

Triumphant TRIO

*The owners of three
historic homes join forces
to revive Port Gibson.*



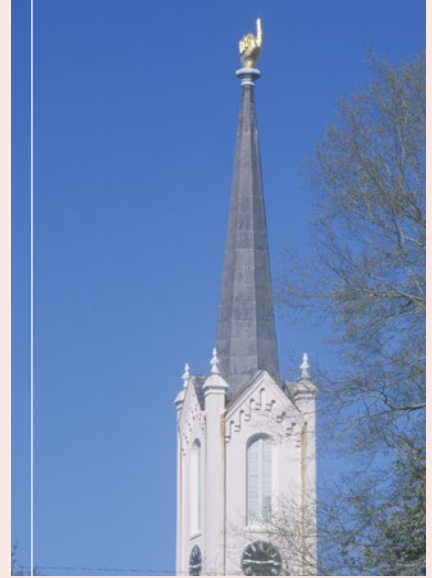
ABOVE: Canemount Plantation Inn is a 40-acre property that includes an 1855 Italianate home and a back house that is available for guests. OPPOSITE: The church steeple from 1859 First Presbyterian Church is best known for its finger pointing upward. The Louisiana natives can see limitless possibilities for the downtown storefronts.

writer **HARRIET RILEY**



PORT GIBSON

*“a small Mississippi
town with a big history”*



Port Gibson, “a small Mississippi town with a big history,” is experiencing a renaissance thanks to three friends who share a passion for its preservation. Claire Viguerie Layrison, Stephanie Boisfontaine Schott, and Isabel White Sullivan—all from Louisiana—have each purchased historic homes in Port Gibson, transforming them into guest accommodations, and are collaborating to turn the town into a destination.

First developed by French colonists of La Louisiane in 1729 and officially chartered in 1803, Port Gibson sits between Vicksburg and Natchez. Although not directly on the Mississippi River, it earned its name for its bayou connection to the waterway. During the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant declared the town “too beautiful to burn,” sparing its historic architecture. Today, visitors are welcomed by a sign bearing Grant’s famous words, and Church Street—lined with historic homes, live oaks, and landmarks—remains the heart of the town.

Despite its charm, Port Gibson faces challenges. Church Street, designated as one of the Mississippi Heritage Trust’s “most endangered places,” endures heavy commercial traffic as it intersects with Highway 61. However, the trio of homeowners sees the potential for revitalization.

**THE WOMEN BEHIND THIS REVIVAL BRING DIVERSE BACK-
GROUNDS AND A SHARED VISION.**



Layrisson bought Collina House in 2023 with the intention to turn it into a retreat center. At the time, she was 14 years into recovery and working at Imagine Recovery in New Orleans. Layrisson had never been to Port Gibson before. While at a wedding in Brookhaven in late 2022, she heard about the beautiful properties available in Port Gibson. She and her husband visited, and she “fell in love” with Collina and the town.

Set at the end of a long driveway, the impressive Collina House is an 1830s center-hall cottage in the Greek Revival style. Layrisson can accommodate 10 guests in five bedrooms complete with 8.5 private acres on a wooded hill just off Church Street.

By coincidence, Layrisson discovered that Schott, her friend from middle school in New Orleans, was buying Canemount, another historic property just outside of town. Schott also wanted to create an upscale accommodation for relaxation and recovery.

Schott and Layrisson then met Isabel White Sullivan, a native of Jackson living on the Northshore of New Orleans, who also had recently purchased an inn, Isabella Bed and Breakfast, in Port Gibson.

The three women became good friends and decided to work together to bring bigger groups to the city. “We are all super enthusiastic about the area and getting people to come see what’s here,” says Layrisson. **“MY VISION IS A RENAISSANCE OF SORTS HERE IN PORT GIBSON.”**

All three owners came to the hospitality business from varied professional backgrounds. Layrisson had a long career in journalism with stints at various national outlets, including the *Washington Post*. Sullivan has an MBA and has worked in banking and sales. Schott had a long career with her digital marketing firm in New Orleans.

Sullivan and her husband purchased the Isabella Bed & Breakfast in spring 2022. During the 16 days after Hurricane Ida when she was without power at her home in Mandeville, Sullivan dreamed of a place to evacuate with enough room for her four children, two dogs, and four cats. She also wanted a place in Mississippi, her home state.

