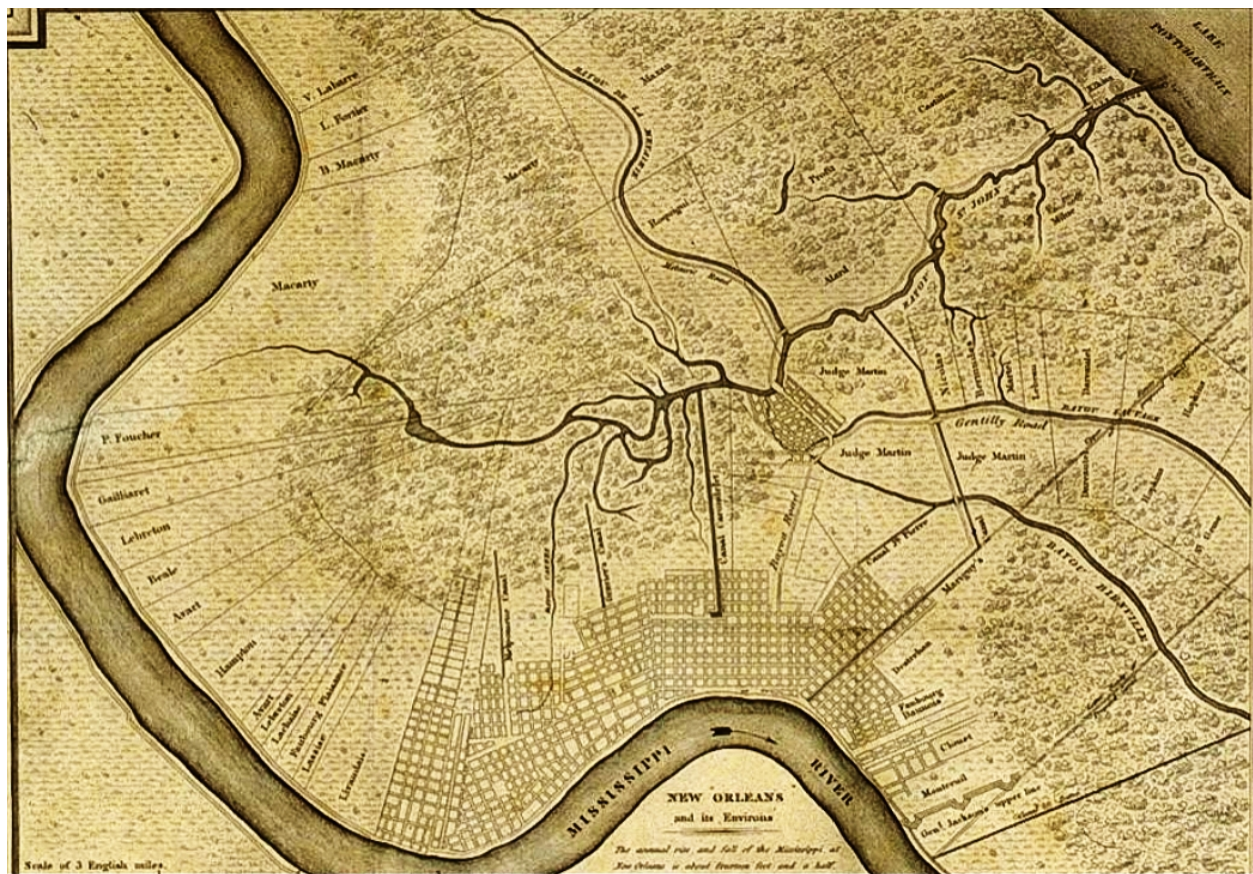


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Because distributaries deposited river-borne sediment, they built up ridges, or natural levees, along their banks, which were used as roads by early inhabitants. Distributary bayous and ridges were among the higher parts of the deltaic plain, though not quite as high as the natural levees of the Mississippi itself.



Detail of 1829 Ogden Map of New Orleans, showing swamp tributaries to Bayou St John, courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Tributaries, on the other hand, flowed through the bottom of swamp basins and were only accessible by pirogue. They were among the lowest spots on the delta, a few inches above lake or sea level.

The primary East Bank distributary flowed out of the Mississippi around Upland Avenue in River Ridge and coursed 30 miles eastward, along a route that had previously hosted the river's main channel. What that injection of muddy water left behind were the ridges underlying today's Metairie Road, City Park Avenue, Gentilly Boulevard, Old Gentilly Road, and U.S. 90 to Chef Menteur Pass.

As for the distributary itself, that waterway had become "abandoned" — that is, broken off from the Mississippi — around 1700. Natives called it Bayou Coupicatcha; French settlers called it Bayou Métairie, for its small tenant farms; and one Spanish map labeled it Arroyo de la Alqueria, meaning an outlying stream. Farther eastward, the sluggish waterway became known as Bayou Chantilly (Gentilly) named for an estate outside of Paris, and as it discharged into wild marshes, it was called Bayou Sauvage.

