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Days at Chicora: Lifestyles of the Landed Gentry of Early Bossier Parish

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Bossier Parish, Louisiana was carved out of Claiborne Parish in 1843. The northern border constituted the Arkansas state line, with the Red River dividing Bossier Parish from Caddo to the west. The western border of Caddo Parish, a scant 15 miles from northern Bossier Parish, served as the boundary between the United States and the Republic of Texas. The east bank of the Red River on a high bluff (named Carolina by John Adger) at the foot of what was known as the Great Raft was the location selected by the Adger family in 1846 for several new plantations. The Adger plantation home called Chicora was typical of that of early Bossier planters.

Far from representing poor pioneer settlers, the early planter families migrating to the region between Cedar Bluff and Hurricane Bluff on the Bossier bank of the Red River were already well established within the planter class. As a rule they brought their slaves, tools, and capital from the east and quickly established working plantations. Their lifestyles included such amenities as yearly vacations back to South Carolina as well as excursions to New York, Canada, and Europe. Their children were educated by private tutors and governesses as well as in institutions back east. Their homes were constructed with slave labor of the best materials and contained furnishings from New Orleans, New York, and Europe. They attended Presbyterian services at the nearby settlement of Rocky Mount, as well as a local church at Cottage Grove, but also regularly went to Shreveport to worship with many other area planters. They attended the opera in Shreveport and New Orleans, as well as Mardi Gras in the crescent city. Other recreational diversions included hunting and fishing, as well as jousting tournaments hosted by the

"Knights of Cottage Grove." The legacy of the society created by the early northern Bossier Parish planters continued well into the twentieth century, with many of the early landowning families continuing to hold vast acres of land. Descendants of the early slaves still live on land their forebears cleared over 150 years ago.

When John Adger from Winnsboro County, South Carolina purchased land in Bossier Parish, Louisiana in 1846, the United States had annexed Texas into the Union and was involved in war with Mexico. The fruits of the fighting were enormous. America's total size was increased by about one-third (including Texas), an addition even greater than that of the Louisiana Purchase. By 1848, a year highlighted by a rash of revolutions in Europe, America was filled with unrest. Land recently wrested from Mexico proved a bone of contention, for it raised anew the issue of extending slavery into the territories. General Zachary Taylor, a wealthy sugar planter from Louisiana, won the Presidency due largely to his wartime popularity. The compromise of 1850 created the territories of New Mexico and Utah without restrictions on slavery, hence open to popular sovereignty. A more stringent fugitive slave law than that of 1793 was enacted. The 1850s reflected the continuing controversies of both the existence and expansion of slavery.¹

In 1860 when John and Margaret Adger established Chicora, the impending war was all but inevitable as two cultures and two sets of values appeared irreconcilable. The Civil War would bring an end to slavery, but did not sever the attachment of the black families to the region. They would continue to work the land, as both tenants and landholders, with some of their descendants remaining until the present on land their ancestors cleared from wilderness that until they arrived had been cultivated by Native Americans. After the Civil War the Adgers appeared to have leased much of their land in Bossier Parish to former slaves. Descendants of these black families continue to live in the vicinity of the plantations to the present day, some tracing

1. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes. *A Short History of the American Nation*. (New York: Longman, 2001), 292-296.

their genealogy to slaves born in Africa that are buried in Carolina Bluff cemetery. The land along the east bank of the Red River between Cedar Bluff to the north and Hurricane Bluff to the south in present day Bossier Parish was recognized by the earliest inhabitants as a particularly desirable place in which to live. The Caddo tribes were early residents of the region, dwelling on the high ground along the river which was interspersed with fertile bottom land. Easy access to the region known as Caddo Prairie on the west side of the river afforded other tracts of arable land for corn as well as abundant wild game. In the early period of the nineteenth century the Alabama and Coushatta Indians resided at Cedar Bluff north to what is now known as Coushatta Bluff.² The area from Coushatta Bluff south to Cedar Bluff, Carolina Bluff, and finally Hurricane Bluff was characterized by portions of high ground extending to the east bank of the Red River interspersed with parcels of alluvial bottom lands. Because the Great Raft clogged the river channel with a gigantic logjam, these bottom lands were subject to annual overflow. The area along the west bank of the river was an immense, almost impenetrable swampy region with portions of prairie along the higher banks of the numerous creeks and bayous. This region extended from the west bank of the river channel through present day Caddo Lake into Texas. For the Indians as well as the early planters, the high ground along the Red River surrounded by regions of extremely fertile ground was valuable real estate.

