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1 ledger - manuscript - French

**LETTERS AND ACCOUNTS RELATING TO THE PROPERTY OF
Mr. and Mrs. L.T. DELASSIZE (FMC), WRITTEN BY THEIR AGENT J.V. LAVIGNE.
1873-1875**

"Par procuration de M et Mme Delassize - J.V. Lavigne"

Also contains 3 private letters by various authors.

Scope & Content Note

This ledger, written in French, belonged to Joseph Vignaud Lavigne who worked as a clerk, on what appears to have been a freelance basis. The ledger can be divided into two distinct sections; the first containing copies of three private letters written by Lavigne for clients between 1870-1872; the second containing copies of accounts, of receipts and of letters relating to the New Orleans property of Louis Théodule Delassize during the period 1873-1875. From 1873 Lavigne acted as agent for his close friends, M. and Mme Delassize, who had gone to live at 198 Chaussée de Wavre, Ixelles-les-Bruxelles in Belgium. Delassize, a free man of color¹, had been Register of Conveyances and later Administrator of Public Buildings in New Orleans. On his arrival in Belgium Delassize became involved in the invention of surgical instruments.²

The richest element of this ledger is the series of letters written by Lavigne to Delassize. These letters are more than just statements of account. They are peopled with recurring characters whose changing fortunes paint a picture of the demise of the antebellum way of life during Reconstruction. The letters tell of the crumbling of the economy³, tumbling property values⁴, bankruptcy⁵, petty crime⁶, illness⁷ and military occupation⁸. Viewing life through Lavigne's eyes

¹ Edward's City Directory, 1870

² "If you wish I'll write an article in our newspapers about the wonderful and useful surgical instruments which you've just invented", Letter 9, 1.1.1875.

³ "More or less none of the banks which suspended payments three weeks ago have reopened nor are they about to, nobody is paying, everything is stopped, we have never seen the like ..." Letter 2, 11.12.1873,

⁴ "An Italian offered me \$1,500 for the land in Metairie..." -land valued at \$3,500 in 1873 -Letter 8, 11.25.1874,

⁵ "Wm. L. Campbell has declared himself bankrupt for \$9,000 ... the sum he owes you for the properties on Bayou Rd and Toulouse St.," Letter 8, 11.25.1874,

⁶ "... you have been the victim of the most heinous crime ..." Letter 3, 12.25.1873,

⁷ "... my 10-year-old daughter suffered a collapsed lung ..." Letter 12, 6.24.1875

⁸ "There are six warships on the river and thousands of troops in the barracks." Letter 8, 11.25.1874.

substantiates the horrors that New Orleans suffered in the post war period. However the gloom that permeates these letters is countered by the fact that Lavigne detailed how he managed, on the whole, to liquidate Delassize's property and shares at a minimum loss.

Lavigne made frequent reference to the Catholic ethos he shared with Delassize often ending letters with a biblical quotation or blessing⁹. Lavigne wrote of Masses he offered and wrote about *Monseigneur* (Archbishop Napoleon Joseph Perché?). The letters stopped abruptly in 1875. The St. Louis #2 cemetery records indicate that Lavigne died on June 11, 1887 at the age of 56.

⁹ "Seek first and above all else the Kingdom of God and all the rest will be given you in addition." Postscript to Letter 1, 8.14.1873.

SECTION I

Section I consists of three private letters. Two of these letters are transcribed by Lavigne for clients to third parties while the third is from Lavigne himself to a friend.

Letter i, 2/25/1872, (2.5 pgs)

From: François Ovid Dupuis, New Orleans.

To: His sister, Mme St. Félicien, France.

Concerning illness, the difficulty of life in Louisiana and the unreliability of the mail. Dupuis referred to the fact that not all of the religious objects Mme St. Félicien sent were received. He promised to keep her up to date on the effectiveness of the Lourdes' water on "Emma's deafness".

Letter ii, 3/3/1872, (1.5 pgs)

From: Lanoix Parent, New Orleans.

To: His newly wed niece and her husband, M. et Mme Bouillet, France.

Parent thanked his niece for the wedding photo she sent. He included reference to the idea of Love and God. He cited "the blockade" as his reason for not writing sooner.

Letter iii, 7/22/1870, (4.5 pgs)

From: Joseph Vignaud Lavigne, New Orleans,

To: His friend (half brother?), Armand Chabaud, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Lavigne noted the difficulty of the mail and "the blockade" and that he closed his private school because of the opening of a number of public schools. He took a new job as an Inspector of Taxes. He recounted the story of a "mental" illness his son (an apprentice pharmacist) developed. The illness seemed to take the form of fear or paranoia, probably stemming from the boy's brush with death on an elevated section of the New Orleans-Mobile railroad. Lavigne wrote about the arrival of a boat from Haiti, he explained that it took 24 days to reach New Orleans. The crew were forced to collect rain-water in the sails to sustain the passengers.

