

Monkey Hill *and the Geography of Childhood*

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, July 11, 2014

Perhaps the highest return on investment ever earned on a few thousand federal dollars came in the form of a pile of dirt in a rather forlorn park at the depth of the Depression. The agency behind it was the Civil Works Administration, the park was Audubon, and the dirt is now known as Monkey Hill.

Contrary to popular belief, the Works Progress Administration did not build Monkey Hill; the mound was nearly complete before the WPA came into existence with the 1935 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act.

Nor was the hill a primary goal of the project, much less a designed landscape feature with a name and purpose. Rather, the CWA aimed to drain a wet thicket on the batture by digging a 1,200-foot-long lagoon and expanding the parkland around it, forming what are now the water bodies of the Audubon Zoo's Louisiana Swamp, Jaguar Jungle and South American Pampas exhibits. Workers then used the spoil from the excavations to form a hill a few hundred feet inland.

Because parts of the batture had previously been used as a city dump, it may well be that, as one 1933 report anticipated, "broken bedsprings, cast-off tires, old shoes and other refuse" would end up in the mound, as they did in shored-up neutral grounds.

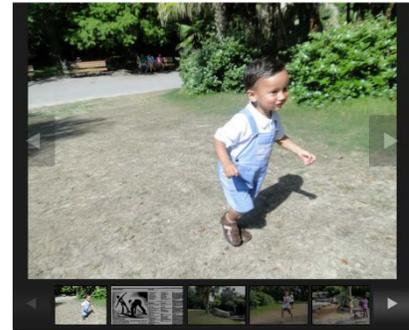
While it remains unclear if the CWA explicitly endeavored to give children a topographic experience, observers expected "Audubon Park Hill" would become a place where, according to a November 1933 *Times-Picayune* article, "native-born youngsters of New Orleans could run and boast that they had been on a real mountain." By late March 1934, the lagoon and hill were nearly complete, having cost \$59,000 in labor and \$3,800 materials.

At the time, Monkey Hill's summit—by one account 40 feet above sea level (likely overstated by around 10 feet)—lay higher than some riverfront levees, although it is difficult to ascertain the exact historical elevations of either.

The project was one of many metro-area undertakings of the CWA, which used state-administered federal dollars to put otherwise unemployed people to work on civic improvements. Laborers earned at least 30 cents an hour for up to 24 hours per week improving the Lakefront, destumping City Park, beautifying Bayou St. John, planting trees along Chef Menteur Highway, restoring Jackson Barracks and improving Audubon Park.

Eighty years ago this summer, children began to discover this new unnamed mound and took to it like kittens to catnip. They scampered up and around it and rode bikes and go-carts down its steep slopes with reckless abandon. Adults called it "the Indian mound," for its resemblance to prehistoric middens. But kids called it "Monkey Hill," perhaps on account of how the tots frolicked upon it, or as a counterpart to Monkey Island, which was formally designed and named (and is now part of the Jaguar Jungle exhibit).

Whatever the reason, the name stuck. Planners took note of the hill's popularity, among them a 1929 Tulane University architecture graduate named Newtown Reeve Howard. When the WPA took over from the CWA, Howard oversaw \$400,000 worth of construction projects throughout the park and zoo (which were both free and not separated as they are today), creating stately brick buildings and landscaping the hill and its surroundings.



A child runs up Monkey Hill. The hill has been a favorite play spot for New Orleans youngsters for eight decades.

This probably explains why the WPA, which would soon supersede the CWA in size, impact and in the public imagination, is almost universally credited for Monkey Hill today.

For the next 40 years, Monkey Hill would become an integral memory to generations of local children, as well as a rendezvous for Uptown citizens -- sort of an Audubon Park equivalent to "meeting under the clock at D. H. Holmes." But the renown was by no means universal. Monkey Hill was all but unknown to roughly one-third of the city's mid-20th century population, as segregation kept African Americans out of Audubon Park, not to mention many other spaces and opportunities.

In the 1960s, Monkey Hill became a spot for statements, politics and protests. In 1965, for example, a Loyola ROTC battalion hoisted a flag atop Monkey Hill to publicize the university's pressing need to expand its cramped campus. Gubernatorial candidate Cy Courtney held a "Think In" at the spot in 1967 to encourage political engagement, and in 1969 people opposed to the hippie movement held a series of what they called "Square In's" at Monkey Hill.

Locals incorporated Monkey Hill into their vernacular as well. They'd use "Monkey Hill" as a metaphor for something comically puny, such as an undersized city budget, or for any manmade landscaping mound, such as the ones later built nearby on The Fly and in Brechtel Park on the West Bank. In a tradition that thrives to this day, New Orleanians would also use Monkey Hill as a term of endearment to poke fun at their city's cockamamie geography. Behold, a place so ridiculously flat that a manmade mound with so amusing a name would rank as its highest point! By this time, however, certain sections of riverfront levees had been built higher.

