



entertainment  
**LIVING**

NOLA.COM | SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2024 1D

**Well versed**

Mona Lisa Saloy's latest book is chosen for One Book One New Orleans

BY LESLIE CARDE  
Contributing writer

*"7th Ward kisses the Mississippi where Esplanade begins & sashays her bottom at Lake Pontchartrain ..."*

Those lines, from a poem called "7th Ward" by storyteller and former Louisiana poet laureate Mona Lisa Saloy, are from her current book of poetry, "Black Creole Chronicles."

It's part of a melodic ride through a fascinating world that the author inhabits. Her ability to capture in cadence everything from the past segregation of Lincoln Beach and the current violence in her 7th Ward neighborhood has put her in the spotlight for this year's One Book One New Orleans 2024 book selection.

Her winning book was picked from 57 potential candidates and won out over two other finalists, Karisma Price's "I'm Always So Serious" and Jami Attenberg's "All This Could Be Yours."

Megan Holt, executive director of One Book One New Orleans, explains what struck a chord with the committee.

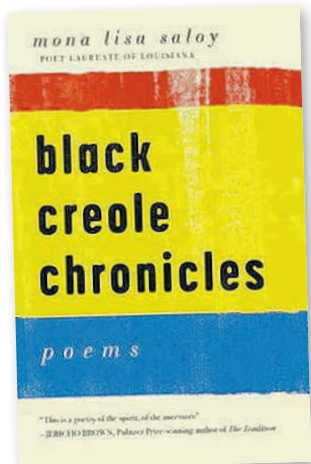


Saloy

"Its vivid depictions of family, neighborhood characters, artistic movements and historic moments create a text that is both timely and timeless," Holt said. "It's deeply rooted in our city, and we felt our readers would see their families and communities in these poems."

As part of the nonprofit's mission to break down the barriers between books and their potential readers, a curriculum is developed around each book chosen, one a year. The lesson plan is given to adult education literacy programs around the city.

Putting books inside the Orleans Parish Prison is the organization's newest initiative, with 100 books donated each month. Visiting authors come to speak, and a book club there has become a big hit.



