

Why support a . . .

Lower Mississippi River National Park?

By Rod Lincoln

In early 2002 an outgoing member of the Parish Council approached the Plaquemines Parish Historical Association requesting help to preserve Fort Jackson. The council had spent between \$.5M to \$1M per year maintaining Fort Jackson excluding the athletic facilities. The council did not have the money to improve the fort nor do needed renovations. The fort had endured decades of deferred maintenance and abuse. Its walls were beginning to show structural cracks and parts were in a serious state of deterioration. Trees growing from the ramparts threatened to collapse the walls. The parish council had offered to give the fort and land around it to the State Park Service in 1997. The state refused to consider accepting the fort unless the parish cleared the athletic facilities, evicted the Oil Mop group on the river on the north side, provide additional land with the fort on the west side of Highway 23, etc. (April 15, 1998 "Feasibility Study for Fort Jackson" by the Louisiana Office of State Parks) The parish refused this "offer" with good reason. Giving the fort to the state would cost the parish not only the loss of the fort but also a considerable amount of additional money and offered no opportunities other than eliminating the cost of the maintenance to the parish. The state was also known for not always having enough money to renovate historic sites like Fort Pike which stayed closed several years before the state did anything with it.

Between 2002-2008 the Historical Association continued filing for grants, working with the National Park Service, Corp of Engineers, National Endowment for the Humanities, local politicians and many others to renovate the fort and save the museum artifacts.

The Historical Association called in the National Park Service, the Corp of Engineers, and several other experts on historical structures to assess the fort and make suggestions as to the best options. The National Park Service (NPS) did an extensive study of the fort at no cost to the parish. Since the NPS cannot solicit park sites and can only accept them if Congress mandates them to, their plan was a road map for whoever chose to renovate the fort. This report to parish government was provided in September 2002 and was called "Condition Assessment Report, Fort Jackson, Plaquemines Parish."

In 2003 the Historical Society contacted the National Park Service and asked them to consider Forts Jackson and St. Philip as Tier One sites. They were named as Tier One sites in March 2004 in the "Vicksburg Campaign Trail Feasibility Study." Tier one means the site is associated with a decisive, major engagement involving field armies/navies in which a commander achieved a vital strategic objective which had a direct, observable impact on the direction, duration, conduct or outcome of the campaign. There were only 19 Tier One sites selected of 491 sites considered. This rating meant the forts would be eligible for comprehensive preservation under the Vicksburg Trail Initiatives and would be eligible for many preservation resources not available to most other historical sites. This designation also makes both forts much easier to be included into the National Park Service should the parish chose this option

At the same time, Senator Livingston and Congressmen Tauzan and Breaux were contacted to support the National Park project. All agreed to support it in January 2003 when funding would be available. Unfortunately all three left congress shortly after and funding was not secured. In late 2003 we were directed to Garrett Graves, Mary Landrieu's Chief of Staff to discuss funding. In early 2004 Graves promised Landrieu's support in the 2005 budget. That didn't happen!

The Historical Association, working jointly with the Corp of Engineers and the Parish Council got a grant for \$10,000 from the Corp with a matching grant from parish government in 2004 to do an economic development master plan for Plaquemines

Parish addressing historical, cultural and geographical assets of the parish. The final draft was reviewed in late August 2005, four days before Hurricane Katrina hit. One conclusion of the study was that Fort Jackson and St Philip were valuable economic assets to the parish that have not been effectively utilized. Development of the forts and the lower parish can add millions of dollars in additional income not just to the lower parish but throughout the entire parish.

Immediately after Katrina I was asked by Parish government to take the lead on getting Fort Jackson museum artifacts stabilized. I was able to get an emergency grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to help with the cost. I called all over the U.S. to find a company or governmental agency willing to help us find, clean and stabilize the articles. It was almost impossible at the time because it was six weeks after the hurricane and all of the groups and facilities had already been committed. (Remember the fort stayed flooded for 6 weeks after Katrina and then FEMA delayed another week arguing which FEMA representative should be the first into the fort). Only the National Park Service and FEMA were willing to help. At most of their parks in the area the Park Service had sent in special evacuation teams before the storm to remove artifacts. They spent an entire week digging through the sludge for artifacts without electricity or water in serious mosquito infestation to save our artifacts. Every time we have asked the Park Service for something, they have provided assistance free of charge to my knowledge.

