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Rocky Sexton

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An anthropologist searches for the Louisiana-Iowa connection in old letters and diaries. Can you help him?

# IOWANS IN CAJUN COUNTRY

## An Overview & A Request

by Rocky Sexton


**T**HE CAJUNS of Louisiana, contrary to popular belief, are not simply the swamp-dwelling descendants of Acadians exiled from Canada in the late eighteenth century. Cajuns are instead the result of a centuries-long acculturation process among Europeans, Africans, Americans, and Native Americans. Settlers of Iowa were one group involved in this melting pot, and the setting for this acculturation was the prairie region of southwest Louisiana, an area very similar to the Midwest.

During the early nineteenth century, southwest Louisiana was only sparsely populated, by Acadians and other groups such as African-Americans and Native Americans. In the 1870s, settlement of the area was encouraged in publications extolling the climate, soil, and other favorable conditions. There was, however, no immediate response to such inducements.

The situation began to change in the early

1880s upon completion of the Louisiana Western Railroad. At this time, the Watkins Syndicate, an investment group headed by Jabez Watkins, purchased one and a half million acres of land encompassing much of southwest Louisiana. To organize agricultural endeavors and promote settlement in the region, the Watkins Syndicate recruited Seaman A. Knapp, an Iowa farming expert, writer, and professor of practical and experimental agriculture. Through the efforts of Knapp and others, a propaganda blitz was directed toward northern states. *The American*, a weekly newspaper promoting the region, was published in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and widely distributed. Circulars and advertisements were placed in farm journals throughout the North. The support of journalists and farm leaders was cultivated through carefully arranged inspection tours of southwest Louisiana. Knapp was especially helpful in directing these recruiting efforts towards Iowans, given his position as





JESUS EST SEIGNEUR

**MILLER**

**FRENCH BAPTIST**

**CHURCH**

This church sign, from Acadia Parish in Louisiana, exhibits the varying influences that have formed the human landscape of contemporary southwest Louisiana. Migrating Iowans were among those influences. On the sign, the Baptist denomination and surname Miller are not usually associated with Cajuns. The term "French" and the barely visible statement "Jesus est Seigneur" (Jesus is Lord), however, demonstrate a Gallic background.

president of Iowa State College in 1884 and his earlier successes in breeding stock and editing the *Western Stock Journal and Farmer*. (In 1885 Knapp himself took a leave of absence to establish a rice plantation in Louisiana.)

Beginning in the 1880s, hundreds of midwestern families, attracted by the promise of cheap land and a warmer climate, began moving into southwest Louisiana. Benton County, Iowa, provided many of the founding citizens of Vinton, Louisiana. At the same time, Benton County experienced a substantial loss in population — nearly a thousand people between 1880 and 1885. By the 1890s, the number of migrants to Louisiana had reached the thousands, and settlement continued well into the twentieth century.

An immediate contribution by midwesterners was the application of northern agricultural technology for raising grain to Louisiana's undeveloped rice industry. Prior to this time, rice was generally grown in small, non-irrigated plots, and harvested and processed by hand. Midwesterners introduced seeders, binders, and threshing machines to the area. They also developed irrigation systems to ensure a steady supply of water to the rice fields. Within a few years, rice became the major product of the region and many towns developed as shipping points.

The Louisiana towns of Vinton and Iowa (still pronounced "Ioway" by natives there) are documented as having been settled by Iowans. Other settlements such as Morse and Milton





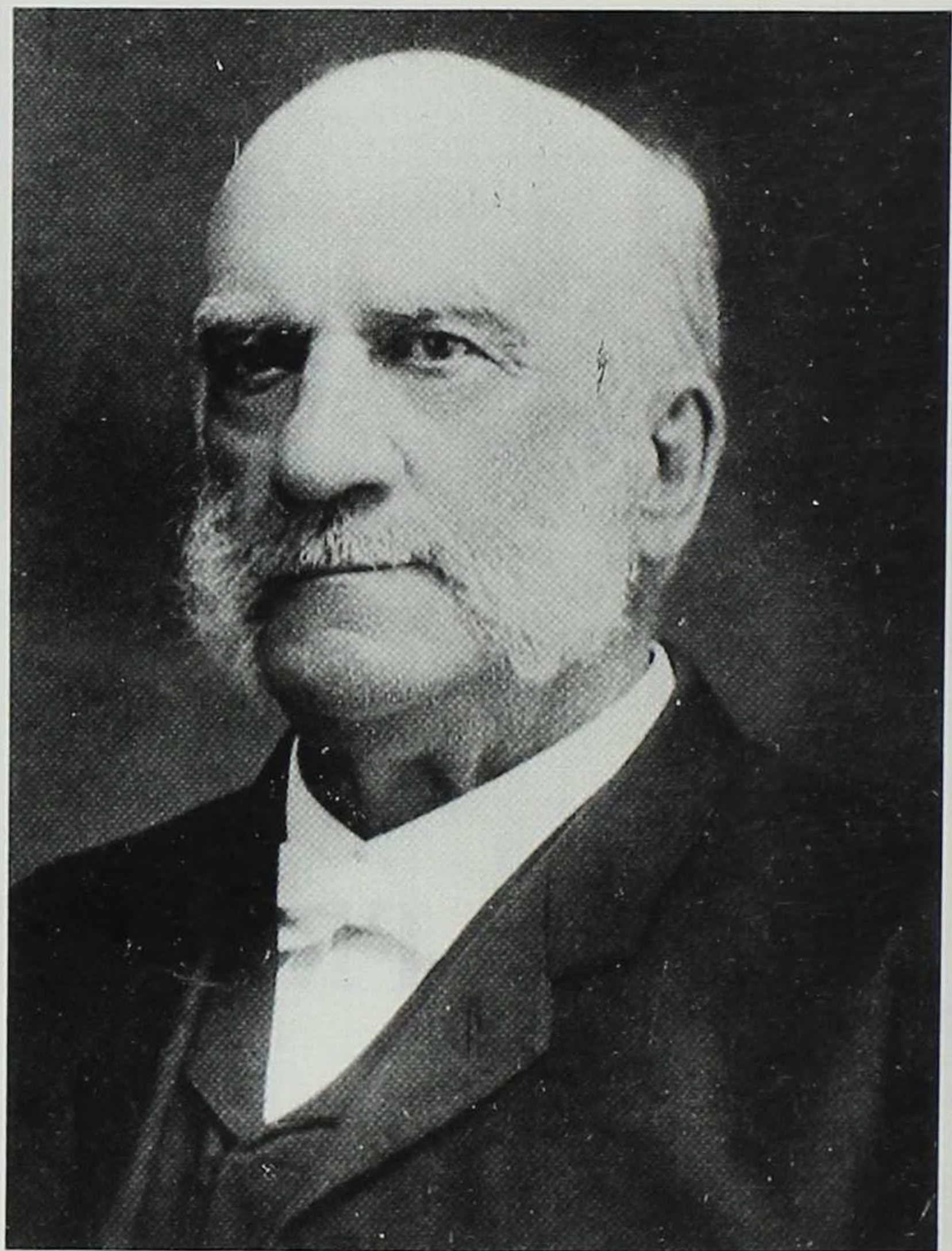
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Many of the "I houses" in Louisiana (a term designated by cultural geographer Fred Kniffen) are nearly identical to midwestern houses typified by this house in Johnson County, Iowa.