But Monkey Hill fell on rough times by the 1960s and 1970s. The zoo, hardly changed since the Depression, had become a local embarrassment, and Monkey Hill had become loved to death—trod bare of grass, furrowed with a deep gully and, like coastal Louisiana, eroding to its current height of 27.5 feet.

To add insult to injury, a new hill had been built in City Park's Couturie Forest from spoil excavated for Interstate 610, and it measured not only higher above sea level but much higher above grade. Now known as Laborde Mountain, the City Park peak rose 46 feet above its 3-feet-below-sea-level base, enough to peer above the treeline, whereas Monkey Hill measured only 16.5 feet above its 11-foot-above-sea-level base.

Planners devising a \$5 million renovation of Audubon Zoo thought visitors were ready for something new, and proposed in 1974 fencing off Monkey Hill and letting goats graze on it, while building a new mound on the batture park (today's "The Fly").

What they had not gauged was just how cherished Monkey Hill had become. Schoolchildren wrote letters of protest, and parents rebuked officials in indignant letters. "How can adults consider goats more important than children?, demanded one mother. "Haven't city officials taken away enough natural ground and woods from our children because of progress?" Another declared "every citizen would be happy to contribute a bucket of mud" to shore up the hill and give it back to children, and recommended the goats instead be "turned loose on Bourbon Street," where adults played.

The outcry helped raise funds and convinced planners to stabilize the original Monkey Hill and incorporate it into the zoo's Grasslands of the World (now African Savannah) exhibit. Unveiled in 1980, the renovation was a hit, and Monkey Hill became as popular as ever, so much so zoo officials in the 1980s held an annual Ski Monkey Hill festival, in which 10 tons of ice were trucked to the top—in September!—for a mini slalom, to promote Eastern Airlines flights to Canadian ski resorts. The gimmick became particularly popular when "a Cajun band and free beer" were added. Ever the entrepreneurs, some New Orleanians sold "Ski Monkey Hill" T-shirts, testament to the mound's role as an amusing prop highlighting the ironies of local geography and the eccentricities of local culture.

In 1999, Monkey Hill underwent another transformation, and adults again fretted whether its *je ne sais quoi* might get lost amid the progress. But the improvements only enhanced its appeal to children, who in addition to the

climbable Pride of Lions sculptures on top and a rope bridge down its side, now found another feature of the natural world previously unavailable on their silty delta: a babbling mountain brook.

It is interesting to watch how children tackle Monkey Hill, especially tots just mastering the art of perambulation. To a tiny body experiencing it for the first time, uphill topography exerts an inexplicable but exultant resistance, one that fuels the spirit more than it taxes the body.

To young eyes grappling with optical illusions for the first time, the view from the top amusingly turns Brobdingnagians into Lilliputians, allowing little ones to fit grown-ups between thumb and forefinger.

To fledgling legs flexing for the first time, heading downhill unleashes the magical power of gravity, letting you go faster than you ever thought you could. You could also roll down like a log or summersault like a ball, and for once parents would not fuss about your gettin' all messy and dusty.

In essence, Monkey Hill is a place where all the staid restraints of the flat plane—and the deltaic plain—are tossed out, and the empowering forces of Make Believe become real.

The mound was originally built merely as lagniappe to a federal works project, but, through sheer youthful exuberance, it became a beloved part of local culture. Children discovered it, claimed it, named it, gave it character and made it their own.

Monkey Hill may be an amusing quirk in the geography of New Orleans, but it is a veritable Everest in the geography of a New Orleans childhood.

POSTSCRIPT: WHAT'S THE HIGHEST POINT IN NEW ORLEANS?

If Monkey Hill is not the highest point in the city, what is? Of course, we can safely say the manmade levees and natural levees along the riverfront are the highest major features in the region. But it's surprisingly difficult to identify a precise apex -- not only because our soils are continually subsiding and some levees are currently being raised, but because it begs the question of exactly what constitutes the "legitimate" topographic surface. Should we include or exclude shored-up lands beneath municipal and industrial facilities, some of which rise quite high? What about piles of sand or aggregate materials, or debris dumps, some of which may rise higher than Laborde Mountain in City Park? Then there is the problem of reliable measurements. This will be the topic of a future *Cityscapes*. -- *Richard Campanella*

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane University School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," "Lincoln in New Orleans," "Geographies of New Orleans," and other books. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu or @nolacampanella on Twitter.