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THE JOHN JAY FRENCH TRADING POST
A glimpse into the past of Beaumont, Texas

ROSINE McFADDIN WILSON

Time and circumstance have changed, but the staunch house built in 1845 by the pioneer tanner and trader John Jay French endures and affords a glimpse into the lives of the rugged settlers who carved civilization out of the southeast Texas wilderness.

What brought John Jay French and others to southeast Texas? The romance of a far away place? The lure of cheap land? The dream of a fortune to be made? The urge of the pioneer spirit? Perhaps all of these entered into the decision of John Jay French to leave his home in New York to try his luck in Texas in the 1830's.

As a descendant of pioneers who had arrived in Massachusetts in 1635, only 15 years after the pilgrims first landed, French came by his adventurous spirit naturally. He was born in Connecticut in 1799, married Miss Sally Munson of New Haven in 1819, and moved to upper New York state in the early 1820's, first to Shawangunk and then to Utica. Here he established himself as a merchant and tanner. Five children were born to the Frenches, but one died. Yet French, in comfortable circumstances as a merchant and with a family to support, found his restless ambition turning his interest toward Texas.

Why Texas? The answer may lie with the agents for various empresarios in Texas who were advertising the glowing prospects of land in Texas to the populous areas of the east coast of the United States. In 1830 the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company had been organized to promote colonization of the grants of Vehlein, DeZavala, and Burnet, and was particularly vigorous in its advertising and promises, even selling land script and sending groups of colonists to Texas.

John Jay French was one of those inspired by the reports and descriptions which were circulated throughout the east, and he decided to make his own investigation of Texas. Family accounts say that he intended to open a store at Galveston, and his ledger for 1831-1832 shows extensive purchases of goods sufficient to open a sizeable store: hundreds of yards of calico, muslin, damask, bombazine, and other materials; needles, pins, buttons by the gross; suspenders, “Italian cravats,” and “shalls” (shawls) by the dozens; “nankeens” and “Bevertcens” which refer to pants made of those materials; spectacles; “clouts” (poulunce cloths); pocket mirrors; back combs and side combs, some designated “fancy”; and coats, vests, and “brogans.” On April 1, 1832, French made a final inventory of all his goods, and soon after set sail on a “fifty ton Schooner,” having divided his goods between another vessel and the schooner on which he sailed. Both vessels ran into a severe storm, and one was lost, but the schooner on which French was travelling managed to reach New Orleans in spite of a broken mast. At New Orleans French transferred his remaining goods
to another vessel and continued on to Galveston, but having only part of his intended stock, did not open a store but went to Brazoria county and peddled his goods.

In 1833 French located some land on Flores Creek (now Taylor's Bayou) in Jefferson County and entered into an agreement with B. Blackmon to survey and claim it. French made application for the land in March 1835, and it was granted to him on June 26, 1835. The grant was signed by George Antonio Nixon, land commissioner for the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company. The lapse of time between the locating of the land and its actual granting can be attributed to the equivocal position of the land company with Mexican Government concerning its right to issue titles in the three empresario grants for which it claimed to be the agent. However, beginning in September of 1834, George Antonio Nixon did grant titles to land, and French, who had undoubtedly returned to New York, returned again to Texas to apply for and receive his title of 2214 acres of land.

In all, French is supposed to have made three trips to Texas, the third in the fall of 1835 when he brought his family as far as Louisiana. French, his wife Sally, and children Nancy, David, Electra Jane, and John J. Jr. set out by flatboat on the new Erie Canal. David, then seven, recalled hearing his elders discuss the wonders of the canal's construction. As they crossed Ohio, tragedy befell the family, for John J. Jr. died in Massillon, Ohio. The family continued by boat down the Mississippi River, and David recalled that they stopped at many "hamlets" and sometimes saw bands of Indians in strange costumes, paint and feathers. After a five week trip, they arrived in New Orleans. Travelling by way of Opelousas toward Texas, they heard of the outbreak of the Texas War for Independence, and stayed in Opelousas three years before moving finally to Texas. At Opelousas another son was born, and named John Jay after the one who had died.

It is reasonable to assume that French left his family in safety and visited his Texas land during this period, and perhaps built a house to receive them. After the birth of the son in 1838, French brought his family to the Taylor's Bayou home. Here they lived until 1845, when French decided to move his family to Beaumont, which had become the county seat in 1837 and was a faster growing and more strategically located center for trade. French bought 300 acres of land from Joel Lewis in the Absolom Williams survey for $400. Lewis had bought the land from Williams in 1842 for $100, so the $300 rise in value may have represented improvements made to the land. French family legend says that there was once a log cabin somewhere on the property. No trace of it is found today. The land was situated about 4 miles northwest of Beaumont in a wooded area with oak, mulberry and hickory trees whose bark French needed in the tanning process. Here he built a two story home, opened a tannery and soon began trading goods to his customers.

