

The Ozone Belt

How St. Tammany Parish Turned “Ecological Services” into Good Business— but for the Wrong Reasons

by Richard Campanella

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New Orleanians today generally think of St. Tammany Parish as the north shore. Before the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway opened in 1956, city dwellers called it “across the lake.” Others described all of Louisiana between the Pearl and Mississippi rivers as “the Florida Parishes,” a term traceable to 1763-1810, when these lands pertained to British West Florida, Spanish West Florida and briefly the West Florida Republic.

But throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, St. Tammany and adjacent parishes were known far and wide by a curious nickname: “the Ozone Belt.”

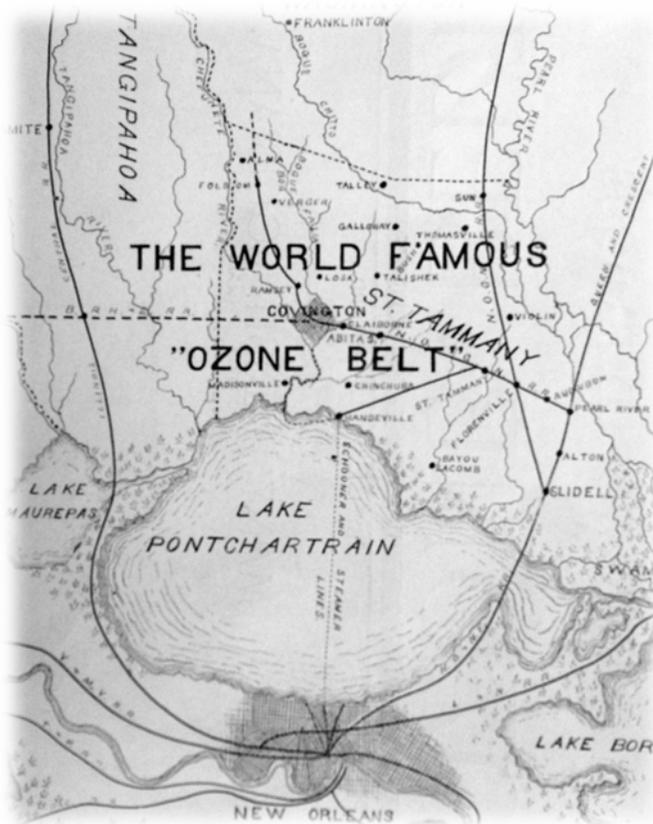
The term reflected an era in medical history, before germ theory, when humans sought explanations for maladies and their remedies in things that they could physically perceive.

New Orleans, “the necropolis of the South,” with annual death rates ranging from 4 to 7 percent or higher, provided all too many opportunities for both lay people and professionals to speculate why so many suffered.

The main suspect was the backswamp, the alleged source of “miasmas,” or noxious vapors, thought to cause yellow fever and other diseases. Wrote one anonymous writer in 1850 on New Orleans’ swamplands, “this boiling fountain of death is one of the most dismal, low and horrid places on which the light of the sun ever shone[,] belching up its poison and malaria....under the influence of a tropical heat.” (The word “malaria,” Italian for “bad air,” indicted the marshes around Rome for that city’s constant plagues.)

In our ancestors’ mental map, the New Orleans backswamp—virtually all the lowlands between the city and the lake—was one big geographical health risk. Its polar opposite was the gently undulating piney woods across breezy Lake Pontchartrain and along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which were thought to be refuges from malady and havens of remedy.

To bucolic places like Mandeville, Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian escaped wealthier New Orleanians by the thousands every August and September, and those towns eagerly erected cottages, hotels and fancy resorts to lodge them.



From “The World Famous Ozone Belt,” by J. I. and W. Sanford, 1905.

One particular piney-woods town had another attribute to offer: artesian spring water, a healthy alternative to the filthy river water or rain-filled cisterns of New Orleans. In the early 1850s, two New Orleans investors, Joseph Bossier and William Christy, acquired land by the springs, built cottages and established an omnibus line to connect with steamers and trains to New Orleans. A *Picayune* journalist who visited “Christy Springs” in 1855 raved not only of “the sparkling liquid that gushes from springs” but also “the bracing air, impregnated with the odor of the pine” and recommended them for “the healthy as well as the invalid.”

It is unclear whether Bossier and Christy specifically coined “Ozone Belt” or if the term arose from the vernacular. What is clear is that, by the late 1800s, that nickname was widely used regionally and even nationally to mean today’s north shore, and among its most enthusiastic promoters were hoteliers, real estate developers and railroad agents.

Covington and Abita Springs formed the heart of the Ozone Belt, but advocates of Hammond, Franklinton, Pearl River and southern Mississippi did not hesitate to include themselves in this salubrious space.

Why ozone? People thought pine trees charged the atmosphere with balsam, a fragrant resin in woody vegetation often used as medicine (hence “balm”). They also sensed that electricity in the atmosphere, as a 1900 *Picayune* article put it, had “intense powers of oxidizing and decomposing organic substances, and purify the air by destroying malignant microscopic organisms.” What resulted, they thought, was ozone—cathartic fresh air. St. Tammany had extensive pine forests, artesian springs, the breezy lake, clean rivers and its fair share of lightning storms. The euphonic word “ozone” worked well in capturing their wholesome interactions — and a brand was born.

