

## Pioneers

*Baton Rougeans Jules and Francis Landry: A 53-year contribution toward the arts, preservation, history and law in Baton Rouge*



(Pictured left to right: Jules F. Landry and Frances Leggio Landry)

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When Frances Leggio graduated from the LSU Law School in 1934, she was the only woman student in the school, and the only woman in the state of Louisiana to take the bar examination that year.

"I was waiting for Frances to get out of law school to help me make a living," chuckled Jules Francis Landry, her husband and law partner of nearly 53 years, as the couple talked about their accomplishments in the community.

Harriett Daggett was then at the law school, and she and Frances Leggio were very close. The young student had a scholarship to attend Yale after graduation, but she decided to marry instead, and says "it took a long time for me to tell Mrs. Daggett. I thought she'd be angry, but instead she hugged me and told me she knew and was waiting for me to tell her." The couple's only child is named Frances Harriett, and her parents call her Harriett.



(Pictured left to right: Jules F. Landry and Frances Leggio Landry)

When the Landrys began their law practice, Baton Rouge was only a fraction of its present size, and struggling through the Great Depression. Landry worked on the docks at the new oil refinery, then called Esso, to help finance his way through law school.

"I was a pipefitter for two years," he said with a cheerful grin. "I worked on the dock, working nights so I could go to law school, and it was hard work connecting those huge pipes to tankers. I could type and do bookkeeping, and I kept trying to get a better job. Every week I'd go and ask for a transfer, and there were no openings. Finally there was a vacancy, but they said I had no experience. I told them no one is born experienced, but I was sure I could learn, and I got transferred to the railroad department."

When Landry finally left the security of Esso to set up his own law practice, he recalls that his boss told him: "I thought you were bright but you're leaving security for insecurity."

The young lawyer rented an office in the old Reymond Building downtown for \$15 a month and "started up with a fountain pen and pencil and two law books."

After a few weeks of struggling, he met his former boss on the street "and I told him I was doing fine. I lied. I almost ran after him to ask if I could have my old job back. But I went back to my office and got a client, and a couple of weeks later I made \$250."

When Frances Landry graduated, the couple married, and she joined him at work. "We started in the Great Depression, and there was nothing but high hopes and determination," she said.

Jules Landry recalled his first big break came through his political support of U.S. Rep. J.Y. Sanders Jr. "When he got elected, I was appointed fee attorney for the Home Owners Loan Corporation, a government agency that gave loans to people who were about to lose their homes," he said.

"Frances became an abstractor, and we began to get ahead."

"I was paid \$7.50 for an abstract," his wife chimed in. "Sometimes I would spend a whole day checking records in the courthouse, and now lawyers get \$100 an hour and up for that work."

Jules Landry, whose recent illness has restricted his activities and confined him to a wheelchair for most of the time, has lost none of his energy and zest for life, and he continues his law practice here. His eyes sparkle with delight as he recalls his career.

In those early years, the couple said they thought having \$100 in the bank each month after the bills were paid was financial security.

The firm grew and prospered along with the booming Baton Rouge of World War II and postwar years, and Jules Landry broadened his interests to include land development and banking. He borrowed \$3,750 from a friend and \$750 from his wife to buy his first piece of property on Main Street. Later, his major development of East Broadmoor was enormously successful.

As their fortunes improved, the couple's interests broadened, and they worked in many areas of civic and community improvement. Always interested in art and history, they were pioneers in historic preservation and cultural organizations in Baton Rouge.

They are enthusiastic travelers and have circled the globe, often returning with priceless antiques and art objects that decorate their home and furnish their renovated offices downtown.

"Our interest in art came on gradually," Frances Landry said. "We were always fascinated by antiques, but it was when we began traveling and visiting museums that our interest in art became strong and we became collectors."

In 1969, their collection became so extensive that they moved many paintings, antiques and objects into the building next to their law offices and opened a downtown art gallery featuring the work of classic realists and some contemporary artists. For some years, Harriet served as curator of the gallery, until her growing family forced her into retirement. She is married to George Borghardt, whom she met while attending Stephens College in Missouri while he was a student at the University of Missouri. The couple has four sons, from 2 to 16 years old.

Since Borghardt left the gallery it has continued in operation, but is open by appointment only.

"I really started the gallery because friends would see our paintings and want them," Frances Landry said. "We love to travel, we always visit museums and galleries, and we started buying in London,

Paris, Spain and Italy and we knew every store on Royal Street in New Orleans. We ran out of room at home, and I took the first piece, a Chinese cabinet, to the office. People thought I was crazy, but the next thing I knew people began to be interested in making offices look attractive instead of like hospital rooms."

She says she continues the gallery because "it gives me the pleasure of finding things for others, and it makes me happy to please them although I hate to part with the art. We love old things because they are so finely made."

The Landrys recently were honored by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana as pioneers in historic preservation in Baton Rouge. Their adaptive restoration of the Lafayette Street buildings that house their law offices and art gallery triggered similar projects in the downtown area.

"The policy on restoration has changed," mused Jules Landry. I tried for a permit to renovate that building and the city turned me down. They said it had been condemned. Then I tried to get a permit to install partitions, and they gave me that, and so I got started."

"We couldn't get an architect to work on the project," added Frances Landry. "But when we began working on the building, architects came around every day to see what we were doing, and one came so often people thought he was architect on the project. We did all the planning ourselves."

When he purchased the old building, Jules Landry recalled, everybody assumed he planned to demolish it and construct a new, modern office.

"In those days it was not considered a successful move for a lawyer to move from an office building to something that looked like an old residence," Landry explained.