may also indicate Iowa place names and family names used for new Louisiana towns. (The fact that Vinton, Morse, and Milton are in eastern Iowa suggests that eastern Iowa provided a large number of Louisiana-bound settlers.)

In the following years, the newcomers mingled with the existing population, and today many Cajuns bear non-Acadian names such as Smith, Gatte, Matte, Hoffpauier, and Miller (see additional names at the end of this article). Likewise, many Cajuns of southwest Louisiana are Protestant rather than Catholic. The presence of Methodist, Baptist, and other denominations throughout southwest Louisiana suggests an influence attributable to settlers from the Midwest and other areas.

Midwesterners also contributed to the architecture of southwest Louisiana. Unlike other areas where Acadian and Creole architecture dominated, the Louisiana prairies still feature many buildings representing styles familiar to the Iowa landscape. Particularly common are



COURTESY IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY/UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Seaman A. Knapp, agriculturalist and 1884 president of Iowa State College, recruited Iowans to move to Louisiana. In 1885 he took his own advice, and established a rice plantation there.

frame houses that are one room deep, two rooms wide, and two stories high. Cultural geographer Fred Kniffen has named these structures "I Houses" because of their builders' origins in Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. In many ways, Iowans and other midwesterners apparently made a lasting impact on the economy, culture, and landscape of southwest Louisiana.

My dissertation topic is settlement and acculturation in Acadia Parish, which lies near the center of prairie Louisiana. In the current phase of research, my particular interest is to study in detail the settlement and interaction of various groups in the area. I am requesting of *Palimpsest* readers any information about families who left Iowa or other states to settle in Louisiana. Of particular significance are letters, journals, and diaries containing references to Louisiana. Such information can provide personal perspectives into the cultural history of both Louisiana and the Midwest. If





Abandoned farmstead, rural Acadia Parish, Louisiana, with outbuildings identical to midwestern structures. The typical prairie landscape shows large, open areas bordered by tree-lined canals and bayous (creeks).

you wish to correspond about this topic, please contact me at the following address: Rocky Sexton, Department of Anthropology, Macbride Hall, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242. Thank you.

**Additional Louisiana towns with possible links to Iowa:**

Edgerly	Jennings
Egan	Lyons Point
Estherwood	Midland
Hathaway	Millerville
Hayes	Silverwood
Iota	Welsh

**Non-Acadian surnames common to southwest Louisiana:**

Abshire	Matte (Mott)
East (Istre)	Miller
Gatte (Gott)	Shexsnyder
Hoffpauir	Smith
Leckett	Wilson

**NOTE ON SOURCES  
AND ADDITIONAL READINGS**

For the most comprehensive study of southwest Louisiana to date, see Lauren Post, *Cajun Sketches: From the Prairies of Southwest Louisiana* (1962). Other works that discuss midwesterners in Louisiana include Fred Kniffen, "The Physiognomy of Rural Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 4 (1963), 291-99, and *Louisiana: Its Land and People* (1968); Harry Hansen, ed., *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1971); and Milton Newton, *Louisiana Atlas* (1974). Examples of promotional publications include Daniel Dennett, *Louisiana as it is: Its Topography and Material Resources, Reliable . . . Information for any who may desire to settle or purchase lands in the Gulf States* (1874); and *idem*, *Southwestern Louisiana: A Description of the parishes of St. Landry, Lafayette, St. Martin, Iberia, Vermillion and St. Mary* (1870). On rice cultivation, see Edwards Phillips, "The Gulf Coast Rice Industry," *Agricultural History* 25 (1951), 91-96. See also Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55 (1965); Lawrence Estaville, "Were the Nineteenth Century Cajuns Geographically Isolated?" in *The American South*, eds. Sam Hilliard and Richard Nostrand (1986); and James Chauvin, "A Socioeconomic Profile of Acadia Parish (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1969), pp. 34-35. Material on Seaman Knapp is from Earle D. Ross, *A History of Iowa State College* (1942).