Only one ledger from the tannery and trading post still exists. This ledger begins in 1831 as an invoice and inventory book listing his purchases of goods made for the first trip to Texas (54 pages), and has a short section (13 pages of which 6 are torn out and only the stubs re-
main) which show sales made in Anahuac and Liberty from March 3, 1834, to April 8, 1834. The last section begins on December 24, 1848, and runs for 261 pages to February 12, 1853. This last section, beginning on Christmas Eve, shows on the second page that customers began coming in at the end of the year to “settle up” accounts, indicating a previous ledger. It would appear that French ran out of pages in the other ledger and, finding his old ledger at hand, used it to continue his accounts.

From this ledger and from the house itself much may be learned about the early settlers in the area. The ledger lists the names of the many customers from the area who traded with French: Nancy Tevis and her sons; William McFaddin; Thomas H. Lewis (an early chief justice of the county); Hezekiah, Charles, Marion and Absolom Williams; Sterling Spell, several Ashworths; William Carr; Stephen Jackson; F. W. Ogden; Isaiah Juncker (another early county chief justice); Joseph Hebert; David and George Burrell; Cave Johnson; William Wingate; Alexander Calder (an early county clerk); Richard West; Biddle Langham; and other names still familiar in Jefferson County today. Also found are the names of other firms in Beaumont, Sabine Pass, Galveston, Houston, Washington-on-the-Brazos, Woodville, and Town Bluff with whom he did business, the names of boats to whose masters he consigned his goods for shipment; as for example he sent a shipment of goods on January 13, 1852, “Consigned to the Sloop Constitution at the Pass” (Sabine Pass) and on July 21, 1852, another shipment consigned to the “Sloop Sarah.” Another shipment, the second entry in the ledger on December 24, 1848 reads:

“H. Frazur To him consigned
4 sides sole 15.77
3 Do saddle L 13.62
12 Sides upper 33.12
Wt. of two rolls 173 lbs
Price of each piece marked on each piece $62.51
Sent to Town Bluff by Steam.”

A later entry lists Mr. Frazur as Harmon Frazur.

The unfamiliar terms found in French’s ledger sends the modern reader to the shelf for dictionaries, books on tanning, old textiles, and antiques, for many are of names or articles not in use today: “salaratus” for baking powder, “fustin” probably fustian, a twill fabric, “nankeen,” a fawn-colored fabric woven in China (hence the name, a corruption of Nanking) and popular for “breeches,” “Opoldeldock,” a cure-all composed of Castile soap, camphor oil, oil of rosemary, and rectified spirits. Life must have been occasionally very rugged indeed.

Other entries show the wages paid to tannery employees ($12 per month) and to others for various services such as “hauling goods from Beaumont” or the blacksmith for repairing a “fusle for gun lock” or to the druggist for “bleeding David.” Even personalities entered into the book, for many men bought a “bot. of whisky . . . 10¢” but the men of one family always got “bot. of gumption . . . 10¢” evidently a family joke—much as we speak of “Dutch courage” today.
A page from the ledger of John Jay French dated February 15, 1852.
One interesting feature of French's ledgers is his use nearly all the way through—into the 1850's—of British pounds sterling to indicate prices of goods. The 1834 section of the book lists prices and total charges thus:

"Mr. Taylor White

to 3 yds spotted muslin at 4/6 13/6"

and continues until French was dealing with Mrs. Sarah Minchery, and in the middle of her account switches to dollars and cents. Perhaps French met his match in a plain spoken pioneer woman who told him to forget that English money and tell it to her in American! From that point his Liberty entries state prices in shilling/pence, but charges to the customers in dollars and cents. French's use of pounds/shillings/pence, even in his 1831 invoices of goods, bought in New York, is perhaps primary evidence of the shortage of United States coinage and the unsettled financial affairs of the country affecting the value of the currency at the time. It is interesting, too, that though he sometimes indicates that he was paid in "U.S." or later "in Texas," he never mentions Spanish or Mexican coins.

Most of French's entries indicate that very little cash actually changed hands, at least in the Beaumont years, but that "trading" was actually the means of exchange. French's customers brought in rough hides, barrels of corn, tallow, beef and hogs to trade for shoes, harnesses, bridles, or sides of sole and upper to be made into shoes at home, saddles or saddle leather, whips, and other leather goods from the tannery, or for the whisky, wine, and brandy which French himself made, or for everyday articles which they needed: cloth, needles, thread, irons, pots, hats, vests, side combs, and other goods. Periodically customers came in to "settle" and French would add up all the credits and debits in the ledger, and the settling was done "by book and by note" with the one found owing giving his note to the other for the amount due. Even wages of the various tannery employees were paid by giving them credit in the ledger against which they charged items in the store or occasionally drew cash. They also charged items at "Herring and Bother" in Beaumont, and periodically the two merchants settled up. Only a few entries show that the transaction involved cash. In fact some of the entries indicate that one man sometimes discharged his debt to another by transferring some of his credit to the other's account or by assuming some of the other man's debts.