As soon as the cession treaty with the Caddo Indians was signed in 1835, planters and farmers, business dealers, and land speculators began to move into the Red River Valley. The Caddo had provided their friend Larkin Edwards the reserve on the high ground at the confluence of Cross Bayou and the Red River. This extremely valuable parcel was purchased by a speculator of dubious character named Angus McNeill and later became the site of downtown Shreveport. Larkin Edwards wished to remain where he had settled at Cedar Bluff.³ Another land speculator from South Carolina named

2. Claude McCrocklin, "The Red River Coushatta Indian Villages of Northwest Louisiana 1790-1835 in *Louisiana Archeology Bulletin No. 12, 1985, 2.*

Pickett (who was a director of the Arkansas bank that had advanced Henry Shreve monies for clearing the Raft) also settled near Cedar Bluff on the high land between the Red River to the west and the swampy region known as the "flatwoods" to the east. This area became known as Cottage Grove. The Picketts acquired large sections of land on both sides of the river in 1841. When Pickett died a year later (buried in the Cottage Grove Cemetery) his wife married James Blair Gilmer from nearby Collinsburg. Gilmer, one of the wealthiest men in the South died while on a trip to Cuba in 1856. His home called Orchard Place reputedly had gold doorknobs. By the time of his death Gilmer owned 13 plantations and scores of slaves.⁴

About two miles south of Cedar Bluff and Cottage Grove was another area of high ground along the east bank of Red River. At the time this bluff was the location of the foot of the Great Raft and served as the northern point of navigation along the main channel of the river. In March of 1846 John Adger from Fairfield County, South Carolina purchased a large tract along the river from James Marks and James Woods, two large landowners from Caddo Parish. This high land became known as Carolina Bluff and became the site of three plantations operated by the Adger family. These plantations extended south along a large horseshoe bend in the river to another high place known as Hurricane Bluff a distance at the time of about ten miles down the river. The river lands were known as Carolina Bluff and Fairfield. There were five steamboat landings on the plantations. The busy landing at Carolina Bluff was called "Independence" and handled much of the freight and cotton from the northern plantations of Bossier Parish and southern Arkansas.⁵ The upland plantation between Carolina Bluff and Cottage Grove became known as Chicora. John and Margaret Adger built a substantial home in 1860 for their son William Ellison Adger and his new bride Mary Moultrie Gamble

3. Marguerite Plummer and Gury D. Joiner, *Historic Shreveport-Bossier* (San Antonio, TX: Historical Publishing Network, 2000), 18.

4. Samuel J. Touchstone, *Bossier Parish History* (Princeton, LA: Folk-Life Books, 1989), 20.

5. *Memoirs of Ellison Moultrie Adger (1875-1945)*, Adger Collection Box 287, Noel Memorial Library Archives, Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

Adger. The home was constructed of the finest heartpine lumber from virgin timber cut at Alden Bridge about three miles to the east.

John Adger, like the other early planters surrounding him, was already firmly established in the planter class prior to migrating west to Louisiana. The vast lands that he purchased were literally at the time on the very edge of the frontier. The family came from Antrim County, Ireland (hence the place name of the Antrim Community near present day Plain Dealing, La.). When the family came to America, they settled around Charleston, South Carolina in Fairfield County. John Adger, along with his son William, were involved in farming interests in both South Carolina and Louisiana from 1846 until 1860, when the family migrated permanently to Chicora. The family made yearly visits back to South Carolina for months at a time during the summer, visiting New Orleans and Atlanta on a regular basis. John Adger, returning to South Carolina from Chicora in 1860 took vacation in New York (incidentally he was severely injured in a boating accident on Lake Ontario and never walked again). James Adger, brother of John, caught pneumonia in New York City in 1858 and died in the St. Nicholas Hotel.⁶