A Hydrological Nexus

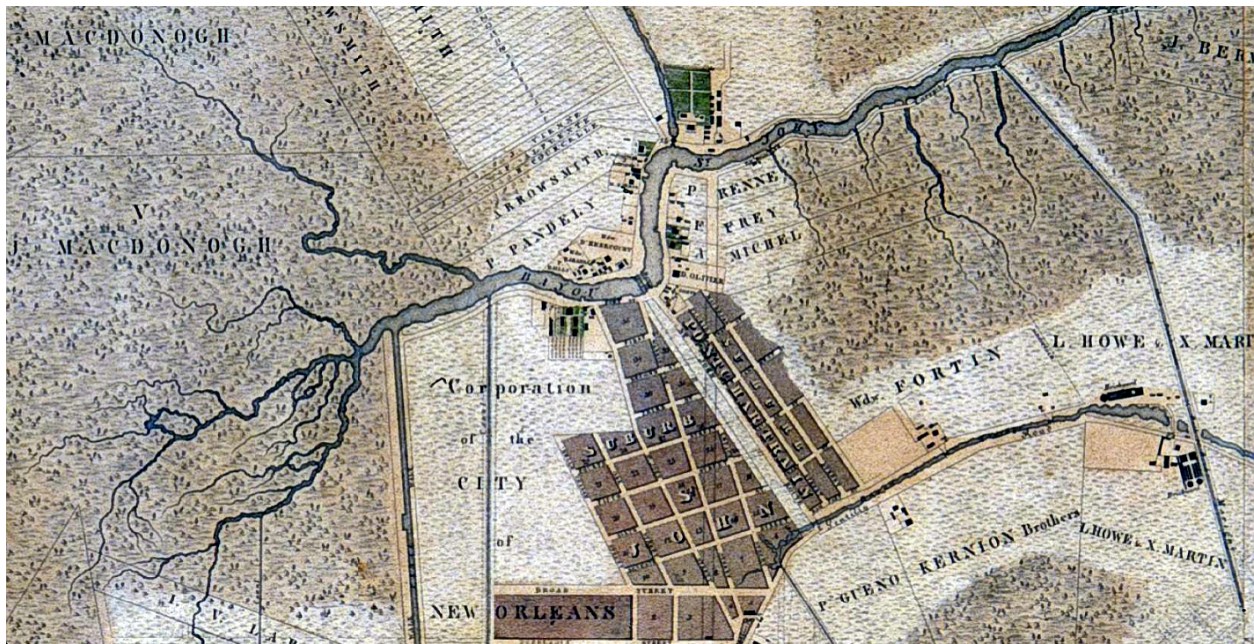
Things got complicated where Bayou Metairie became Bayou Gentilly, in the present-day Bayou St. John and Fairgrounds neighborhoods in the 6th and 7th wards. This is where the distributary system and its parallel ridge tended to impound the tributaries behind them, which sought a drainage outlet for the basin encompassing today's Mid-City, Broadmoor and Uptown. Possibly due to a sedimentary fault, that runoff broke through the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge and flowed northward into Lake Pontchartrain, becoming what Native Americans called Bayouk Choupic, the French named Grand Bayou du St. Jean, and the Spanish called Bayu San Juan—today's Bayou St. John.

In the 1700s you'd get to this hydrological nexus from New Orleans proper (today's French Quarter) by walking the Chemin du Bayou — that is, Gov. Nicholls Street and Bayou Road, which followed the Esplanade Ridge, itself the product of a fork of that aforementioned distributary. That pathway got you to Bayou Chantilly (Gentilly) and the Chemin de Chantilly (now Gentilly Boulevard), which veered eastward.

If you wanted to get to the larger Bayou St. John, you had to turn left onto the Chemin du Grande Bayou St. Jean. This is today's intersection of Gentilly Boulevard with Grand Route St. John, which, as its name clearly states, was the route to the "grander" bayou named St. John.

Things got even more complicated around where Bell Street, Desoto Street, and Bayou Road now intersect North Broad Street. Here, during heavy rainfall, tributaries from adjacent swamps may have risen high enough to backflow into the distributaries. Likewise, during dry spells, water in the distributaries might have flowed down the tributaries and back into the swamp. A map by Joseph Antoine Vinache in 1803 shows up to 18 interconnected bayou segments in this vicinity, in what geomorphologists would call "anastomosed channels." (OK with me to say this but then I think we have to offer a brief definition)

One rivulet gained the name Petit Bayou, or Pequeño Bayou de la Cruz, while another was called Bayou Fanchon and later Bayou Clark. There was also Bayou Gueno and Bayou Au Lavoir, the latter so named because it was used for washing clothes. Two nearby footbridges came to be known as the Bridges of the Washerwomen, one of which, according to map analysis by Peter Trapolin and Ron Domin, was located where Paul Morphy Street now intersects Bayou Road.