"What drove us to act quickly was the failure of the elevators in the Commerce Building, where we had our offices at the time. Walking up those stairs every day precipitated a hasty decision."

One architect informed the lawyer that he couldn't begin on his project for at least a year, and he decided to go ahead with his own plans and a contractor. But when he found a contractor he was told "if you'd just let me tear this old building down I can get you a new one so much cheaper."

"We did what we wanted to do," said his wife, "and it's been rewarding."

Jules Landry admitted that when he first bought the property he contemplated using the site for a new building, but his wife always wanted to restore the structure. It was in the 1960s, 10 years after the purchase, that renovation began, because space in the structure was rented. The exterior was maintained in its original state, but the interior space was made functional.

"I wanted to do the interior in Victorian style," Frances Landry said. "We got the idea from the offices of Melvin Belli in San Francisco. We were walking in San Francisco and looked in his windows and decided we wanted our offices to look like that."

The building, originally a private home, had a small stage incorporated into the first floor, which was used for musical and theatrical performances. The stage was preserved in the renovation and is now part of the reception area for the law offices.

An old sketch, the gift of the late George Reymond, shows that the building was constructed during the first year of the Spanish occupation, 1762, Jules Landry said, although the National Register listing for the structure lists it simply as "prior to 1800."

The Landrys were the first Baton Rouge lawyers to create office space from a former residence, but old houses are now one of the most popular settings for offices of local attorneys, a trend that they pioneered here. Architect John Desmond, who restored the old Warden's House for office space, said he did his building "just like the Landrys."

Frances Landry advised in chartering the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and was active on early boards of the preservation group.

The office building is not the only preservation effort the pair has made. They moved an old cottage from the River Road, below St. Gabriel, to Beech Grove Plantation north of St. Francisville and completely restored the structure as their country home.

"We moved it 70 miles, and the house has six chimneys and 54 piers," said Jules Landry, recounting the intricate work required to restore the home. The house has doors and woodwork rescued from the demolition of the old Istrouma Hotel downtown, and the Landrys haunted other demolition sites in the area to locate materials appropriate to the period of the house.

Both Landrys were on the board of the Bank of Commerce in St. Francisville until 1984 and were instrumental in restoration of that building in the historic downtown area. He recalled that an architect's study recommended demolishing and rebuilding, and he stood firm for restoration.

"I told them I might get lynched if I started to tear this down," he laughed.

An addition to the bank is a panel of dramatic stained-glass windows, using the Audubon flamingo as a motif appropriate to the area where the famous wildlife artist did some of his work.

Preservation is only one of the interests of the lawyer couple. He was president of the Baton Rouge Symphony for three years, during a time of financial stress and low public profile.

"Several times our artists would refuse to go on stage until they got a check," Jules Landry said, "and I was the one who gave them the checks. One time the guest tenor was in costume for a concert opera performance, and refused to go on, so I wrote him my check. Another time I got a call at 11 p.m. from the guest pianist, who refused to use the piano we had, and the concert was the next day. I fought this for three years, but when I left as president, the symphony was not in debt."

He succeeded in getting the LSU Union Theater as a site for orchestra performances, after Lee High Auditorium, where it had been playing, burned. LSU was at first reluctant to agree to the arrangement, and when the agreement was reached, "in a burst of gratitude I gave the original acts of the Legislature, including the territorial acts of 1803, to LSU. At that time, only the Harvard Law School and the University of Chicago had complete sets, and it took me 30 years to collect it."

Jules Landry has a lifelong interest in Southern history and has fostered this field in many ways. For 18 years the couple gave an annual \$1,000 award for the best book on Southern history published by the LSU Press, and they have quietly assisted many young writers, historians and artists through the years.

"Preservation can take many forms." Julys Landry chuckled as he surveyed the book-lined wall of his office.

One effort resulted in publication of a book on the life of Lucy Audubon, wife of the artist, which was written by Carolyn Delatte, with assistance of a grant from the Landrys. Delatte is now an assistant professor of history at McNeese University in Lake Charles and recently has been notified that a film company is interested in basing a movie on her book, which was published by the LSU Press. Jules Landry recalled sadly that T. Harry Williams, DeLatte's instructor who contacted him about assisting the talented young historian, had planned to write the foreword for the book but died before he was able to do so.

Although many people in the community recall a helping hand from the Landrys, Jules Landry laughingly declines to be specific about small, private charities. He admits he "hates to be pressed into giving" but that he has voluntarily benefitted many groups and individuals.

The Landrys say they have an "old-fashioned" law practice, without a by-the-hour charge rate and without computers, although they admit most modern practices now depend heavily on computerized data. And their four grandsons are being educated in the computerized world.

"My oldest grandson is putting my personal library on computer," Jules Landry said proudly, gesturing to his leather-bound collection of Franklin Library volumes housed in a mahogany bookcase.

He is pleased that interest in historic preservation and the heritage of this area has gained greater public support in recent years, and both Landrys praise the Historical Foundation and others for efforts in this direction. When he accepted the award from the foundation, Jules Landry quoted from the Bible, Proverbs 22:28, Remove not the ancient landmark.

In biblical times, the word landmark meant a marker denoting property lines, he explained, but has since acquired a broader meaning, to include valuable structures and locations with important historical significance for an area.

"I suggest a good slogan for the foundation would be Destroy not our ancient landmarks," he said. "I think it would be appropriate to change the word remove to destroy because landmarks may be preserved by removal to a different location and not be destroyed. I think this slogan would cover the preservation of anything worthwhile in our culture, whether art, architecture, or even our native Cajun cuisine."

Photos by Mark Saltz