

## Turf war

With Saints-Falcons showdown looming, book takes a look at the rivalry that predates the teams

BY ERIN GRAYSON SAPP  
Contributing writer

With the Falcons-Saints game Sunday, New Orleans is again abuzz over one of the NFL's most heated rivalries, which is now tied at 54-54 overall in regular season history.

Divisional opponents are often labeled rivals simply because they directly affect each other's shot at postseason play. Then there are real rivalries, the matchups that matter more than any others — even when nothing else is on the line.

Before the Week 12 game in Atlanta, a New Orleans fan informed Saints defensive end Cam Jordan that — despite the Thanksgiving holiday — it was “hate week.” Days earlier, Falcons CEO Rich McKay distinguished this true rivalry from so-called respectful rivalries, where opponents might share dinner afterwards.

This rivalry's roots run deep. The two cities became pro football foes long before either town even had a team.

### Competing for a slot

In 1962, the young American Football League was aggressively scouting new territory and holding exhibition games across the untapped Southeast. Atlanta and New Orleans were frontrunners for an expansion club, but only one new entry was slated for the 1963 season, making the cities pro football competitors for the first time. And so it began.

Expansion was deferred, and over the next several years Atlanta and New Orleans auditioned for a pro franchise by hosting both AFL and NFL preseason games. The cities' performances were polar opposites. Each mastered one — and failed one — of the leagues' two main criteria: integrated public accommodations and adequate paid attendance.

Atlanta was on pace to earn its “City Too Busy to Hate” tag, as its civil rights progress was humming along. However, attendance lagged: multiple exhibition games were canceled outright because of abysmal ticket sales. For games that survived, as few as 8,000 seats were warmed.

In New Orleans, on the other hand, a 1962 exhibition filled City Park's 26,000 permanent seats plus 3,000 temporary bleacher spots, and still around 7,000 disappointed fans were turned away at the gates. In 1965, even the massive old Tulane Stadium neared capacity for a preseason scrimmage.

New Orleans' racial progress, however, was very slow, and

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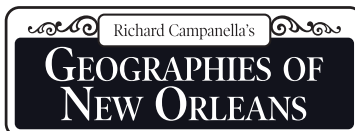
Grand opening of the Harvey Tunnel

FILE PHOTO

# PASSAGE OF TIME

*West Bank's tunnels are linked to a key shipping decision a century ago*

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
Contributing writer



Our two metro-area tunnels have been in the news recently. The Belle Chasse Tunnel is now permanently closed for replacement by a bridge, while the Harvey Tunnel will undergo two years of major maintenance.

The projects come a century after a high-stakes decision laid the groundwork for both tunnels, along with a third in Houma. That decision entailed how exactly to route what writer Harnett T. Kane described as “the world's longest canal” — today's Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

The idea of a coastwise public shipping canal arose with the River and Harbors Act of 1873, which called for piecing together a waterway from the Rio Grande in Texas to the Mississippi River, either by digging channels or dredging natural waterbodies. Work proceeded

plotting routes and securing rights through coastal Texas and Louisiana toward Florida.

### Inland waterway needed

Where to connect with the Mississippi remained an open question until 1914, when the U.S., sensing war on the horizon in Europe, found itself in need of better domestic transportation to export materiel.

In a document titled “Intracoastal Waterway: St. Georges Sound (Florida) to the Rio Grande Section,” the Secretary of War recommended that an “inland waterway” be scoured “7 feet deep and 75 feet bottom width...as near the business portion of the city of New Orleans as practicable,” this being the busiest port in the region. To get there, the secretary recommended using “either the Harvey or Company Canal.”

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piecemeal, with limited funding and low prioritization.

All that changed with the discovery of oil in Texas. In 1905, businessmen in Victoria formed the Interstate Inland Waterway League and proposed an 18,000-mile network of interconnected waterways from the Gulf Coast up the Mississippi to the Great Lakes.

Their interest dovetailed with that of President Theodore Roosevelt, who formed the Inland Waterways Commission in 1907 in the hope that a domestic shipping system would bust the railroad trusts.

“The fall of 1907,” wrote historian Lynn Alperin, “witnessed an unprecedented crop of conventions and support for waterway improvements.” Planners began

## Why aren't sugar cane trucks covered?

A truck loaded with sugar cane heads south on La. 1 in Iberville Parish as sugar cane farmers work through harvest season.