The Adgers from South Carolina were similar to other early planter families that came to the Shreveport area. Many families from Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas, Kentucky, and Tennessee were Americans of considerable wealth and education. They brought with them the cultural traditions of their Scots-Irish forebears, and the religious beliefs of Presbyterians and Episcopalians.⁷ The Adgers of Chicora attended Presbyterian services at nearby Rocky Mount with such families as Scott, Cavett, Gilmer and Hughes, as well as numerous Adger cousins in the area. A Presbyterian church, with an accompanying cemetery, was established at Cottage Grove (both the church and cemetery are still used). Area planters such as Hughes, Doles, Sentell, Adger, Pickett, Edwards, Martin, and Dickson attended services there. Chicora, is still owned by the Adger family. It

6. Adger-Ellison materials by W. E. Glassell III. Adger Collection Box 287. Noel Memorial Library Archives, Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

7. Plummer, 18.

consisted of 832 acres and was located about twenty miles north of Shreveport, La. between the Shreveport-Arkansas road (now the Old Plain Dealing road) and Carolina Bluffs-Rocky Mount (now the Adger Lake road) near their crossing at Dickson's Cross Roads. Chicora was about two miles from the steamboat landing at Carolina Bluffs. The Martin family lived between Dickson's Cross Roads and Carolina Bluff. W. "Abe" Martin operated a large store at Dickson's Cross Roads and had farming interests throughout the area. From 1850 until the final clearing of the Great Raft by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers Dickson's Cross Roads was the center of activity for the plantation region from Carolina Bluff, Rocky Mount, and Hurricane Bluffs.⁸ There was a Post Office and stage depot; Mrs. Adger could expect mail every other day from the regular stage service. Freight was stored in large warehouses at Carolina Bluff and was transported from steamboats to wagons along the Carolina Bluff road to Dickson's Cross Roads and from there it went either to Arkansas along the Shreveport-Arkansas road (also known as the Camden highway) or to Rocky Mount along the Carolina Bluff-Rocky Mount road (which ran in front of Chicora).

In Bossier Parish, only seven years old when the 1850 census was taken, there were 2507 whites and 4455 slaves. By 1860 there were 9000 slaves working on Bossier plantations as the settlers formed a planters' society very similar to what they had left behind east of the Mississippi.⁹ In 1850 John Adger was shown to have owned 76 slaves in Bossier Parish. By 1860 he increased that number to 131 (only 7 are listed as over 40 years old).¹⁰ The Adgers, migrating to Carolina Bluff from Fairfield County in South Carolina were typical in that they, like most other area planters brought their horses, mules, cattle, and slaves overland. The immediate family appears to have taken the less demanding route of steamer to New Orleans, then steamboat from there to Shreveport. The slaves brought from South Carolina represented families that had been born in Africa and purchased in

8. Chicora Plantation Background by W. E. Glassell III, Adger Collection, Box 287, Noel Memorial Library Archives, Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

9. Plummer, 25.

10. U. S. Census Slave Schedules, 1850 and 1860, for Bossier Parish, LA. National Archives, Bossier Parish Library History Center, Microfilm Roll 242.

Charleston. One woman known affectionately by the family as "Ma Jane," was born in 1807 in South Carolina. She was a slave of "pure African descent" and made the journey to Bossier Parish. Her brother "Uncle Soloman" also made the trip. "Ma Jane" lived 102 years and was buried in the Negro cemetery at Carolina Bluff. Some of the slaves who came from South Carolina were direct from Africa. One such slave named "Yammaho" apparently taught the young Adger children how to speak and count in his native African dialect. The children of "Yammaho" later took the surname of Player, and still reside on their land adjacent to property owned by the Adger family.¹¹ Descendants of the Adger slaves still reside on their land near the Dickson plantation.

