

THE LARKINS

A prominent family of 19th century Thibodaux was that of John Larkin, a native of Dublin, Ireland, born in 1822. When only age three, after the death of his mother, John arrived in the U. S. with his father, James, and two siblings Mary and Richard. They settled first in Philadelphia, then moved west to Harrisonburg. Upon his father's death when he was ten, Larkin was raised by an uncle, Pat, who apprenticed out John and Richard as metalsmiths in Pittsburgh. John soon was a master coppersmith and engineer-inventor, and his brother a blacksmith and engineer. John's invention of a steam plow led him to come by steamboat to Louisiana to attempt a sale of the patent. The arrangement failed, but Larkin remained, working in sawmills and sugar houses along Bayou Teche. He became a U. S. citizen in 1845; a sworn affidavit by his brother, who also had migrated to Louisiana, stated that John had been in the country since 1826.

Larkin moved on to Thibodaux when the town and surrounding sugar plantations and mills were booming. His talents were in great demand. For the census of 1850, Larkin registered 27 years old and designated himself as a farmer. He had a wife, Susan (Sherrod), age 20, born in North Carolina but raised near Thibodaux by a wealthy uncle, Richardson Darden (a founder of St. John's). She had met John at a ball in Thibodaux. At the time, 1850, the couple had two daughters, Martha, three, and Emma, six months. A son, Charles, born in 1858, and two other children, Anna and John, Jr. were the sole survivors of seven children when the Civil War commenced.

John Larkin thrived. He owned property before 1850, for instance, and in 1852 exchanged a lot fronting on St. Mary Street – adjacent to one owned by the carpenter and Pennsylvania native

Morgan Springer – with another owned by the merchant William Ragan on the corner of Levee and St. Philip Streets. Prior to the Civil War, Lafourche Parish court records show him in partnership with G. W. Westbrook and occupied as a tinner. At the 1860 Census, the family lived about a mile up Bayou Lafourche from Thibodaux, adjacent to the St. Bernard and Energy Plantations of Susan's uncle Richardson Darden and David Bryan Pugh. Perhaps Larkin serviced the plantation mills. Richard Larkin also had been a part owner of the Thibodaux Foundry and no doubt employed John at times.

During the Civil War, John Larkin left Thibodaux for New Orleans, entered the Confederate army, was captured and paroled, and was assigned by Union Gen. Benjamin Butler to run six sugar mills, for which he earned \$500 a month. Upon his return to Bayou Lafourche after the war, Larkin resumed farming, but a crevasse during flood time ruined his crop. He then returned to metalwork. By the 1870s Larkin at times partnered with the town mayor and merchant Silas Grisamore, in "Dealership in Stoves, Tinware, Lamps, Bar & Sheet Iron, Gas Pipes & Fitting, etc." In 1871, he also contracted with Fayette Clay Ewing of Ariel Plantation to keep up "Sugar mills, engines, and boilers" on two of Ewing's plantations for a period of four years. He received a princely \$1,000 each January during the term of employment.

As the sugar industry slowly recovered, John Larkin had the talents that were needed to rebuild and maintain the mills. On one occasion with two of his men en route to work by steamboat, two miles upstream from Thibodaux a boiler explosion caused Larkin severe scalding. Unlike 17 other passengers, he recovered. Again farming, but repeatedly suffering from floods,

he worked at least through the 1880s and died in 1901. Susan, who predeceased John in 1895, and John Larkin both are buried in our Historic Cemetery.

Larkin's son Charles found his calling elsewhere and took up photography and instrumental music. Before turning to farming in South Lafourche, he lived on a Bayou Lafourche houseboat. It served also as his studio to provide photographic services to dwellers along the bayou from Donaldsonville to Larose.

(Sources courtesy Janet Lee Davis; Cliff Theriot of Nicholls State University Archives; David D. Plater, ed., The Remarkably Neat Church in the Village of Thibodaux [Lafayette, 1994]; Philip Uzee, ed., Records and Recollections of Thibodaux, Louisiana, Thibodaux Woman's Club, n. d.)



Charles S. Larkin's boat, Retta

(Photos courtesy of Janet Lee Davis)

Top, Susan Sherrod Larkin; Bottom, John Larkin