STAFF FILE PHOTO  
BY HILARY SCHEINUK

BY LAUREN CHERAMIE  
Staff writer



In October through December, it never fails that I end up behind a sugar cane truck on my way from Baton Rouge to visit my family in Morgan City. During my route, I drive through Port Allen, Brusly, Addis, Plaquemine, White Castle, Pierre Part, Belle River and Stephenville on my way.

Truth be told, I'm always thankful for the sugar cane harvest because police cars

tend to stake out in between the tall stalks to catch speedy drivers. Though, while I'm cruising through, having a one-person concert in my car, I pray that a sugar cane truck doesn't pull out in front of me.

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# TUNNELS

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That recommendation pitted two private West Bank canals engaged in a century-long rivalry. The first had been dug by the Baratavia and Lafourche Canal Company, starting in 1829 and using enslaved labor, to connect present-day Westwego with Lockport and ultimately with today's Morgan City to the southwest.

Later known as the Company Canal, the operation came into the possession of the Barrow family, and remained an important channel bringing Baratavia seafood and other coastal resources into Salaville and through a lock on the Mississippi River.

The other canal had been launched by Nicholas Noel Destréhan, starting in 1839 and using paid laborers, to connect present-day Harvey with Bayou Baratavia and points south. Later taken over by Destréhan's talented daughter Louise Destréhan Harvey and renamed the Harvey Canal, the waterway competed with the Barrows' Company Canal, especially after the Harveys had a modern lock built on the Mississippi in 1907.

At first, neither the Barrows nor the Harveys knew quite what to make of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' inquiries about their interest in selling. The proposed free federal shipping waterway would surely put their toll canals out of business, but it could also dramatically increase access to their leaseable wharves, which would remain under private control.

## War breaks out

By this time, war had erupted in Europe, and the U.S. prepared to join the conflict. Getting materiel to the front became a national priority, and digging the Intracoastal Waterway rose in importance. In January 1917, the Corps sent a second round of inquiries to the Barrows and the Harveys.

The Harvey family responded with an offer of \$531,300, or roughly \$13 million in today's dollars. The Barrows vacillated, worrying that selling a portion of their much-longer waterway would "make the rest of the canal useless by cutting off its head," wrote the family patriarch, according to historian Thomas A. Becnel. Their lag in responding gave the Harveys an opportunity to establish better rapport with federal officials.

