Is Louisiana in the South? Lower South? Deep South? Gulf Coast? Gulf South?

The Varied Lexicon of Regional Identity

BY Richard Campanella

Historically, too, Louisiana regionalized in complex and ambiguous ways. The present-day state had at least six major indigenous linguistic regions and twenty tribal territories in precolonial times, and was later crossed with international borders separating France, Spain, Britain, Mexico, and the United States—not to mention the Republic of Texas, the Confederate States of America, and the West Florida Republic.

When the lands of the Louisiana Purchase first joined the domain of the United States, they were regionalized into the Territory of Louisiana and the Territory of Orleans. To most Americans at that time, “Louisiana” implied a vast expanse of wilderness beyond the settler

sun, and not until a number of years after statehood—Louisiana joined the Union in 1812 but did not attain its current borders until 1819—did that perception settle on the boot-shaped map we know today. Even then, Americans saw the state as pertaining to a number of broader regions. Chief among them was “the Southeast,” meaning Arkansas, Mississippi, and particularly Louisiana, whose heel represented the southeasternmost point of the United States for decades. One early example is Joseph Holt Ingraham’s two-volume 1835 travelogue, The South West by a Yank, which recounts his journey from the Caribbean through Louisiana and Mississippi with main stops at New Orleans and Natchez. Use of “Southeast” persisted decades after its abandonment in the early French-language newspaper L’Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans, for example, billed itself in an 1819 ad as “The Oldest Paper in the Southwestern World” and pointed out that it circulated “extensively in the French and Creole Parishes of Louisiana... as well as in France, Mexico and the West Indies... A very valuable medium for advertising.”

Others saw early-nineteenth-century Louisiana as part of “the West,” meaning beyond the Appalachian Mountains or across the Mississippi River. Phrases like “Western rivers,” “Western lands,” and “Western interests” were exceedingly common in the parlance of the day, and Americans moving in that direction prized New Orleans as the “Western port” for its exports. To be sure, few called New Orleans the “Queen of the West” that was Cincinnati—but Louisiana and its river cities were seen as critical to Western commerce, and thus part of the Western region.

A number of developments put an end to the perceptions of Louisiana being in the Southeast or West. First was annexation of Texas in 1845, followed by the Mexican Cession and Gadsden Purchase, which pushed “the Southwest” to the deserts of Arizona and the rocky coasts of California. Secondly, pioneering settlement across the Great Plains and over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific transformed what Americans previously thought of as “the Far West” into “the West,” and thus into “the West” in 1904’s “Midwest.” Finally, the intersecting political polemics over the spread of slavery into these new territories had the effect of hardening regional identity along the lines of free versus slave states. They colored contingently, even as they balkanized into “the North” and “the South” into today’s “Midwest.”

One in the lexicon of Louisiana regionalization: “the Deep South,” “the Southwest,” “the Gulf Coast,” “the South,” and “the Gulf South?” “Deep South” mostly came into the vernacular in the mid-twentieth century, at the time the national press arrived to cover civil rights stories. Reporters used “Deep South” to mean the southermost tier of old Confederacy, but its connotations soon extended beyond cartography to geography, becoming a shorthand for old planters, whiteness, and officials of “Deep South” states registered the most vociferous opposition to integration, and along with it, a sobriquet that came to stand for a particularly intense and insubordinate Southernness.

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