

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Donato, Martin House; Donato, Auguste House

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 8342 U. S. Hwy. 182 Not for publication: NA

City/Town Opelousas Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: St. Landry Code: 097 Zip Code: 70570



3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: Locally: X

Jonathan Fricker

March 11, 2005

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation & Tourism

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 2

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper: *Edson H. Beall*

Date of Action: *4/27/05*

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
 Private:
 Public-Local:
 Public-State:
 Public-Federal:

Category of Property
 Building(s):
 District:
 Site:
 Structure:
 Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

Non contributing
 buildings
 sites
 structures
 objects
 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: Louisiana's French Creole Architecture

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 3

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: domestic Sub: single dwelling
Current: vacant Sub:

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: other: French Creole

Materials:

Foundation: brick
Walls: weatherboard
Roof: metal
Other:

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 6

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A_X B_ C_X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): NA

A_ B_ C_ D_ E_ F_ G

Areas of Significance:

architecture; ethnic heritage (black)

Period(s) of Significance:

circa 1825 (architecture)
c.1825-1860 (ethnic heritage)

Significant Dates:

circa 1825

Significant Person(s):

NA

Cultural Affiliation:

NA

Architect/Builder:

unknown

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 4

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Donato House (c. 1825) is a single story, medium to large, French Creole plantation house with Federal details. The once totally rural landscape surrounding it has been encroached upon by the northward expansion of Opelousas. However, the immediate setting is rural and remote because the house is set back about a quarter of a mile from the highway (Louisiana 182). Mature live oaks are disposed informally about the property. Despite a c.1900 side wing and a few other changes, the house's original French Creole character is quite strong.

The Donato House consists of a single range of four rooms with a front gallery and rear *cabinet-loggia* range – all set under a pronounced hip roof with a slight French kick at the eave. There were never side galleries. The heavy brick-between-post structure is raised approximately three feet above grade on brick piers. (The use of brick as an in-fill material in rural Creole structures is not as common as *bousillage*.) The floor plan is anchored by an almost square *salle* with a single narrow and deep room to the west and two narrow deep rooms to the east. Exposed beaded beams run from front to rear in the ancillary narrow and deep rooms and from side to side in the *salle*. The door to the *salle* is in the center of the façade, with other openings spaced more or less regularly on either side.

Thus despite the house's irregular Creole floor plan, its façade achieves a semblance of symmetry and regularity, which may be seen as evidence of the American Federal taste. This may also be seen in the front gallery columns, which are spaced more closely in the middle to emphasize the center and register the entrance. Federal stylistic features include the compressed elliptical arches between the gallery columns and the delicately molded column capitals. As with other Creole houses, the front gallery is plastered and fitted with a chair rail as though it were an interior room. The chair rail also forms the window sill for the gallery's window openings. The windows are surmounted with transoms, which is unusual in nineteenth century Louisiana residences. Another prominent feature (one generally associated with the Acadian subtype of French Creole architecture) is the pronounced exterior staircase, set against the façade, that ascends to the unfinished attic. The easternmost room extends forward so that its front wall is flush with the outside of the staircase. The gallery retains its exposed beam ceiling and approximately half of its original balustrade.

The plastered interior features some of its original four-panel doors. Most window and door surrounds feature a delicate molding typical of the 1820s. Some surrounds are of plain boards. There never was an interior chair rail; thus, in this respect, the gallery was more richly adorned than the interiors. There was always only one chimney in the house-- set between the *salle* and the narrow westernmost room. In the *salle*, the chimney features a delicate aedicule style box mantel with pilasters surmounted by entablature blocks and twin vertical panels on each side. There is no over-mantel, but the plastered chimney breast is marked by a broad cornice at the ceiling formed of built-up planks.