Seeking purity each summer, upper-class New Orleanians boarded steamers and trains bound for places like Covington’s Claiborne Hotel, the physician-owned Ozonia Rest Cure Inn or the sumptuous Southern Hotel (built in 1907 and reopened in 2012). Those seeking remedy for “consumption” convalesced at the Louisiana Tuberculosis Sanitarium. Slidell had Sabrier’s Resort right by the railroad station, while the Oaklawn Inn, “A Piney Woods Resort without a Peer,” positioned itself along the New Orleans Great Northern Railroad near Lacombe.



1909 postcard courtesy LSU Libraries.

As for Christy Springs, it was renamed Abita Springs, and its hospitality business boomed at places like the Ozone Belt Hotel and cottages, built within a forest of towering pines. The town's mayor, who had migrated to the region for its healthful properties, was also its premier doctor, president of the town's Board of Health and owner of its main pharmacy.

To the north, Franklinton tapped into its artesian wells and hoped to duplicate Abita Springs' success. To the east, Pearl River aimed to sell both its clean water and air with its Ozone Springs Hotel. At the same time, the Florida parishes were also developing a timber industry—so much so that proto-environmentalists worried, as a 1906 *Picayune* article expressed, whether the “splendidly healthful localities [of] the ‘ozone’ belt of St. Tammany...may lose [their] health-restoring properties if the trees are cut away...”



1915 postcard of physician-owned Ozonia Rest Cure Inn in Covington, courtesy LSU Libraries.

We now know our ancestors were entirely wrong about ozone. In fact, it's dangerous to humans, and, ironically, a pollutant of forests. But they were not entirely wrong about the geo-medical dots they connected. It was not the wetlands and cistern water that killed New Orleanians; it was virus-infected mosquitoes. But those vectors found ideal habitats in the marshes and cisterns, and they conveniently obtained their blood meals from human hosts living adjacently in high density. *Aedes aegypti*, the yellow fever mosquito, had a particular penchant for urban habitats, and to this day, this species is more likely to be found in the inner core of New Orleans than the suburban or rural periphery.

The undulating pine savannahs of low-density St. Tammany Parish, on the other hand, had few of these conditions. Its water was purer because there were fewer people to pollute it, and because some of it flowed from artesian wells unavailable in deltaic New Orleans.

And while electricity in the air had nothing to do with malignant microbes, lightning strikes are quite frequent in St. Tammany, because continental cold fronts arrive there without encountering the stabilizing

effects of Lake Pontchartrain's warm waters. Sharper temperature clashes produce intense storms and lightning strikes, not to mention occasional tornados. The "lake effect" also explains why the North Shore's



THE LOUISIANA TUBERCULOSIS SANITARIUM.

Covington's tuberculosis sanitarium, from "The World Famous Ozone Belt," by J. I. and W. Sanford, 1905.

temperatures drop lower at night and are the first to freeze each autumn—which also cuts down on mosquito populations.

So while our ancestors' medical understanding was way off, their geographical reasoning was not. "A remarkable fact about (Covington)," wrote the *Chicago Clinic and Pure Water Journal* in 1903, is "that when New Orleans...quarantines against yellow fever, this locality is never quarantined and the village council invites the refugees from all over the South to come to its healthful climate...in the 'Ozone Belt...'"

In the parlance of modern bioscience, St. Tammany's environment offered "ecological services," and cities like Covington, Abita Springs and Mandeville succeeded in turning them into dollars without depleting the resource.

In time, medical advances, the discovery of the yellow fever virus, and improved municipal services in New Orleans would undermine the rationale for St. Tammany's health-tourism industry. Summertime in the city was no longer dangerous. Highways and later airplanes allowed New Orleanians to vacation farther away and for different reasons. The resorts closed, and the summer cottages became full-time homes.

Yet the myth of the Ozone Belt endured, and it continued to attract medical refugees. Among them was famed writer Walker Percy, who as fellow Southern writer Shelby Foote explained in a book by David Horace Harwell, "was allergic to everything on earth," and moved to "healthy" Covington in the "Ozone Belt...because of its numerous longleaf pines." Added Foote, "Now we know that ozone is the deadliest thing in the world, so they don't advertise themselves as the Ozone Belt anymore..."

Residents continued using the old brand into the late 20th century. "Tired of pollution?," asked a 1987 classified ad for an Abita Springs property. "Breathe in the clean air of the ozone belt." But usage has dropped off dramatically in recent decades, likely for two reasons. One was news of a hole in the earth's atmospheric ozone layer, an environmental problem which came to light in the 1980s and became an

issue in the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Ozone took on an alarming tone, and ozone belt sounded more like a warning than a boast.

The other factor was suburbanization. As journalist and author Ron Thibodeaux explained in an email, “‘Ozone Belt’ faded from usage as St. Tammany transitioned from small towns and piney woods to the final suburban frontier of Greater New Orleans. ‘We moved there in 1990, just as that dynamic was gaining momentum, and I only heard the term come up in casual conversation a handful of times in all those years, always from seasoned natives.’”

A century ago, we disdained wetlands and valued ozone. Now we value wetlands and disdain ozone. And while some folks still say “the Florida parishes” and others continue to think of St. Tammany as being “across the lake,” just about everyone else calls it the north shore—including the north shore. As for the Ozone Belt, Thibodeaux said, “it’s a term that might best be described today as archaic, if not obscure.”

Today, we find only a couple of usages remaining in the landscape: the name of a car wash, a stump-grinding business, a road, a sports field and a few others, most of them in Covington—the “heart,” a hundred years ago, of the Ozone Belt.



Ozone Car Wash in Covington, courtesy Google StreetView

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