

The Flow and Ebb of Bayou Metairie

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It once hosted the main channel of the Mississippi River. It created a topographic ridge that became a key cross-swamp artery. It helped feed a city through its fertile bankside soils. It was called Bayou Metairie, and while only fragments survive today, its impact on our cityscape was considerable.

Bayou Metairie originated 2,600 years ago when the Mississippi shifted eastward, disemboguing in what is now St. Bernard Parish. While flowing in this channel, the river deposited sediment to form New Orleans' first topographical feature, the Metairie-Gentilly Ridge.

Over the next 1,200 years, the river would jump twice more and eventually settle into its current channel.



This 1806 map by Barthelemy Lafon, titled Carte generale du territoire d'Orleans, prominently depicts the Metairie-Gentilly bayou and ridge. Courtesy Library of Congress.

The former route became an “abandoned distributary,” a long narrow bayou broken off from the river, starting at present-day Upland Avenue in River Ridge and wending twenty miles eastward.

Sometime later, possibly on account of a sedimentary fault, the distributary spawned a northward outlet into Lake Pontchartrain, today's Bayou St. John. The section west of the fissure would become known as Bayou Metairie, while to the east it would be called Bayou Gentilly and Bayou Sauvage.

Bayou Metairie's relevance to humans came via its narrow elevated banks, which served as a passable road through water-logged backswamps. The loamy soils were well-drained and fertile—used not for sprawling commodity plantations, but for small market gardens, dairies, orchards and tenant farms (*métairie*), thus the French name *Chemin de la Métairie*. Indigenous peoples called the stream Bayou Tchoupitoulas (Coupicatcha) because it accessed the riverbanks known by that name, while a Spanish-era map labeled it Arroyo de la Alqueria, meaning a stream by an outlying hamlet.

Being remote yet accessible, Bayou Metairie and Metairie Road invited furtive activities. Smugglers travelled it as an ingress to evade authorities, and runaway slaves used it as an egress to backswamp maroon communities. The section nearest New Orleans became a favored dueling ground, remembered today by City Park's famed Dueling Oaks.

Legally, too, the bayou and road had a liminal status. Courts would debate whether Bayou Metairie formed a navigable stream at the time of statehood, and whether the road constituted a “grande chemin” (highway owned by the nation) or a “chemin public” (owned by adjacent landowners).

For most denizens, however, *Métairie* was just a country road, lined with cabins and picket-fenced farms. One colorful description comes from Louisiana's last French administrator, Pierre Clément de Laussat. Writing in 1831, Laussat recalled an 1803 horseback ride "along the Metairie road" near the present-day Lakewood neighborhood. "[T]he day was delightful, the sky serene, and the breeze...cooled off the heat of the sun. Trees were still thick with foliage," he wrote of what is now the Cemeteries area, among them "evergreens[,] magnolias, vines, oaks, wild grapes, [and] shrubs heavily laden with fruit."

"Sprinkled here and there are log cabins and some cultivation," Laussat continued, "and most everywhere it is alive with...curious birds." It was a Sunday, and "whoever had a horse or a carriage was on [Metairie] road. Strollers dressed in their Sunday finery, [and] young folks...challenged each other to *raquette des sauvages*," a lacrosse-like Choctaw game known as *toli*. "The road was full with an unbroken line of traveling coaches, *cabriolets*, horses, carts, spectators, and players."

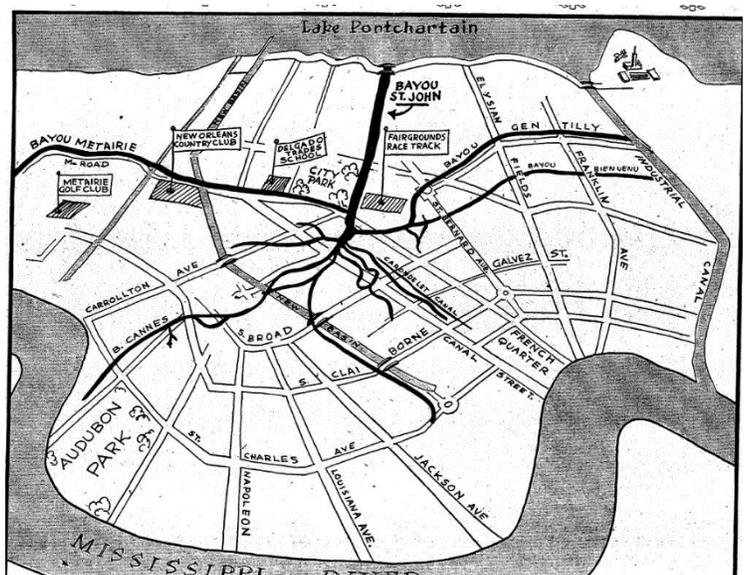
Note that Laussat never actually mentions the bayou, probably because the stream was only intermittently navigable by small craft. Unless river water found its way into the channel, which mostly ceased by 1700, the bayou begged water from other sources. One was when winds and high tides swelled Lake Pontchartrain, which would raise the level of Bayou St. John and the New Basin Canal, and backflowed up Bayou Metairie. Other sources were runoff and groundwater, which fed the bayou via ditches dug to drain sugar cane fields or inundate rice fields. Thus, depending on conditions, water from lake, river, sky or ground circulated in Bayou Metairie in varying quantities, directions and salinities.