The original mantel that would have been on the other side of the firebox, in the westernmost room, is gone due to a c. 1900 remodeling and enlargement. At that time, the westernmost room was extended to the side to create a "Victorian" parlor. This side addition culminates in a two-story Queen Anne polygonal bay set under a faceted roof that connected with the old Creole hip roof. (The upper story of this addition is a dummy crawl space that connects with the old unfinished attic.) As part of the remodeling a new Colonial Revival mantel/over-mantel set was installed featuring free-standing columns and a mirror.

The baseboards in the *salle* match those in the new "Victorian" parlor. (The easternmost rooms have simpler baseboards typical of an early nineteenth century house.) The evidence is inconclusive on the date of

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 5

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

the front gallery enclosure on the western side (communicating with the "Victorian" parlor). While its baseboard matches that found in the c.1900 parlor, its double window opening points quite strongly to the 1910s and 1920s. The staff of the Division of Historic Preservation has never seen a double window opening in a Louisiana house of c.1900. Instead, such a fenestration pattern is a signature of the bungalow era of the 1910s and 1920s.

The once open loggia at the center of the rear elevation was enclosed at some time. There is not enough architectural evidence to be certain of the date. The loggia also has the same baseboards as the "Victorian" parlor, but this alone is not a conclusive clue. Probably sometime after the loggia enclosure, the western *cabinet* was converted to a bathroom. This change involved installing new small windows which, in turn, necessitated replacing the clapboards. These new clapboards are somewhat narrower than the original. The eastern *cabinet* has been converted for a kitchen. Finally, most of the present window sashes date from the early twentieth century.

Despite these admittedly noteworthy alterations, the house still easily retains the bulk of its original French Creole character, including most of its characteristic hall-less Creole floor plan, its hip roof-over-gallery massing, its brick-between-post construction, its French wraparound mantel, most of its distinctive shallow arch colonnade, its exposed beam ceilings (interior and front gallery) and its attic staircase. In short, the Donato House is still easily recognizable as a substantial rural Creole residence built near the end of the first third of the nineteenth century.

The present owner plans to remove the front gallery enclosure as part of an overall rehabilitation project using the Register's 20 percent tax credit.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 7

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Donato House is of local architectural significance under Criterion C as an important and rare surviving French Creole house within St. Landry Parish. It is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of ethnic heritage because it embodies the economic attainment of an important ethnic group in antebellum St. Landry – the *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color. Specifically it was home to the Donato family, the most prosperous free people of color family in the parish. The period of significance under ethnic heritage begins c.1825, when the house was built, presumably for patriarch Martin Donato (see below). Martin's son Auguste Donato inherited the property upon his father's death January 1, 1848. He remained prosperous through the 1860 census, but had lost almost everything by 1870. Because the house represents the economic attainment of the Donatos (as free people of color), the period of significance for ethnic heritage ends in 1860.

Architecture:

The region where the Donato House is located is one of Louisiana's earliest settled areas. The parish of St. Landry was one of the state's original parishes, having been established in 1807. And, like the rest of southern Louisiana, St. Landry was settled by the French. French Creole houses would have been the norm from the colonial period through roughly the 1830s and 1840s. In the later years of this period, the tradition was being influenced and in some cases supplanted by the American Greek Revival.

Given the foregoing, it is clear that St. Landry Parish would have been a showcase of French Creole architecture, with examples numbering in the hundreds. And while St. Landry today is known for a handful of French Creole landmarks, the actual number of buildings remaining to represent this native tradition is rather small, when one considers the number that once existed. As is typical in the state, the vast majority of St. Landry's historic buildings date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A partial survey combined with Louisiana SHPO staff knowledge reveals that there are probably less than 20 to 25 French Creole houses remaining in St. Landry. (This number does not include seriously altered examples or late nineteenth century cottages that have an overall Creole shape and maybe a detail or two.) These buildings collectively represent the parish's most important architectural patrimony. The Donato house makes an important contribution to this identity with its abundance of French Creole features, including the signature hip roof, hall-less floor plan, brick between posts infill, exposed beam ceilings (interior and gallery), and elegant French wraparound mantel. The mantelpiece, along with the chair rail on the façade and the elliptical arches between the columns, make it a particularly refined French Creole house within St. Landry.

