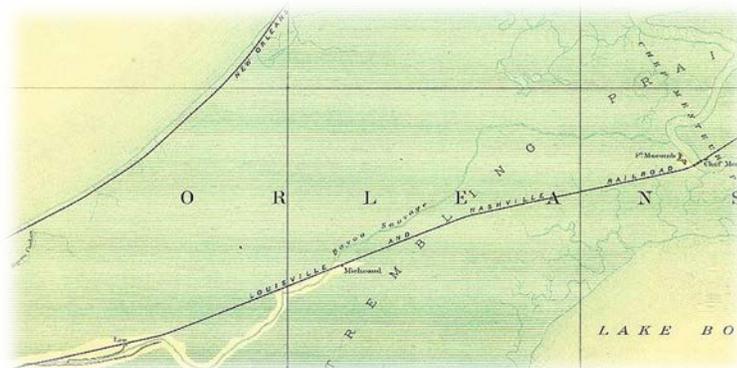


Lost Coastal Communities of Eastern New Orleans

Richard Campanella, Geographer, Tulane School of Architecture rcampane@tulane.edu

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Author's Note: This is part of a series exploring the various historic coastal communities that once surrounded greater New Orleans, principally along the brackish waters of Lake Pontchartrain. In previous months we've investigated [Milneburg](#), [Spanish Fort](#), and [West End](#); here we consider hamlets farther east. Though mostly gone now, these communities remind us that New Orleans, while not on the Gulf Coast, is and always has been a coastal city.



Seabook. Edge Lake. Citrus. Little Woods. South Point. Lee. Micheaud. Chef Menteur. Rigolets.

Sound familiar? Some yes, some no?

These were all tiny communities in eastern New Orleans a century ago. Some were fishing enclaves or recreational facilities; others were train stops serving hunting and fishing clubs. Nearly all have since disappeared or transformed utterly, such that New Orleanians today may be surprised to learn of their city's historic "rural coast." And coastal it was (and remains): lakes Pontchartrain, Catherine, and Borgne are all brackish tidal lagoons connected to the Gulf of Mexico, and while we call them "lakes," they are really bays, making New Orleans a coastal city and its eastern flanks an estuarine marsh.

Present-day eastern New Orleans originally comprised two basins separated by a ridge created by a former channel of the Mississippi River, and later by its since-abandoned Bayou Gentilly/Bayou Sauvage distributary. This winding upland, barely a few feet above sea level but high enough to enable foot passage, underlies today's Old Gentilly Road and Chef Menteur Highway. To the north of this ridge was an expanse of swamp and shrubby marshes that the French called *Petit Bois*, or Little Woods, extending to the waters of Lake Pontchartrain. To the south was an inland swamp basin that drained out Bayou Bienvenue into Lake Borgne to the east. The channel of this twisted waterway and the shore of this lake now form the Orleans/St. Bernard parish line.

Humans occupied this region long before the city's founding. Important archaeological sites associated with the Tchefuncte people have been found at Big Oak and Little Oak Island, both middens (shell heaps) in present-day Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge, and by the Rigolets Pass, where the subterranean barrier island known as the Pine Island Trend breaks the surface.

Natives navigated future eastern New Orleans' maze of bayous and bays on pirogues. Colonials sailed through its two deep straits, the Rigolets and Chef Menteur passes, to transit between the existing French outposts at Biloxi and Mobile and the budding project of New Orleans, founded in 1718.

Residents of the new city used the *chemin* (path) to *Chantilly* (today's Gentilly, probably named for an estate outside of Paris) to access the eastern region.

Ownership of the area came into the hands of Gilbert Antoine St. Maxent courtesy of a royal concession, and then to Louis Borgnier DeClouet, both of whom ran plantations along the ridge. The outlying marshes remained mostly wild, the haunt of hunters and fishermen as well as maroons (escaped slaves). It was in this remote region that the famed Jean Saint Malo led a group of maroons in a low-level guerrilla war with Spanish authorities in the early 1780s.

War with Britain, or rather its aftershocks, brought the first major permanent structures to the area. Alarmed at the ease with which a foreign power was able to threaten New Orleans before being defeated at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, the U.S. War Department devised the so-called "Third System" of masonry forts along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. One bastion, in a spot on Rigolets Pass the French called *Petites Coquilles* (little shells), was completed in 1824 and renamed Fort Pike in 1827; a similarly designed bastion was erected on Chef Menteur Pass during 1821-1828; originally called Fort Chef Menteur, it was renamed Fort Wood in 1835 and Fort Macomb in 1851.

For the next 50 years, life in eastern New Orleans mostly involved these two forts; boat traffic on the lakes, bayous and the two passes; small truck farms and plantations along the Gentilly/Chef Menteur Road; and an itinerant circuit of hunters, trappers, fishermen, and oystermen, as well as collectors of Spanish moss (for mattresses and cushions) and shells (to pave roads or make mortar). Ownership of the tract, meanwhile, shifted from DeClouet in the late 1700s, to Barthelemy Lafon in the early 1800s, to Antoine Michoud in 1827.

