

# A 'Lake' in Broadmoor?

## Natural Paradise Once Graced Uptown's Last Open Tract

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Conversations with older residents of the Broadmoor and Fontainebleau neighborhoods often prompt recollections of a “lake” in that vicinity prior to its urbanization.

Indeed, a 1922 aerial photograph shows a large undeveloped tract—the last in the area—between Jefferson and Nashville avenues, going back from South Claiborne Avenue to Gert Town. Having subsided to a few feet below sea level, those open fields probably accumulated runoff after heavy rains, creating what looked like what many secondary sources describe as a “twelve-acre lake” in Broadmoor.

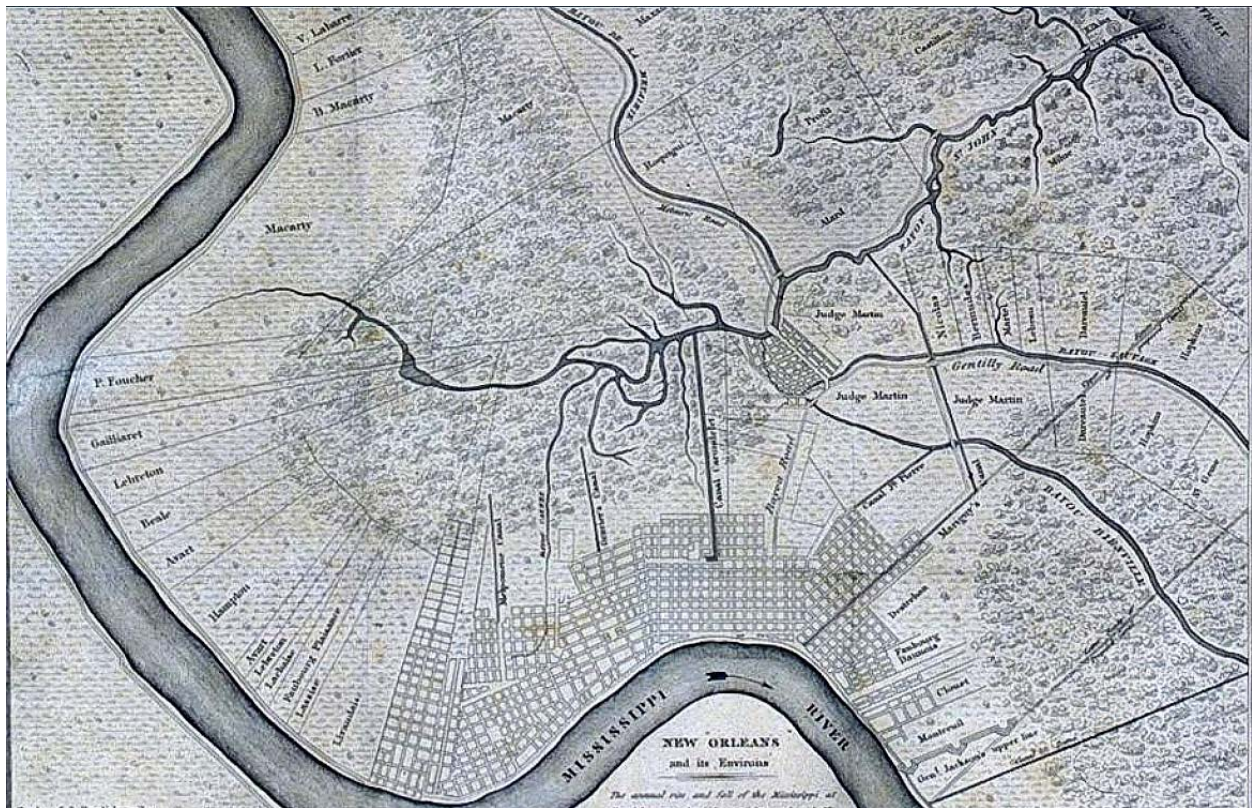
But if we go back a century earlier, there turns out to be more to the story than a muddy field.

Descriptive evidence comes from the pen of famed lawyer and narrative historian Charles Gayarré, who grew up on the plantation encompassing that low spot, and wrote of his memories in an 1886 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* article titled “A Louisiana Sugar Plantation of the Old Regime.” Gayarré was the grandson of Etienne de Boré, the man widely credited—thanks in part to Gayarré’s own dramatized recounting—with figuring out how to granulate locally grown sugarcane juice. That 1795 breakthrough led to a massive expansion of sugar cultivation in lower Louisiana, and of the institution of slavery on which it depended.

