

# HISTORY OF THE BAYOU LAFOURCHE AREA

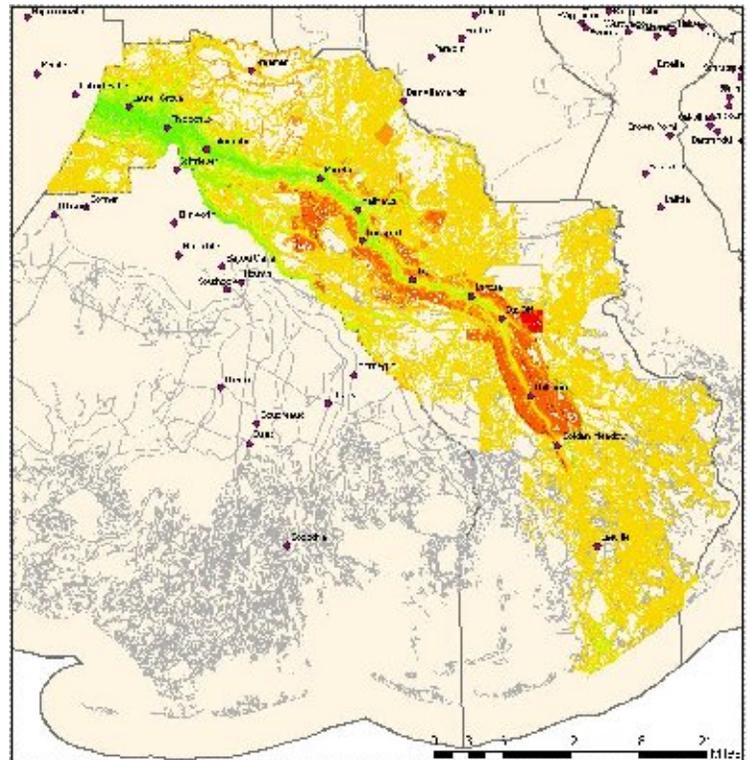
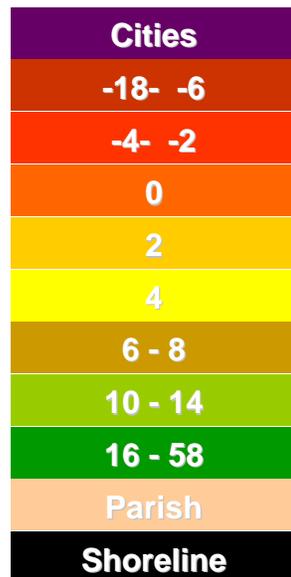
## Introduction

Some 110 miles long, Bayou Lafourche was formerly a distributary of the Mississippi River leading to the Gulf of Mexico. Beginning in 1903, in the interest of flood control, a levee was constructed across the bayou at its source, the Mississippi River near Donaldsonville. Without its natural water supply, the bayou became stagnant and its role as a source of potable water for the area inhabitants became questionable. Thus, in 1950 the Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District was created. Pumps were installed to pump water from the Mississippi into the bayou.

Today Bayou Lafourche largely determines the economy of surrounding Parishes and shapes the lives of those who live there. We believe any plan for additional development of the bayou as a resource must begin by drawing attention to it. Once that attention is focused, we believe a number of choices can be made which will increase opportunities for the community throughout the Bayou region.

### **LEGEND**

Lafourche LIDAR Contours South of Hwy 90.



## Discovery and Exploration

The first known exploration of the area was done by Hernando De Soto in the 1600's, although no specific interest was made of the Lafourche area. One hundred years later, during explorations of the Mississippi River, LaSalle discovered three channels near the mouth of the river; one of which may have been Bayou Lafourche.

Further explorations by Iberville failed to turn up this branch of the Mississippi River. Bienville's later ventures into the area also failed to discover the bayou. The identity of the Mississippi was well established by this time and there was no apparent interest in discovering the Lafourche branch. It has been hypothesized that among the reasons for the failure of these expeditions to find Bayou Lafourche was due to the large amount of debris that accumulated during flood stages. The guide Indians did not point out the bayou to the explorers since they believed it to be un-navigable.

Original inhabitants of the area were various Indian tribes such as the Chawasha, Washa, and the Chitimacha. In the latter half of the eighteenth century there was a small European settlement including a few settlements in the Lafourche area. In 1764 two hundred "Taensas" and about two hundred "Alibamons" were allowed to set up two villages on Bayou Lafourche. The Acadians, French Canadians who were forced to flee Nova Scotia in 1755, began arriving in Louisiana in 1764, some fourteen years later. They were given land close to the German coast on the Mississippi and later along Bayous Teche and Lafourche. They adapted quickly to their new environment and flourished as farmers and fishermen.

In addition, the area was settled by "Islenos" between 1788 and 1793 who were a small group of Canary Islanders that were imported by the Spanish government to help settle the

Louisiana territory. These people were assimilated into the Acadian culture and by the close of the eighteenth century both groups had established themselves on Bayou Lafourche.

During the nineteenth-century antebellum period, two events had a profound effect on the Bayou Lafourche area. The first of these was the discovery of the process for the granulation of sugar which allowed the cultivation of sugar as a cash crop. The second event was the Louisiana Purchase by the United States of America from France in 1803, opening the area to Anglo-Americans and Protestant immigrants. Louisiana's entrance into the union provided a larger market for the sugar cane crop which produced an increase in settlers, slaves and markets along the bayou.

In 1811 the first steamboats began traveling along the Bayou. In 1884 roads were cut near "Thibodeauville". Railroads were extended into the region in 1853. Thus by 1860 the region had changed from a community of small rural farms of Catholic Acadian descent to one more culturally diverse with economic and social stratification occurring.

During the Civil War, battles were fought along the bayou because of its value as a major alternative route to the Gulf of Mexico. The battles resulted in the destruction of railroads and bridges. Many persons fled to Texas after the fall of New Orleans. Flooding became a major problem as the levees, once maintained by the plantation owners, were neglected. Shortages of food and medicines were common. With reconstruction, recovery of the area was slow, and it was not until after technological advances such as telephones and ice manufacturing, did stability and economic growth start.

Between 1903 and 1906 the bayou was dammed at Donaldsonville and all water transportation from the Mississippi halted. Rail transportation thus increased with canals

providing alternative shipping routes. As the bayou was still open to the Gulf of Mexico, it remained important to the fishing industry.

The 1920's saw the discovery of oil in the marshlands and offshore. This set the economic trend of the Bayou Lafourche area until the present day. The growth of this industry was a boom for towns like Morgan City and Houma. The oil industry also provided



the first major challenge to the sugar industry which had reigned for many years. The resulting growth is now rapidly encroaching on the Thibodaux area.

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