

Plaquemines Parish History

By Rod Lincoln

Natural History

Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana geologically is the newest land in all of North America. It is this continent's most dynamic ecosystems – the Estuary of South Louisiana. The Mississippi River is approximately 2,340 miles long and drains 600,000 cubic feet of water per second from a 1,125,910-square-mile watershed. It includes 14,500 miles of navigable waterways. It is the third longest river in the world.

Geologists believe the land known as Plaquemines Parish is about 700 years old. It was created when the natural levee at what is now known as English Turn eroded through and the Mississippi changed its course into its present one. This is the reason English Turn is such a dramatic turn in the river.

Plaquemines has what is considered the sixth Mississippi river delta since the Ice Age. The Mississippi River is one of a few rivers that define their mouth by breaking down into multiple passes, often called "bird foot" deltas. The point where the passes are created on a bird foot delta is referred to as the Head of Passes. At this point, multiple passes fan out. Plaquemines first delta approximately 700 years ago extended from English Turn about 60 miles to the Head of Passes, the point where Forts Jackson and St. Phillip are now located. The central pass would eventually widen and the large amount of river sediment would continue building the river further south. The river created a new Head of Passes about 23 miles further south now known as the Balise or modern delta. During its 700 year history of building Plaquemines, the Mississippi created approximately 1000 square miles of land. Early explorers into Plaquemines noted that the ground shivered (from the land building process), the lands flooded and at night, balls of fire could be seen shooting through the woods (spontaneous combustion of seeping marsh gas). There were also many documented stories of the "mud lumps." Mud lumps are geological phenomenon occurring only in the Mississippi in Plaquemines Parish. There are several different types of mud lumps, but the most noted can raise a ship completely out of the water with great force in the blink of an eye. These mud lumps caused great problems for river commerce during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Other types of mud lumps created water geysers or folded layers of river bottom across their surface allowing scientists to better study the areas geology. With the construction of Eads Jetties, mud lump activity is better controlled and now exists primarily on the west side of South Pass.

President Theodore Roosevelt traveled to Plaquemines Parish in 1904 to establish the nation's second National Wildlife Refuge. It would become known as the Delta-Breton Wildlife Refuge. It incorporates a 48,800 acre river estuary plus another 6,923 acres on Breton Island, a barrier island to the east of the river's mouth and in St. Bernard Parish, the Chandeleur Islands.

The parish had been noted as the third largest supplier of sulfur in the United States, and one of the greatest oil producers. There is probably no other area in the nation that provides a more significant portion of the nation's seafood or oil. Sulfur is now depleted. Oil production is still active, but depleting. In the process of mining for these resources, companies dredged many canals that have caused unprecedented coastal erosion. The quantity and effect of coastal erosion and subsidence is particularly concerning and visible across the parish. Levees and jetties exacerbate the problems.

Plaquemines' unique geographical location and dynamic characteristics with salt, fresh and brackish water domains, located on one of the world's largest rivers, projecting into and surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico, at the entrance to America's greatest flyway gives it potential to be a world-class international eco-tourism destination.

Local History

Columbus may be the first explorer to see what is now known as Plaquemines Parish according to the Commodore's Map of 1503. Pineda in 1519 and Narvaez in 1528 passed near the mouth of the river, but neither saw the mouth or stopped to explore it. Most historians think the first non-Indian explorers were remnants of the Hernando Desoto party under the leadership of Louis de Moscoso in 1544. They probably were the first to traverse the lower delta while trying to find their way back to Mexico. LaSalle traveled the entire Mississippi River, and at a point south of current day Venice, in Plaquemines Parish, claimed the all lands drained by the river for France on April 6, 1682. He also named Louisiana for his benefactor, King Louis XIV.

