

THE GREAT STORM OF 1915

TRAGEDY IN THE RIGOLETS

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Freight tracks in the Rigolets today, along the same corridor that served the Anglers Club in 1915. Photo by Richard Campanella, 2007.

A CENTURY AGO, the far eastern fringes of New Orleans bustled with an unusual economic activity for an area technically within the limits of a major American city. Scores of urbanites, mostly middle-class businessmen, would catch a train at the Louisville & Nashville Station and ride out to any one of a number of fishing and hunting lodges on the Rigolets land bridge, a marsh-impounded ridge connecting eastern Orleans with southern St. Tammany Parish. Varying salinity regimes in the adjacent lakes of Pontchartrain, Catherine, and Borgne made this marsh abundant in fish and game, and all the more attractive for its proximity to urban sportsmen. The Anglers Club was among their favorite spots, and along with commercial fishing operations and private camps, the Rigolets prospered with its unusual urban-ecological economy.

By nature of its position, the Rigolets land bridge was also supremely vulnerable to gulf tempests. Whereas the threat of a hurricane today sends residents fleeing from New Orleans, coastal denizens a century ago sought refuge by evacuating to New Orleans — because it enjoyed a lower level of risk from storm surges at the time, its coastal marshes not yet having eroded and its urban soils only beginning to subside below sea level. To evacuate to New Orleans, however, folks in the Rigolets needed at least a few hours of prior warning. And they needed to heed it.

Denizens of the Gulf Coast in the summer of 1915 had hurricanes on their mind. A storm in August had killed 400 people in Galveston, evoking nightmares of the 1900 catastrophe that claimed over 6,000 lives in that Texas coastal city. Late-summer sea temperatures now heated dangerously, creating optimal conditions for tropical activity. On September 22, sailors detected a depression over the Lesser Antilles, and over the next few days, the unnamed system gained forward momentum and traced a smooth arc-shaped track

between the Yucatan Peninsula and Cuba.

Forecasting and communications as they were in this era, people in the Rigolets saw the odds in their favor and continued about their lives. But on Tuesday, September 28, an ominous “cirrus veil” of clouds reached city skies, and reports from ships confirmed that the immense hurricane imminently threatened the Barataria and Terrebonne basins. After a “faint brick-dust” sunset fell upon New Orleans, rains from the system’s outermost feeder bands drenched the region. Official warning of an unequivocal strike went out at 8:20 a.m. next morning

from the Weather Bureau office of the famous meteorologist Isaac M. Cline. By that time, the eye had made landfall over Grand Isle and veered gently to position New Orleans in general, and the Rigolets in particular, in the dreaded northeastern quadrant.

A worried *Times-Picayune* reporter asked Cline about the fate of the Rigolets, where some acquaintances of his were staying at the Anglers Club. “[You] had better telephone them at once[!]”, admonished Cline, who later transcribed detailed records of the events of that day. The reporter dialed and incredibly, the call went through—to one Manuel Marquez, a 51-year-old black Creole from the Seventh Ward who worked as the lodge caretaker. The reporter urged Manuel to gather all patrons and flag down



the very next train, due at 10 a.m., for a last-minute evacuation to the city.

“[T]he train [will] not stop for [us],” Manuel countered, as if experienced in this rejection.

“[Then] put a cross tie on the track” and force them to stop!, pleaded the reporter. “They will put me in jail,” Manuel groused.

“You would be better off in jail than where you are now and for God’s sake stop that train at all hazards and come to New Orleans[!]” shouted the reporter.

Manuel had much to lose, the least of which were his job and responsibilities to the club members. His wife, sister, children, grandchildren, relatives, and friends, all huddled nearby, also looked to him for salvation.

Winds by this time surpassed 40 m.p.h., pushing the sea to one, two, three feet above normal levels. Having squandered earlier evacuation opportunities and now seemingly out of options, “occupants of the Anglers’ Club apparently considered it the wisest course to remain” in the coastal clubhouse, according to a news bulletin. Cline’s interpretation of the members’ decision was less generous: “absolute disregard of specific warnings and advice,” he called it.

Hope came in the form of the last train to New Orleans, the *Mobile Limited*, steaming westward through gusting surf along the Louisville & Nashville rails. Manuel flagged it down frantically, hoping for mercy but fully expecting to be bypassed. “Put a cross tie on the track[!],” he remembered the reporter saying. No need: the train, already filled with apprehensive passengers, screeched to a stop.

Manuel’s salvation had arrived, but his charges remained scattered throughout the compound, hunkered down for safety. *Wait, wait!*, he cried to the engineer as he raced away from the very train he worked so hard to summon. Anxious and bewildered faces gaped at him from the rain-splattered windows of the passenger cars, as he frantically ran off to seek his people.