De Bore’s plantation extended from the present-day 6000 to 6300 blocks of Tchoupitoulas Street straight back to what is now the intersection of Nashville Avenue and Earhart Expressway, an area that includes the aforementioned tract that was still undeveloped as of 1922.

“On the Boré plantation,” wrote Gayarré, “midway between the river bank and the cypress swamp, there was a depression in the land, where, in consequence of it, a large pond of standing water had been formed.” Gayarré’s estimated location as being “midway” between the plantation’s bankside frontage and its swampy rear puts us roughly in today’s Fontainebleau neighborhood, near the upper edge of Broadmoor.

Low as this area was, Gayarré explained, it was not perfectly flat. There was a slight rise known as “La Terre Haute” (the high land), although it was not more elevated than the other part (of the plantation) running to the public road,” meaning Tchoupitoulas Street. Gayarré was probably referring to the ridge-and-swale topography seen on the backslopes of the natural levees of the Mississippi, the *terre haute* being the ridge and the “large pond” having formed in the swale.



1829 Ogden Map, showing La Mare à Boré at center left.

“This pond, known far and wide,” Gayarré wrote, “was called La Mare à Boré (the Boré pond).” In today’s terms, the wet spot had incredible ecological productivity, a haven for all sorts of flora and fauna. “All around this pond,” he recalled, “the soil was of a marshy nature, full of tall weeds, sheltering a multitude of wild game, such as snipes, water-hens, rails, etc.”

As the only open water body in the vicinity, *La Mare à Boré* became a favored stopover for migratory birds. “During the winter it was the resort of innumerable flocks of ducks, that successively came to it in the evening until it was completely dark.”

Think of the lagoons in Audubon Park today, which in winter often attract flocks of black-bellied whistling ducks, mallards and other species on the move.

Except *La Mare à Boré* was no park; it was a happy hunting ground. “As they passed over their expected shelter,” Gayarré wrote of the ducks, “the ambuscaded hunters rose from their concealment and emptied their guns. Hence this was called *La Passée*.... This pond and marshy ground was a famous shooting spot at that epoch,” meaning the late 1810s and 1820s, which is when Gayarré, born in 1805, lived nearby.

Gayarré made an interesting comment regarding use of the pond. “In any other country this sporting ground would have been jealously guarded, but in Louisiana this would have been looked upon with extreme disfavor. Hence this pond, or *Mare à Boré*, was treated as public property, without any interference from the owner.”

Perhaps Gayarré, a learned esquire and proud Creole, was invoking the spirit of Roman civil law, which tended to view riparian lands and battures as public domain, or at least publicly accessible.

American notions of English common law, on the other hand, tended to give the upper hand to private ownership, with restricted access.

But Gayarré also made clear that this pond did have a rightful owner, his grandfather. When de Boré died in 1820, Gayarré inherited part of the property, along with other kin. Some of Gayarré's memories probably stem from his nine-year tenure as part owner, ending in 1829.

Late Saturday afternoons, he recalled, were something of an event at *La Mare à Boré*, when “the élite of (New Orleans) — lawyers, physicians, commission merchants, brokers, bankers” came out for some shooting. “On such occasions we could hear from our dwelling-house a lively rattle of gun-firing, as if a skirmish was going on. Some even camped there, to be ready for the sport early on the next morning.”

For it to have become so renowned suggests that *La Mare à Boré* was a rather salient feature, the nearest and most accessible “sportsman's paradise” closest to the urban population. “Fires were lighted, tents erected, and the comforts and wants of the human body attended to with proper care,” wrote Gayarré, implying that libations flowed liberally at the popular getaway. “Jokes were cracked, tales related by the blazing piles, pranks perpetrated, and to speak the unpleasant truth, there ensued, although rarely, quarrels that led to duels.” Local folks, he recalled, “connected that spot with hobgoblins and apparitions, among others the ghost of a colossal raccoon.”

We have two contemporary cartographic sources illustrating where—and exactly what—*La Mare à Boré* was. Francis P. Ogden's *City of New Orleans* map (1829) mostly focuses on the urbanized part of the city, but also contains an inset map of the larger region, including the network of now-gone bayous that drained the Uptown “bowl” through sluggish rivulets and drained out Bayou St. John to Lake Pontchartrain.

