

THOMAS R. CHANEY PAPERS

Mss. 5162

Inventory

Compiled by
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Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University

2016

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SUMMARY

Size.	0.3 linear feet
Geographic locations.	Texas; St. James Parish, Louisiana
Inclusive dates.	1863-1916
Bulk dates.	1893-1900
Language.	English
Summary.	Papers consist primarily of business correspondence, but also include photographs, plantation map, and a commemorative booklet printed after Chaney's death. The majority of the correspondence is from Benjamin Pring to Chaney reporting on the operations at Oneida Plantation in St. James Parish.
Restrictions on access.	None.
Related collections.	None.
Copyright.	Physical rights and copyright are retained by the LSU Libraries.
Citation.	Thomas R. Chaney Papers, Mss. 5162, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
Availability of originals.	The Oneida Plantation map, photographs, and the correspondence written by Thomas Chaney are reproductions; original materials were retained by the donor.
Stack locations.	U:310; OS:C

BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL NOTE

Colonel Thomas R. Chaney was born in New London, Connecticut, July 31, 1841. He served in the Union Army during the Civil War and continued to work for the U.S. Government afterward, in both Kentucky and Texas. In the 1870s he became involved in the cottonseed oil business, establishing the first mills in Texas, and founding the Howard Oil Company in Houston. He is considered a pioneer in the cottonseed oil industry, having innovated the ways in which oil was produced and transported.

In 1893, he bought Homestead Plantation in St. James Parish, Louisiana, and ventured into the sugar business with partners R.L. Heflin, Commission Merchant and Exporter, and Benjamin H. Pring, who served as the plantation manager and oversaw daily operation. The name of the plantation was later changed to Oneida, with the three men forming the Oneida Planting and Manufacturing Company. Chaney died in New Orleans March 25, 1914.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The earliest items in the collection consist of letters from Thomas Chaney written while working in the office of the Chief Quartermaster Headquarters, District of Texas. In letters to his family, Chaney discusses life in Texas and how it differs from life in the rest of the country, “The manners and customs of this place are entirely different from anything that I have ever seen before. We have no greenbacks here everything is gold or silver and it does not seem as if I were in the United States” (October 2, 1866), and notes that “ ‘Yankees’ don’t take well here” (March 8, 1868). Chaney discusses Reconstruction and the country’s general political situation, writing, “the old Democratic Party of 1860 are very defiant and the ‘carpet baggers’ at the convention...have not the good of the state at heart and the work of reconstruction progresses but poorly, Union men outside of military posts have no safety and it is one continued rule of robbery and murder through the northern counties” (July 31, 1868). In his later correspondence from Texas, Chaney discusses interactions with Native American tribes in the area. He writes, “...the Indians are getting very troublesome, they have recently murdered families and stolen stock within eighteen miles of this city...” (August 25, 1870). He also writes in detail of a “tribe called Ton-ka-ways...[who] have for a long time been friendly to the whites. A number of the young men of the tribe are kept constantly in the service of the United States to watch the movements of hostile Indians and guide the troops when in pursuit. They live on a reservation near the post, their habits are the same as the savages, and their contact with civilization has not improved them” (May 27, 1873).

After 1890, Chaney writes from the plantation in St. James Parish and discusses the labor situation, problems with the levees and flooding, and some general politics. He describes to his family the basic process of growing and processing sugar cane and also comments on their African American and Italian laborers (1893-1897). In April 1897, he writes to his sister of efforts to protect the fields from river flooding, including building up levees, patrolling levees, and inspecting for any weaknesses. He also includes a rough sketch of the elevations of the fields, levee, and river to illustrate their predicament (April 26, 1897). Chaney writes to his family of the Spanish-American War and the danger that the possible annexation of Cuba could pose to the sugar industry in the U.S. (April 27, 1898). Finally, Chaney tells his sister of a tour he attended of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in St. James Parish, describing in detail the building, school, grounds, and nuns who run the convent [December 31, 1899].