Winds whipped up higher and wilder waves “with ever-increasing savageness,” splashing salt water dangerously against the locomotive’s hot boiler and greased pistons. Passengers hardly assured of their own survival grew agitated and then enraged at the seemingly endless delay. Every passing moment increased the odds that Manuel and his people would make it safely to the train but decreased the chances that the train would ever arrive safely to the city. Consider the passengers’ frenzied debate: At what point does the possibility of everyone surviving evaporate, leaving them to choose between *all* perishing, or *some* perishing? When the winds and surf suggest that point is about to pass, who among us would choose the former?

The passengers’ dilemma pales in comparison to Manuel’s. He could have boarded the train to save his own life, and, if circumstances permitted, his family’s. But he convinced himself that all could be saved if he were only granted a moment to gather and guide them to the train. Seemingly blocking out the fact that the passengers could easily trump his decision, off Manuel waded to search for his people. Who among us would not?

Perhaps Manuel succeeded in finding some members of the group. Apparently he ran back to ensure the engineer would not move the locomotive before he gathered the others. But “the rising tide was jeopardizing the passengers on the train,” Cline later wrote in his report, “which could not wait until the people could be collected from the houses. Manuel returned to his companions,” and the train departed without them.

History does not record the trip across the wind-swept marshes and surging sea. We do know from a *Picayune* report that “the last train in on the Louisville and Nashville [line] was the *Mobile Limited*, which reached the city at 11:50 o’clock a.m., [having gone] some distance...through water.” The passengers’ decision to abandon their fellow citizens surely weighed heavily on them as their own fate played out. Some sense of guilt might have abated when, after departing the Anglers’ Club, the passengers spotted a



Detail of 1884 drawing by Edward Molitor shows the Louisville & Nashville railroad tracks traversing the Rigolets landbridge (upper center) eastward toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast. It was in this remote corner of New Orleans that Manuel Marquez and his companions found themselves in a dramatic life-and-death moral dilemma during the Great Storm of 1915. “Bird’s-Eye View of the Mississippi River, 1884” courtesy Library of Congress

work train on a side track and a coal barge in a nearby canal, both of which eventually saved the lives of many stranded locals. Perhaps, they hoped, Manuel and his people sought refuge there.

What they in fact experienced late that afternoon was terrifying. Surges 15 to 20-feet high subsumed the entire Rigolets region into the Gulf of Mexico. Bridges and trestles along the Louisville and Nashville tracks were destroyed utterly. The “Anglers’ Club,” reported the *Times-Picayune*, “was literally splintered into kindling wood.” New Orleans itself suffered extensive damage. Winds blew to 86 m.p.h. at 5:10 p.m., with gusts easily topping 100 m.p.h. They paused eerily and, around 6:35 p.m., reversed directions, as the eye passed 12 miles west of the city. A few hours later, a reporter described “a peculiar lightening...

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flaring up in sheets not unlike the fire coming out of the mouths of serpents...” Storm surge, meanwhile, overtopped the meager levees lining the lakeshore and adjoining outfall and navigation canals, filling the largely uninhabited bottomlands from present-day Broadmoor to Lakeview. A crevasse in the Florida Avenue rear protection levee inundated lowlands of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth wards, while the Mississippi spilled laterally over the river levees and swept across St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.

“CITY CUT OFF FROM REST OF WORLD,” proclaimed that evening’s *Item*. Nevertheless, the worst was over, and Thursday morning brought with it sunshine — and a view of the wreckage. Over 25,000 buildings suffered serious structural damage, including prominent landmarks such as the French Market and Old French Opera House. Eleven major churches lost their steeples, and the famous St. Louis Hotel was so battered it later had to be razed. The storm surge re-

ceded everywhere except impounded areas, where the water took four days to pump out via the recently installed municipal drainage system. Damages exceeded \$13 million region-wide, in unadjusted 1915 dollars, with roughly half occurring in New Orleans. At least 275 Louisianians perished. The nation’s top meteorologist later described the storm as “the most intense hurricane of which we have record in history of the Mexican Gulf coast and probably in the United States.”

Residents of the Rigolets could attest to the might of the Great Storm of 1915. The land bridge itself endured the hurricane fairly well; it might have even benefited, as gulf storms often deposit off-shore sediments upon coastal marshes. Had the structures been built with appropriate strength and height, and had residents heeded evacuation warnings, the hurricane would have represented a survivable inconvenience. Instead, it was a tragic disaster, to both the built environment and its humanity. Reported the *Times-Picayune* correspondent who telephoned Manuel the morning prior, “The survivors...were so distracted they did not know what to do with the bodies after they found them. Relatives of the dead were so downhearted and so “sick” of [this] place...they pleaded that the recovered bodies be buried elsewhere.”

But what of Manuel?

“[W]hen the storm was over,” wrote Isaac Cline at the conclusion of his poignant scientific report, Manuel’s “lifeless body, with 23 others of those who were in the club, were found strewn over the marshes.” Among the dead were his wife, sister, at least two and possibly all five of his children plus four grandchildren, fellow employees, neighbors, and all the guests of the Anglers Club.

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