SECTION II

Section II deals with the administration of the property and financial affairs of Mr. and Mrs. L.T. Delassize by J.V. Lavigne in their absence from New Orleans. This section can be divided into three parts; i) accounts, ii) document duplicates, iii) copies of letters.

i) Accounts

The accounts detail amounts received in rent from named tenants for the following properties: 68 Orleans Ave, 154 Galvez St., 50 Toulouse St., 258 Bayou Rd, 128 Urquhart St. and farmland in Metairie. Also detailed are the taxes and the cost of upkeep of these properties. Financial assets detailed include shares in The Southern Bank, The Metropolitan Bank, The Orleans Railroad Company, The US and European Propelling Car Company and the St. Louis Hotel Association. Delassize held accounts at the Louisiana Savings Bank and The Southern Bank.

ii) Document duplicates

Duplicates of all documents relating to the affairs of Delassize including: the proxy awarding Lavigne power of attorney in all Delassize's affairs; a lease agreement for 154 Galvez St.; a list of objects given to Lavigne by Delassize including bonds, share certificates, insurance policies, collateral notes, the reserve price for the sale of each property and instructions from Mme Delassize regarding the Havana Lottery. There are copies of all receipts issued to or by Lavigne on behalf of Delassize. These include rent receipts (sometimes in English), fire insurance policy receipts (which describe the property in detail), bank deposit receipts and a receipt for a \$10 offering at St. Louis Cathedral. The ledger contains copies of various receipts for work done by handyman Frank Albert on the properties, including the purchase and installation of faucets, floorboards, gas lamps, windows and the maintenance of the Delassize tomb in St. Louis #2 Cemetery for All Saints Day. Also included are tax receipts, receipts for surveys done regarding drainage tax on the land in Metairie and ultimately receipts for the sale of most of the properties and shares of the Delassize family.

iii) Copies of Letters

Between August 1873 and June 1875 Lavigne wrote twelve letters to Delassize detailing his successes and failures in collecting rent and selling Delassize's shares. He also requested directions on how to proceed in certain matters, furnished statements of account and described everyday events in New Orleans life. A copy of each letter was kept by Lavigne in this ledger. Following is a summary of their contents.

Letter 1, August 14, 1873 (6 pgs)

Lavigne hoped the Delassize family had recovered from their journey to Brussels via New York and Le Harve. Bad harvests and burglary in Louisiana prevented tenants from paying the rent. The New Orleans Railroad Company showed a profit. Rotten boards in the house on Orleans Ave needed replacing, the roof of the house on Galvez St. needed repair. Mme Bonnafon, who owed Delassize \$200, had disappeared, Lavigne vowed to find her new abode. Sidney Thézan wished to pay off a \$1,000 loan six months early. A military representative visited Lavigne demanding the return of a Winchester rifle that had been loaned to Delassize by the State some time previously. The rifle could not be found. Lavigne signed off with this sentiment: *"Nothing good to report. Politics is going backwards and business has never been worse"*.

Letter 2, October 12, 1873 (8 pgs)

Lavigne referred to Delassize's last letter and told him that the rifle was indeed in the trunk indicated. However the bayonet and the rocket-stick were missing. Lavigne sent the trunks as requested although he expressed surprise that Delassize wanted such sparsely filled trunks. Some repairs were carried out on the properties, Lavigne had to have some brick reinforced and re-mortared by government order because the cracks between the bricks could contribute to the spread of Yellow Fever. Seven priests just died in Shreveport of Yellow Fever. Lavigne liquidated some of the shares to protect against bank failure. So far, The Southern Bank was surviving although many others were folding. Tenants were defaulting continually. He wrote of friends of Delassize, such as ex-Judge Charles Leaumont, who were threatening suicide because of the financial situation.

Letter 3, December 25, 1873 (7 pgs)

The trunks Lavigne sent to Delassize should indeed have been more full. The contents were pilfered while they were stored at Mme Avila's. Lavigne apologized for having wasted Delassize's money sending near empty trunks. The defaulting tenants were listed in detail and Lavigne transmitted his outrage that the bank was refusing to buy back shares. Debtors were unable to pay back Delassize's loans. Nobody in New Orleans could foresee an improvement in the financial situation. The statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, for which Delassize donated \$10, was unveiled in St. Louis Cathedral on December 8.

Letter 4, January 20, 1874 (3 pgs)

Lavigne was approached by a man interested in buying Delassize's small lathe. However this lathe was one of the items sent to Belgium. Lavigne asked if he should try to sell him the large lathe. If so, what price did Delassize suggest. Lavigne went on to discuss the problem of exchange rates. In New Orleans financial dealing was becoming more risky each day. Lavigne wrote Delassize that he needed clear instructions from him on how to proceed.

