

Opposition Grows to Plastics Plant near Whitney Plantation

By Carol Strickland

These are our Loire Valley chateaux, our castles on the Rhine," says Tulane University architecture professor Eugene Cizek of the palatial antebellum plantations along Louisiana's River Road. Yet the 100 petrochemical companies located along the 85-mile-long stretch of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans make the area seem more like Germany's Ruhr Valley.

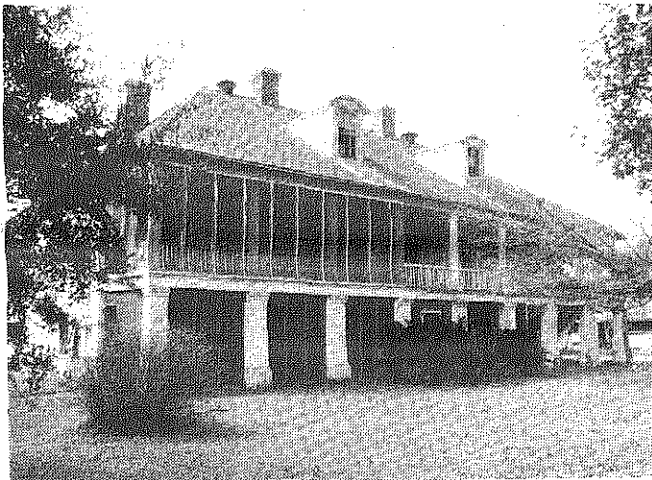
One 30-mile stretch of greenbelt remains undeveloped—a countryside where sugarcane fields, live oaks, and magnolias surround such stately homes as Whitney and Evergreen. Last year Formosa Plastics Corporation purchased Whitney in order to build a wood pulp/rayon factory there. With this incursion, some fear the transformation from plantations to plants will be complete (*Historic Preservation News*, April 1990).

Whitney and Evergreen are neighboring plantations constructed circa 1780. "Whitney is not only of state significance but also of national significance," says Patricia Duncan, an architectural historian for Louisiana's state historic preservation office. Although unoccupied for decades, the house is in good condition and the plantation complex has been relatively unaltered.

In April 1990 at tumultuous public hearings, preservationists, environmentalists, and citizens of the town of Wallace, where Whitney is located, protested against the location of Formosa Plastics in their community, which is predominantly black and poor. Despite the outcry, the St. John the Baptist Parish Council voted unanimously to rezone the land from residential to heavy industrial use. Equally contentious Environmen-

that the \$700-million facility will use "state-of-the-art technology and is absolutely committed not to pollute." Donald Hays, the state's director of international investment, adds, "Formosa's record as a responsible corporate citizen in Louisiana has been a very good one."

The EPA can approve, modify, or deny a wastewater permit to Formosa based on plans for the property, which the EPA describes as "a virgin, historic site." Steve Lee, the former parish council president, says, "The parish and Formosa have made a commitment that Whitney be enhanced rather than destroyed." (The current council president, Lester Millett, failed to return repeated phone calls.) Lionel Bailey, Formosa's manager of environmental affairs, says the company is discussing "donating the building site with surrounding outbuildings," perhaps 10 acres of land, and "possibly" some funds to an "organization that can renovate Whitney and open it to the public."



The Environmental Protection Agency describes Whitney Plantation as "a virgin historic site."

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is located, protested against the location of Formosa Plastics in their community, which is predominantly black and poor. Despite the outcry, the St. John the Baptist Parish Council voted unanimously to rezone the land from residential to heavy industrial use. Equally contentious Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hearings followed in January and February of this year.

Supporters of Formosa are advocates of economic development. Pointing out the area's 20 percent unemployment rate, state Representative Joseph Accardo, Jr., sees the potential for 2,000 construction jobs and 1,000 permanent jobs at Formosa as "an opportunity to eliminate a pocket of unemployment and improve the standard of living."

In opposition, environmental activists label the multibillion-dollar Taiwanese company "a world-class environmental outlaw," and cite Formosa's history of polluting at its Delaware, Texas, and Baton Rouge plants. The organization Save Our Wetlands filed a lawsuit challenging the rezoning. "The Parish Council failed to comply with Louisiana law requiring an environmental study for a rezoning decision," says Luke Fontana, the group's executive attorney.

Harold Price, the acting secretary of the Louisiana Department of Economic Development, says company officials have promised

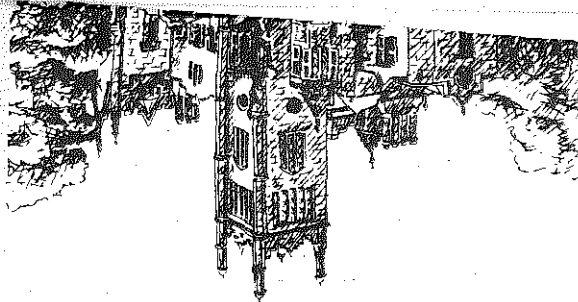
A newly formed nonprofit group, Historic Whitney Plantation Compact, offered to take charge of the estate, pressing for a parcel of at least 50 acres plus a landscaped buffer that would separate Whitney from manufacturing operations. The organization estimates the cost of stabilizing the buildings at \$50,000 and of restoring them at \$2 million.

Some believe the sight of Whitney surrounded by a 300-foot smokestack, large water-treatment facilities, and massive warehouses to store the 8,000 tons of wood pulp the plant will consume daily is "another kind of razing," as Blanche Lovelly, a member of the River Road Restoration Coalition, terms it. "A plantation is not just a big house, but an entire complex. We don't want another San Francisco."

The San Francisco referred to is an ornate French Colonial/Gothic-style plantation house engulfed on three sides by Marathon Oil Co. oil-storage tanks. Marathon, as does Amoco with Destrehan Plantation, contributes to the upkeep of the building, which is open to the public as a museum. "Some people question the refineries in the back yard," admits Patsy Torres, operations manager, "but we have to live and let live."

A conspicuous instance in which Marathon failed to live and let (Continued on Page 17)

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