Isabella Bed and Breakfast is directly on Church Street. The home dates to 1834, when Will Person built it as a one-story dog-trot cottage. The house was expanded over the years to two stories, and it was later named after Isabella Person who lived in the house until she passed away at age 93. Isabel Sullivan calls it a “happy coincidence” that she shares her name with her bed and breakfast. In addition to the main house, they have two more bedrooms in the back house.





Schott and her husband bought Canemount just outside of town this past November. The couple sold their house in Metairie and took over the operation of the inn almost immediately.

Schott had also been looking for a place to evacuate after Hurricane Ida hit the New Orleans area in 2021. When the last of her five children had left for college, Schott, who had been in recovery for 27 years, felt **“CALLED TO CREATE A SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO CONNECT AND FIND PEACE.”** When she saw Canemount, she knew “this was it.” The extensive property has seven structures, primarily

built in the early 1800s, including the main home, which was built in 1851. The inn currently has 10 suites but will expand to 12 and later 18.

The converted dairy barn now serves as an event center. The space once housed a restaurant and is where Schott plans to host pop-up chef-centered dining events. She also hopes to partner with students majoring in hospitality at nearby Alcorn State University. She also has plans to offer 12-step retreats and corporate retreats. **“I WAS GIVEN A GIFT, AND IT’S MY JOB TO SHARE IT,”** says Schott.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: An old barn at Canemount has been repurposed as an event space. Isabella Bed and Breakfast is a stately 1880 Queen Anne-style home located just off the Natchez Trace. Isabella’s interiors have been fully updated, but the furnishings stay true to the period of its history. The main house at Canemount is a breathtaking Italianate structure. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: The Collina House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is a perfectly preserved example of a 1830s planters cottage in the Greek Revival style. A game room in The Collina House allows guests the opportunity to relax and enjoy a game of billiards. The picturesque grounds of The Canemount Inn provide respite away from the rest of the world.



Port Gibson has much to offer visitors. “Coming from a tourist destination, I can see how Port Gibson needs to embrace tourism just like Natchez and Vicksburg,” says Sullivan. Church Street is indeed an attraction with its iconic 165-foot steeple topped by a golden hand pointing towards the heavens. This unusual steeple was put on the church when it was completed in 1860 to honor the church’s first minister, who often pointed his hand to the sky during his sermons. Church Street is lined with historic homes, live oak trees, and the now-closed Temple Gemiluth Chessed, built in 1892 in Moorish Revival style with a Russian-type cupola. The street boasts several architectural styles, including Federal, Gothic Revival, and Classic Revival. From the Claiborne Hardware Store to Hudson’s Grocery to the public library, they find the town welcoming and friendly. Hudson’s Grocery, with its mounted deer heads on the wall, offers taxidermy, is a licensed gun dealer, and sells groceries.

They all envision Port Gibson—the third oldest town in the state—as more of a tourist destination. The town is well positioned for visitors as it is located just off the Natchez Trace and the Mississippi Blues Trail. The trio shares that the Viking Cruise Line Mississippi Delta Explorer, which brings tourists to nearby Vicksburg and Natchez, could also incorporate Port Gibson as an excursion. And Sullivan says she sees the potential for a music festival honoring Lil Green, who was known as the Queen of the Blues in the early 1940s. She also would love to organize a farmers market day to support local farmers and attract tourists. As they work towards making a bright future for Port Gibson, Schott can picture Church Street in the fall with pilgrimage visitors walking along the streets, stopping in the historic houses, visiting crafts of homemade quilts, and sampling tasty muffins from pop-up shops in the abandoned storefronts. **“WE JUST WANT PEOPLE TO STOP IN PORT GIBSON,”** says Sullivan. *M*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Canemount is filled with places that offer a peaceful retreat in the outdoors. Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, also known as the Confederate Memorial Chapel, is one of the city’s beautiful and historic churches. Gemiluth Chessed Synagogue, the oldest surviving synagogue in Mississippi, was built in 1891 and is an example of a combination of the Moorish Revival, Byzantine Revival, and Romanesque styles of architecture.



*Claire Viguerie
Layrisson*



*Isabel White
Sullivan*



*Stephanie
Boisfontaine
Schott*