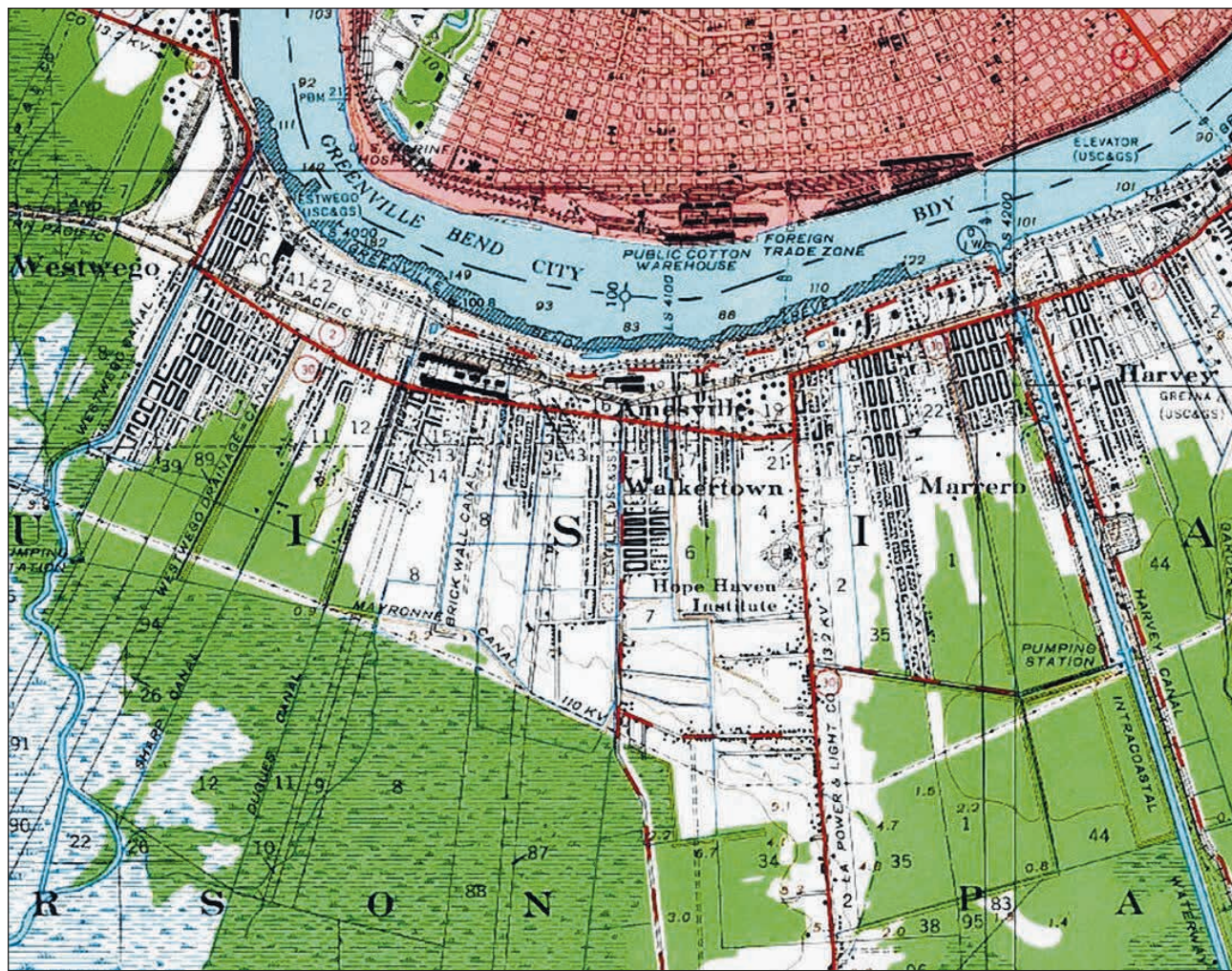
In the meanwhile, rising water on the Mississippi damaged the Company Canal lock in Westwego, forcing the Barrows to close their operation and relinquish their customers to the Harvey Canal — whose lock held just fine.

Officials also noted that the Harvey Canal was wider than the Company Canal, and sat closer to the heart of the Port of New Orleans and the Industrial Canal, through which the Intracoastal Waterway would be routed to points east.

In 1919, shortly after the end of World War I, the Corps made its decision: it would route the Intracoastal Waterway through the Harvey Canal. Following five years of negotiations and land acquisitions, in 1924 "the Harvey Canal Land and Improvement Company finally sold its canal to the United States Government [for] \$515,000," wrote historian William Reeves.

## A vital link

The Corps proceeded to dredge the channel, update



PROVIDED PHOTO/USGS

1950 map of Company Canal in Westwego at left, and Harvey Canal in Harvey, at right

its facilities, and in 1934, build a 425-foot-long, 75-foot-wide, 12-foot deep lock. The Harvey Canal became the most vital link in what would eventually become a 3000-mile-long toll-free public shipping channel, running along the Gulf Coast and Eastern Seaboard, from Texas to Massachusetts. The southern segment came to be known as the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, or GIWW.

As for the Company Canal, the Barrows did manage to sell its Lafourche-to-Terrebonne Parish section to host the GIWW. But the head of the canal, in the Salaville section of Westwego, lost value and was eventually filled.

During the 1930s through 1950s, West Bank populations grew with the opening of the Huey P. Long Bridge, the Avondale Shipyards and other riverfront industries. Commuter traffic became congested as it maneuvered to get across the Harvey Canal at 4th Street (now La. 18), creating what the Jefferson Parish Yearly Review called "one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in the State."

With a planned bridge over the Mississippi expected to create a boom, West Bank leaders called for new expressway to be built inland, which would require a new crossing at the Harvey Canal, aka GIWW — which itself had seen a boom in maritime traffic.

Indeed, the GIWW proved to be such a success that another bottleneck formed on the Harvey Canal, this one of vessels. Tugs and barges lined up five-deep at the lock in Harvey, and, just like the motorists on 4th Street, crews felt they had to wait too long for the drawbridge to allow them to pass.