Early entries in the ledger suggest that at first French operated a tannery only, for all the items listed are raw hides or tanned goods, with an occasional entry showing "55 lbs of beef borrowed" and later marked "returned." Corn, flour, and tallow were also bartered and loaned. As his sons grew old enough to help in the tannery, French resumed his trade as a merchant, first with a few household items and later with a large stock including the home brewed spirits. Eventually French sold the tannery to his sons, and operated only the store, which by this time was housed in a separate building.

The tannery consisted of a shed and a number of vats in the ground in which hides were soaked in water and ground bark from oak, mulberry, or chestnut trees, depending on the color desired in the finished leather. French sold "russet," black and white deerskins, bridles, sides of sole and upper leather for shoes. The 1850 Census Records, Schedule 6, show that
French was engaged in the business of tanning, with a capital investment of $1000, that he used horses as his source of power (though later he bought a mule) and that he had 3 male employees with a total monthly payroll of $40. He listed his raw materials used as 300 hides valued at $450 and 50 cords of bark at $150, and his goods produced at 600 sides of leather valued at $2000. (French may have been "talking poor" to the tax collector because his competition in the county, another tanner named Larkin Thomas, valued his 600 sides at $2400.) Even with French's valuation he should have shown a profit of $920 for the year on the tannery alone.

Beside his tannery and store, French also operated a mill for grinding corn and sugar cane, and the area settlers paid to use these facilities. Later his sons David and John Jr. were the first to mill rice in the area, but their early mill never developed into a full scale commercial mill. Grindstones from these mills are still embedded in the ground near the Trading Post. French also had a smoke house and sold smoked meat, and he had a "wine house" where he made whisky which he sold by the pint, quart or gallon from a barrel. His granddaughter remembers that about half dozen Indians used to come around the trading post and "when they got their whisky they would go away happy," but "you never saw a drunk man on the premises."

Legend had it that the Indians had small nuggets of gold which they carried stored in quills, and that they traded this for whisky and goods. It was this legend that lured a Yankee carpetbagger after the Civil War to an untimely end. The Yankee, a clock tinkerer who was under some suspicion at the time because so many of his customers soon after became the victims of robbery, heard of the rumored horde of gold and tried to bribe a Negro servant of the French's to be his accomplice in robbing French. The servant, remembered as "Uncle Straud," promptly told all to his employers, and a group of neighbors joined the French sons in setting an ambush for the thief. The thief came, tried to escape the trap, and died in an exchange of shots with the local citizenry. Later the old servant used to tell the tale and say that they buried the Yank "whilst he was still battin' his eyes." The Union authorities investigated the incident but pressed no charges.

During the Civil War, French and his sons were detailed by the Confederacy to stay home and make shoes and leather goods for both army and civilians.

French lived for 46 years in Jefferson County, then in 1885 when he was 86 years old, the pioneering spirit seized him again, and he and Sally moved to west Texas where he died in Merkel in 1889. He had left his mark in Jefferson County: French's Island in Taylor's Bayou, French Road and French School in Beaumont still bear his name.

The home which French had built in 1845 became the residence of his son John Jay Jr. and his wife Frances Cox French. This home was a symmetrical, two story house, one room deep, with a fireplace at the northwest gable, a central hall, and two rooms on either side with a shed room behind each. The roof of the shed rooms to the rear was balanced by the porch roof in front. A steep, narrow staircase led from the central
hall to the second floor room which ran the length of the house. The house had simple Greek Revival style doors, sash trim, and column cape, and 12 light windows, adequate but with no excess. The house shows New England frugality with planning of space for one double bed per room. The house has unusual cornice and gable juncture treatment of two super-imposed two-inch wood plinths to receive cornice corner boards and rake trim. Framing joinery and finish reflect excellent workmanship with a sure knowledge of the capabilities of virgin pine lumber, and physical hazards of the area, as demonstrated by the severely economical spacing (42 inches) of the horizontal and vertical framing members and the amplitude of the diagonal windbracing. Rooms throughout were painted in cheerful warm gray or beige, with one room a gay old rose. The ceilings throughout were indigo blue and most rooms had blue or brown painted bases. The doors, frames and standing trim were "grained" umber color. The square porch columns showed successive coats of gray, brown, indigo blue, and medium green. Joined to the house on the northwest side by a covered breezeway was a semi-detached kitchen building of three rooms: dining room, kitchen and storeroom.

