

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Artist George L. Viavant and The Old Gentilly Road**

Naturalist and painter of Louisiana wildlife and marshland scenes George Louis Viavant (August 6, 1871 – November 30, 1925) sat in his buggy alongside the two old Michoud sugarhouse chimneys on Old Gentilly Road, once an early Indian trail, to pose for the photograph below. The land around him was primarily hunting grounds.



*Artist George Viavant on the Old Gentilly Road*

On January 15, 1939, an article in the *Times-Picayune* entitled "Chimneys Remain as Trail Becomes 4-Lane Highway," reported the history of the old Indian trail and its upgrade to a modern paved thoroughfare.

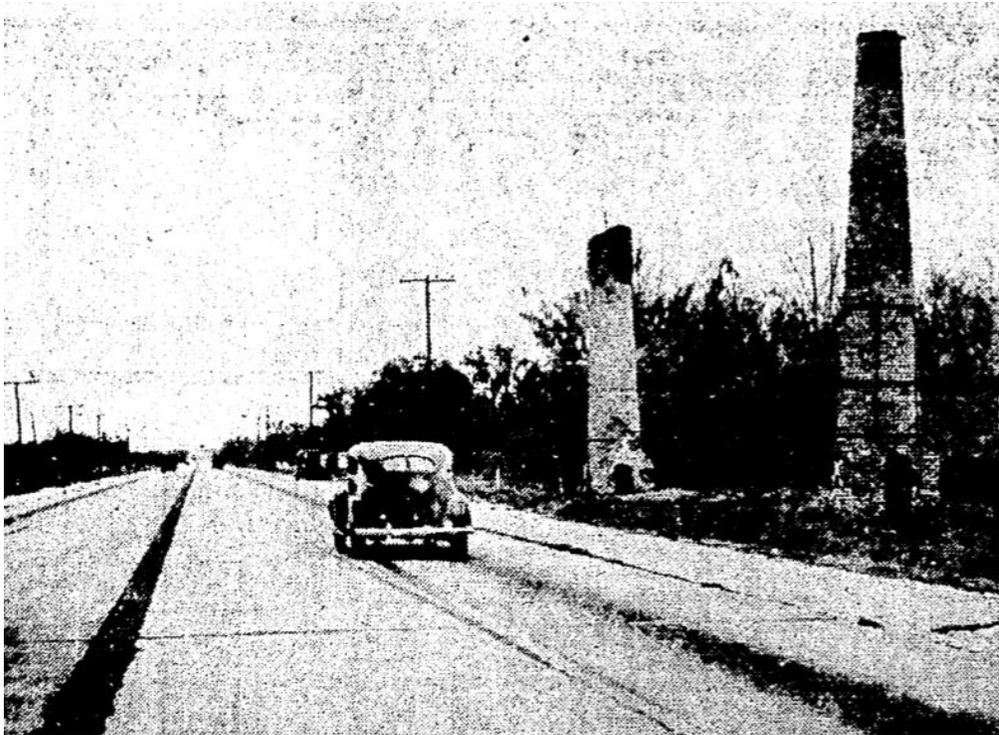
"Two sugarhouse chimneys stand as monuments" along Gentilly Road, along which stands the ancestral home of the Viavant family. The article began with comments by Louise Viavant, sister of artist George,

whose grandfather Judge Augustin Viavant was the first of the Viavant family to live on what was known for many years as the Viavant Plantation, toward the Chef Menteur from New Orleans.

Louise and George's father, Henry Viavant, built a hunting lodge on the property about 50 years before. It was at this very same lodge that actress Sarah Bernhardt stopped on her way to capturing her first alligator in 1901. Back then the land was "swampy and wild life was abundant." The lodge was eventually converted to the family home.

Miss Viavant explained, "In the first part of the last century," (that's the early 1800s), "Gentilly Road was still an Indian trail which followed the curves and angles of Bayou Sauvage and connected the city with the Chef Menteur."

Today the area is known as the Michoud section, but in the article it was spelled in the old manner, "Micheaud." She spoke of the area's "forests of oaks and cypress trees, lagoons and bayous, and wild life even to bears, according to legend. There the Micheaud sugar plantation was established."



*Michoud chimneys in 1939, beside a modern four-lane highway*

"Then came the War Between the States," she said, "and when the Yankees entered the city they built a blockhouse, or a fort, on a high shell bank, which was an Indian camping ground." Part of the fort's moat was still visible in 1939, near the Gentilly Road. "The Federals shelled and patrolled the road to block any attempt of the

Confederates to enter the city by way of the Chef Menteur and to have that access to the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Gentilly was a land of plenty,” Miss Viavant proudly stated, a place where “deer could be seen grazing in the pastures with the cows and horses.” In addition, there were wild ducks, geese, perch and other fish. “Crabs and crawfish were secured by the sacks in the swamps.”

“With an expression of lingering regret,” she missed some of the excitement of days gone by, “to encounter an alligator or an unusually large snake,” or to experience “the hyacinths in bloom” and “the scent of the hundreds of aquatic herbs and the tall cypress trees garlanded with moss.” This “century of progress and the evolution of time,” she believed, were responsible for the many changes that had taken place.



