

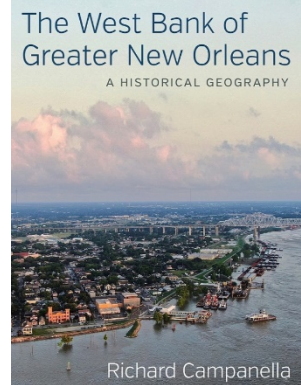
Cajun Culture Thrived Near N.O. in Westwego Acadian Connections Run Deep in Area

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Locals are quick to point out to visitors that, despite the trappings of certain tourist enterprises, New Orleans is not a Cajun city—that Cajuns historically settled well west of the metropolis, and that this largely rural ethnic group should not be confused with the Creole society of New Orleans.

It's a point worth making—but not overstating.

There is one corner of the modern metropolis where Cajuns and other coastal peoples have interacted economically for nearly 200 years, and have resided for over a century. It's in the Westwego area, the spot where greater New Orleans nearly abuts the “Acadian Triangle,” those 22 contiguous parishes where most Cajuns live.

This French-Canadian ethnic group first arrived in Louisiana after a years-long diaspora following their expulsion by the English from the Acadie region in Nova Scotia during the French and Indian War. Starting in 1766, Spanish administrators in Louisiana, who sought to increase the colony's population, offered the *Acadiens* land grants west of New Orleans. Understanding that the area had a Catholic Francophone society, many took the offer, forming what would become known as the *Côte de Acadiens*.

In the decades to come, the *Acadiens* spread throughout south-central Louisiana, from the Barataria Bay westward to the Attakapas prairies and as far north as Marksville. The French demonym *Acadiens* got corrupted to *'Cadiens* and eventually anglicized to *Cajuns*, a term that in Louisiana today is generally synonymous with Acadians.

What brought Cajuns to Westwego was a new connection between the Acadian region and what was then called the “right bank” of New Orleans—today's West Bank. In 1829, a consortium of planters and merchants won state approval to form the Barataria and Lafourche Canal Co. Using a sliver of Camille Zeringue's plantation on Nine Mile Point, the company aimed to excavate a channel to Bayou Segnette, through lakes Cataouatche and Salvador, and southwestwardly to Bayou Lafourche and beyond. The channel would also access Barataria Bay and the fishing villages of Chênière Caminada and Grand Isle.

In between were vast stocks of cypress timber, Spanish moss, shells for making mortar, game, fur-bearing animals, and estuarine waters abounding in finfish and shellfish. The mostly Francophone ethnic groups who worked these environs included Houma, Chitimacha, and other native groups; Creoles of various racial backgrounds; those of German, Spanish and African descent; and of course Cajuns.

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Using enslaved labor and state subsidies, the B & L Canal Co. dug its way to Bayou Segnette in the early 1830s. By 1841, it reached Bayou Lafourche, where it built a lock, giving rise to today's Lockport. The waterway became known as the "Company Canal."

At the same time, a few miles to the east, neighboring planter Nicholas Noel Destréhan set about to create a similar waterway, this one pointed southward toward the island communities. Started in 1839 with the use of Irish contract labor, the Destréhan Canal opened in 1844, bringing Barataria Bay resources to what is now Harvey. The waterway would later be renamed for Joseph Hale Harvey, husband of Nicholas Destréhan's remarkable daughter Louise, who in her elder years would bring the company into the modern era.

Together, the Company Canal and Harvey Canal enabled coastal resources — oysters, crabs, shrimp, fish and game as well as timber, moss, shells, and other raw materials — to flow inland on small steamboats, luggers, barges, skiffs, bateaus, and pirogues.

The Harvey Canal gave rural Baratarians access to the urban market, while the Company Canal, because it reached deep into the Acadian areas, became something of a Cajun pipeline into the Creole city.

The canals would soon get competition from railroads, starting in the 1850s and especially after the Civil War. In 1869, the New Orleans, Mobile and Texas Railroad aimed to connect north Texas with Mobile by building tracks on both banks of New Orleans, with a train ferry crossing the river.

The railroad company decided to build its tracks alongside the Company Canal to the Mississippi River, forming a key intermodal transportation node they dubbed "West-We-Go," to herald the new westward access. The facility was completed in 1870, after which the operation would become known as the Texas & Pacific Railroad. In time, the catchy name got truncated to "Westwego," and came to imply the adjacent settlement.

With trains ushering in cargo from the west, a canal bringing in seafood from the south, and busy wharves on the Mississippi, Westwego developed an industrial base. Some coastal families who previously did business here came to settle for the job opportunities.

In 1892, a 65-year-old Spaniard named Pablo Sala purchased part of the Zeringue plantation and laid out lots immediately adjacent to the Company Canal. "Salaville" would become the historic heart of Westwego, and among its first residents were African American families who were previously enslaved on Zeringue's plantation. They formed the True Vine Baptist Church, which still operates on Sala Avenue today. By 1893, up to 200 people lived in Salaville and Westwego, three-quarters of whom were African American.