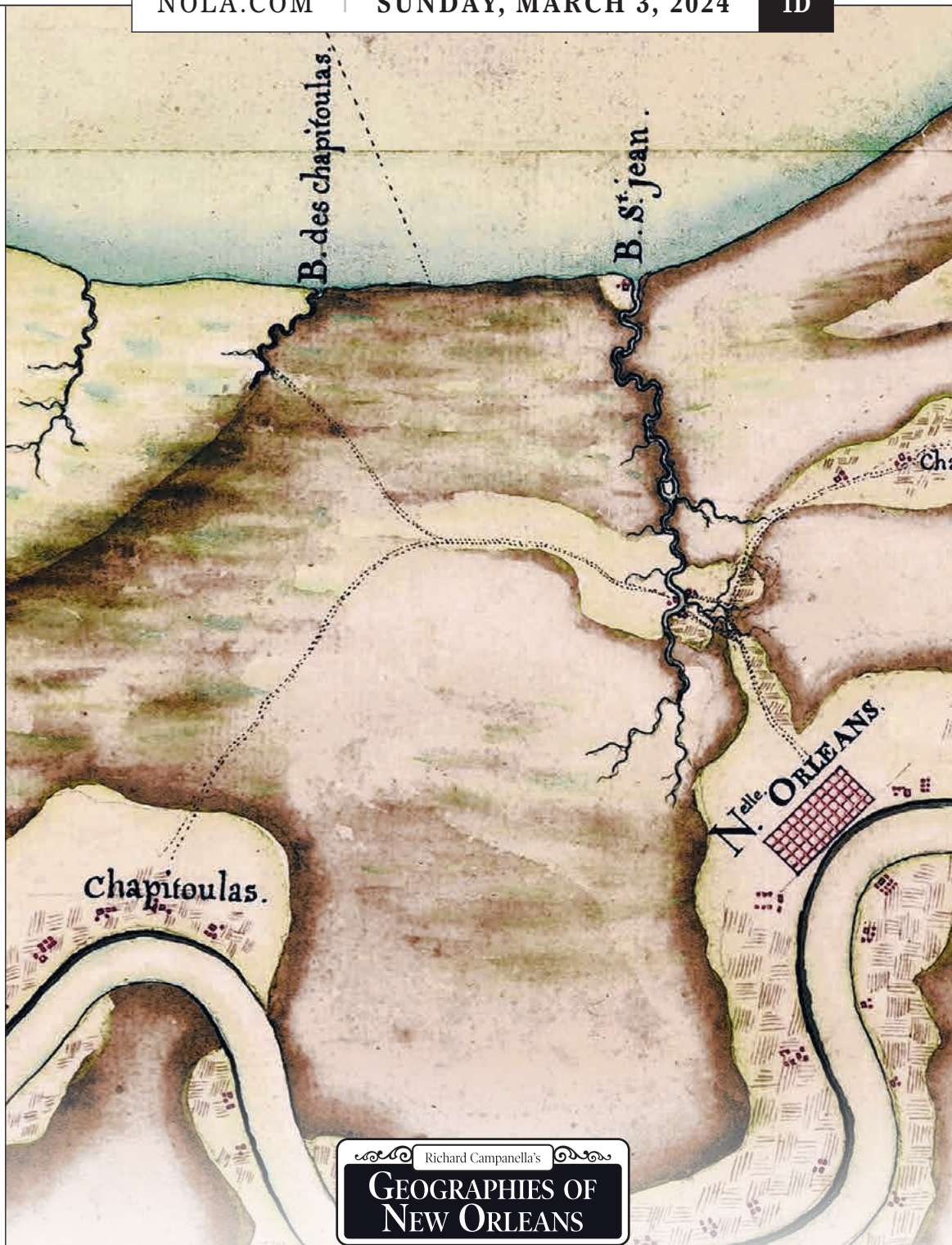
A rich back story

Author Saloy draws inspiration for her poems from a rich back story. When she writes about segregation and Jim Crow laws, she knows whereof she speaks.

Growing up in New Orleans, she lost her mother as a teenager. She attended a 7th Ward public high school after her father told her there was no more tuition for Xavier Prep.

Upon graduation, amid segregation and the barriers to a Black Creole woman trying to make it in the world, she left New Orleans and headed for Seattle, where her sister, who is

► See SALOY, page 9D



*Twists & Turns*

HOW NATIVE KNOWLEDGE OF PORTAGES INFLUENCED FOUNDING OF NEW ORLEANS

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA | Contributing writer

**O**n a foggy morning 325 years ago, a French explorer learned a geography lesson that would forever alter our regional destiny.

The explorer was Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, along with his brother Bienville and crew; the informants were Native people possibly of the Quinipissas tribe; and the lesson came while sailing up the Mississippi River, after anchoring two other ships in the Mississippi Sound.

"The Indian I have with me," wrote Iberville aboard the *Badine* on March 9, 1699, "pointed out to me the place through which the Indians make their portage to this river from the back of the bay where the ships are anchored. They drag their canoes over a rather good road (whose) distance ... was slight."

► See PORTAGES, page 8D

**TOP:** This detail from the 1749 Saucier Map shows the Bayou Road portage as a dashed lined above the word 'Orleans,' which was a key reason why Bienville established New Orleans here in 1718. But it is believed that the portage initially described on March 8, 1699, was actually the dashed lined shown at left, in the Chapitoulas area. | PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



How many bridges cross the Mississippi River in Louisiana?

BY JAN RISHER  
Staff writer

A reader asked, "How many bridges cross the Mississippi River in Louisiana?"

The answer to the question has some variables, including if you're counting bridges that cross into Louisiana along with the rest of the bridges that are completely in Louisiana.

Rodney Mallett, communications director for Louisiana's Department of Transportation and Development, confirms that the list of Mississippi River bridges in Louisiana, from north to south, including those that cross into Louisiana from Mississippi, is:

- The Old Vicksburg Bridge, former U.S. 80, completed in 1930
- Vicksburg Bridge, I-20/U.S. 80, built in 1973
- Natchez-Vidalia Bridge, U.S. 84/U.S. 425, originally built in 1940, rebuilt in 1988
- John James Audubon Bridge in St. Francisville and New Roads, La. 10, completed in 2011
- Huey P. Long Bridge (Baton Rouge and Port Allen), U.S. 190, completed in 1940
- Horace Wilkinson Bridge (Baton Rouge and Port Allen), I-10, completed in 1968
- Sunshine Bridge (Donaldsonville and Sorrento), La. 70, completed in 1964
- Gramercy Bridge (Wallace and Gramercy), La. 3213, completed in 1995
- Hale Boggs Memorial Bridge (Destrehan and Luling), I-310, completed in 1983
- Huey P. Long Bridge (Harahan and Bridge City), U.S. 90, originally built in 1935 and rebuilt in 2013
- Crescent City Connection (New Orleans), U.S. 90 Business, originally built in 1958 and rebuilt in 1988

Five ferries cross the Mississippi River in Louisiana, but only one of them is run by the DOTD.

Mississippi River ferries in Louisiana include: the Plaquemine Ferry (Sunshine and Plaquemine), the Canal Street Ferry (New Orleans), the Chalmette-Lower Algiers Ferry (Chalmette and New Orleans), the Belle Chasse-Scarsdale Ferry (Scarsdale and Belle Chasse) and the Pointe à la Hache Ferry (Pointe à la Hache and West Pointe à la Hache).

