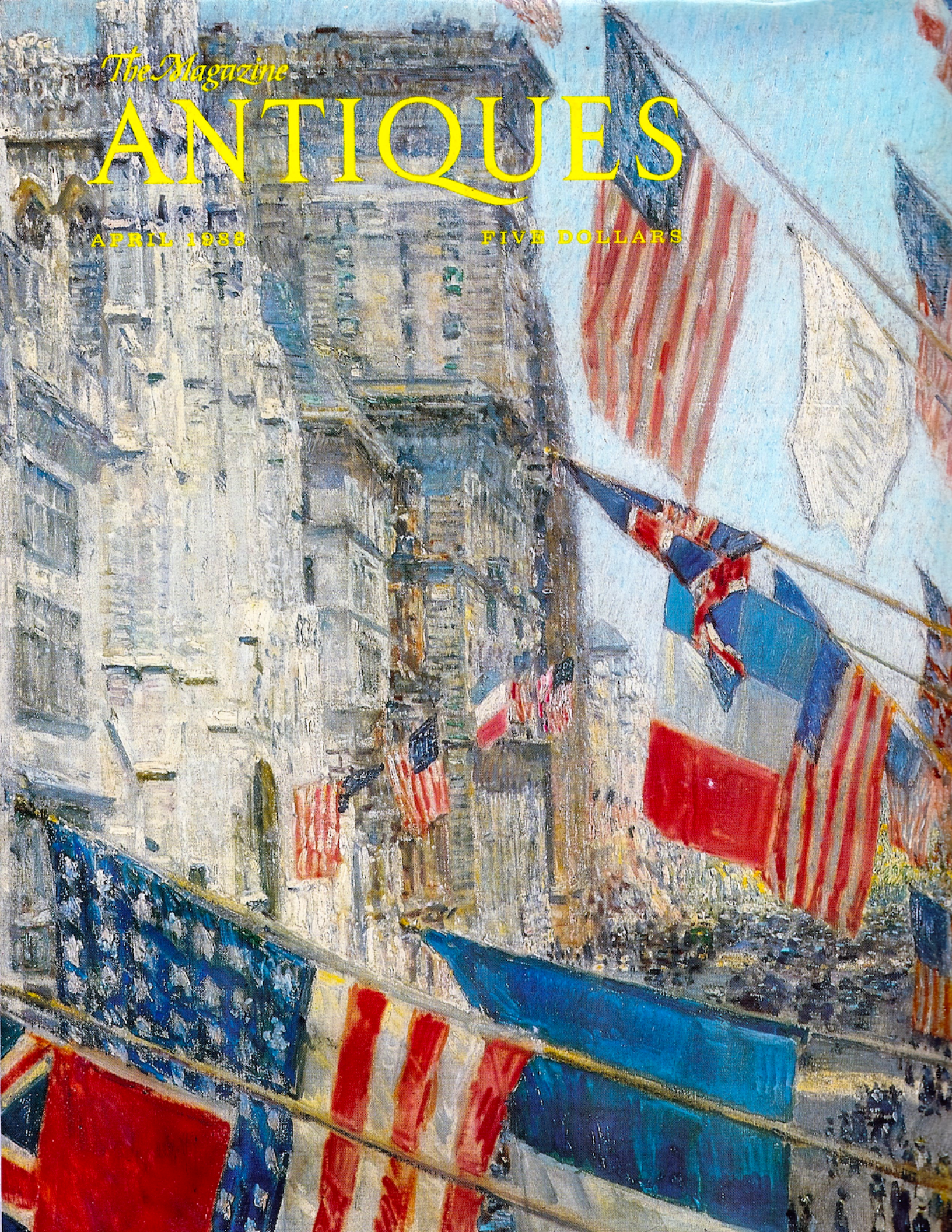


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Living with antiques

The Henri Penne house complex, Saint Martin Parish, Louisiana

BY H. PARROTT BACOT



Pl. I. Henri Penne house, built c. 1821–1830 in Iberia Parish, Louisiana, and moved to the Anse La Butte district of Saint Martin Parish, Louisiana, in 1974.
The fenced parterre garden is based in part on a nearby garden planted c. 1835.
Photographs are by Paul Rocheleau.

THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION consultant Robert Edward Smith has rescued the Henri Penne house and five dependency buildings from various early nineteenth-century southwestern Louisiana plantation sites for use as his residence and office. Since none of the structures could be saved on their original sites they have been moved to the Anse La Butte (cove on the hill) district near the town of Breaux Bridge in Saint Martin Parish, and there meticulously restored. In addition to the Penne house, the *Petite Maison*, a *pigeonnier*, a storage building, two privies, and a period garden are so arranged as to re-create a fairly complete Creole plantation.

The Penne house originally faced El Camino Real, the old Spanish trail on the west side of the present town of Jeanerette in Iberia Parish. When it was moved the twenty miles to its new nine-acre site on October 30, 1974, it was oriented to the southwest, as it had been before. On the new location, as on the old, the front yard is encircled by live oaks.

The Penne house was built for Henri Marie Penne

Sr., who was born in Nantes, France, in 1767, and died in Charenton, Louisiana, in 1847.¹ The house was erected between about 1821 and 1830 on land that Penne's wife, Ann Celestine Hebert (d. 1841), had inherited in 1812 from Jean Louis Hebert.² The date for the construction of the residence is predicated in part on Penne's sale of two pieces of property in 1821,³ which would have provided him with the money to build his Federal style house.

One would expect a Louisiana house of this period built for a French-born citizen to reflect many French colonial influences, but there are really only two: that the principal rooms open directly onto the front gallery, and that an exterior staircase leads from the gallery to the half story. The house exhibits far more An-

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Pl. II. The mahogany armchair to the right of the fireplace in the *salon* is in the Louis Philippe style and dates from c. 1835. It was found in a house down river from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and could have been made in New Orleans or France. Opposite it is a mahogany armchair in the French Restauration style that dates from 1820–1835. Signed “Dubois N. [?],” it came from a New Orleans estate and could have been made in that city. Above the fireplace hangs an English or American looking glass of c. 1810 found in Baton Rouge. The candlesticks on the mantel were made in France 1830–1840 and found in Saint Martinville, Louisiana. They are close-plated silver on copper and have copper-wheel-engraved glass shades. On top of the Philadelphia card table of c. 1830 to the left of the fireplace are *vieux Paris* porcelain urns and a *vieux Paris* porcelain coffee service of 1815–1830. The saber-legged mahogany side chair is one of eight made in the workshop of Duncan Phyfe (1768–1854) and given to Abigail Lefferts Lott by her father on her marriage to Dr. John Barrea Zabriskie in 1830 (see Nancy McClelland, *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency 1795–1830* [New York, 1939], pp. 306–308). The mahogany sofa was made in Connecticut c. 1820, while the mahogany pembroke table in the foreground was made in New York City c. 1810–1820. On the latter are French close-plated candlesticks of 1789–1810 and an English silver-plated tray of c. 1835 supporting three English glass decanters also of c. 1835, which were found in nearby Opelousas, Louisiana, and five French glasses of about the same date. To the left of the door is a portrait of an unidentified man painted c. 1835 and found locally. The six-branch, gilt-bronze French chandelier dates from c. 1815.

glo-American characteristics. Its central hall is flanked by two rooms on either side; the six-panel double entrance doors have side lights and a glazed transom; and the clapboarded brick-between-posts structure has a gable-end roof and double-hung sash windows.

Facing on the gallery at the left of the entrance is the *salon* (Pl. II), and at the right the dining room (Pl. III). The room behind the *salon* was originally the dining room, judging by the holes in the ceiling beams from which a punkah was suspended. Mr. Smith, however, has furnished it as an Acadian bedroom in which he

displays what is generally acknowledged to be one of the finest extant collections of Acadian textiles (Pl. VIII). The room behind the present dining room was probably first used as a bedroom but has been converted into Mr. Smith's office. The Penne house is furnished with a combination of American Federal and Empire furniture and Louisiana Creole and Acadian furniture made between 1750 and 1835.

