

THE FAMILIES THAT BUILT ZACHARY

By Jen Gennaro

If you've been in Zachary long enough, you know everyone's related somehow. I learned this the hard way.

Picture this: it's fall of 2012 outside BREC's Church Street Park, where the Tiny Steps program used to operate. We've been in Zachary for less than two years at this point, and I've just become friends with Laurie Hunt. I see across the parking lot a tall, beautiful redhead putting two little girls into the car and pecking a handsome man on the cheek before leaving. It's a different handsome man than the one who was here yesterday that she also kissed, and this time there's more kids getting in the car. "Hey," I whisper to Laurie. "What's with her? I've seen her give two different men a kiss this week! I can't figure out which one's her husband and how many kids she has!" Laurie positively cackles and calls me out in front of the gorgeous redhead we all now know is Claire Kent Simmons, who explains one of the men is her husband, Trez, and the other is her brother. And Laurie's husband Stephen is Claire's first cousin. The moral of the story is twofold: there are no secrets in Zachary, and everyone's related.

Editor's note: Due to space constraints, we aren't able to deep dive into each branch of the family trees, nor are we able to give enough recognition to each family that has played a significant part in the development of the Zachary community; namely the East, Young, Montegudo, Kennedy, Flonacher, Buhler, Samuel, Loudon, Noble, Bond, Brian, Annison, Amrhein and Harrell families, and many more. We apologize in advance if any family has been overlooked in this feature. The stories herein are meant for illustrative purposes, to tell the stories and the struggles of some of Zachary's earliest families, and trace their descendants to those who live in Zachary to this day.

ZHS's 1944 State Basketball Champs.

From Zachary
Faces and
Places.



NO MORE FOES TO CONQUER - Zachary's State B Class Basketball champions, turned down in bids for additional titles against Jesuit High of New Orleans, State A Class Titlists and Macedonia, Miss., prep kingpins last night, had their season officially culminated when they were banqueted by Coach R.O. McCraine and the other school officials. Winners of 51 games against two losses, the Bronces, shown above, are, left to right, front row: Coach McCraine, Buddy Hunt, Huey Langley, Reggie Wicker, David Hunt, Donald Bennett and J. Hunt, manager, Row 2: Kernan Kendrick, Harry Hughes, Hardee Brian, J. B. Whitehead, D.E. Hunt and Calvin Brown.

— Picture taken by the Morning Advocate, April, 1944



Zachary High School 1930 Graduation

ZHS Class of 1930. Many of their descendants still live in Zachary.
From the scrapbook of Dotty Watts Mills.

Story sources: Zachary Faces & Places; The Plains and the People: A History of Upper East Baton Rouge Parish by Virginia Lobdell Jennings; public records both online and in the Town Archives, and scrapbooks and interviews with the subject families.

THE MCHUGHS

Few families are as deeply woven into the fabric of Zachary as the McHughs. Their story begins in the early 19th century, when Philip McHugh, an Irish immigrant from County Cork, sought new opportunities in America. After settling briefly in Pennsylvania and then the Natchez territory, he applied for a Spanish land grant in 1809. Pledging his allegiance to the Catholic Church, he received land in The Plains, now part of modern-day Zachary. Alongside the Shaffetts and Sullivans, he helped establish the first Catholic church in the region.



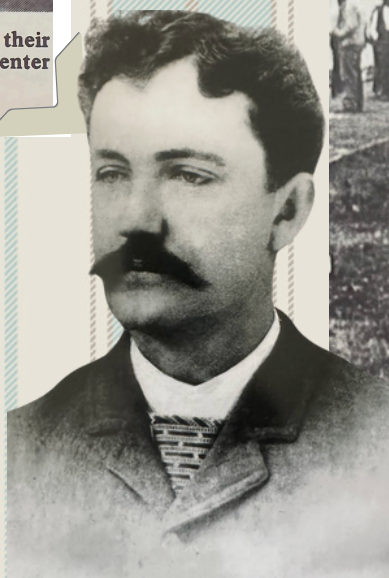
THE MCHUGHS WERE AMONG THE FIRST FAMILIES TO SETTLE IN ZACHARY – and the four shown here in a picture taken about 1909, were brothers and sisters, left to right: seated, Susanna Amanda Carmena, mother of seven children; Thomas Edward, the first mayor of Zachary and father of two children; top, left to right, James Babin, father of seventeen children and David Samuel, father of twelve.



