

Bucktown and the Lost Bayous of East Jefferson

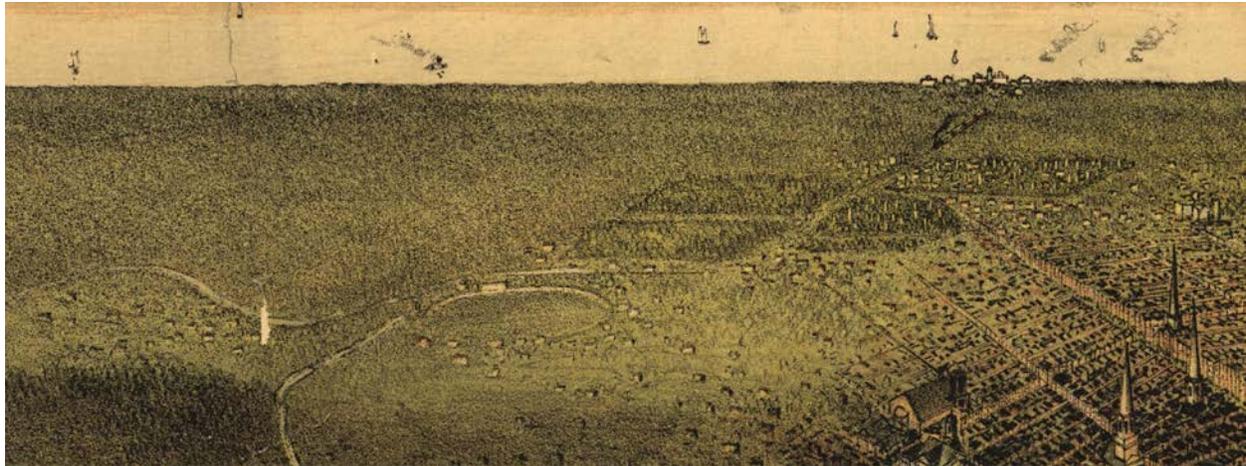
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Within the boundaries of Orleans Parish, the shores of Lake Pontchartrain were once dotted with small coastal communities: [West End](#), [Spanish Fort](#), [Milneburg](#), Seabrook, Citrus, Little Woods, and South Point, as well as the train-stop hamlets of Lee, Micheaud (Michoud), Chef Menteur and the Rigolets in [eastern New Orleans](#).

When we look to the city's upriver neighbor, though, we see a different pattern. Jefferson Parish's lakeshore had only one 19th-century community, and its swamps and marshes had hardly any, except for those along the road on the Metairie Ridge.

Why did Jefferson's East Bank have only such outlying coastal settlement, while Orleans Parish had a dozen? The answer entails 19th-century population distributions, and the network of canals and railroads built to serve them.



1885 lithograph of Jefferson swamp and lakeshore, with Bucktown and West End at upper right; New Orleans at lower right.

Two hundred years ago, most area residents lived close to the Mississippi River between present-day Bywater and the Lower Garden District, with the highest concentrations in and around the French Quarter. Their demand for building materials (timber, clay for bricks, shells for mortar) and wild food (finfish, shellfish, game) put a premium on access to the Lake Pontchartrain basin, for which two navigation canals and one railroad were built between 1794 and 1831. These three cross-swamp arteries gave rise to Spanish Fort, Milneburg ("Lake End"), and West End (originally "New Lake End"), in that chronological order.

Later in the century, two new railroads were built to connect New Orleans with points east, one through the marshes toward Mobile in 1870 and the other along present-day Hayne Boulevard to Slidell in 1885. Their trackbeds explain the locations of those train-stop outposts, from Lee Station to Rigolets Station on the Mobile line and from Seabrook to South Point on the Slidell connection.

