



OF STORM, FIRE AND FISH *The Shaping of Salaville*

by Richard Campanella

THE CHARMING NEIGHBORHOOD of Salaville, along Sala Avenue in Westwego, is an unusual example of a historic district that actually postdates the formation of the surrounding community.

This part of the West Bank began developing beyond an economy based on enslaved agriculture, dominated by the Zeringue family of the Seven Oaks Plantation House, in 1830, when the Barataria and Lafourche Canal Company dug the “Company Canal.” The channel, cut through Bayou Segnette westward to Bayou Lafourche, gave various rural peoples, namely Acadians (Cajuns), access to the New Orleans market, while creating a small transshipment port where the canal neared the Mississippi, in today’s Westwego.

Ten years later, Nicholas Noel Destrehan built a similar waterway, today’s Harvey Canal, south through Bayou Barataria, which did the same for populations in the Barataria Basin, bringing additional commerce to today’s Harvey/Marrero area.

Railroads came in the 1850s, and in 1869, the New Orleans, Mobile and Texas Railroad, aiming to connect north Texas with Mobile, Ala., decided to bring their tracks up alongside the Company Canal to a ferry terminal to cross the Mississippi River. To advertise the western access, railroad officials dubbed their riverside track facility “West-We-Go” and completed it in 1870, after which the company became known as the Texas & Pacific Railroad. Workers settled nearby in an ad-hoc manner and called the area “Westwego,” despite that it did not yet have an established street grid.

Enter a 65-year-old Spaniard named Pablo Sala. In 1892, Sala pur-

chased part of the Zeringue plantation, including the Seven Oaks Plantation House, and had an engineer lay out 162 lots immediately adjacent to the lower bank of the Company Canal. “Salaville” would form the urban core of Westwego, and among its first residents were African American families who had been previously enslaved on Zeringue’s plantation. By 1893, up to 200 people lived in Salaville and Westwego.

Later that year, a terrible hurricane struck Chenier Caminada near Grand Isle, killing more than 800 people and sending refugees inland. Being long-time fishermen of the Barataria Bay, they knew Westwego and Harvey well, thanks to the two canals they had long used to bring their catch to market. So they made their way up the waterways and sought refuge, temporary or otherwise, in the communities at the head of each canal.

By Oct. 9, 1893, up to 74 Chenier families settled along the Harvey Canal, with space for 50 more. The population later grew to 126 families, and by April 1894, according to the Daily Picayune, “some had moved further up towards [the] Company canal; others are now living in Gretna [or New Orleans], while the majority went down to Barataria and along Bayou Lafourche.”

Pablo Sala catered to the demand by selling inexpensive lots for houses along Sala Avenue. By the end of 1894, 20 refugee families built homes here, and their breadwinners soon returned to guiding luggers to and from Grand Isle. Brethren would later settle nearby, through a sort of domestic chain immigration. Pablo Sala had also converted Seven Oaks into a resort named Columbia Gardens, one of the first major conversions of an antebellum plantation house into a tourist attraction. But his death

in 1894 derailed that project. As for Salaville, Pablo’s sister Maria Sala y Fabregas arranged, from Spain, for the expansion of the subdivision with a hundred new lots laid out toward Bayou Segnette, and coordinated their sale to rural peoples moving closer to the city.

The migrants would impart the West Bank with a lasting cultural change, for unlike the rest of New Orleans’ French-ancestry population, those settling in Westwego were predominantly Cajun, with names like Terrebonne, Pitre, Chabert, Arodin, Guidry, Boudreaux, Gaspard, Ducos, Billiot and Broussard. Westwego’s population had nearly tripled between 1893 and 1899, to about 500, with much of that increase directly or indirectly attributable to the hurricane, and most of the new population Cajun, as well as Creole and African American. They brought coastal folkways to greater New Orleans, and made Westwego in general, and Sala Avenue in particular, the region’s “Cannery Row,” home to the seafood processing, canning, packing and distribution industry.

All was nearly lost on April 14, 1907.

Before dawn that day, a clerk named Alidore Guidry awoke to intense heat and smoke in his apartment near Durac Terrebonne’s Fishermen’s Exchange. Escaping just in time, Guidry alerted neighbors to the flames sweeping down Sala Avenue, driven by northeasterly winds and fueled by wooden building materials. Having few resources to battle such a blaze, neighbors desperately formed a bucket brigade to douse the perimeter. It was futile.

Around 7 a.m., horse-drawn fire engines arrived from New Orleans on the Walnut Street Ferry and pumped arcs of water into the inferno. Smoke and flame slowly turned to steam and wet ash, amid skeletons of charred timbers and leaning chimneys. By noon, 42 buildings had been utterly destroyed, including the town hall, post office, two schools, a Presbyterian church, a bakery and two stores, including the Fishermen’s Exchange. As many as 600 people found themselves homeless — again.

The Westwego Fire of 1907 was the region’s largest neighborhood blaze since the Great Algiers Fire of 1895. Like Algiers, Salaville promptly rebuilt, for there were livelihoods to be earned, and the community, which needed canal access to incoming fisheries, as well as railroads and steamboats for export, could not be relocated.

The new blocks of Salaville flourished, and the cannery industry recovered, even as Westwego maintained its rural Cajun ambience. “Most of the people speak a French dialect,” wrote Edwin Ney Bruce, the author of a 1942 study. “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.” By this time, five major processors — Ed Martin Seafood, Robinson’s Shrimp, Louisiana Blue Crab, Hudson Seafood and Cutcher Seafood — employed 567 people in Westwego (population 5,000), of whom 83 percent were women and nearly 60 percent were black.

French is no longer heard in the streets of Westwego, and the Company Canal has since been filled at its river end. But Cajun ethnicity is very much present. Names like Pitre and Terrebonne are still prominent, and a walk around the Westwego Shrimp Lot, with its fresh seafood, boudin, alligator, and fishing fleet on nearby Bayou Segnette, is like a trip to Acadiana without leaving the metro area.

On Sala Avenue in the Salaville Historic District may be found the Westwego Historical Society Museum in the Durac Terrebonne’s Fishermen’s Exchange, rebuilt after the 1907 fire, as well as an assortment of historical vernacular houses and relics of old “cannery row.” The True Vine Baptist Church, where generations of descendants of Zeringue slaves worshiped, endures on Sala Avenue, proud of its status as the oldest church in Westwego. At Sala and 4th Street is a former railroad station converted to a community market, where Friday night fish fries are typically held, and on the River Road at its intersections with Louisiana Street and Sala Avenue, may still be seen the concrete lock of the Company Canal, the circa-1830 channel that first triggered the formation of a community here.

TOP: Our Lady of Prompt Succor Parish was established in 1920. The current church building was dedicated on June 3, 1956, according to its website. **MIDDLE:** The Westwego Shrimp Lot offers fresh-from-the-boat seafood, a link to the city’s past in the cannery industry. **BOTTOM:** The Westwego Historical Society Museum is housed in Durac Terrebonne’s Fishermen’s Exchange, a building that was rebuilt after a devastating 1907 fire. *Photos by Liz Jurey.*



streetscapes

Richard Campanella is a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and author of *Cityscapes of New Orleans; Bourbon Street: A History; Bienville’s Dilemma*; and other books.

ABOVE: Sala Avenue, seen here in a drone photo from 2019, was named for Pablo Sala, who began developing land in the area in 1892. *Photo by Marco Rasi.*