Mr. and Mrs. J.B. McHugh pose with eleven of their children in their yard on Main Street. In the background can be seen the Carpenter home on Church Street. Taken in the 1920's.



Robert "Dukey" McHugh, Ben's grandfather, was inducted into the ZHS Hall of Fame in 1992. He earned both football and basketball scholarships to LSU, but forfeited his athletic career to marry his high school sweetheart.



ZHS Physics teacher and head wrestling coach Ben McHugh (above) bears a resemblance to his ancestor, Tom Ed McHugh, who served as Zachary's first mayor (left).

COVER STORY

Philip's son, John McHugh, was born in Philadelphia in 1781 and later settled on White's Bayou with his wife, Susanna Shaw McHugh, in 1813. A year later, he joined General Andrew Jackson's army to defend New Orleans. Tragically, he never returned home, succumbing to illness in March 1815. His widow and their infant son, John Anthony "Squire" McHugh, left their homestead and moved in with her family.

Despite these hardships, the McHugh lineage thrived. "Squire" McHugh married Amanda Jane Bridges in 1850, and together they had six children, expanding the family's influence in the growing town of Zachary. Their son, James Babin "JB" McHugh, married Rachel Francis Shaffett in a double wedding; JB's brother married Rachel's sister Sarah! The two couples had 29 children between them—several of whom became Catholic nuns. The family "continued as the main support of St. John The Baptist Catholic Church," wrote Virginia Jennings in the 1999 book, *The Plains and the People: A History of Upper East Baton Rouge Parish*. Tragically, one of David and Sarah's children became Zachary's sole casualty of World War II.

Perhaps the most well-known of Squire's children was Thomas Edward McHugh, born in or around 1861. He became the first mayor of Zachary in 1889, shaping the town's early government. His leadership set the foundation for future development, securing the McHugh family's place in local history. Generations later, a descendant also named Thomas Edward "Tom Ed" McHugh carried on the family legacy, serving as Mayor-President of East Baton Rouge Parish, where he proudly proclaimed his Zachary heritage.

The family's legacy continued through generations. Robert Hull "Dukey" McHugh, a grandson of Squire, played on Zachary High School's first football team and earned an athletic scholarship to LSU for both football and basketball in 1957. He was later inducted into the ZHS Hall of Fame, where his picture hangs to this day. However, he chose family over sports, marrying his high school sweetheart and leaving behind a promising athletic career to work at Lane Memorial Hospital, where he served as head of maintenance for 40 years.

The McHugh influence is still seen in the town today. The Victorian-style McHugh House, built in 1903 by David and Ana McHugh and donated to the City of Zachary by Jesse Weldon McHugh in 1973, stood for decades as a museum before being repurposed into a bed and breakfast and event venue. Descendants continue to live in Zachary, preserving the family's rich history and contributions to the town's growth. Dukey's grandson, Ben McHugh, is a physics teacher and the head wrestling coach at ZHS, and Ben's wife Ashleigh is the Director of Economic Development for the City of Zachary.

From their early days as settlers on Spanish-granted land to shaping the modern identity of Zachary, the McHugh name remains synonymous with the town's history and future, with generations who have both built Zachary and continue to shape its path forward.



DOWNTOWN ZACHARY'S FIVE STAR AIRBNB

Perfect for couples or for small groups of travelers.

Located only 20 minutes away from the airport, this 2400 sq. ft. house has two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and can comfortably sleep a group of four.

RENT A VENUE IN DOWNTOWN ZACHARY

Perfect for receptions or graduation parties, the venue can accommodate up to 150.

The Carriage House features a 900 sq. ft. enclosed bar and commercial warming kitchen, covered porch, dining hall that seats 60, and gardens.