The geography of eastern New Orleans forever changed with the advent of railroads. First, in 1870, came the New Orleans, Mobile and Texas (later the Louisville and Nashville, or L&N) Railroad, whose tracks were laid near the ridge and on trestles to connect with coastal Mississippi and Alabama. In the 1880s came the New Orleans and North Eastern Railroad (N.O. & N.E., also known as the Queen & Crescent and later the Southern line), which ran along the lakeshore (now Hayne Boulevard) to connect with Slidell and beyond. The trains put the remote region within a short, comfortable ride from downtown. Stations opened along the routes, each with water tanks and fuel supplies, and they gave rise to tiny hamlets in places hitherto inaccessible.

First out on the L&N was Lee Station, located at present-day Schindler Drive at Chef Menteur Highway, "where a few hundred people reside and enjoy the benefits of Uncle Sam's postal service," reported the *Daily Picayune* in 1888, indicating that the community was stable enough to warrant a post office.

Next stop was 4.2 miles further east, named Micheaud (or Michoud) for the old sugar plantation of Antoine Michoud. This station was not located at the present-day NASA plant, but along Chef Menteur between present-day Alcee Fortier Boulevard and Industrial Parkway. Both Lee and Micheaud stations became popular destinations for hunting groups such as the Cyclone Club, which stalked ducks, deer, hogs and small game around Bayou Gentilly (Bayou Sauvage).

Then there was the fishing: "Perch and crabs were taken in great numbers in the vicinity of Micheaud," wrote the *Item* in April 1910, "the 'fisherman's train' bringing quite a number of anglers who spent the day at that place with good results."

Next came Chef Menteur Station, located across the pass from Fort Macomb, where a fishing fleet was docked. Ten miles eastward was the Rigolets Station on Rabbit Island, near where the eponymous pass opened into Gulf waters. These two stops were famous for their elaborate hunting and fishing clubs catering to downtown businessmen, who would board the L&N train at the foot of Canal Street on Friday afternoon and return Sunday. In and around Chef Menteur Station, for example, were the Tallyho Club, the Happy Club, and the We-Go-Fishing Club, while by the Rigolets Station operated the Anglers'

Club, Pine Island Club, A.B.C. Club, Happy Family Club, and the Old Sport Club. Each organization had staff, and together with railroad employees and fishing families, the stations became year-round coastal communities living in rural isolation—yet still within the municipal limits of a major American city.

While the L&N imparted economic life to the heart of eastern New Orleans, the N.O. & N.E did the same for its lakeshore perimeter. Trains departed from Press Street Station and headed north along Peoples Avenue before curving northeasterly along Lake Pontchartrain to a trestle connecting with Slidell and Covington. Because they fronted open water with refreshing breezes, stations along the N.O. & N.E. were more likely to become picnic and bathing destinations, rather than hunting spots. Scores of family fishing camps sprouted up on pilings along the Lake Pontchartrain shore, forming a long linear coastal “neighborhood” that would last to the end of the 20th century. Folks disembarked at stations named Seabrook and Edge Lake, between present-day Mayo and Crowder boulevards, or at Little Woods, where two entrepreneurs named Barbot and Allen acquired a five-year lease and built “a house with capacious dining-room and apartments for private parties, a well stocked saloon and a covered platform for dancers.” Nearby, according to an 1887 *Daily Picayune* article, were “natural attractions for picnic and pleasurable purposes, such as shady groves, fine bathing...the [lake] bottom being hard sand and the water quite salty[,] excellent fishing, and pleasant walks.”

Though it could not rival the resorts of West End, Spanish Fort, or Milneburg, Little Woods would become a popular getaway for urban masses, a destination for company picnics, and an important venue for up-and-coming jazz musicians. Located where Paris Road now intersects with Hayne Boulevard, Little Woods had a permanent residential population large enough to warrant its own school. Another six miles on the railroad got travelers to the last stop in Orleans Parish, the fishing community of South Point. This marked what the French called *Pointe Aux Herbes*, a name still on the map today, after which came the trestle and St. Tammany Parish.

Railroad access attracted the interest of land developers to eastern New Orleans, but before they could make money off the area, its swamps had to be drained. While the Orleans Parish Levee Board erected lakefront levees, the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board in the 1910s dug drainage canals and installed pumps, which succeeded in drying out the basin—and also sinking it below sea level.

The New Orleans Lake Shore Land Company, under the leadership of cotton merchant Frank B. Hayne, secured ownership of 7,500 acres of this now-dried land and sold off hundreds of five-acre tracts for the planting of commercial orange groves as well as truck farms. This gave rise to yet another community along the railroad, “Citrus,” where the orchard operations were headquartered. This explains today’s East and West Citrus Play Spots located along the Citrus Canal off Hayne Boulevard.

What happened to Citrus and all these other eastern coastal communities?

Those along the L&N track fell victim to the Great Storm of 1915, which killed 24 people at Rigolets Station, destroyed the train bridges and trestles; and “literally splintered [the] Anglers’ Club,” reported the *Times-Picayune*, “into kindling wood.” The clubs could have rebuilt, and some did. But by this time more and more New Orleanians were driving personal automobiles to their weekend destinations, and the state responded with modernized infrastructure. In the 1920s, the ridge-top road was paved, eventually becoming Highway 90 (Chef Menteur Highway) , and state bridges were built over the two passes. The highway killed the old train stations as community loci, and shifted the action to the shoulders of the auto artery. Lee, Micheaud and all the station-based settlements fell off the map, replaced by family camps and roadside communities familiar to motorists along Chef Menteur Highway today. This was also the era when U.S. 11 was built along a subsidiary ridge, which gave rise to today’s Irish Bayou community on Ridgeway Boulevard.