Ethnic Heritage:

Antebellum Louisiana is well known among historians for its extraordinary population of free blacks. Because they typically were of mixed race, free blacks in Louisiana are generally referred to as free people of color, or in the French of the day, *gens de couleur libres*. People of mixed race are also called Creoles of Color, which is sometimes shortened to simply Creole. (However, the word Creole without a modifier can mean many things.) These terms remain in use today.

Louisiana was distinguished by its large number of free people of color, the economic prosperity of a significant percent, and the broad legal rights they enjoyed. Typically the product of a French man and a

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 8

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

woman of color, they spoke French, had French surnames, and were Roman Catholic. On the whole, they identified more with the white elite than enslaved people.

While a significant majority of Louisiana's free people of color lived in New Orleans, certain rural parishes had important concentrations as well. The four with the highest and most notable were St. Landry, Natchitoches, Pointe Coupee, and St. Martin.

Louisiana's large population of free people of color can be traced to the following:

- 1) Liberal emancipation policies in the French and Spanish colonial periods.
- 2) Extramarital relations between whites and blacks. The just referenced policies of the French and Spanish colonial periods enabled white owners to free their enslaved mistresses and the children they had together.
- 3) Natural increase (from both legal unions of free people of color and extramarital relations between white males and free women of color).
- 4) A great influx of mixed race free blacks to New Orleans after the slave revolution in Santo Domingo in the 1790s.

Although free people of color were in no way considered equal to whites, they enjoyed many of the same legal rights. Most notably, they could own property, make wills, make contracts, sue whites, and testify in court (even against whites).

New Orleans' free people of color were among the nation's most well off. While most were middle class, some were quite wealthy. A few had homes and/or business interests in Paris as well as New Orleans. Many made their money buying and selling real estate or worked in the skilled professions (building trades, dressmakers, shoemakers, etc.).

The vast majority of rural free people of color were small farmers of modest means or landless farm laborers. However, some became wealthy planters. In fact, Louisiana easily had the largest number of black planters in the South. The best known are the Metoyers of Cane River, who were at one time the wealthiest black family group in the United States. The descendants of an enslaved woman named Marie Thereze Coincoin and the Frenchman Pierre Claude Metoyer, they created a dynasty with Melrose Plantation as its seat. Family members collectively owned 287 slaves in 1830.

Chief among St. Landry's "first families" of free people of color were the Donatos and Lemelles (the Metoyers, so-to-speak, of St. Landry). Other prominent names include Simien, Meullion and Guillory. As was typical, prominent free people of color lived in a fairly closed society. They generally had many children and tended to marry each other (a Donato marrying a Lemelle for example). A common practice (and one not confined to St. Landry) was marriage between first cousins.

The patriarch of the Donato clan was Martin Donato. At least one local historian considers Donato to be the patriarch (using the term more loosely) of the entire *gens de couleur libres* population in the Opelousas area. The known facts warrant such a claim. Born c.1770 in what is now St. Landry Parish, he was the son of Donato Bello, an Italian or Spanish militia officer (sources differ), and Marie Jeanne Talliaferro, a New

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 9

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Orleans-born free mulatto. In 1803, Donato (a quadroon) married Marianne Duchesne, a mulatto with whom he had co-habited for some time. At the time of their marriage contract the couple already had six children. Together they owned property totaling \$20,390, making them among the wealthiest people in the area. Originally known as Martin Donato Bello, Martin Donato dropped Bello from his name sometime in the early nineteenth century. (The name is also spelled Donnato on occasion. Some of his children are Donate in legal records.)