THE MCHUGH HOUSE
4524 VIRGINIA STREET
225-400-2044



Guest favorite



One of the most loved homes on Airbnb, according to guests

5.0

★★★★★

58

Reviews

The Mills Family

"My family has been here since Zachary was founded," says 24-year-old Ashtyn Mills. "My great-great-grandfather was Thomas Lilley Mills, who was a surgeon back in the day and owned that big white house across from the Plains Presbyterian. My grandfather is Clyde Mills, and my children, I think, are the youngest Mills still in Zachary."

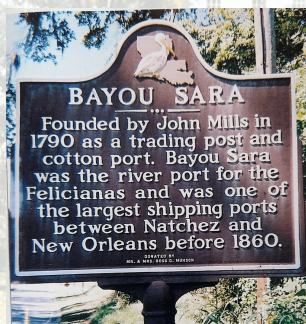
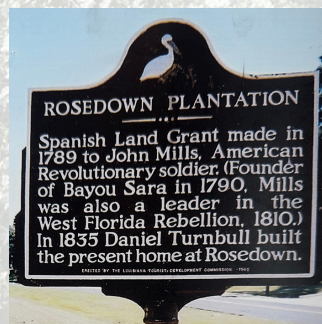


The Mills family's roots trace back to the late 18th century, connecting with early settlers like the Lilley and Smith families, who helped develop the Zachary-Plains-Baton Rouge region. Edith Smith of Natchez married John Christian Buhler in 1788. They had extensive land holdings in a part of the Plains of Zachary, later referred to as Buhler's Plains. In 1789, Edith's sister Eunice married Thomas Lilley, who purchased land near Baton Rouge in 1790. Their lineage shaped the area for generations, with many present-day Zachary families linked to their descendants by birth or marriage.

Today, multiple generations and branches of the Mills family still call Zachary home, their legacy woven into our town's history.

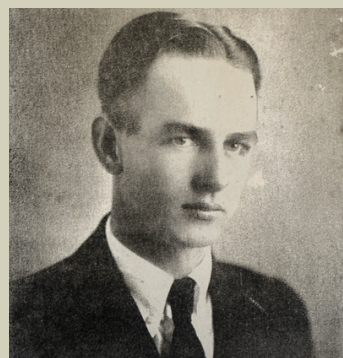
Of Eunice and Thomas's nine children, their daughter Eunice was born in 1804 and eventually married John Mills, son of an early settler of the Felicianas by way of New York, whose father was one of the original deedholders of the land that is now Rosedown Plantation.

Eunice Lilley Mills and John Mills had nine children.



One of Eunice and John's nine children was **Dr. Thomas Lilley Mills**, born in 1835, the first in a line of four descendants who would eventually bear his name. Thomas and his wife, **Mary Louise Young**, had seven children of their own.

Dr. T.L. Mills & Mary Louise Young's Descendants



One of their grandsons was **David Pipes Mills**, a Zachary businessman who operated Zachary's first supermarket.

One of their sons was **Albert Carter Mills**, grandfather of **Dotty Watts Mills'** late husband, **Albert Carter Mills III, Ph.D.**, who was an elder in Plains Presbyterian Church, a member of the Board of Directors at Bank of Zachary, and a business owner in Zachary.



One of their granddaughters is **Jane Mills Burk**, who celebrated her 100th birthday in 2024. Her son, **Jack Burk**, owned an Allstate insurance agency here in Zachary until his recent retirement, as well as the Burk Building on Church Street. Jane and Jack are pictured on the cover, along with Jack's son, Evan, and grandson, Liam (below).



Margaret Ann Germany 1852-1942
married
Thomas Chalmers McKowen 1849-1926
their daughter
Margaret Jane McKowen 1890-1985
married
Albert Carter Mills 1881-1956

The McKowen and Mills families are connected by marriage. From the scrapbook of Dotty Watts Mills.



Dr. Harry **Morris**, first Chief of Staff at Lane Memorial Hospital, married Beryl **McKowen**.

Their only grandson is Dr. **Chad Morris**, who owns Morris Family Dentistry on Church Street.

Dr. Roberta **McKowen** (page 10) is the wife of Keller McKowen, a descendent of Mary Virginia and Dr. T.L. Mills, Jr.