The semi-detached kitchen of the Penne house was built about 1927 in the general style of the house (see Pl. VII, center). During the early part of this century



Pl. III. The mahogany and oak dining room table was found in New Iberia, Louisiana, and has probably been in Louisiana since soon after it was made in France c. 1830–1845. The fourteen American mahogany and mahogany veneer fiddle-back chairs of c. 1835 in the room are an assembled set of a type of chair that was very popular in Louisiana. They are upholstered with a reproduction fabric made by Scalamandre. The table is set with *vieux Paris* porcelain by various makers, all of which was collected locally and ranges in date from 1815 to 1850. The French champagne flutes of c. 1825 are of a pattern found in old Louisiana houses. The silver flatware was made in Paris c. 1803–1809. The mahogany tables in the background are American, c. 1810–1820. The cut-glass and gilt-bronze chandelier is French, c. 1825. The pelmets over the windows are made of antique French silk and cotton fabric.

the original dining room had been made into an indoor kitchen, for the original detached kitchen had been converted into a servant's house.

The second residential building on the property, the *Petite Maison*, is so positioned as to suggest an overseer's house or a *garçonnière* for the Penne house (see Pl. VII). This elegant, twenty-eight-foot-square, three-room house was probably built between 1831 and 1835 for Rosalie O'Reilly. It was originally situated on Bridge Street in the parish seat of Saint Martinville. In

Rosalie O'Reilly's sale of the property to Pierre Aimé on October 22, 1835, the contract reads in part "avec ce lot, la petite maison construite dessus" (with this lot, the small house constructed thereon).⁴ The lot had been given to Rosalie O'Reilly on September 15, 1831, by Charles Henriot.⁵ It is most likely that the *Petite Maison* was built by William Rogers, a builder since 1816,⁶ who married Rosalie O'Reilly on January 31, 1832.⁷

Mr. Smith, an ardent Francophile, has furnished the

furniture in the French taste and French-made decorative arts. The *Petite Maison* has a central chimney serving the *salon* (Pl. X) and the bedroom (Pl. XI), and in both rooms the fireplaces have their original cypress mantels (with the marbleizing restored) in the transitional Louis XVI-Directoire style. The lozenge-shaped



Pl. IV. Armoire, Louisiana, c. 1805–1820. Mahogany and yellow poplar with light and dark wood inlays; height 85, width 57, depth 23 inches. The armoire, once owned by Robert Smith's great-great-grandfather Louis Emelien Charbonnet, is one of a handful of Louisiana-made pieces bearing an eagle inlay. The inlay matches those used by New York City cabinetmakers and is believed to have been made by an inlay specialist in that city.

motif in the center of the *salon* mantel is typically French. While the building has Anglo-American sash windows, the glazed double doors are definitely in the French taste. The hardware on the doors combines French style wrought-iron head and foot bolts and thumb latches with Anglo-American iron and brass strike latches.

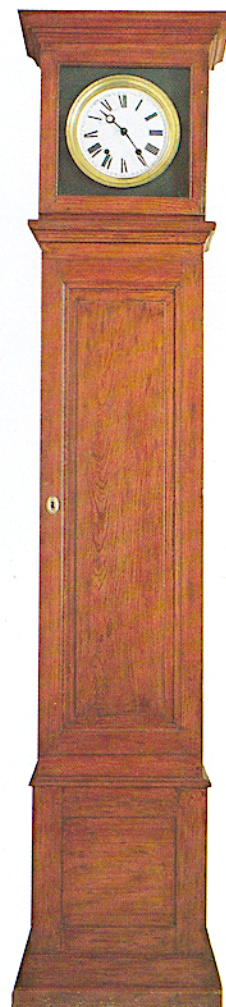
In the bedroom of the *Petite Maison* is a portrait of Alexandre De Vins Bienvenu II, a prominent house builder in Saint Martin Parish, and an armoire with his monogram. Bienvenu was born in New Orleans on January 15, 1784, but spent most of his life in Saint Martin Parish.⁸

The next building in the complex in order of size is the *pigeonnier*. Louisianians have always enjoyed squab, pigeons, and their eggs, and most Louisiana plantations had one or more *pigeonniers*, although ac-

ording to the Louisiana State Office of Historic Pres-

ervation fewer than thirty remain. The two-story *pigeonnier* at the Penne house complex was originally twenty-two miles away on the Olivier plantation, in Iberia Parish, between the towns of New Iberia and Jeanerette. It is nine feet square, twenty feet tall, and solidly built. Its four-by-four-inch cypress studs are sheathed with one-inch-thick flush boards twelve inches wide on the first floor and seven-inch-wide beaded clapboards on the second. When *pigeonniers* were built in pairs, as was frequently the case, one was usually fitted with pigeonholes and nesting boxes, and the other, lacking these appurtenances, was used for storage. The *pigeonnier* at the Penne house complex falls into the second category.

