

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Matilda Geddings Gray and *Evergreen* Plantation**

Louisiana oil heiress and philanthropist Matilda Geddings Gray (1885 – 1971) of Lake Charles was the daughter of John Geddings “Ged” Gray, who began the family fortune by accumulating property in western Calcasieu Parish between the Calcasieu River and the Sabine River. The acreage comprising the Gray Ranch, as it was known, was acquired primarily for raising horses and cattle, for agriculture, and eventually for oil and gas development. The oil fields on the Gray Ranch were, at one time, the most productive in the world.



*Matilda Geddings Gray by Helen M. Turner*

Unmarried when her father died in 1921, it was Matilda, not her brothers (Bill and Henry), who took over the reins of the family's oil and timber business. This was a strong-willed move for the time, but she was a determined, intelligent woman. Matilda Gray possessed a strong confidence in her ability.

Besides being an astute businesswoman, Matilda was also an artist of refined aesthetic sensibility, having attended the Newcomb College School of Art. Her interests were wide-ranging, from Guatemalan Indian fabrics and French book binding to studying with a Greek sculptor and collecting Fabergé eggs.



*Matilda Geddings Gray, circa 1940  
Photograph by Dorothea Thorp*

A sophisticated collector, she acquired her first Fabergé *objet* in 1933, at a time when the name of the Russian visionary artist-jeweler, Peter Carl Fabergé, was virtually unknown in the United States. Over a number of years, Matilda Geddings Gray amassed one of the finest Fabergé collections in the world. After her death, Gray's collection passed to the Matilda Geddings Gray Foundation she had established, with the stipulation that a broad viewing public should be able to enjoy these exquisite pieces. The sumptuous collection was on display for many years at the New Orleans Museum of Art before later being on long-term loan at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Matilda Gray also enjoyed restoring historic structures. In 1937, she purchased an 1856 Italianate villa known as the John Gauche House at 704 Esplanade, corner of Royal Street. He had been an importer and dealer of chinaware and crockery. She restored this French Quarter gem in 1938, as did her niece, Matilda Gray Stream, in 1969. When derelict plantation homes on the River Road north of New Orleans were being leveled in the name of progress, she rescued *Evergreen* Plantation from that fate. The year was 1946.

*Evergreen*, a National Historic Landmark located in Edgard, St. John the Baptist Parish, was constructed (and completed mostly by 1790) by Jean Christophe Haydel and renovated to its current Greek Revival

style in 1832. Christophe's brother, Jean Jacques, built the adjacent *Whitney* Plantation concurrently with *Evergreen*. Christophe's daughter Magdelaine, widow of Pierre Antoine Becnel, acquired full ownership of *Evergreen*, a working sugar plantation, in 1801 from her sister Françoise Marmillon. Grandson Pierre Clidamant Becnel, who gained full ownership in 1830, added the stuccoed-brick Doric columns during the 1832 expansion. During Ms. Gray's extensive restoration of *Evergreen* in the 1940s, 300,000 bricks were used from the demolished *Uncle Sam* Plantation in nearby St. James Parish.



*Evergreen Plantation*

*Evergreen* includes a wealth of outbuildings, including *garconnières* for young bachelors or guests; *pigeonniers* for keeping pigeons (a status symbol among planters); 22 slave quarters, arranged in a double row along an *allée* of oak trees; a kitchen; a privy; and an overseer's cottage. *Evergreen* is also known for its impressive winding dual stairways servicing the galleries.

Matilda Geddings Gray was internationally renowned and had been honored by three countries. England awarded her the Order of the British Empire, France The Legion of Honor and Guatemala the Order of the Quetzal. She died in Lake Charles in 1971 at the age of eighty-two.



*From Matilda Geddings Gray's Fabergé Collection*

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