Detail of 1833 Zimpel Map shows tributaries of Bayou St John--note Bayou Metairie at top and Bayou Gentilly at right; courtesy Tulane Special Collections

Tributary Systems

Though largely ornamental today, Bayou St. John was once the city's primary natural drainage outlet. It carried runoff from an extensive dendritic network of tributaries, shaped like branches in a **tree**, draining from Old Metairie to Esplanade Avenue and from river to lake, and outflowing into Lake Pontchartrain.

One branch, named Bayou des Cannes, drained present-day downtown via a channel roughly following today's Pontchartrain Expressway. Another branch originated in Uptown and curved through Fontainebleau and Broadmoor, where it ponded to form a backswamp lagoon known as *La Mare à Boré*. Measuring 2,000 feet long and up to 700 feet wide, "Boré's Pond" became a popular duck-hunting spot in the early 1800s, and is the likely origin of the oft-heard recollection of a "lake" in Broadmoor lasting into the 1920s.

Greater New Orleans had other tributary systems. In the 7th, 8th and 9th wards plus Arabi, Chalmette and Meraux, various branch bayous sent runoff into Bayou Bienvenue, which drains into Lake Borgne.

Along what is now Hayne Boulevard, tidal streams with names like Bayou Cochon, Little River, and Turtle Bayou drained the marshes of today's New Orleans East into Lake Pontchartrain. To the west, rivulets with names like Indian Bayou, Bayou Tchoupitoulas, Bayou Labarre, Bayou Laurier and Alligator Bayou drained present-day Bucktown, Metairie and Kenner.

Across the river, a distributary known as Bayou des Familles built up a ridge running through present-day Marrero, which divided the West Bank into two hydrological sub-basins. Areas from Westwego westward drained out Bayou Segnette to lakes Cataouatche and Salvador, while lands from Harvey to Algiers and down to Belle Chasse drained out Bayou Fatma and into Bayou Barataria.

Losing the Bayous

What became of this labyrinth of bayous?

Most met the same fate as the swamps around them — that is, they were transected, drained down, dried out, filled in and hardened into a modern cityscape.

The process started in the 1830s, when the first steam pumps were installed to speed urban drainage. Bayou St. John remained the city's main discharge, except for the neighborhoods below Esplanade Avenue, which used Bayou Bienvenue.

Though the swamps largely remained in place, enough standing water had been drawn down by the mid-1800s to dry up some tributaries, and channels like Petit Bayou and Bayou Au Lavoir became memories.

In the 1890s, engineers devised a sophisticated mechanized drainage system, and installed it in the early 1900s. By the 1920s, most swamp basins within the metropolis had been "reclaimed," meaning their standing water had been removed. By the 1950s, subsurface drains and pipes had been installed to lower the groundwater for full development.

As for the distributaries, Bayou Metairie became viewed as a nuisance and traffic obstacle, and was filled during the 1920s through 1950s. The urbanized segments of Bayou Gentilly and Bayou des Familles met the same fate.



Remnant of Bayou Metairie, known as Horseshoe Lake, seen in 1905, with Metairie Road at left and Metairie Cemetery at right; courtesy Library of Congress

Drainage in East Jefferson Parish, which began in the 1910s, obliterated most bayous in Metairie and Kenner, though as late as 1958, you could still paddle a pirogue from today's Causeway Plaza to Veterans Boulevard.

New Appreciation for Old Bayous

Most New Orleanians a century ago cheered these transformations, particularly the draining of the swamps, which had long been viewed as pestilential impediments to progress.

Today, we have a better understanding of the role of water in urban deltas — to unburden pumps by storing runoff on the landscape; to reduce subsidence by recharging groundwater; to create urban amenities for people and habitat for wildlife; and possibly to stabilize local temperatures.

New appreciation is now going to waterways once ignored, such as Bayou Bienvenue, and various efforts citywide aim to install “blue” and “green” features where “gray” infrastructure currently prevails.

The lost bayous of New Orleans will never return. But insight into the role they once played, and the beauty they once exuded, gives us new perspectives on those that remain.

Consider, for example, Bayou Segnette in Westwego, our last best example of a functioning swamp ecosystem within the metropolitan area, complete with a fishing industry and a recreational economy.

Consider also the beautiful lagoons in lower City Park, the last remnants of Bayou Metairie.

Finally, consider Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge, which came close to being developed a generation ago, but instead became a haven for wildlife, a buffer for storm surge, and home to the last stretch of that centuries-old abandoned distributary, a channel still known as Bayou Sauvage — “wild bayou.”

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Drone photo by Marco Rasi of the lagoons at City Park, last remnants of Bayou Metairie.