Post Katrina, in 2005-2006 the "Louisiana Speaks" Store Front Initiative by FEMA identified major economic development activities across Louisiana that offered the greatest impact on recovery opportunities. Hundreds of projects were identified as valuable projects to implement. Seventeen high priority projects were identified state-wide in 11 parishes. Plaquemines had two projects that made the list of high priorities. One was restoration of Forts Jackson and St. Philip to seek National Park status. The reason was simple. FEMA saw the broad economic development impact of a national park, particularly one that included the lower reaches of the Mississippi River. A ***Lower Mississippi River National Park*** like this has the potential of bringing a substantially new tourism base to the entire New Orleans region establishing lower

Plaquemines Parish as a unique tourism destination for river, eco, and military history tourists. FEMA also realized national park status meant national and international promotion of the park and an opportunity for Plaquemines to tell its story and show its value through a coastal erosion interpretive center.

In 2005 the historical association in conjunction with the Parish Tourism Director nominated Forts Jackson and St. Philip for the Civil War Preservation Trust "Top Ten Endangered Battle Sites." The forts were listed on the Top Ten list in March 2006. Being on the list opened many opportunities for funding, lobbying and planning. To my knowledge the parish did not choose to take advantage of any of these funding or lobbying opportunities, rather it depended solely on FEMA for funding. Over the past fifty years parish government has squandered most opportunities to gain additional funding, save the forts museum artifacts, renovate the fort, or follow a comprehensive plan to leverage the fort to the economic gain of the parish. In February 2008 Parish President Billy Nunnguesser and Councilmember Anthony Buras took the plan to Congress and the National Park Service for review.

The Lower Mississippi River National Park Concept

The Lower Mississippi River National Park concept is that the park will consist of at least two locations (Fort Jackson the headquarters and a Venice transportation center/interpretive center/observation tower), preferably four locations (Fort St. Philip and the Delta National Wildlife Refuge above the Head of Passes). The more locations, the greater economic impact the park will have. The forts would have broad impact on historical tourists who often plan large group activities and stay multiple days while the lower river would have extremely broad appeal to a large population of river and eco-tourists, explorers, recreational tourists, historical tourists, etc. By using interpretive centers at each place telling the story of local history, culture, eco-systems, coastal erosion, the parish will have a much greater opportunity for influencing the public about local issues, educating our children in a

world class communications laboratory, and have many more economic and social opportunities. An educational center on Gulf Coast water, weather, geology, hydrology, etc. established at a location where the public can virtually see it all in action is the objective of several National groups and Plaquemines is better suited than any place on the Gulf to show this. This also offers some major funding opportunities because of the timeliness of the issue. The Venice Transportation Center would offer a place for tourists to take pictures at the end of the road, buy souvenirs, learn about coastal erosion and Mississippi hydrology, go up an observation tower to see the Head of Passes, the river, the jump, erosion, fresh, salt and brackish water, etc. It would also offer water travel to the National Refuge and Head of Passes and other locations. It would also be an ideal place to put tourist brochures for local guides, sport fishing, hunting, bayou tours, restaurants, etc. The Department of Interior is responsible for both the National Park Service and the National Refuges. They may be willing to construct a raised observation center in the refuge to allow visitors to see the refuge as a “Joint venture” with the Park Service.

The Economics of a National Park in lower Plaquemines

Turning Fort Jackson over to the National Park Service will bring significant money to the parish and many new economic and recreational opportunities for local residents and the entire New Orleans region. ***Giving Fort Jackson to the state would only allow the parish to save \$.5M - \$1M in annual maintenance expenses and it would be a complete sell-out of the residents.***

The negatives to having a Lower Mississippi River Park:

- Parish government will give up ownership of Fort Jackson for parish events like the Orange Festival. This is not to say the National Park would not allow this and other events, but the NPS would own and be responsible for maintaining the park. This is what the previous council and President were willing to do by giving it to the state. Having the Orange festival in the fort is no longer practical because of its weakened condition. To be able to handle a festival like this in the future the fort would have to go through a major renovation to strengthen its walls.
- A popular national park could draw as many as 2,000 – 3,000 additional people (not

vehicles) per day into the parish, roughly as many additional vehicles as the parish saw during the 1960's- 1990's

- Property values and economic development, particularly along the west bank of the parish, will increase rapidly putting a strain on infrastructure for the short term. The federal government would help the parish expand the infrastructure to meet the needs of the parks.
- Some current fort employees may not be hired by the NPS to work at the fort so they would be available to work elsewhere in the parish or retire.
- Some parish residents fear change and may not support this effort without education

The positives to having a Lower Mississippi River National Park:

- Parish government would save the annual \$.5M-\$1M maintenance expenditures for the fort just as it would if it had given it to the state.
- There is real potential to bring in **\$3M to well over \$50M** dollars per year in new revenue positively affecting virtually every business and resident in Plaquemines.
- Will result in renovation and protection of Fort Jackson and possibly Fort St. Philip where parish government does not have the money to do this.
- After each of the last three major hurricanes into Plaquemines (Betsy, Camille, and Katrina) the federal government threatened to close off the road at West Pointe-a-la-hache, Empire and Alliance respectively. Each time parish officials had to plead to keep the road open all of the way to Venice. Having a national park can secure permanent road access into lower Plaquemines after future hurricanes
- Will revitalize parish infrastructure (roads, sewer, etc.) over the long-term with extra government subsidies
- Will bring international publicity to coastal erosion, subsidence, and environmental issues helping to address them quicker. Hopefully better protecting the parish and its fragile ecosystems.
- Creates a world class educational resource for local students, tourists, and community
- Will attract dignitaries and well known personalities from across the globe interested in Plaquemines history, culture and concerns. This will instill more self-respect and pride in residents.
- Will be a catalyst to create much more family recreational activities in the lower part of the parish
- Can make the lower river area, particularly the Delta National Refuge, more accessible and user friendly to the public.
- It will open up many opportunities to the parish that we cannot now even imagine!

Questions:

1. Why are we talking about a Lower Mississippi River National Park rather than a Fort Jackson or Forts National Park? A mature national park consisting of only Fort Jackson would only be expected to draw 12,000 to 30,000 paying visitors annually. Fort Jackson claimed to have had around 12,000 visitors annually during the 1980s.

By tying the park to a high visibility “natural wonder” like the mouth of the Mississippi which has very broad tourist appeal the potential number of visitors increase to over a half million (based on Lake Itasca State Park “Beginning of the Mississippi” experience). A Lower Mississippi River National Park has the potential of hiring a much larger number of parish residents than the Fort Jackson park had.

2. How many people would likely come to see the mouth of the river? Lake Itasca State Park boasts of having a half million tourists every year to drive into this remote section of Minnesota to step over the ditch where the Mississippi River begins and take a picture by a sign. Conservatively we can say a lower Mississippi River National Park in close proximity to New Orleans with multiple attractions will easily draw half a million tourists once the word is out that we are open for business and have suitable hotel rooms, restaurants, etc.

3. How much cash would a Lower Mississippi River Park generate in the parish? In tourism, the top tourists that everyone wants to attract are the eco-tourists and the historical tourists. They are older, wealthier, better educated, more respectful, spend more time and money at the attractions, and cause fewer problems. The average historical tourist, someone traveling to a historical site as their primary or one of their primary destinations, will typically spend two nights at the historical site. They will study the site closely, ask questions, collect information, and are likely to share information or relics with the site administration. They are also more likely to recommend a site to friends and schedule group outings to revisit the site with groups of friends. The National Park Service “Blue, Gray and Green: A Battlefield Benefits guide for Community Leaders” published in May 2005 surveyed 13 of their Civil War related parks. They ranged from large parks like Gettysburg with 2,653 employees to Brice Crossroads, Mississippi with only 2 employees. According to this book, the Civil War tourists are the best of the historical tourists. They typically travel with their families who spend a lot of money on shopping, transportation, food, etc. pending availability. The more there is to see, the longer the Civil War tourist is likely to stay. The average Civil War Tourist spends from \$30 - \$76 per person per day with an average of \$48.65 per person. Though lower Plaquemines does not have a strong

tourism infrastructure after Katrina, the 90 minute ride each way through Plaquemines could easily result in gas fill-up, food, snacks, souvenirs, citrus or seafood purchases, car repairs, etc. even if they did not spend the night. If there was a National Park with at least Fort Jackson and the transportation center to the mouth of the river, lower Plaquemines would become a tourism destination and there would be many wanting to stay. There would be many new cottage industries making souvenirs, giving tours, sport fishing, hunting, food, gas, campgrounds, repair shops, medical facilities, etc. all adding to the parish economy. Hypothetically if the average tourist only stayed in the parish one day, drove from New Orleans in the morning and drove back only spending \$30 per person which is (40%) less than the minimum NPS visitor and we have only 100,000 visitors which is extremely conservative (20% of the projected number) based on the tourism information available, this will bring in \$3M per year in tourist spending. The \$3M has a multiplying effect because once spent that money is re-spent several more times by the businesses to gain more labor, goods or service and then re-spent again by their workers or vendors, etc. This means \$3M has an impact of \$ 7.5-\$9M or more on the local economy. As hotels and more business become available, this new money increases exponentially. When the parish reaches the average of about \$50 per person per day with an average two day stay the initial annual spending is about \$50M tourist dollars per year with 500,000 tourists per year. With the multiplier the effect on the local economy would be more than \$125M. This does not take into consideration the new businesses that are started, new jobs, new opportunities, etc. that add to the local economy.