In October of that year, a hurricane struck Barataria Bay, wreaking havoc on Chênrière Caminada and killing over 800 residents. To the rescue came the people of the West Bank, who had intimate ties to the



The Company Canal running from Westwego to Bayou Segnette in 1936, courtesy USGS.

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devastated region, and the means to get there. Canal owner Horace Harvey, son of Joseph and Louise Destréhan Harvey, guided a vessel down the Harvey Canal and arrived to find “hordes of haggard and starving people [with] ungovernable damnable thirst,” according to an Oct. 6, 1893 report in the *New Orleans Item*. More rescue operations followed, sponsored by churches, social clubs, newspapers, businesses, relief committees, even theaters and music academies.

But the vessels bringing relief to the coast soon found themselves transporting refugees from the coast. Storm victims had every reason to leave: their fishing fleet had been obliterated, and the oyster reefs were buried in sand.

With nothing to go back to and nothing left to lose, many storm victims cast their eyes to the one part of greater New Orleans with which they had familiarity: Westwego and Harvey, at the heads of the Company and Harvey canals.

The Harvey family granted space along their waterway as a temporary encampment, to which the Sisters of Charity distributed donated supplies. By October 9, up to 74 Chenier families were taking refuge along the Harvey Canal. The number would later grow to 126 families.

Pablo Sala by this time had subdivided Salaville, and lots could be bought cheaply. By late 1894, 20 refugee families had built homes on or near Sala Avenue. Kin settled nearby, some on houseboats moored up and down the Company Canal and into Bayou Segnette.

The refugees and later migrants would impart to the West Bank a lasting cultural change, as they were mostly Acadian, with varying amounts of Houma, Creole, and other bloodlines. Their names were a who’s-who of Louisiana Cajun clans: Terrebonne, Pitre, Chabert, Guedry (Guidry), Bourdro (Boudreaux), Gaspard, Ducos, Broussard, plus a few of Italian, Spanish, Croatian and Anglo origin.

The 1893 storm is a case study of the tendency of disasters to prompt demographic change. It made Westwego and adjacent communities the closest greater New Orleans would have to a “Cajun neighborhood.” A 1942 Tulane thesis by Edwin Ney Bruce estimated that Westwego’s population had nearly tripled after the 1893 storm, to about 500. “Most of the people speak a French dialect,” wrote Bruce of the community in the early 1940s. “Even the people who speak Spanish speak French also, [namely] Creole and Arcadian (‘Cajun’).... The High School offers a course in Classical French, but it is not generally popular.”

Around this same era, as technology advanced in refrigeration and rail networks expanded, demand soared for Louisiana seafood. Westwego became greater New Orleans’ “cannery row,” taking advantage of its canals, railroads, and coastal-savvy denizens.

The nucleus of the seafood processing scene was Sala Avenue at 2nd Street, where Durac Terrebonne’s Fishermen’s Exchange, a crab meat processor, a shrimp factory, two ice manufacturers, a cold storage unit, and a seafood retailer operated, all within a block of the Company Canal fish wharf and shed. By the 1940s, five major processors employed 567 people in Westwego (population 5,000), of whom 83% were women and nearly 60% were Black. Most spoke French.

Wartime ship-building jobs attracted additional Cajuns and other coastal peoples to the metro area, as did the oil and gas industry.

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Into the late 20th century, the Westwego census tract comprising old Salaville and the former Company Canal enumerated 2,952 residents who claimed French as their “mother tongue,” meaning the main language of one’s childhood home, by far the most throughout the metropolis. Adjacent tracts in Westwego, Marrero and Harvey also had high numbers.

According to the 2000 Census, more people claimed “French” ancestry in parts of Westwego, Marrero, and Harvey down to Lafitte, than anywhere else in the metro area. The 2013-2017 American Community Survey showed that the heart of Westwego was the only census tract in the metro area in which a measurable percentage of respondents (7.05 %) identified “Cajun” as their ancestry. Combined with those who claimed “French” ancestry, as many Cajuns do, fully one out of every three residents claimed this heritage, among the highest rates in the metropolis.

While Cajun French is no longer heard in the streets of Westwego, Cajun ethnicity is very much present. Names like Pitre and Terrebonne are still prominent, and Durac Terrebonne’s Fishermen’s Exchange is still standing, though it’s now home to the Westwego Historical Museum and Society. A walk around the Westwego Shrimp Lot, with its open-stall vendors of fresh seafood and the nearby fishing fleet on Bayou Segnette, is like a trip to Acadiana practically within sight of downtown skyscrapers.

And while the seafood markets’ address is on the West Bank Expressway, it aligns precisely with the now-filled front end of the circa-1830 Company Canal, the area’s original connection to the *Côte de Acadiens*.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans—A Historical Geography” (LSU Press), from which this material was drawn, as well as “Bourbon Street: A History,” “Bienville’s Dilemma,” and other books. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu, <http://richcampanella.com>, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.



Photo by Richard Campanella