Later LaSalle returned by way of the Gulf of Mexico, but could not find the mouth of the Mississippi, and he was killed in Texas. In 1698 the king sent the brothers Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville and Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to locate the mouth of the river and to establish a French colony on the central Gulf Coast. After creating a settlement near Biloxi, they attempted to find the Mississippi. On March 2, 1699, with great difficulty, they rediscovered the river near what is now known as Pass-a-Loutre. They proceeded up the river to the first major bend and camped there. The site was covered with wild persimmon trees and there was a small bayou just south of these trees. They raised a large cross of logs, and had mass there the next day, Mardi Gras day. They named the bayou "Bayou Mardi Gras," which was the first non-Indian place name on the lower Mississippi River.

Many of the locations along the river were named by the early river pilots, several of which were Indian, as a way to distinguish one turn or area from another. This bend in the river would be called Plaquemines Bend. Its name was derived from the Mobilian Indian word for persimmon “piakimin.” In 1749 it became the site of a strategic fortification known as Fort St. Phillip. Fort St. Phillip with its enclave of buildings at this site would be collectively known as the “Post of the Plaquemines,” named for the bend. During the Spanish era, because of the difficulty sailing around English Turn (which was just south of New Orleans), the post became the civil as well as military center of the area below English Turn. Authorities in New Orleans would refer all business below English Turn to the Plaquemines Post and eventually just “Plaquemines.” By the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the entire area south of English Turn was known as Plaquemines. When parishes were created, Plaquemines was the logical choice of a name. In the late nineteenth century after Capt. James Eads constructed the jetties at South Pass to clear the lower river of mud lumps and sand bars there was a move to change the name of the parish to “Eads Parish” but this was not supported by the populace.

As Iberville and Bienville continued up the river in March 1699 exploring it, they picked out a site near the present town of Phoenix to build the first fort on the lower Mississippi River. It was completed in 1700. They continued up the river to identify a site for the city that would be called New Orleans. After some exploration up-river, Bienville decided to return down river through the river's mouth. His brother Iberville and most of the rest of their party chose to go more of a land route through Lake Ponchartraine. When Bienville got around what is now known as English Turn he was surprised to find an English ship waiting for favorable winds to precede upriver. Bienville, fearing the English would attempt settlement in the lower river. He told them that this was French territory and there was a French fortification and fleet just up-river. English Turn is one of the sharpest turns on the river. Sailing ships often had to wait days or weeks for the wind to change to get past the turn. Knowing the difficulty he would have negotiating the turn, and then possibly being trapped on the other side of the bend if there was a French outpost upriver, the English captain decided to leave the Mississippi. This is how the bend got its name English Turn.

Fort Mississippi, near the town of Phoenix, was only occupied until 1707 because it was always flooding. By 1720, the lower Mississippi area was being developed. The King of France and Company of the Indies owned a large concession at what is now Belle Chasse on the west bank many other large grants were given predominantly on the east bank. A settlement of the Chacoas Indians living near Scarsdale (just below English Turn) was slaughtered by slaves sent by Governor Perrier about 1724. The remaining Chacoas disappeared from the area after this, many fleeing to remote Indian mounds down river near Grande Bayou, the Head of Passes or north of New Orleans to merge with other tribes.

The two most prominent places in the early decades of the eighteenth century Louisiana were New Orleans and the Balise. The Balise was a fortified lighthouse and shipping center near the mouth of Passe-a-Loutre. It housed a small military force to protect the lower river, river pilots, a catholic church, and stevedores and others to expedite

commerce to the site where New Orleans was being built. Plaquemines Parish's native Americans, the Chaoachas Indians, also served as assistant pilots along the lower river from their Indian mounds near the Head of Passes. Many ships would come to the Balise and unload their cargo into the warehouses of the Balise and if there was cargo to go out they would often pick it up. The Balise would then send freight from its warehouses up river to warehouses at English Turn. From English Turn merchants and settlers could consolidate freight onto either a land route or if the winds were right, onto sailing ships going around the turn. As a result of all of the commerce, the lower Mississippi River, primarily the upper east bank, was settled heavily during the later part of the eighteenth and all of the nineteenth century. Despite regular hurricanes that destroyed much of the residential areas and businesses along Plaquemines, the robustness of the river traffic and excellent farming made it worthwhile for residents to rebuild. By the 1850's, the east bank of the river from English Turn to Pointe-a-la-Hache was so heavily settled it gave the impression that it was one continuous town from the river. The west bank which was recognized as more prone to flooding was not very developed until the sulfur and oil industries began in the 1930's and paved highways were built to Venice.