A large amount of correspondence is written by Benjamin H. Pring to Thomas Chaney in which he describes the daily operations at Oneida Plantation. He details the purchase of Homestead (later Oneida) Plantation (April 22-23, 1893), mentions dealings with the Mississippi Valley Railroad and the running of a road through part of their place (April 29, 1893), and mentions the discussion among the partners about the name for their plantation and company (May 9, 1893). Pring writes often of his efforts and the difficulties encountered to procure labor. He mentions the possibility of a contract with the State Prison employing convict labor for levee construction (June 11, 1893) and also discusses the lowering of wages, “Heretofore all male labor received 75¢ a day; women 60¢ – This year we have started in as follows: First class (plow) hands 60¢, second class, including all Italians, 50¢ – women 45¢ – Of course there has been some kicking, principally among the Italians but, I think if, planters generally will only remain firm, and I think

necessity will compel them, we will be able to carry our point” (January 28, 1895). Later Pring complains of the scarcity of labor because many African Americans are joining the army (July 14, 1898) as well as his difficulties teaching the Italian laborers how to work in the field (June 17, 1900).

Pring writes of the presidential race between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley in which he claims, “that by November, this Bryan craze will have lost its force and he will be snowed under” (September 1, 1896). He also writes of the Spanish-American War, Cervera’s fleet (June 3, 1898) and his fears the war will result in the annexation of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, thereby causing the sugar industry in the U.S. to suffer (June 22, 1898).

The majority of Pring’s correspondence reports on the operation of the plantation, including financial matters, construction and improvements to infrastructure, and basic daily operations. He describes his fears and extensive efforts to hold back water as the river rose 6 inches above the levees (July 17, 1893). Some letters concern dealings with the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. and the right-of-way rights of a spur track running through the plantation (1895-1896). Pring describes in great detail the progression of the construction of a sugar house on the plantation (1898-1900) as well as efforts to maintain sugar equipment (1900). Finally, Pring mentions the devastation caused by the hurricane in Galveston in 1900 and mentions an acquaintance who was killed (September 16, 1900).

Other correspondence includes letters from R.L. Heflin to Chaney discussing general financing and plantation operations (August-October 1893), as well as a letter from E. George to Miss M.B. Chaney (Thomas Chaney’s only surviving sister at the time of his death) in which he responds to her inquiries about the sale of the plantation’s sugar equipment, reporting that Mr. Heflin bought out the other partners and shipped the equipment to Sugarland, Tex. (June 27, 1916). Other items within the collection include a Civil War era pass to Thomas R. Chaney to travel to Arlington from his camp at Alexandria, Va. (December 25, 1863); two ledger sheets listing an overview of expenses for Oneida Plantation (1894, 1896); photocopies of portraits of Chaney (ca. 1868-1908), and a copy of a photograph of Oneida Plantation (ca. 1890-1900); and a booklet and certificate presenting resolutions adopted by the Interstate Cotton Seed Crushers’ Association and the Cotton Oil Trade of New York upon the announcement of Chaney’s death (May 1914). Finally, a copy of a map of Oneida Plantation notes which crops were planted in each field (1894).

INDEX TERMS

African American agricultural laborers--Louisiana.
Agricultural laborers--Louisiana.
Chaney, Thomas, 1841-1914.
Convent of the Sacred Heart (Convent, La.)
Convict labor--Louisiana--Saint James Parish.
Cotton growing--Texas.
Heflin, R.L.
Immigrants--Louisiana.
Indians of North America--Government relations, 1869-1934.
Indians of North America--Texas.
Levees--Louisiana--Saint James Parish.
Oneida Plantation (La.)
Plantations--Louisiana--Saint James Parish.
Pring, Benjamin H.
Reconstruction (U.S. history, 1865-1877)
Reconstruction (U.S. history, 1865-1877)--Texas.
Saint James Parish (La.)
Spanish-American War, 1898.
Sugar growing--Louisiana--Saint James Parish.
Sugar plantations--Louisiana--Saint James Parish.
Sugar workers--Louisiana.
Sugar--Manufacture and refining--Equipment and supplies

CONTAINER LIST

<u>Stack</u> <u>Location</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Folders</u>	<u>Contents with dates</u>
U:310	1	1-12	Correspondence and other papers (1863-1916)
OS:C	--	1	Map of Oneida Plantation (1894); resolution adopted by the Interstate Cotton Seed Crushers' Association (1914)