Letter 5, March 9, 1874 (5 pgs)

Lavigne gave the large lathe to an intermediary to sell for him. He was trying to liquidate Delassize's shares in the Metropolitan Bank but he could not get a good price. He tried to sell them back to the bank but they refused to recognize him as Delassize's agent without a notarized Power of Attorney document in English. Lavigne was very annoyed and asked Delassize to immediately forward him such a document. However, at the last moment Lavigne managed to find a broker that was able to get a good price for the shares. He used \$1 from the proceeds to have a Mass said. Lavigne's brother-in-law died in Haiti. He remarked that he was three times his brother-in-law, as not only had the deceased been married to Lavigne's sister but Lavigne's first two wives (mothers of his eight children) had been sisters of the deceased. He wrote of his visit to *Monseigneur* at the Archbishop's residence.

Letter 6, June 15, 1874 (6 pgs)

Tenants were defaulting and banks were collapsing. Lavigne told Delassize that he would not recognize New Orleans if he returned now. There were floods, crop failures, debtors extending loans and death around every corner. Lavigne's sister who taught French at the convent was gone to France on a tall-ship. There was information about other mutual acquaintances who died.

Letter 7, August 22, 1874 (5 pgs)

More bad news, debtors were dying. Lavigne continued to try to liquidate Delassize's assets but was finding it very difficult and he detailed some losses. Some properties were damaged by people dismantling balconies for fuel. The lathe was not yet sold.

Letter 8, October 25, 1874 (4 pgs)

Wm. S. Campbell died intestate and bankrupt. He owed Delassize \$9,000 (\$7,000 for the house on Toulouse St. and \$2,000 for the house on Bayou Rd). The sheriff seized both properties and put them up for public auction to raise the money Campbell owed in taxes.⁹ Delassize could have lost half their value. An Italian offered to buy the farmland in Metairie but he required some kind of dwelling on the property. The saga of the lathe continued. Lavigne asked what to do with it, he had it on display at a workshop on Exchange Alley and Conti. He was now asking \$250 for it.

PS. There were six battle ships on the river and 1000s of troops in the barracks.

Letter 9, January 1, 1875 (4 pgs)

The Campbell property was auctioned and Lavigne managed to purchase it back for Delassize for \$3,500. The Italian did not go through with the purchase of the land in Metairie. Lavigne was very annoyed at this because he went to great lengths to have surveys done to prove the land was not part of Carrollton but would be considered part of Orleans. This meant it would not be liable for drainage tax. He noted that all the neighboring land in Metairie was more or less abandoned at this time. All Delassize's houses were let but no one was paying the rent. Delassize's friends in New Orleans congratulated him on being away while things were so bad. Lavigne noted that there was nothing left to live for, nothing to hope for. *Monseigneur* was quite ill, before he fell ill he gave Lavigne a gift of his portrait which was now hanging in Lavigne's home. Many clergymen came to visit and pray at his home. He assured Delassize that he was always included in their prayers. Lavigne inquired about Delassize's invention of surgical instruments and offered to write an article in the New Orleans newspapers on the subject. He recounted the story of an altercation between the manager of the *Bulletin* and ex-Governor Warmoth in which the manager died of stab wounds.

Letter 10, February 19, 1875 (4 pgs)

Lavigne managed to liquidate some shares. He condemned the Democrats saying they threw everyone from their jobs. He, himself, lost his job four months ago. He was offered \$10 for the

⁹ See notice in *New Orleans Republican*, November 16, 1874. Photocopy enclosed in RG 407.

shanty on Urquhart and \$800 for the property on Bayou Rd. He wrote that people are dying of hunger.

Letter 11, April 27, 1875 (4 pgs)

Lavigne was sorry the lathe had not yet reached Delassize but assured him that *L'Express* shipping office in New Orleans said it is in Belgium. He detailed rents collected and owed. One tenant, Thomas Soublot, was dying and he had a child suffering from a very complicated inflammation of the lungs. Metairie was under water, the break in the levee opened again. *Monseigneur* left for France and Rome. He might visit Delassize in Brussels.

Letter 12, June 24, 1875 (4 pgs)

Lavigne opened with "*God has visited me...*" explaining that his ten-year-old daughter suffered a collapsed lung and then his twenty-four-year-old daughter was left slightly paralyzed by illness. He himself was suffering from a nervous illness. M. Hébert wanted to move from the second floor of the house on Toulouse to the first floor. Paul Livaudais, the broker, offered \$1,500 for the property on Galvez St. and \$1,000 was offered for the property on Bayou Rd. Lavigne asked Delassize if any of the great scientists with whom he worked might have a cure for his illness as he was suffering so much.

PS The price of gold was incredibly high.