In the early 1800s Donato landholdings grew considerably, and as his land under cultivation increased, so did the number of enslaved people he owned. In 1803, he and his wife owned approximately 2,142 acres and three slaves. By 1818, Donato owned 5,096 acres worked by forty-nine slaves. At the time of his death on January 1, 1848, he owned ninety slaves (per his probate inventory), making him one of the very largest black slaveholders in the United States. This does not include the twelve slaves he freed in his will. (One source, with statistics for the year 1830, identifies Donato as the largest black slaveholder in Louisiana and the third largest in the country.) His voluminous probate (over 100 pages) valued his estate at \$96,620.54.

It is abundantly clear from Donato's succession that he served as a private banker for numerous individuals, both people of color and white. The greater portion of his estate was in cash and collectable notes, the latter detailed name by name. The appraisers found bank notes, gold and silver in his bedroom totaling \$3,705.70.

Martin Donato fathered two sets of children, at least seven by the woman who became his wife in 1803, and at least an equal number by an enslaved mulatto woman he owned named Julie. She and their children are freed in his September 1847 will, and financial arrangements are made for them. Julie was 32 and the children ranged in age from 1 to 14. Donato's wife had died in 1832. At the time of his death January 1, 1848, Julie was living with him. (In his will Donato makes reference to the furniture in Julie's room belonging to her.)

The United States Land Office confirmed, in 1811, Martin Donato's claims to land north of Opelousas -- Section 50, where the candidate is located, and three adjacent parcels. But at the time of his 1803 marriage contract, Donato is known to have resided on property he owned near presentday Leonville (also in St. Landry). By the time of his death January 1, 1848, he is living in the candidate. Despite exhaustive research in primary sources, it is impossible to know when Martin moved from one land holding to another. For the purposes of this nomination, it is presumed that he had the candidate built circa 1825 and lived there continually until his death.

In his September 1847 will Martin Donato bequeathed the plantation where he resided to son Auguste Donato. Auguste (sometimes known as Augustin) also was a prosperous planter, although not as wealthy as his father. Nonetheless, he is the most prosperous free person of color in St. Landry in the 1860 census, with real and personal holdings of \$68,600 (including 60 enslaved people). But by 1870, he is worth only \$6,000. Auguste died presumably in 1874; his probate is dated December 10 of that year. The estate was in debt, and a public auction was held in 1875. Authorities divided Auguste's 1137 acres into 45 parcels. None of the land was purchased by family members (and Donatos were thick on the ground in St. Landry). The widow Mrs. Edmond Dupre purchased the piece of land where the house is located as well as various adjacent parcels.

The rise and fall of the Donato fortunes is a microcosm of Louisiana's prosperous free people of

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 10

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

color. With the Civil War and Reconstruction, they lost their money and their distinctive status.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Brasseaux, Carl A., Fontenot, Keith P., and Oubre, Claude F. Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country. University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Donato, Martin. Probate. Filed July 22, 1848. Number 1339, St. Landry Parish.

Donato, Auguste. Probate. Filed December 10, 1874. Number 3766. St. Landry Parish.

Oubre, Claude and Leonard, Roscoe. "Free and Proud: St. Landry's Gens de Couleur." In Louisiana Tapestry: The Ethnic Weave of St. Landry Parish. Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1983.

Sterkx, H. E. The Free Negro in Antebellum Louisiana. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- ___ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
___ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
___ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
___ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
___ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- [X] State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State Agency
___ Federal Agency
___ Local Government
___ University
___ Other (Specify Repository):

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Donato, Martin House, St. Landry Parish, LA

Page 11

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: 75.598 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
(1)	15	588800	3380540
(2)	15	590180	3380360
(3)	15	590100	3380180
(4)	15	588760	3380320

Verbal Boundary Description:

Please refer to attached plat map. Nominated area is parcel marked 75.598 acres.

Note: The attached USGS map is incorrect in showing two additional buildings on the property. The candidate is the only building within the nominated acreage.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries recognize what remains of the acreage historically associated with the property (see part 8).

