



The Long Legacy of Oakley Plantation

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Oakley Plantation | NPS

Oakley Plantation may be most famous for its naturalist resident, a young John James Audubon, who stayed here during the summer of 1821—indeed, it's now called the Audubon State Historic Site. But the stately mansion has a long, interesting heritage, including, of course, a connection with the Civil War.

Ruffin Gray, from Natchez, Mississippi, began construction on Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish in 1799. He purchased the land from the Spanish government but died before the house was completed.

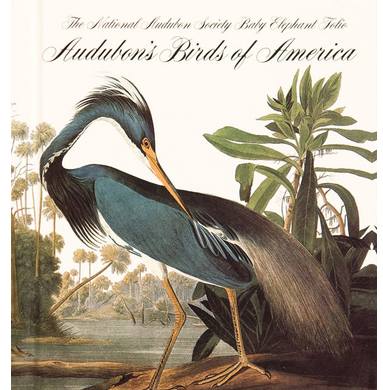
His widow, Lucy, oversaw its completion, and she soon married James Pirrie. His family was from Scotland, and he and Lucy had one child, a daughter named Eliza. In 1821, Lucy travelled to New Orleans and met John James Audubon. She hired him to tutor Eliza. Audubon stayed at Oakley for four months, and while there he would receive fifty dollars a month plus room and board for himself as well his thirteen-year-old protégée. While at Oakley, Audubon developed a love for the natural beauty of the area and used his free time to paint 32 of his bird pictures. These would become the basis for his famous *Birds of America*.



Eliza Pirrie, by John James Audubon | public domain



Self-portrait, John James Audubon | public domain

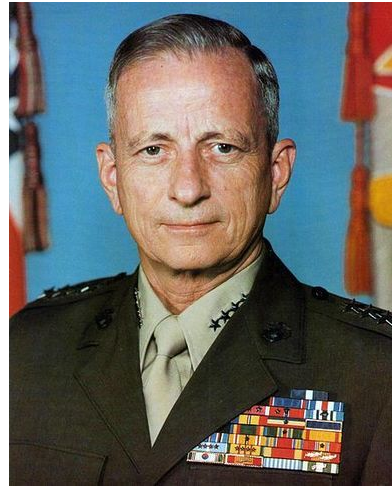


Book cover, *The Birds of America* | public domain

Eliza Pirrie eloped in 1823 to marry her cousin, Robert H. Barrow. Sadly, he contracted pneumonia on their honeymoon and died six weeks later. As a widow, Eliza gave birth to their son, Robert H. Barrow, Jr.

Robert, Jr., went on to aid the formation the 4th Louisiana Infantry, Confederate States Army. The unit was organized on May 25, 1861, at Camp Moore, Louisiana, with 862 men. Robert Barrow was made a colonel and served as the first commander of the regiment. The 4th Louisiana reported to the Mississippi Gulf Coast until September, when it was moved to protect the lower Atchafalaya River near Franklin and Brashear City. In February 1862, it was ordered to Jackson, Tennessee. While there, Colonel Barrow resigned and did not join his men for the battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, in April 1862.

Robert Barrow, Jr., and his wife, Mary, had six children. Their great-grandson—also named Robert H. Barrow—was born in 1922 on another family plantation near Oakley. He was a smart, hard-working child and managed to take advantage of a special opportunity to attend Louisiana State University in 1939 for free. While there, he worked as a janitor and waiter and served in the school's corps of cadets. He liked the military. During World War II, he joined the Marines as a private and rose in rank as he saw action in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. A military historian described him as the “finest regimental commander” of the Korean War. He retired in 1983 as the Commandant of the Marine Corps. As the 27th leader of the Marines, he was the first commandant to serve, by law, as a regular full member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He died in 2008 and was buried with full military honors at the family cemetery at Grace Episcopal Church in St. Francisville.



Gen. Robert H. Barrow

His son commented on his father's leadership style by saying, “[My father] believed that people and quality of people transcends everything else that you do in an organization.”

Today, Oakley Plantation—aka Audubon State Historic Site—is open for tours, and the grounds host events like weddings and reenactments. But, apparently, the visitation goes on nonstop, because paranormal activity is commonly reported. Footsteps and voices and the image of a young girl have been reported in the house. Tour guides report seeing a young boy standing near one of the beds, a woman with children sitting in a chair, and even a young girl waving from an upstairs window.

With all the history and beauty associated with Oakley and the heritage of the families that have lived there, who knows, maybe some of them just keep coming back to reconnect with times gone by??



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