Jefferson Parish, meanwhile, got only a fraction of this action. When the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern Railroad first crossed the parish in the 1850s, its tracks, raised on earthen beds or trestles, penetrated the middle of the Metairie swamp basin, following neither the Metairie Ridge nor the curving lakefront. Without dry land or waterfront access, no substantial stations were built, and thus no hamlets formed. This trackbed later became today's Earhart Expressway, which, you may have noticed, is not exactly known for its historic neighborhoods, nor its scenic lake views.

Further westward, the tracks did indeed curve onto the western shore of Lake Pontchartrain, where railroad communities such as Frenier, Ruddock, and Manchac formed. But these are all in St. John the Baptist Parish.

So what about that one lakefront community that bucked the trend and did form in present-day Jefferson Parish? That's today's Bucktown.

The settlement originated in 1853, when the Jefferson & Pontchartrain Railroad opened to link the city of Carrollton, at the time in Jefferson Parish, and Metairie Road with the lake. Its terminus, a 2,170-foot-long wooden pier where steamers could dock parallel to the cars, brought economic activity to the area.

The tiny port came to be known as "Jefferson Lake End," to distinguish it from "New Lake End" just 2,000 feet away—which itself was so named to avoid confusion with "Lake End" (that is, Milneburg, over in Gentilly). The nomenclature got messier when "Jefferson Lake End" came to be known as "East End," for its position at the easternmost point on the Jefferson Parish lakefront, after the city of Carrollton (which had extended all the way to the lake) got annexed into New Orleans in 1874.

What made "East End" utterly confusing, however, was the fact that it sat *west* of "West End," which was the new name given to "New Lake End" by another railroad company in 1878! Given their geographical adjacency and intertwined coastal economies, circumstances were ripe for a vernacular nickname to help clear up matters.

Enter "Bucktown." According to a 1921 article in the *Item*, the snappy sobriquet came "from the nickname of one William Wooley, who had come to [East End] from New Orleans, and had been invested by the witty inhabitants with the *nom de guerre* of Buck Oliver." Apparently Wooley's job as the village's night watchmen gave him plenty "of opportunities of meeting the young blades of the place."

The chaps dubbed Wooley's purview as "Buck's Town," which became "Bucktown," and to the chagrin of the village elders who were trying to promote the place as a tranquil hamlet, the plucky name stuck, particularly among weekend warriors visiting from the city. Another story, recounted to the *New Orleans States* in 1936, traced the name to a quick-fighting cowboy named Buck Oliver who drove cattle to East End for shipment across the lake, only to end up spending more time in the village's slammer—"Buck's town."

Either way, locals saw the nickname as offensive slang. "Here, we people of East End are trying to forget the name Bucktown," despaired John Bruning, whose family had run the famed seafood restaurant Bruning's since 1859. "The more we try to be refined," he told the state Legislature in 1921, "the more that name Bucktown prevents us. If we've got one prayer, it's please stop calling us Bucktown."

Bruning argued the village's real name was "East End, Metairieville." Records from the Jefferson Parish Police Jury show officials once tried posting signs calling the place "Jeffersonville." Instead, both "East End" and "Bucktown" circulated interchangeably into the mid-20th century, after which the latter finally prevailed.

For decades West End and Bucktown formed a sort of cross-parish coastal collaboration. While West End catered to downtown crowds with Coney Island-style entertainment, Bucktown, better connected to Metairie and Carrollton, had more of a residential community, with a one-room schoolhouse and a general store. It was best known for something West End lacked: a fishing and boating fleet, with a population of skilled boat builders. According to the *Jefferson Parish Yearly Review*, this mini-armada, known in 1900 as the "Famous White Squadron, comprised "42 sleek white fishing boats for hire — 16- and 18-foot skiffs which [John Bruning] rented for 50¢ a day for fishing expeditions a mile or two out in the Lake."