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register Staff, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation

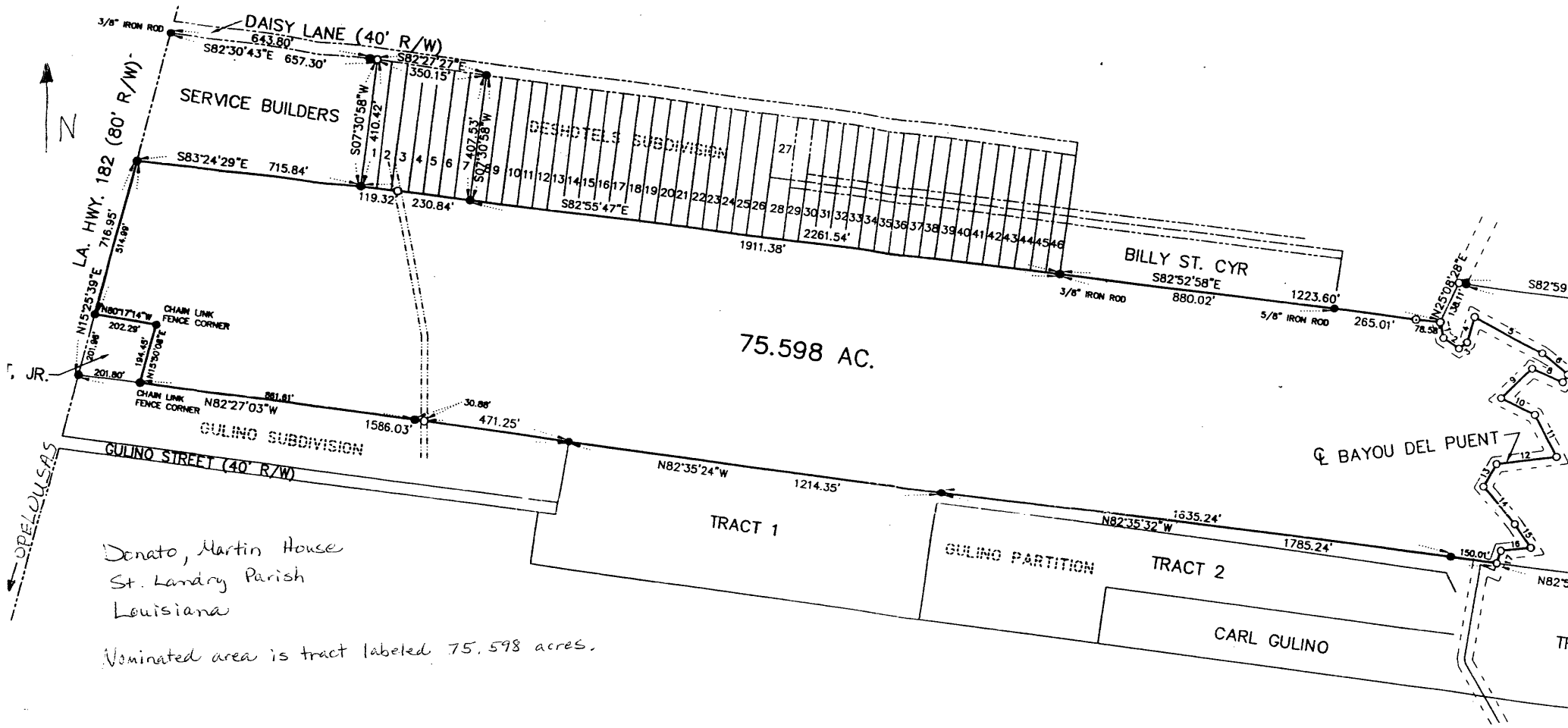
Address: P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Telephone: 225-342-8160

Date: June 2004

PROPERTY OWNERS

Larry Davis
5503 Sheraton Oaks Drive
Houston, TX 77091



Donato, Martin House
 St. Landry Parish
 Louisiana

Nominated area is tract labeled 75.598 acres.