In 1763 Louisiana was succeeded to Spain. The first governor Ulloa did not arrive until 1766. At that time he decided that rather than going to New Orleans, he preferred the Balise as his capital and ruled Louisiana for almost a year from Plaquemines.

As New Orleans got larger, the Balise became more critical to the safety and security of the region and it too got larger and more diverse. It would take on quarantine duty, tax collection, and boat repair. It would eventually shift from a governmental/military role to a large business and economic center for the lower river. It was plagued twice by the bayou it was built on filling in and the town had to move further up the bayou to the main pass. In 1860, a hurricane broke the levee that protected the town and it was covered over with mud and debris. It was rebuilt above the same site, but was abandoned in the late 1860s when a deadly disease outbreak occurred there. All three Balise sites sank into the delta marsh. As late as the 1960s, the old Spanish Magazine and the Balise cemetery were visible at low tide. The sunken cities of the Balise would become known as "Americas Atlantis."

Early settlers to the area planted indigo, rice and sugar cane, grew oranges, fished the Gulf for shrimp and oysters, and lived isolated lives along the river banks.

Because of its location as the protector of America's heartland and the nautical landmark for most of the Gulf Coast shipping, Plaquemines has had more than its share of military and nautical sites. The following forts were built along its shores: Fort Mississippi, 3 Balise fort sites (each had multiple rebuilds), Fort Real Catolica, Fort St. Phillip (Fort Plaquemines), Fort St. Leon, Fort Marie, Fort Bourbon, Fort Wilkerson, and Fort Jackson. It had naval bases at Burrwood and Port Eads, both at the mouth of the river. There were important naval munitions and communications facilities built at English Turn during WWII. The Belle Chasse airfield was converted to a military blimp airfield during WWII. In the 1950's it would become the first joint services naval air base in the nation.

Early in Plaquemines history, pirate attacks were as feared as enemy fleets. Pirates attacked the Balize on several occasions and Fort St. Phillip at least once. During the Battle of New Orleans, Fort St. Phillip proved itself a mighty protector of the Mississippi River by keeping the British fleet from taking New Orleans. During the Civil War, there was a minor skirmish at Southwest Pass between the two navies. This was followed by one of the most significant naval battles of the Civil War, the battle for the Mississippi River. During World War II, Mississippi delta was one of the very few places in the continental United States that the German's attacked and their submarines were often observed by local citizens.

Plaquemines had one of the few Lazarettos in the nation for contagious disease as well as customs houses and quarantine stations at the mouth of each of the passes and at the Head of Passes, Fort St Philip and Ostrica.

Nautically Plaquemines has a unique Pilot Town where both River and Bar Pilots worked and lived prior to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Now only the River Pilots live there. It was a town on piers with each pilot group well represented by hotel-like living quarters and support residences. There are also two additional Bar Pilot stations at the end of South and Southwest Passes. Pilot system traces its heritage back to the 1720s when the pilots worked from the Balise. Besides the pilots, there were many lighthouses built across the delta at each of the Passes, Head of Passes, and near major landmarks. Today there are only five existing light houses: three on Southwest Pass, one each on South Pass, Passe-a-Loutre. The oldest built in 1823, Frank's Island Lighthouse, fell over in the summer of 2005.

Burrwood, Oysterville, Port Eads, and Pilot Town Bayou are towns along the lower river that have been destroyed or deserted over the past hundred years. There were many other Plaquemines towns destroyed or deserted as a result of the Bohemia Spillway. This spillway was established in the late 1920's supposedly as a method of protecting New Orleans from flooding. The spillway extended from Pointe-a-la-Hache to Fort St. Phillip.