## Alternative route authorized

Widening the Harvey Canal would be too costly, so in 1948, Congress instead authorized an alternative GIWW route to be dug along the Jefferson/Plaquemines parish line and across Cut Off in Algiers. Excavation began in the early 1950s, followed by the construction of a lock at the river, a bridge for today's Gen. DeGaulle Drive and Woodland Highway, and a combined railroad bridge, auto bridge, and an auto tunnel to access Belle Chasse — "the first underwater tunnel in the state," according to the Jefferson Parish Yearly

Review. The new facilities, including the GIWW Alternative Route (aka Algiers Canal) all opened by spring 1956.

By this time, a similar tunnel was under construction for the new West Bank Expressway as it crossed the original Harvey Canal segment of the GIWW. Members of the Harvey Canal Industrial Club had initially debated whether to build a bridge, but in July 1950 unanimously endorsed a tunnel because of concerns over what President Joseph G. Boudreaux explained as "serious impairment to the business interests" due to a bridge's possible "low clearance for large vessels." State officials concurred, opting for a tunnel instead.

Described by the Jefferson Parish Yearly Review as "the second fully automatic underwater tunnel in the world," the underpass comprised "two parallel tubes, each having 2-lane concrete highways," and ran 1080 feet underground across a full span of "1850 feet ...

from ground level to ground level."

The Harvey Tunnel opened in September 1957, one year after the Belle Chasse Tunnel and one year before the opening of the Greater New Orleans Mississippi River Bridge.

## Growing population

West Bank population indeed soared following the new infrastructure, so much of which was configured around that 1919-1924 decision of where to route the GIWW. Whereas 53,000 people lived in the contiguous urbanized areas of the West Bank in 1943, nearly 100,000 called the West Bank home in 1960, and 170,000 in 1970.

Commuter traffic overwhelmed the design capacity of the 1958 bridge, and after decades of planning and construction, a second span opened in 1988, becoming today's Crescent City Connection. By 2000, the West Bank's population hit the quarter-million mark.

Since then, like so many other Louisiana communi-

ties, West Bank populations have leveled off and begun to age — as has its infrastructure.

In 2018, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development began the process of replacing the Belle Chasse Tunnel with a new midlevel fixed-span bridge for two-way traffic over the GIWW Alternative Route. Louisiana's "first underwater tunnel" closed permanently in December 2023, and around the same time, workers sealed off the Harvey Tunnel for much-needed maintenance.

Imagine how different the West Bank would look today had the Corps a century ago selected the Company Canal for the GIWW. Nicholas Noel Destréhan's channel in Harvey might have been filled in, and the West Bank Expressway would rise high over Westwego or plunge beneath a tunnel at Louisiana Street.

Or perhaps the Harvey Canal would have become the Alternative Route in the 1950s, meaning that there

would be no Algiers Canal or Belle Chasse Tunnel. Indeed, we'd have a whole different West Bank drainage and hurricane risk-reduction system, because in geography as in ecology, everything is interconnected.

## The downside of tunnels

Another impact of our two tunnels, as well as the third built under the GIWW in Houma in 1961, is that they seem to have dissuaded regional transportation planners from building any more. Dug into soggy soils in a deltaic region, all three leaked frequently and required lots of maintenance.

"Never build a tunnel if you can build anything else," warned New York planner Robert Moses in his 1946 Arterial Plan for New Orleans, and since the 1960s, state officials have apparently agreed.

To get an idea of what was at stake when the Corps made its decision during 1919-1924, visit the River Road at Louisiana Street in Westwego, and you will see two massive concrete walls embedded in the levee. That was the lock of the Company Canal, which ran parallel to Louisiana Street until it was filled in during 1959-1962.

You can still see a slight depression in the terrain, traceable to the enslaved workers who dug it starting in 1829. The former Company Canal, which specialized in seafood and spawned a "cannery row" in Salaville, also explains the location of the popular Westwego Shrimp Lot seafood market, adjacent to the small fishing fleet on placid Bayou Segnette.

It's a far cry from the maritime bustle and canal-side industry in Harvey and Belle Chasse, and it all came close to playing out very differently.

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