Most of what we know about Bayou Metairie comes from historical maps. Engineer and cartographer Charles Zimpel's *Topographical Map* (1834), for example, plots Bayou Metairie as something looking like a long, thin, sinuous caterpillar. The 1849 Sauvé Crevasse flood map features both bayou and road prominently, because they prevented the deluge from spreading northward, and labels them as a "ridge covered with live oak–persimmon–liriodendron (tulip trees)–pecan–wild cherry, interspersed with Acacia trees." The 1863 Nathaniel Banks Map traced the bayou as a thin blue line crossed by numerous small bridges. Fifteen years later, Thomas Hardee's *Topographical and Drainage Map* showed no bayou at all, despite that the 1884 *Map of the City of New Orleans Showing Location of Exposition Grounds* depicted the channel as still in place, though severed from Bayou St. John.

By the early 1900s, Bayou Metairie had been reduced to a series of elongated lagoons, weedy in some parts, used for storm water storage in others, and beautified only in Metairie Cemetery and City Park.

The cemetery and park spoke to recent changes along the bayou. Urban expansion had displaced the old *métairies* in favor of land uses which needed to be close enough to the populace for access, yet far enough to minimize real estate costs and elevated enough to reduce soil moisture. The Metairie-Gentilly Ridge offered all three advantages, and thus attracted parks, fair grounds, race tracks, tree nurseries, cemeteries and campuses. One spot hosted two such uses: the Metairie Race Course (1838) became Metairie Cemetery in the 1870s, and retained the oval shape of the track.

Real estate interests actively marketed Metairie Road's rural-urban nexus. "The Only



Map of Metairie-Gentilly bayou and road system from 1937, courtesy the New Orleans Item-Tribune.

Farm Sites With City Advantage,” proclaimed a 1914 ad in the *Times-Picayune*. “The urban farms are only ten minutes from New Orleans.” A similar operation, Metairie Nurseries, covered 200 acres with numerous greenhouses along the road, said to be the largest nursery in the South.



Rare aerial photo of Metairie Road in late 1920s, bayou may be seen paralleling road at left center. Detail of aerial photography courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection.

The winding corridor also became popular for auto-touring. Stated a 1913 article in *Horseless Age: The Automobile Trade Magazine*, “The road for miles winds...like a serpent among avenues of magnolia, oaks and cedars, while beyond the fences on either side are truck farms galore with splendid crops [and] orange trees.... Bayou Metairie creeps along in perfect outline, between fringes of cedars, water oaks and cane.”

Automobiles would soon clog Metairie Road, making the rural enclave more like a modern suburb. Cabarets and gambling clubs opened for the same remote-yet-accessible reasons that had attracted prior *sub rosa* activities. Intent on expelling the gambling halls, residents convinced the state in 1927 to incorporate the community as a village and later a city, named Metairie Ridge. But the move was legally tenuous, and in 1928, the Louisiana Supreme Court withdrew municipal status. Metairie has been unincorporated ever since.

Traffic and drainage needs increasingly squeezed out Bayou Metairie. Reports from Jefferson Parish in the 1920s to the 1940s make it clear the once-scenic waterway had become a nuisance and an obstacle, and its channel would be incrementally filled. Some remaining ditches or indentations may be seen today near Airline Drive around Garden of Memories Cemetery, and on certain streets intersecting Metairie Road, such as Wood Avenue, where pairs of telltale storm drains mark slight indentations in the street grade.



Remnant of Bayou Metairie, known as Horseshoe Lake at the time (c1910), with Metairie Cemetery on the right and Metairie Road on the left. Courtesy Library of Congress.

The only sections of Bayou Metairie not considered a nuisance were those that been landscaped, and both were located within Orleans Parish. One, known as Horseshoe Lake, paralleled Metairie Cemetery and featured weeping willows, ornamental bridges and islands. Pretty as it was, Horseshoe Lake also formed a traffic bottleneck, as narrow Metairie Road was among the few arteries connecting the two growing parishes. As part of Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison's street improvement program, Metairie Road was widened in 1953-1954 from two to four lanes at the expense of the ancient waterway. Bayou Metairie was, quite literally, buried at Metairie Cemetery.

That left only one other remaining major section of Bayou Metairie, and happily, it is the most beautiful: the lagoons of lower City Park. Despite many alterations, they provide an idea of what the abandoned distributary looked like centuries ago.

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The lagoons in lower City Park are the last surviving substantial sections of Bayou Metairie. Photo by Richard Campanella