During the 1900s, oil, natural gas and sulfur were discovered beneath Plaquemines' shallow marshland areas. These natural resources were so abundance Plaquemines would again become one of the richest parishes in Louisiana. Sulfur was found at Lake Washington and Grande Ecaille in 1932 and within four years over a quarter-million long tons were being produced there. Millions of barrels of oil and cubic feet of natural gas have flowed from wells in the Gulf and the marsh around the parish (Louisiana Encyclopedia, 2004).

Cultural History

There are several things that distinguish the cultural history of Plaquemines Parish from most of the rest of the United States. While the French, Spanish, African and Native Americans have interwoven the cultural fabric of the Parish, the metropolitan mixture of many cultures such as the south European Slavs, Germans, Italians, Irish, Portuguese, English, Danes, Swedes, Greeks, Filipinos, Chinese, Malays, Canary Islanders, and Vietnamese coming as emigrants, international travelers, river workers and miners have created many different traditions and local customs. Since many of these cultures felt compelled to exist in remote areas of the Parish before Hurricane Camille in 1969, many have retained a sense of individuality such as the Creole families at Grande Bayou, the Croatians near Empire and the river folks at Pilot Town. Land is still measured in arpents rather than acres. Louisiana uses Napoleonic Law and refers to counties as parishes. Until the 1960s Plaquemines was known for their "Rainbow Schools"- independent schools for blacks, whites and mulattos. During much of the central part of the twentieth century, Plaquemines politics were some of the most controversial of any in the United States with States Rights Leader Judge Leander Perez in charge of the government.

An under-pending of the local culture is a fierce independence and willingness to stand-up to rugged natural calamities such as hurricanes, freezes and flooding. Many of the local families have lived many generations in Plaquemines and have been wiped out several times by weather, but they continue to rebuild.

The culture is primarily an eco-related or maritime culture with much of its population in the lower part of the parish involved in either the maritime activities or eco-related businesses. Many of those not involved in eco- or maritime related activities are avid outdoorsmen. It is common for older residents to remember family members collecting building materials from the rivers edge, trapping and fishing for food, raising providence rice on the banks of the river, raking oysters and other water-related subsistence activities.

The majority of the population has historically been Catholic. Catholic tradition is part of the community fabric. Several nationally recognized priests lived and worked in this lower delta region. Catholic doctrines often provide direction to local residents.

Though it is not as prevalent as it once was, Creole and Caribbean architecture is common in Plaquemines. Because of its remoteness, local building contractors often learned how to build houses from their fathers and learned to reuse materials from torn down structures creating buildings with the appearance of much earlier structures.

The food of the area, much like nearby New Orleans, is indigenous cuisine using local seafood; fruit, vegetables and game in complex dishes drawing heavily from the heritage of the place and people. Creole, Croatian, French, Italian, Irish, African, Vietnamese and many other contrasting food preparation styles are merged to create unique culinary tastes.

Though local music is not as distinct as it once was, Plaquemines supplied many of the more notable leaders of early Jazz music from local plantation bands. Their unique style and skill guided Jazz music popularity during the early part of the twentieth century.

Two recent events have had a significant effect on the spirit and psyche of the area. In January 2002, the parish's century old courthouse was burned in Pointe-a-la-Hache by an arsonist. This devastated the economy on the East Bank of the river and destroyed the icon many locals considered the symbol of home. This was followed by Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005 which devastated the entire lower parish forcing thousands of residents to move or change their life. Plaquemines Parish will be reeling from both of these for many years to come. A significant loss from Katrina has been another icon for stability in lower Plaquemines, Fort Jackson, the only park and museum in lower Plaquemines. Getting it renovated, open and possibly as a National Park would have both economic development and morale implications for those remaining.