

# DILIGENT RESTORATION

## The renovation and remarkable history of Ashland–Belle Helene plantation

PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

Any house celebrating its quartoseptcentennial—175th anniversary—has stories to tell, and Ashland–Belle Helene has its share. Built in 1841 as Ashland Plantation by sugar planter and Louisiana legislator Duncan Farrar Kenner, it survived pillaging by Union soldiers, vandalism, fire, and the evolution of the River Road landscape now dominated by petrochemical plants. The property, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, was shuttered for decades before being purchased by Shell Chemical. In 2015, Shell completed an extensive restoration of the estate, concluding a prodigious renovation that Helene and W. Campbell Hayward, owners of the house during its second incarnation as Belle Helene, had begun in 1940.

The two-story Greek Revival home, a square structure measuring sixty feet on each side, is encircled by twenty-eight square columns rising thirty feet high, and it stands less than a quarter mile from the Mississippi River in Geismar, adjacent to the Shell plant on Highway 75. Two years after Kenner's death in 1887, ownership of the house passed to John Reuss, who christened it Belle Helene in honor of his

newborn granddaughter, Helene. Years later, Helene and her husband W. Campbell Hayward sought to revive the magnificent home, which had fallen into disrepair. "It is our dream to see Belle Helene completely restored," Campbell Hayward told the *Baton Rouge State-Times* in 1964. "I hope we can do it in my lifetime."

Family members, including Helene's granddaughter Joan McKee, continued the effort. "It was in 1980 I got completely entranced with that house," McKee recalled. She commuted between her New Orleans home and Ascension Parish to work on renovations. "I was up there continually for about ten years. It was in 1980 I put a new roof on the house. Shell was wonderful to me when I was up there working. They matched the grant I got to work on the house, and whenever I needed anything Shell was there to help me."

In 1992, the family sold to Shell the remaining hundred-acre parcel of the plantation, including the great house. "Because it was listed on the National Historic Register, part of the purchase deal was that we agreed to maintain it structurally for perpetuity,



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which Shell did diligently for many years," said Kevin Hardy, Shell Geismar Communications and External Affairs Manager. Maintenance Manager Bobby Otterstetter, who is responsible for the property's maintenance as part of Shell's physical plant, and who has a personal interest in the house, had the vision of launching a full-scale restoration in 2014.

"We recognized it's a local treasure, people really appreciate it and know about it, and are interested in whatever fate it meets," Hardy said. "We finally realized we needed to go ahead and restore it so it can be used both for our business purposes and also to make it available to the community." Its complete restoration also results in easier ongoing maintenance.

The project consisted of installing a new roof, as well as interior and exterior renovations, including repairs to the columns, shutters, and gallery railing. The exterior has been repainted its original yellow with green shutters. "It had gone through some alterations through the years," said Hardy. "We tried to get that back to the way it looked originally."

The architect's identity may forever remain a mystery. Although its design is commonly attributed to James Gallier Sr., it also has been credited to the Dakin brothers (Charles or James), and to Henry Howard for the elegant spiral staircase located at the rear of the house, according to its original floor plan. Today the main entrance is the original rear door, with the staircase greeting visitors immediately on the right; McKee confirmed that her family had used this door as the entrance, for convenience. The house also features a center hall that is duplicated upstairs, with parlor rooms on the first floor and bedrooms on the second floor on either side of the great hall.

Its interior décor consists of several furnishings that are unique to Ashland-Belle Helene's history. One upstairs bedroom features a wooden canopy bed that had belonged to Kenner—"One of the slats has Kenner's name written on it," Hardy explained—in addition to chairs and animal prints provided by Kenner descendants. This bedroom also features a reproduction of an 1846 portrait of Kenner at age thirty-three by artist Jules Lion, a French free man of color who produced a lithograph series of prominent Louisianans. It hangs above the bedroom's fireplace, one of multiple fireplaces that required restoration since the marble had been stolen by vandals.

In the adjoining bedroom stands another canopy bed, a prop that remains from the filming of the 1971 Clint Eastwood movie *The Beguiled*. In addition to this film, Belle Helene served as a set for other productions, including *Band of Angels* starring Clark Gable (1957), *The Long, Hot Summer* with Paul Newman (1958), and *Mandingo* (1975). During the filming of *Fletch Lives* (1989), a Chevy Chase movie in which Fletch inherits a crumbling Louisiana estate, the crew caused damage to the house when a fire for a scene in a bedroom was not properly contained.

Downstairs in a former parlor room hang racehorse portraits that pay homage to Kenner's thoroughbred racing stable of champion runners. Kenner had served as a member of the Confederate States House of Representatives, and all but one of the original portraits of his horses by artist Edward Troye were stolen or destroyed by the Union army when Ashland was raided to apprehend Kenner in 1862. During the raid, Kenner escaped arrest, having been alerted by a slave to the approaching forces, but Ashland was pillaged by soldiers over the course of four days. A painting of Kenner's mare Gray Fanny was spared and currently resides with a family member.

An upstairs room will serve as a museum area to acknowledge the history of the Ashland sugar plantation, in particular its slave history. As one of the top sugar producers in the state, the plantation enslaved a workforce of nearly five hundred people by 1860. The museum is still in the planning stage, but its intent will be for visitors to engage in self-guided tours of interpretive history that will include posters with narratives about the plantation's past as well as artifacts.

Shell also honors the memory of Kenner's slave and leading jockey Abe Hawkins with signage that stands on the lawn near Ashland Road: "Once enslaved at Ashland Plantation, became noted 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American jockey. Rode the horse Lecomte to victory over Lexington in 1854 in New Orleans. Inducted into the Louisiana Racing Museum Hall of Fame in 1997." Hawkins also found success riding in the North after the war, then returned to ride in Louisiana in 1866. The following spring, he fell seriously ill—his death was erroneously reported by *Turf, Field and Farm*—but recovered,



according to the *St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican*, with support offered from "Duncan Kenner, his former master, who, in the hour of sore affliction, attended with paternal care to the wants of the supposed dying freedman, and saved him from the eager clutches of unwelcome death."

Hawkins' recovery was only temporary, for he died from consumption weeks later after riding again. He was buried at Ashland in a brick tomb under a live oak tree near Kenner's training track, which had been located a half-mile southeast of the house, but today the precise site of the tomb is unknown.

In addition to its use for Shell business, Ashland-Belle Helene will occasionally host community events. In 2016, Shell sponsored a music history camp led by musician Bill Summers, who taught students to play traditional African instruments and educated them on the history of music as part of slave culture. This winter, Shell plans to repeat its "Christmas at Ashland" party held last year for local children and families and will provide concert space for the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra. Other events may include open houses for the community to tour the home.

In 2015, Preserve Louisiana recognized the restoration through its Corporate Preservation Award, praising Shell "for its efforts and dedication in preserving Louisiana's architectural heritage and for its efforts 'in making the past known and useful to the present.'" Joan McKee visited once renovations were completed and echoed this positive feedback. "I was very much impressed with it—it was everything I'd hoped," she said.

After enduring decades of sitting vacant, Ashland-Belle Helene can once again tell its stories, as the house begins its third incarnation with a new purpose that can benefit the greater community into the future.

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