The remaining three outbuildings, dating from between 1820 and 1850, are the two privies and a storage

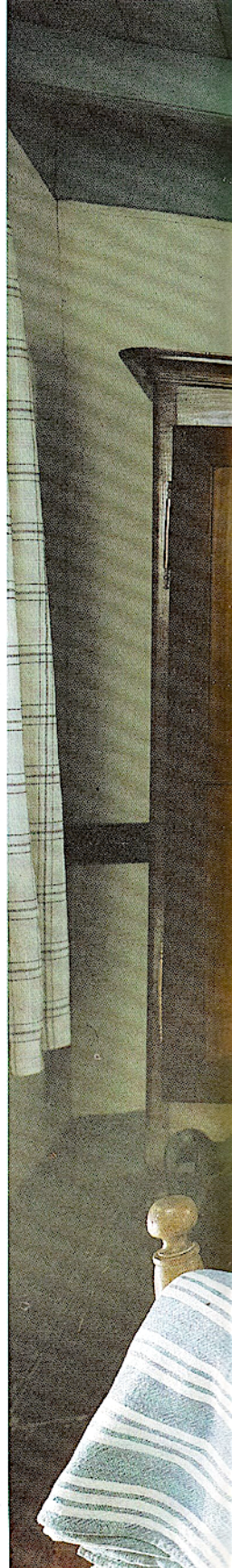


Pl. V. Tall-case clock, Louisiana, c. 1830–1840, with a French Morbier movement. Red cypress; height 98½ inches. The case was originally grained to resemble mahogany. The clock was first owned by Jacques Dupré (1773–1846), the governor of Louisiana in 1830 and 1831.

building, which were moved from Breau Bridge.

The garden on the Penne house property is based in large part on that of the Academy of the Sacred Heart Convent, some fifteen miles away at Grand Coteau. The Academy garden is purported to have been laid

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Pl. VI. Side view of the Penne house and, at the left, its semi-detached kitchen. The five different paint colors duplicate the originals.

Pl. VII. View of the *Petite Maison* (left), the semi-detached kitchen (center), and the Penne house (right).



Pl. VIII. Mr. Smith calls this room in the Penne house the Acadian bedroom. The low-post bed of c. 1830–1840 is from the Prairie Ronde district between Opelousas and Ville Platte in Saint Landry Parish, Louisiana, and it reflects the blending of Anglo-American and French Louisiana characteristics. The basic style is Anglo-American, but the poles supporting mosquito nets and the use of swamp maple (for the posts), ash (for the side rails), and cypress (for the headboard) are Acadian. The side rails and the headboard are painted with casein paint in a color called *gros rouge*. The quilt on the bed is made from swatches of the homespun fabric the Acadians made and used for clothing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This fabric was woven from white, indigo-dyed, and natural yellow cotton (*coton jaune*) threads in seventeen different, fairly complex patterns. The cradle at the foot of the bed is French Canadian, 1750–1790, and was found in Baton Rouge. Made of pine and birch with traces of its original blue paint, it could have been brought to Louisiana by Acadian settlers. The walnut armoire in the *retardataire* Louis XV style was made in Louisiana c. 1810–1820 and contains a selection of Acadian-made Louisiana coverlets, blankets, and mattress covers. In the foreground is a copy of volume 11 of Denis Diderot's (1713–1784) *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers*, published in 1772, which contains illustrations of looms and the tools needed for weaving.



Pl. IX. View from the gallery of the *Petite Maison* into the *salon*. The various candlesticks are from Mr. Smith's collection of eighteenth-century French lighting devices.



