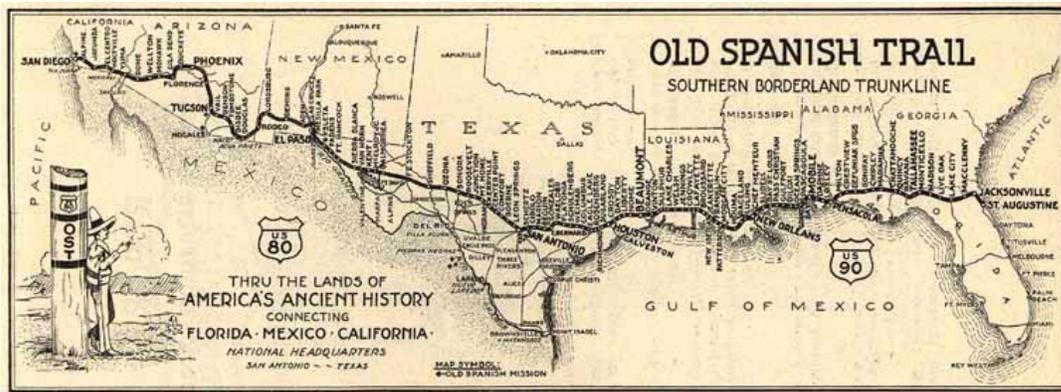
General Agents: The Johness Realty and Securities Company
611 Common St. New Orleans, La. 70002



The Johness ad above, featured June 9, 1926, in the *Times-Picayune*, makes evident a different time and place – with different means of getting there. “In these streams,” it states, “will Pass Christian Isles’ yachts, motorboats and schooners be moored.” It also claims, “And gliding smoothly in the cooling shadows will be your canoes.”

The biggest selling point of all, however, was its location being “only 90 minutes from New Orleans by the railroad.” And, not only that,

"The new bridge across the Bay of St. Louis, over which will run the Old Spanish Trail, ends on the property". Trouble was, the Old Spanish Trail (OST) would not be completed until 1929. Begun in 1915 as what would become the shortest auto route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the Old Spanish Trail connected St. Augustine, Florida, with San Diego, California, and took fourteen years to construct at a cost of more than \$80 million.



In 1928 a \$5.5 million privately constructed toll bridge built across Lake Pontchartrain briefly frustrated the OST officials, since free bridges over the Chef Menteur and Rigolets passes were not completed until the following year. Unlike other transcontinental highways that stitched together existing roads, much of the Old Spanish Trail had to be created across virtually impenetrable swamplands in the Southeast, including five major outlets into the Gulf of Mexico. But in 1926, a train could get one to Pass Christian Isles in only 90 minutes. The highway would be along shortly.

Only \$50 per waterfront foot, \$40-60 per front foot on the golf course. \$10 per foot and up for interior frontage. "Why pay more? Why delay?" One just had to contact Mr. Johness at "The Johness Realty and Securities Company," located at "635 Common Street" in downtown New Orleans, telephone "Main 6030". Prices today in the Isles, by comparison, are thousands of dollars per waterfront foot.

In addition to developing and marketing Pass Christian Isles, Allen Johness (in one of his earliest projects) founded the town of Harahan, Louisiana (named for James Theodore Harahan of the Illinois Central Railroad Company). Johness also developed Orleans Parkway, the Colonial Country Club area, Bridgedale, Elmeer Place, Richland Gardens, Highland Farms, Pontchartrain Gardens, Pontchartrain Shores and other subdivisions. He played a vital role in bringing the Jefferson Highway to New Orleans and assisted in the layout and construction of Airline Highway into the city (donating much of the land necessary for its rights-of-way). He founded both the Colonial Golf Club and the Pass Christian Golf Club.

In a run for the New Orleans City Council, a 1954 campaign ad stated

that he “was a staunch advocate of woman suffrage” and “was responsible for securing an appropriation for the paving of Claiborne Avenue. He also helped reorganize “the drainage district for East Jefferson which drained over 29,000 acres of land – an area which was previously a swamp – and which, today, is composed of some of the finest residences in Jefferson Parish. He founded and served for 19 years as President of one of the first Homesteads that was authorized to resume business 100% after the Bank Holiday.” In addition, he “served on the Louisiana Real Estate Board for 16 years under four Governors”. The nationwide “Bank Holiday” and the Emergency Banking Act of March 1933, passed by Congress, put an end to the bank runs that had plagued the Great Depression.

Johness was also engaged in development projects in Baton Rouge, Shreveport, Covington and Napoleonville, Louisiana; in Mobile, Alabama; and in Bay St. Louis and Gulfport, Mississippi. In the 1950s he was President of the American Association of Small Business, giving constant attention to the needs and concerns of small business owners.

Toward the latter part of his career, he was deeply involved in shopping center development. He assembled land in 1940 in order to develop the Carrollton Shopping Center (once home to a Gus Mayer’s, Labiche’s and J. C. Penney’s), today the site of Costco. He opened the initial phase of the shopping center in 1947 and later sold it to Equitable Life Assurance in 1966 for \$7.25 million.

He owned or developed numerous other shopping centers known as Claiborne, Metairie, Lutchter-Gramercy, Bay St. Louis and Carolyn Park.

The real estate dynamo died December 20, 1966, after a brief illness. He was survived by his wife; a son, Allen H. Johness, Jr.; and four granddaughters. Vast swaths of the Greater New Orleans area, surrounding parishes, and neighboring states were converted from idle acreage to thriving neighborhoods, major roadways and bustling retail centers. Few entrepreneurs have done so much in a single lifetime.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“A Dynamic Developer”
Ned Hémard
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