*Present-day view of Old Gentilly Road's Michoud Chimneys*

The old road was then paved with miles of concrete, creating the new Gentilly Highway, “bordered by camps, commercial places and homes.” The landmarks of long ago gradually disappeared, such as the old wood fort, which had fallen into decay. The high shell bank, once “an Indian camp of a happy hunting ground,” had been leveled. The area’s name had been changed to Faubourg DeMontluzin, and would continue as such for another twenty years when it was sold in 1959 to New Orleans East, Inc. Beginning in 1961, the Space Age was underway as NASA began operations at the Michoud Assembly Facility,

one of the largest manufacturing plants in the world. The chimneys are still there, having “withstood the ravages of time” and “still keep their vigil over a past that is fast vanishing into oblivion.”

## **The Art of George L. Viavant**

George Louis Viavant, the son of a New Orleans cotton broker, grew up within the city limits of New Orleans, fishing and hunting out of his father’s hunting lodge located on the Old Gentilly Road. He began art lessons at the Southern Art Union in 1884 with Achille Perelli, a student of John James Audubon. Another New Orleans artist who exhibited at the Southern Art Union was Andres Molinary (1847 – 1915), born in Gibraltar.



*Old Gentilly Road (1890) by Andres Molinary*

George’s grandfather, Judge Augustin Viavant (François Léonard Augustin Viavant), was the first to acquire land in Gentilly three years before George was born. Listed in the city directory as a justice of the peace, Augustin was married to Charlotte Laure Bienvenu, from an old Louisiana family.

George’s first bird painting, a cedar waxwing, was at the young age of 16. His work was a natural blending of his boyhood interests: fishing and hunting game birds in the Louisiana marshes, the natural beauty of wildlife and a love of art. He took inspiration for his art from the bayous, marshes and lagoons of Southern Louisiana. George Louis Viavant produced unique paintings of the birds, fish, and small game that he knew from hunting on the family land on the Gentilly Road.



*Green Winged Teal (1917) by George Louis Viavant*

The art genre for which he is best known is *natures mortes*, after-the-hunt watercolor paintings of dead birds and animals. These were usually depicted hanging from a short cord or string. He was also active in painting other forms of still life, as well as Louisiana landscapes.

Viavant described his early years in a journal:

“When I reached five years I was full of fun. Every Sunday I would go to my father’s place on the Gentilly Road seven miles from the city of New Orleans. It was and it is a pretty place. The house is situated within a half a block of the Nashville and Louisville Railroad Co. At night I would sit on my gallery and see the cars pass. All those lights, it makes a beautiful effect. If you wanted to make me happy, it was to give me a bow and arrow. With that I would start and hunt all day.”



*Redfish by George Louis Viavant*

Viavant's images of regional wildlife became sought after in other parts of the country, even more so than in his native New Orleans. He often used a special split camel's hair brush to attain the realistic hues and textures he was trying to achieve. At a very young age, he won a blue ribbon at the New Orleans Cotton Centennial Exposition of 1884-1885.

Henry Viavant (1841 – 1906), who became a cotton broker after the Civil War, was George Louis Viavant's father. His mother was Alice Bordelois. Henry acquired land along Gentilly Road and even named one of his sons Louis Jules Gentilly Viavant (died May 6, 1936). Henry represented the second generation of Viavants to live in New Orleans.

It was Henry who, in March 1901, met actress Sarah Bernhardt's alligator hunting party passing through his property on Old Gentilly Road and presented the "Divine Sarah" with a large bunch of roses from his garden. The leader of the hunt was a local black man, Charles Bell, who had a cabin on the Gentilly Road. He was apparently an adept alligator caller who lured the singular saurian out of his hole by "a curious whining call," reported the *Birmingham Age Herald*. The

gator, “huge, ugly and dirty” was Sarah’s prize.

Another account of the story had George Louis Viavant, gentleman and hunter, securing the gator for Charles Bell. Bell was instructed just where the reptile was tied up and waiting for them.

With French Creole roots, artist George Louis Viavant married a Kentucky woman from an English-speaking Protestant family. Her name was Sarah Grinstead. Together they had six children: Alice, Jeanne, Ruby, James, George Louis, Jr., and Robert, the youngest.

Many of South Louisiana’s bird species became subjects of Viavant’s *natures mortes*, as did the popular fish available in and around the area of the Chef, such as red fish, speckled trout, flounder, drum, croaker and green trout (aka largemouth bass).

One of the painter’s sons, George Louis Viavant, Jr., became a surveyor and helped lay out the route for U.S. Highway 90 through his family’s property. Later in life, he returned to the marsh and opened a small marina at Chef Menteur Pass. His son, Louis (George Louis Viavant, III), who experienced a harrowing experience during Hurricane Katrina, runs the Chef Harbor Marina today.

Another son, the eldest, James Grinstead Viavant, was first employed at the Canal Commercial Bank and Trust, Tremé Market Branch. Later on, he became co-founder of Avondale Shipyards with Harry Koch and Perry N. Ellis in 1938. James’ younger brother Robert was the company’s first employee, working there until 1986.

Sisters Alice and Jeanne never married and lived together for most of their lives.

In the area of art, George L. Viavant’s most gifted student was his own daughter Ruby. She was extremely talented and destined for a promising career, but her life was cut short in 1925 at the young age of 21. Her death was a terrible blow to her painter father. In less than a year, he, too, would be dead. He suffered a heart attack while waiting his turn in his doctor’s office at the Maison Blanche Building.



*Old Gentilly Road in the Space Age:  
Same chimneys, but different modes of transportation*

For a wonderful in-depth biography, beautifully illustrated with works by the artist, please explore *George L. Viavant: Artist of the Hunt* by George E. Jordan, published by The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2003.

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