One tributary, Bayou des Cannes, drained the present-day Central Business District and Lower Garden District and flowed out a channel roughly aligned with today's Pontchartrain Expressway. It then formed confluences with other bayous in the Mid-City area before flowing out Bayou St. John.

The largest tributary merging with Bayou des Cannes drained most of today's Uptown. Ogden's map shows it originating between today's Audubon Park and Carrollton, flowing within a few blocks of Broadway, and curving back through present-day Fontainebleau and Broadmoor. It joined Bayou des Cannes near where the Orleans Justice Center now stands on Perdido Street, and thereafter flowed to the lake.

It's in that Fontainebleau/Broadmoor stretch where Ogden shows a 2,000-foot-long segment of the bayou broadening by as much as 700 feet. Its widest spot aligns precisely with the rear of the former Boré plantation, so we can be reasonably certain that this was *La Mare à Boré*.

Was it a lake? A pond? What to call such a widening on an otherwise flowing bayou? After consulting with my colleague Dr. Bob Thomas at Loyola University -- who in turn checked with hydrologists at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers -- we surmised that, while terms like “slough” or “coulee” might be used elsewhere, most Louisianians through most of history described such a water body simply as a lake (*lac*) or pond (*mare*).

Ergo, *La Mare à Boré*, and the provenance of the lake still distantly remembered today.



*La Mare à Boré location encircled at center.*

Overlaid on a modern-map, Ogden's depiction of the now-gone water body falls around the Nashville Avenue intersections with McKenna and York Streets, extending from just off Calhoun Street over to the Fontainebleau Drive/South Salcedo intersection.

Engineer Charles Zimpel's *Topographic Map of New-Orleans and Its Vicinity*, published in 1834, largely tracks Ogden's depiction, but shows *La Mare à Boré* as being 1,250 feet long and consistently 200 feet wide, spanning the rear sections of three plantations: that of the Foucher family (covering present-day Audubon Park and areas inland), the Burthe family (which by this time owned the former Boré plantation), and the Avart family.

What became of *La Mare à Boré*? Along with most of the dendritic system of tributaries that drained the Uptown New Orleans watershed, the scenic spot fell victim to three phases of drainage history. The first came in the 1830s, when the New Basin Canal was dug across the backswamp and lined with guide levees, which had the hydrological effect of partitioning a once-vast watershed into what the Dutch would call "polders"—that is, artificial sub-basins of impounded water.

At the same time, local investors formed the New Orleans Drainage Co., which used steam pumps to lift swamp water out of the polders and eject it out either the New Basin Canal or Bayou St. John.

This first attempt at mechanized drainage did not last long, nor did it succeed in drying out the backswamp. But it did draw down enough standing water such that, in maps from the 1840s onward, we no longer see the network of backswamp bayous, and we certainly don't see *La Mare à Boré*.

Indeed, even in his 1834 map, Zimpel shows *La Mare à Boré's* bayou as already severed from its downstream tributaries, on account of the New Basin Canal.

The second phase of massive hydrological change came in the late 1890s and early 1900s, when the newly created Sewerage & Water Board installed a robust modern municipal drainage system, with electrified pumps. It was in this era that most backswamp basins in and around New Orleans were dewatered, a process accelerated by the brilliant young local engineer Albert Baldwin Wood, who upgraded pumping apparatus starting in 1906 and invented his famous "Wood screw pump" in 1913.

But removing swamp water does not quite ready wetland soils for development. For urbanization to proceed, subsurface drainage apparatus must be installed—stormwater drains, underground pipes, subterranean drainage canals—to draw down the soil water and turn mud into dirt.

That open tract visible in the 1922 aerial photo was the last major space in this vicinity to get subsurface drainage, and until it did, puddling on those open fields is probably what got remembered as "the twelve-acre lake." When developers finally arrived later in the 1920s, trucks brought in artificial fill, and bulldozers graded the streets and blocks, making those old natural ridges — Gayarré's *La Terre Haute* — and swales indiscernible in even the most detailed elevation data of the area today. Instead, those maps show that this entire area has subsided below sea level — one of the more insidious consequences of draining deltaic soils.

Another consequence of the drainage and development was the loss of beautiful nature features like this backswamp bayou pond, and the ecological and cultural value they rendered. "Page after page could be written," concluded the 81-year old Charles Gayarré of his youthful reminiscences, "about the many occurrences which in those days contributed to the fame of La Mare à Boré."

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