Pl. X. The settee, side chair (one of a set of four), and the gilded armchair in the *salon* of the *Petite Maison* are French, c. 1780. The settee retains its original greenish gray paint, and both the settee and the side chairs are upholstered with a silk and cotton fabric of c. 1880 in the Louis XVI style. The armchair is said to have come from an Opelousas estate. The cherry tilt-top candlestand was made locally c. 1810–1820. On it are two late eighteenth-century European decanters, a silver-plated brass Directoire candlestick that was found in Saint Landry Parish, Louisiana, and a French wineglass of c. 1795–1800. In the corner is a Louisiana cherry armoire of c. 1820 in the *retardataire* Louis XVI-Directoire style, which was found in New Iberia. The overmantel looking glass and flanking gilt-bronze sconces are French, c. 1795. The gilt-bronze mantel clock was made in Paris c. 1815, and the urns on the mantel are *vieux Paris* porcelain of c. 1820. The brass andirons were made in New York c. 1810. The table in the foreground is set for lunch with plates made c. 1785 at Count D'Artois's factory in Paris and French wineglasses of c. 1795–1800. The pelmet over the door (and the window hangings) are of a fabric of c. 1880 reproducing a Louis XVI linen toile. The tole and cut-glass chandelier, which retains its original paint, is French, c. 1795.



Pl. XI. In the bedroom of the *Petite Maison* are a portrait of Alexandre De Vins Bienvenu II (1784–1855) painted in New Orleans c. 1820 by an unidentified artist, and a Louisiana cherry armoire of c. 1810 inlaid with Bienvenu's monogram. The high-post mahogany bed of c. 1820 was found in Saint Landry Parish. At the left is a miniature mahogany blanket chest made in France, 1780–1810, on an American cherry and yellow poplar table of c. 1800. The lithograph above it depicts Jacques Dupré, and was executed in 1847 by the New Orleans artist Jules Lion (d. 1866), a free man of color. The Louis XVI candlesticks on the mantel are close-plated silver on brass. The French tole *cache-pots* date from c. 1810.

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out about 1835, modeled on those of Bishop Jacques Bénigne Bossuet's (1627–1704) palace at Meaux, France, which was designed by André Lenôtre (1613–1700) in 1642 and 1643. And indeed, the basic layout is similar.

The parterre beds at the Penne house are in the shape of hearts, stars, diamonds, octagons, and circles outlined by closely clipped privet and edged with brick, like those at the Academy. Paving paths with pea gravel was popular in France in the 1830's and not unknown in Louisiana, although the Academy's paths were first paved with coarse river sand.

Plants have been carefully selected from native or imported species known in Louisiana gardens by 1835. Among them are old roses such as Malmaison, duchesse de Brabant, and Louis Philippe; perennials such as phlox, Coreopsis, shasta daisies, native verbe-na; and annuals that include poppies, larkspur, violas, and petunias.

The Penne house complex affords a rare glimpse into the sort of setting that might commonly have been lived in by middle- to upper middle-class southwestern Louisiana Creole planters in the 1820's and 1830's. The rich collections of Louisiana-made decorative arts have been appropriately fleshed out with objects imported from France, the East Coast, and England, as was the practice in early nineteenth-century Louisiana.

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¹ Parish Records, vol. 1, p. 3, Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church, Charenton, Louisiana.

² Succession of Jean Louis Hebert, conveyance book 1, fol. 14, entry 461, Saint Mary Parish Court House, Franklin, Louisiana.

³ On March 19, 1821, Penne sold a "habitation" on the Vermilion River in Saint Martin Parish to François Bourg for 1,500 piastres (conveyance book 1B-½, fol. 218, entry 4459, Saint Martin Parish Court House, Saint Martinville, Louisiana). On August 20, 1821, he sold a 4½-arpent parcel to John Pintard for 3,000 piastres (conveyance book 1C, fol. 324, entry 5490, Saint Martin Parish Court House).

⁴ Conveyance book 9, fol. 394, entry 7822, Saint Martin Parish Court House.

⁵ Conveyance book 7, fol. 146, entry 7001, Saint Martin Parish Court House.

⁶ On June 18, 1816, Rogers contracted with Neuville DeCloutet to disassemble, repair, and reconstruct a raised cottage in a new location (conveyance book 1A, fol. 203, entry 2945, Saint Martin Parish Court House).

⁷ Marriage declaration, conveyance book B7, fol. 211, entry 7067, Saint Martin Parish Court House.

⁸ He built the now-destroyed Lady of the Lake Plantation near Cade, Louisiana, in 1827. A gouache of this plantation, done by Adrien Persac (1823–1873) in 1860, was illustrated in *ANTIQUES* for April 1968, p. 505, Fig. 2.