Following the Civil War William Adger appears to have leased much of his over 2300 acres to former slaves. Credit accounts of W. A. Martin at Dickson's Cross Roads show numerous items purchased for use by the "Adger hands." Numerous steamboat bills of lading for the Adger plantations of Fairfield, Independence, and Carolina Bluff contain many items for the "Adger hands" after the Civil War.¹² Along the old Shreveport-Arkansas road from Hurricane Bluff to Collinsburg, the current black landholders can trace their ancestry directly back to the Adger plantations. Player, Adger, and Beasley (a large plantation just across the river from Carolina Bluff) are among the few black landowners in the area to the present day.

A slave known as "Uncle Noah" apparently saved the life of William Adger during a duck hunting excursion on the Red River. The early planters enjoyed such diversions immensely. Numerous accounts of turkey hunts in the woods, free of underbrush due to annual burnings by the previous Indian residents, abound in the park-like setting. Reportedly every fence post near Chicora was adorned by the antlers of deer killed by William Adger, a testimony to his marksmanship. It is reported that while riding his favorite horse "Tom" that William Adger shot a wild turkey through the head while

11. *Memoirs of Ellison Moultrie Adger.*

12. *Steamboat Bills of Lading, Adger Collection, Box 287, Noel Memorial Library, Louisiana State University in Shreveport.*

both the turkey and the horse were still running.¹³ Horsemanship was a skill highly respected by the planter families. The planter society valued chivalry, as portrayed by Sir Walter Scott's widely read *Ivanhoe*. Jousting tournaments were popular throughout the South. Numerous tournaments were held in the Cottage Grove area, with one successful "Knight of the nineteenth century" N. W. Sentell of Collinsburg choosing as his "Beauty Queen" Miss Janie Adger of Chicora. The Cottage Grove tournaments consisted of running the mount full speed and catching two inch rings suspended from posts.¹⁴ The Adger family appears to have attended Mardi Gras in New Orleans annually, as well as the theater and opera in Atlanta and New York City. The Adger children were tutored by a governess with some of the male children attending military school in South Carolina. A Dr. Wilson seems to have lived at Chicora for quite some time, enjoying many night hunting excursions. The credit ledgers of the Martin store include barrels of rum and gin, presumably for medicinal purposes. The "Days at Chicora" Journal written by Mrs. Mary Adger, wife of William, reflect many details of vacations to South Carolina with stops in New Orleans and Atlanta, with Charleston being quite popular.¹⁵

The lifestyles of the early planter families of Bossier Parish, while reflecting the hardships of living in a remote area, also depict much in common with the society that they knew in their eastern homes. The early planters rapidly transformed an area cultivated previously by Indians for their subsistence into a region producing enormous amounts of cotton sold on the international market. Because of the wealth of the land and the labor of their slaves, they enjoyed education, travel, culture, and recreation unheard of by the poor pioneer white farmers.

The history of the Adger family in Bossier Parish is typical of the majority of the early planters in the area. They, like many others, came from an established planter society in the older eastern states and

13. Memoirs of Ellison Moultrie Adger.

14. Shreveport (Louisiana) *Times*, 02 Nov. 1940.

15. "Days at Chicora," Journal of Mrs. Mary Moultrie Adger, Adger Collection, Box 287, Noel Memorial Library, Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

brought with them the necessary slaves, tools, livestock, and lines of credit to enable them to rapidly establish themselves as substantial planters. They significantly increased the number of slaves working their plantations from 1850 to 1860. Many of their former slaves continued to work the plantations as tenants, with some actually owning small portions of the plantations. With the clearing of the logjam on the Red River in the decade following the Civil War, the fertile lands along the west bank of the river in Caddo Parish were drained. The Adgers, like the Sentells and Dicksons, moved from their upland Bossier plantations to Caddo Parish to continue their large cotton farming operations. The Adgers were also typical in that they retained ownership of their lands in Bossier Parish long after even the black tenants no longer farmed the land. Today only sunken paths through timber land and pasture mark the once well traveled roads from places with the forgotten names of Carolina Bluff landing, Chicora and Dickson's Crossroads. The legacy of the early planters continues in names such as the Herron field, the Adger Lake Road, Carolina Bluff cemetery, and the marble spires in Cottage Grove cemetery bearing the names of the early settlers.