

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

The Varied Lexicon of Regional Identity

BY
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Louisiana does not sit snugly within a universally agreed-upon region. Most would agree the state is not purely Southern, as its Acadian and Creole coastal parishes feel distinctly *south of the South*. Its largest city is famously described as the northernmost city of the Caribbean, while its southwestern prairies feel Texan and once brushed shoulders with Mexico. The pine-covered hills of northern Louisiana, meanwhile, have more in common with neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi, and Shreveport seems to be more in the orbit of Dallas than Baton Rouge or New Orleans.

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 crisscrossed with international borders separating France, Spain, Britain, Mexico, and/or 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 setting



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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 Southwest,” meaning Arkansas, Mississippi, and particularly Louisiana, whose heel represented the southwestern-most point of the United States for decades. One usage example is Joseph Holt Ingraham’s two-volume 1835 travelogue, *The South-West by a Yankee*, which recounts his journey from the Caribbean through Louisiana and Mississippi with main stops at New Orleans and Natchez. Use of “Southwest” persisted decades after its obsolescence: the old French-language newspaper *L’Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, for example, billed itself in an 1879 ad as “The Oldest Paper in the Southwest” 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 their 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 Southwest 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 “the West” into today’s “Midwest.” Finally, the intensifying 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 cohered contiguously, even as they balkanized into “the North” and “the South.” The shifting spatial gravities firmly aligned Louisiana with the latter, and made New Orleans the putative “Queen of the South.” Yet one can find just as many uses, perhaps more, of the term “Lower South” to describe Louisiana’s region in antebellum writing. (Capitalization, incidentally, varied widely, as people generally thought of regions as common rather than proper nouns.)

Louisiana’s stint in the Confederacy, and the postbellum rise of white supremacist rule, reified many Americans’ sense that Louisiana was not only in the South, but quintessentially Southern—despite that many Louisianans had more in common with the Creole Atlantic than with Dixieland. Others, however, embraced their Southernness, and, as a whole, the state’s cultural compass would increasingly turn away from the Caribbean and toward the American South. It’s worth noting that the same 1879 publication (J. Curtis Waldo’s *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans*) in which the *Abeille* billed itself as “The Oldest Paper in the Southwest,” with circulation through the

West Indies and beyond, also featured ads from two English-language competitors which claimed to be “the leading journal of the South” and “larger than . . . any paper published in the South” (emphasis added).

In addition to “the South,” three other monikers circulate today in the lexicon of Louisiana regionalization: “the Deep South,” “the Gulf Coast,” and “the Gulf South.” It may surprise readers to learn that the term “Deep South” is not old; historically, folks would have said “lower 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 southernmost tier of old Confederacy, but its connotations soon extended beyond cartography to sociology. Because many residents and officials of “Deep South” states registered the most vociferous opposition to integration, they earned for the region an enduring stigma of dihard racism—and along with it, a sobriquet that came to exude a particularly intense and unapologetic Southernness.

“Deep South” remains in usage today, but does not seem to be regularly invoked by denizens of the region—perhaps because its

literal meaning implies a fundamentally external perspective, or because they vaguely detect a critique. Other terms and icons associated with the Old South have also soured: both the song and nickname “Dixie” have become less endearing; Confederate flags quietly disappeared from French Quarter trinket shops in the late 1990s; “Lost Cause” monuments have been removed from the streets of New Orleans; and schools are retiring their gray-coated colonel mascots.

With “the Deep South” in decline, “the South” imprecise, and “the Southwest” and “lower South” antiquated, a vacuum has opened for a more apt and palatable replacement.

Enter “Gulf South.” This regional perception properly unites the Bayou State to the larger Gulf Coast and Gulf of Mexico, while duly acknowledging its Southern heritage. It deep-sixes the baggage of “Deep South,” while avoiding the problem of “Gulf Coast,” which (I believe) fits better where there is a firmer littoral, such as the Mississippi Gulf Coast or Texas Coastal Bend, as opposed to Louisiana’s frayed marshy apron.

“Gulf South” seems to resonate with humanists, in that it conflates what works about “Gulf Coast” and “Deep South,” while eliding what does not: namely the “coast” (too literal, too limiting) and the “deep” (too stigmatized, too unreconstructed). It’s an appealing neologism that nevertheless manages to sound authentic and familiar.

But therein lies a problem: ordinary Louisianans just don’t use “Gulf South” that often to describe the region they live in—especially in the northern parishes, which are closer to the Ozarks than the Gulf.

So perhaps we should make peace with the fact that Louisiana is at once multi-regional, transregional, and a region unto itself. If no perfect appellation describes how we fit into the cultural geography of the United States, maybe we should view that as the *answer* to our regional identity, rather than the question. **64**

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