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Antique treasures in Breaux Bridge

L'ATTITUDE

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If shopping for antiques conjures images of claustrophobic city shops, try hunting for that perfect French antique in a rural Creole retreat. Aux Vieux Paris Antiques in Breaux Bridge is as remarkable for its setting as for its collection of 18th and 19th century French furniture and accessories.

Restoration consultant Robert Smith recreated a Creole-style compound by moving seven 1820s buildings to a wooded property, restoring them and unifying the group with a formal French garden. Smith lives and works on the property in rustic 19th century style, and with an appointment you can browse in his collection. I found Smith eating lunch on the wooden stoop of the largest building, the Henri Penne House. Stretched symmetrically before him was a picture-perfect garden with pea gravel paths and manicured flower beds with heart and diamond shapes copied from ones French nuns planted at The Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Cou-tau.

Smith's devotion to the 18th and 19th century extends to his formal manner of speech and his appearance. His shoulder-length hair, goatee and handmade shirts looked as if they had been copied directly from one of the French oil portraits sold in the shop, and his speech was littered with French phrases.

Inside, we sat in high-backed wooden chairs at a small marble-top table set with demitasse cups. "The house in which you are sitting was a Maison dimanche — a Sunday house for someone who wanted a small house in town when attending the opera, Mass or parties. We forget about the threat of unpaved roads in rainstorms today," Smith said.

Smith talked about the range of mid-18th to 19th century objects he brings from France: big pieces of furniture, both formal and informal, and a full range of decorative arts including mirrors, lighting devices, curtain hardware and stemware.



Photo by Shelley N.C. Holl

FLASH FROM THE PAST: Robert Smith's impressive collection of French antiques in Breaux Bridge extends from his shop to his living quarters.

My attention strayed to the antiques. To my left was a low chest of drawers made of honey-colored wood with swirls like taffy. Worked into its worn brass handles were figures of Native Americans with feathered headdresses.

"That commode is my favorite," Smith said. "It's late Louis Quatorze, transition to Regency with American Indian handles in Chinoiserie style."

We toured the property and Smith presented his most recent shipment of antiques, carefully describing the original use or importance of each piece. As Smith described the functions of objects such as pot au confit — a jar in which game was preserved — I pictured their uses in 19th century Louisiana plantation life. Among the kitchen items were kettles with details identical to those in the "Tunica Treasure" — a collection of artifacts found in Louisiana in an early 18th century Native American grave.

Most of the antiques were displayed in

HOW TO GO

To get there: Take I-10 west past Baton Rouge and across the Atchafalaya Basin. For Aux Vieux Paris, take exit 109 and drive south toward Breaux Bridge. Go right on Mills Avenue (across from Wal-Mart) then left on Henri Penne Road, 1 mile beyond Mulate's. For Cafe Des Amis, take exit 109 and go south on Hwy. 328 (Rees Street) to Bridge Street. Go west on Bridge Street. Cafe Des Ami is on the left just across the bridge.

Aux Vieux Paris: The antique shop is located at 1040 Henri Penne Road, Breaux Bridge, La., 70517; call (337) 332-2852. (There is also an Aux Vieux Paris shop in New Orleans.)

Cafe Des Amis: The cafe is located at 140 East Bridge Street, Breaux Bridge, call (337) 332-5273. It is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hours are Tues-Fri 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sat 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; and Sun 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Closed Mon.

settings appropriate to their use. Mirrors, formal furniture and portraits were shown in the salons at the front of the house; a large collection of hand spun and woven linens were displayed in a room toward the back.

Outside I saw glass bells that once served as miniature greenhouses for bedding plants and iron garden furniture. An open-air garden room covered with lattice held more rustic furniture and wooden bowling balls covered with nail heads used in a French lawn sport.

As a college student, Smith became interested in French antiques and his first purchase was a French-Acadian armoire. Today such pieces are relatively rare.

"I wish I could collect Acadian and Louisiana Creole pieces today, but there's absolutely nothing coming up. The last piece I had was seven years ago. In Louisiana people throw things away. Even if you put them in the barn the wood might rot."