Anne Eliza Young

Adolphus deBretton

John deBretton married Mary Lilley Mills. Their son, Adolphus **deBretton**, married Anne Eliza **Young**. The couple's home was "The Ratcliff-deBretton House" on Virginia Street, where *Porch & Parish* stands today.

Suzi Eckert Gautreaux, Realtor and wife of Sheriff Sid Gautreaux, is a descendant of one of Mary Virginia and Thomas Lilley's children. Mary McKowen Mills's daughter Mary Virginia married Fred Eckert II. Suzi's daughter Ginny is pictured on page 27 with Matthew McConaughey.



Morris Family Dentistry

Our Services

Invisalign treatment



Sedation Dentistry



TMJ/TMD Treatments



Cosmetic dentistry



Call to schedule your appointment today!

Call Today: (225) 654-3964

Dr. Chad Morris is a third generation healthcare provider with a legacy that spans 80 years. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Dr. Harry Morris, Sr., and his father, Dr. Martin Morris, Chad upholds the family's commitment to providing care and compassion to the residents of Zachary.

4488 Church Street, Zachary
www.chadmorrisdds.com

Dr. Thomas Lilley Mills Jr.

Dr. Thomas Lilley Mills, Jr., a towering figure in the family's history, followed in the footsteps of his father, also a physician. A graduate of Tulane Medical School in 1918, Dr. Mills began his career as a railroad physician in Wilson before returning to The Plains to serve his hometown. He married Mary Virginia McKowen, and the couple had six children. Curiously, Dr. Mills also had a pet monkey that bit his left thumb "clean off!"

Their home, the iconic "Shadowfield of the Plains" at the corner of Old Scenic Highway and Brian Road, doubled as his medical office, where patients often gathered under a covered bridge to wait for treatment. Dr. Mills was a country doctor, a dentist, and a pharmacist; he was called a "pioneer physician" in a 1959 article. He made house calls by horse-drawn buggy and later by car, wearing out multiple vehicles a year due to his relentless commitment to his patients.

Dr. Mills was a close friend of Governor Huey P. Long and was present the night he was shot. Dr. Mills rode to the hospital with the dying politician and was in the operating room as physicians attempted to save his life.

Beyond medicine, Dr. Mills served in the state legislature, the school board, the police jury, and as parish health officer for four years. He remained a cornerstone of the community until his passing in 1960 at the age of 93. The home on Old Scenic remains in the family to this day.



The Mills' and their beloved Grandchildren,

Front steps of the Home of Dr. & Mrs. Thomas Lilley Mills, Jr.:

Left to right: Top Step- Mrs. Mammie Mills (Mary Virginia McKowen Mills) holding granddaughter, Edith Mills, Eric Day Jr., Edward L. McGehee, Jr., Mary Virginia "Gigi" Day, & Dr. Buddy Mills holding Thomas "Harry" McGehee.



Patients gathered under the covered bridge at Dr. Mills's home to wait for treatment.



Shadowfield of the Plains

THE HUNT FAMILY LEGACY IN ZACHARY

The Hunt family has helped shape Zachary's growth and development for generations. Their ongoing contributions span education, real estate and community development, leaving a lasting legacy on the city that current generations continue to uphold.

Their story begins with David D. Hunt, who came to this area in 1856 and became a farmer. He married Juda Temple of Mississippi, and the couple had three children, one of whom was Delbert Decanter Hunt. Delbert was just two years old when his mother passed away, and David raised the family alone.

Delbert married Margaret "Maddie" White Hunt in 1896. The couple raised their six children "at the Hunt place" on Plank Road, back then a dirt path that led to Baton Rouge. According to family lore, of these children was a set of twins, who grew up to marry another set of twins from Baton Rouge!

One of their sons, Luther, married Doris Rabalais, and the couple had two children. Luther and Doris's son, Donald Dewitt Hunt Sr., is the patriarch of the Hunt family that still resides in Zachary today. He married his high school sweetheart, Shirley Claire Baker, and the couple had eight children. Donald and Shirley's eight children blessed them with 12 grandchildren, 55 great grandchildren, and three great-great grandchildren, most of whom still live in Zachary to this day!