4. What about Infrastructure? The NPS usually helps to some degree on infrastructure, particularly around the park. They also restore the sites and build new sites to accommodate large groups of tourists. They tend to be very good neighbors to local governments that want to work with them.

5. What about the people we have working at the fort right now? Do they get laid off? The park service will hire their own employees and they often hire many of them from the local community. A park with 500,000 tourists per year could easily have a

total staff of over 100 employees based on the NPS current average.

6. Realistically how long will it take to begin getting all of this money flowing? It will depend on when the National Park service is allowed to get the property, what properties they get and how quickly they can get funding. Tier 1 forts should be much easier than Tier 2-3 structures. The Historical Association got both Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip named as Tier I sites in March 2004. If the NPS can get them quickly they can restore them for the Battle of New Orleans bicentennial in 2015, particularly Fort St Philip. This would be a quick-start for getting international coverage. Once they get the forts and the funding, it will take 5-10 years to really see the money rolling in. If they get both forts renovated in time for the bicentennial, it will really take off at that time.

7. What if all we can get is Fort Jackson into the National Park Service? Our economic impact will be significantly lessened but the parish will get out from under the \$.5M-1M annual expense to maintain the fort without having to pay off the state in additional property, repairs, etc. The NPS will assume responsibility for renovating and reopening the fort. It will be saved. We will see much more tourism than pre-Katrina because of the international marketing. Everyone wins.

8. Who and how will Fort St Philip, the Venice transportation terminal and the Delta Wild life Refuge be incorporated into the project? The Parish and the NPS will have to work on Fort St Philip, the Venice transportation terminal and the Delta Wildlife Refuge. At one time we thought Frank Ashby would donate Fort St Philip outright to the National Trust and in return get significant tax relief for him and his partners and grant money for his non-American partner. This is still possible. The NPS would buy the land in Venice for the terminal. Including the Delta Wildlife Refuge will require the NPS and one of our senators meeting with the NPS's bosses at the Department of Interior to get that approved...strictly political. This will literally take an act of Congress.

8. Besides the obvious restoration of the fort and economic development issues, is there an underlying sense of urgency? (1) Fort Jackson is in a particularly fragile

state because of the oak trees growing through its bricks. We were very fortunate the cantilevering of the trees during Katrina and Rita did not collapse the entire fort. Cutting the trees and repairing the masonry of the fort could take several years. In the meantime it is very vulnerable. (2) Before Katrina the Historical Association recommended the parish turn Fort Jackson into a National Park to have a reason to maintain highway 23 after a major hurricane. After Katrina, Benny had to go to Washington to plead with them to keep the road open to Venice rather than closing it at the Conoco refinery. To ensure the road stays open the federal government must have a reason to keep it open ...like access a National Park. (3) The 200th Anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans is a major opportunity for international publicity of the forts but it will take several years to renovate the forts and prepare them for this event. To take advantage of this opportunity, the parish must act quickly! Parish government has historically been unable to act on issues very quickly.

Conclusion

For someone with vision, the *Lower Mississippi River National Park* could be a premier park on the same scale as Yellowstone National Park if pursued. Unlike Yellowstone, this park would celebrate our nation's water resources, particularly the Mississippi River and Gulf Coast region.

While the Lake Itasca State Park in rural Minnesota boasts a half a million visitors to the "beginning of the Mississippi," the Lower Mississippi River National park could host a much larger number of visitors annually to see the "end of the river," "end of the road," two of the nations most important but little known fortifications, to study the environmental effects of coastal erosion and subsidence and to tour the rarely seen sites at the rivers mouth. The diversity and character of our environment and its location on the Mississippi River flyway will draw a myriad of global eco-tourists and visitors.

We have only a few historic and cultural sites left. If a major initiative to protect these resources isn't started soon, we won't have any. Its success or failure is

squarely on the shoulders of parish government. During the past century, parish government's record on preservation and tourism has been dismal. It's handling of Fort Jackson museum artifacts after Katrina was scandalous. We must strongly communicate to our parish officials our support of a Lower Mississippi River National Park which can provide more jobs, higher income, preservation of our culture and environment, first class infrastructure, access to our homes after future hurricanes and restoration of our historic forts. The Plaquemines Parish Historical Association, a non-political organization, whole-heartedly supports the national park to protect the forts and our local environment.

There is an old Scottish saying "**There is nothing in your future unless you put it there!**" We haven't put much in our future relative to preservation of our culture, history or geography. Its no wonder people are questioning whether we have a future in Plaquemines. **Let's put a National Park in our future.** Call your local council member and express your support.

Rod Lincoln,

Office 504-431-6111, 504-920-9448,