It is not known who built the house for French, but five years later he built a house for his son David on his marriage, and it was said to be a mirror image of his own. Records during the building of David's house indicate that part of the work may have been done by slaves, as entries in French's ledger show that he paid various other settlers for work done by "Jessy," "Eli," "Black Isreal," and "Black Usan." Other payments for labor and materials are entered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov 13, 1850</td>
<td>6 M shingles</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 21, 1850</td>
<td>2 M shingles</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 13, 1850</td>
<td>1850 pickets</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 13, 1850</td>
<td>5 days work this week</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 17, 1850</td>
<td>3½ days work</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 5, 1850</td>
<td>Making 13 doors and windows</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doors for two windows</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eve troughs</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At Browns</td>
<td>$39.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, through the building of David's house it can be guessed that most of John Jay French's house was built, if not by the same craftsmen, at least in the same way with local craftsmen making doors and windows. Sawed lumber was available locally, as one Lucien Hopson had a "saw pit" in Beaumont as early as 1839," and the 1850 Census records show that by 1850 there was a saw mill at Sabine Pass founded by I. M. Ketchum and Orrin Brown (this could be the Brown referred to under the entry above for John Fowler "At Browns" indicating that some of the mill work was picked up there by Fowler). This mill was later sold to a William Wingate.

During the years the house passed through two generations of Frenches after John Jay Sr. and was occupied at times by other members of the family. It stayed in the family 95 years until its sale in 1940 to S. W. Aldridge. It was sold by Aldridge's wife Lula Aldridge Lawrence to Charles C. Aldridge, Sr., and left by him to his daughter Weir A. Merchant and her husband M. A. Merchant in 1948. In 1968 the Merchants allowed the
Junior League of Beaumont to purchase the house for the Beaumont Heritage Society to be restored as a museum.

Through the years the house had undergone many changes. Its one story porch has been changed to a two story porch, and additional second story rooms added above the shed rooms, necessitating a change in roof line; but happily the new roof frame was added above the original one, which was left intact. A bedroom wing was added to the northwest side, from which the kitchen wing had long since disappeared. One shed room became a bath, the other a kitchen. A large “den” was added to the rear of the house. Inside a section of the partitions between the front rooms and the hall was removed and supporting beams installed to make it one large room, and nearly all walls and ceilings were covered with panelling, sheet rock, or tile. The floors were covered by modern oak flooring and linoleum.

The Beaumont Heritage Society obtained the services of Raiford Stripling of San Augustine, noted restoration architect, and under his direction all the added structure and materials were removed, and the house was restored to its earliest appearance. Fortunately previous remodellings had reused much original material, so that porch columns, banisters, sections of trim, and original windows were found to tell their story of its original appearance, of colors used. Whenever new materials were used in the restoration, they were hand planed to the appearance of the original materials.

After the restoration was virtually complete, an old photograph of the house was found, showing that Mr. Stripling’s expert architectural archeology had been accurate, with the exception of the spacing of the front porch columns, and this was changed to conform with the picture.
Archeology in the grounds around the house turned up hundreds of artifacts and several original brick foundations of the vanished kitchen structure, which shows in the old photograph. Future plans include the rebuilding of the kitchen wing, the smoke house, the wash house, and the outhouse, and some farm buildings such as a barn, pigsty, and corral. It is intended that the French house itself will tell a story of the pioneer life, of the lack of conveniences we take for granted such as electric lights, running water, indoor plumbing, heating, window screens, appliances, ready-made clothing, dependable and well-circulated coinage, fast and comfortable transportation and communication. Furnishings, window treatments, tools, plantings, and buildings will all be in keeping with the early time and New England frugality of its owners in order to give as true a picture of the life of the early settlers of southeast Texas as possible. A trading post will be stocked with items found listed in French's own ledger, and special exhibits of unusual articles of the time with their names and uses will be rotated and demonstrated from time to time.

NOTES

1French family genealogical papers; Samuel Orcutt's "History of Old Town of Derby"; Hazen's "History of Billerica."

2Handbook of Texas, Texas State Historical Association, 663; Richardson, Rupert, Texas the Lone Star State, Englewood Cliffs (Prentice Hall), 1958.

3Manuscript of Mrs. Thomas H. Langham, a granddaughter of John Jay French.

Ibid., Vol. B, p. 140.

*Beaumont Enterprise, Sunday, November 18, 1917, p. 28 Feature article on David French.

Langham manuscript.

*Beaumont Enterprise, Sunday, December 31, 1833.

*Condensed from the description of the house by Raiford Stripling, AIA Architect for the Restoration of the French Trading Post.