DONALD SR. (1928—2000)

A lifelong advocate for Zachary, Donald Sr. dedicated his life to education, community service, and local business. A graduate of Zachary schools, he excelled in basketball and track, earning a full athletic scholarship to LSU. After graduation, he served in the United States Air Force before returning home to teach history and coach basketball at Zachary High School.

In addition to his career in education, Donald was a successful entrepreneur, founding Zachary Realty & Insurance Agency and Zachary Homes & Land. His commitment to the city extended beyond business. He took immense pride in promoting Zachary schools and the community's way of life. His contributions were recognized in 1990 when he was inducted into the Zachary High School Hall of Fame.

Donald's dedication to Zachary's future led him to serve as a City Councilman and a member of the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board for 16 years. He fought to ensure local students had the necessary resources for a quality education, from supplies and equipment to new schools. He played a pivotal role in desegregating Zachary's schools ahead of state mandates and opposed bussing students from other areas into Zachary. A visionary leader, he was part of the early movement to establish Zachary as an independent school district—an effort he championed but, sadly, did not live to see completed.

Donald Sr.'s legacy lives on through the community he helped shape, as well as through his descendants, who continue to uphold his commitment to the Zachary community.

The extended Hunt family at a gathering.



Craig Hunt of Craig Hunt Builders, alongside his son Stephen, built a lasting legacy as homebuilders in Zachary. After a courageous 13-year battle with cancer, Craig passed away in March 2025.

Donald D. Hunt Jr. is the oldest son of Donald and Shirley, and he went to work with his father after graduating from LSU. Together, Jr. and Sr. built nearly 400 homes in and around the Zachary community. They also developed many of the subdivisions that continue to flourish to this day; namely, Cypress Park, Myrtle Court, Plains Crossing, Fennwood Links, and Clairmont, before Sr.'s death in 2000.

Donald D. Hunt III, known to most in Zachary as just "De," moved back to Zachary to start his architecture firm after graduating from LSU in 1999. He set to work on a redesign of the approved, but not yet launched, subdivision of Clairmont, transforming the design from a "meat and potatoes" tract-type subdivision into a higher-end, amenity-laden neighborhood. In 2018, De and his son Austin started Heirloom Homes here in Zachary, and the duo builds custom homes within a 50 mile radius.

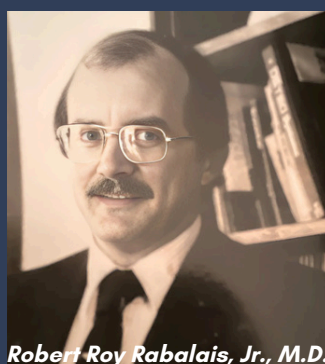
Today, the Hunt family's impact can still be felt in the schools, neighborhoods and values that define Zachary. Beyond just buildings and businesses, their legacy is one of commitment to community, education, and a better future for generations to come.

family ties

DORIS' BROTHER ROBERT IS THE GRANDFATHER OF DR. DAVID RABALAIS, ORTHOPEDIC SURGEON HERE IN ZACHARY—WHOSE FATHER ROBERT ROY RABALAIS, JR., WAS ALSO AN ORTHOPEDIST IN ZACHARY.



Robert David Rabalais, M.D.



Robert Roy Rabalais, Jr., M.D.



Donald Sr. on his wedding day. He was the beloved **"Pawpaw"** of these familiar faces, and many more: (counterclockwise, from top) De Hunt, Claire Kent Simmons, Gordon Lipscomb (pictured with his wife Shae, a counselor at ZHS), and Stephen Hunt (bottom, with his father).



All eight of the Hunt family siblings. From left: Jeff Hunt, Stacey Denicola, Craig Hunt (deceased), Ginger Kent, Brad Hunt, Da'Anne Lipscomb (deceased), Tara Jones, and Don Hunt.



Below: Father, Craig, and son, Stephen Hunt. In addition to building homes together, they loved fishing, cooking, and LSU football. Craig passed away in March of 2025.