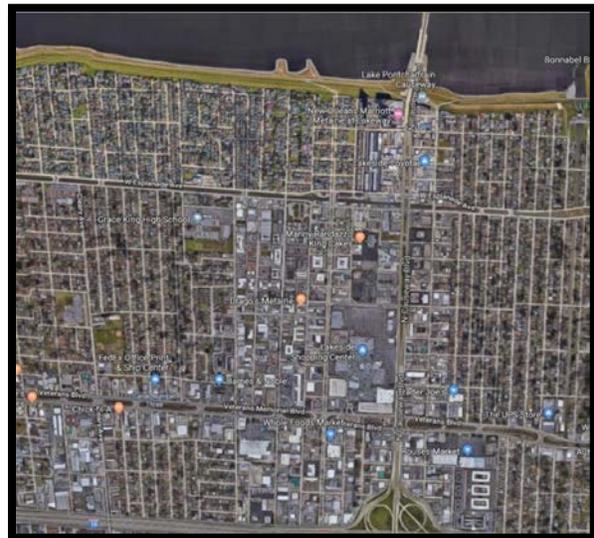
Other forays went inland to hunt the swamps of present-day Metairie and Kenner, via the wending rivulets that transected the morass. There was Indian Bayou right by Bucktown, which gave rise to the community's alternate name "Indian Beach." To its west was Bayou Tchoupitoulas, which flowed into the lake by today's Bonnabel Boat Launch; followed by Bayou Labarre in today's Fat City area; then Bayou Laurier in the vicinity of Pontchartrain Gardens/Pontchartrain Shores; and finally Alligator Bayou in the Chateau area of North Kenner.

One hunter in 1900 reported to the *Daily Picayune* a trip by his party up Alligator Bayou to two lagoons where they killed "a number of black ducks, *poule d'eau* [coots], and some *dos gras* [scaup], and upon our return [made] some jambalaya from the gizzards...which has dwelt in my memory...with the most exquisite pleasure." This would have

been in the vicinity of the Esplanade Mall. Deer were also hunted in Metairie’s swamps, leading some to speculate on another possible explanation for Bucktown’s name.

Like all coastal communities, Bucktown suffered in storms and floods. It went underwater during the hurricanes of 1856, 1893, 1915, and 1947, and burned in 1910. It was rebuilt each time, because its livelihood came from the water. One resident in 1936 estimated Bucktown’s population at “about 400 voters in the village and ‘about 300 children,’” most of them living along or near Orpheum Avenue along the 17th Street Canal.

By that time, the lakefront had changed. Levees were erected; the boardwalk resort at West End transferred from the control of a railroad company to the purview of the city of New Orleans, which made it into more of a park and harbor. In the 1920s came the Lakefront Improvement Project, creating today’s Lakefront neighborhoods, and in subsequent years a drainage system was installed throughout the lowlands of East Jefferson, turning swamps into forests and marshes into fields. Development ensued, though by as late as 1958, you could still row a pirogue from today’s Barnes & Noble on Veterans to Causeway Plaza (see aerial photos below).



Only two years later, Lakeside Shopping Center opened, and by 1970, the Metairie we know today was largely in place—and the bayous and *poule d’eau* gone from the scene.

As for Bucktown, it persevered in its new form, becoming the name for a modern inland neighborhood as well as its historic lakefront perch, famed for its shrimping fleet, ramshackle camps, and famed restaurants, including Fitzgerald’s, Sid-Mar’s, and Bruning’s, among others.

Then came Katrina, and those too mostly passed into memory. Yet Bucktown endures, as a stable Jefferson Parish neighborhood with a seafood economy on the land side, and over the levee, as a pleasant lakefront park and marina with sailing vessels and a small fleet of shrimping boats. There on the grassy field, old-timers and their descendants hold tailgate picnics to renew bonds and reminisce, taking in the same breezes and scenery that have been drawing people here since the 1850s.

Bucktown’s future looks bright as well. Restoration projects championed by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation have nearly tripled the landmass extending into the lake over the past twenty years. Another project funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Jefferson Parish is slated for the lakeshore between Bucktown and the Bonnabel Boat Launch, aiming to recreate a marshy shore much like the one that existed here centuries ago.

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