"The only ferries that the DOTD runs is the Plaquemine Ferry," Mallett said. "The rest are private."

As Mallett talks about bridges and ferries, the inevitable question of new bridges bubbled to the surface.

"People compare Louisiana's part of the Mississippi to other cities," Mallett said.

Relatively speaking, Mallett said that building a bridge, say in Baton Rouge, is quite an undertaking because of the span of the river, compared to a bridge that crosses the Mississippi further upstream.

For example, the Mark Twain Memorial Bridge in Hannibal, Missouri, is at its longest span 640 feet long — compared to the Horace Wilkinson Bridge in Baton Rouge at 14,150 feet long and the Huey P. Long Bridge in

► See CURIOUS, page 9D



# PORTAGES

Continued from page 1D

Iberville learned that by use of such a portage (a short distance connecting two navigable waterbodies), he could circumvent the treacherous mouth of the Mississippi and sail inland through Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John instead. Nineteen years later, Bienville would capitalize on that lesson when he selected the site to establish New Orleans.

Researchers have concurred that the portage Iberville described in 1699 was today's Bayou Road, extending from Gov. Nicholls Street to Bayou St. John. Among them were the late historian Richebourg Gailard McWilliams, who translated and annotated Iberville's Gulf Journals (University of Alabama Press, 1981), and myself, in one of my earlier books.

But a close reading of Iberville's journal entries leads me to question whether the portage he described was precisely today's Bayou Road.

The evidence is in the meanders.

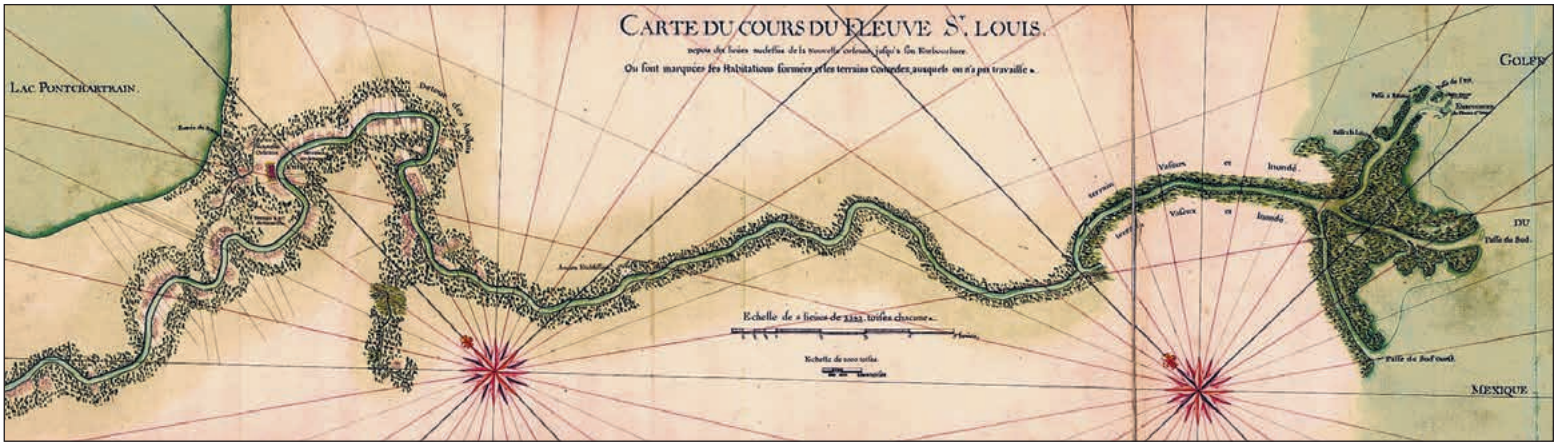
## Bends in the river

Lacking discernible landmarks, Iberville relied on meanders, or bends in the river, to mark his passage, and measured his daily progress using the unit league, which equates to about 3 miles. Though much has changed on the lower Mississippi, the river's major bends have generally retained their shape, allowing us to follow Iberville's waypoints.

Iberville first entered the main channel of the Mississippi on Tuesday, March 3, 1699 — fortuitously “Mardy Gras day,” as he wrote it. “Two leagues and a half above the mouth it forks into three branches,” he noted in reference to the river's birdfoot-shaped delta, after which he proceeded up its main middle channel, “being 350 to 400 fathoms wide,” or 2,100 to 2,400 feet wide, not too far off from its current width.

“From the forks up to 6 leagues inland,” Iberville continued, “the river is rather straight, running northwest 5 (degrees) north” — that's the section along present-day Venice — “then it winds west for 2 leagues and again runs northwest,” meaning the bends from Boothville to Triumph to Buras.

The expedition camped “at a bend it makes to the west, 12 leagues above the mouth, on a point on the right side (east bank) of the river, to which we have given the name Mardy Gras.”



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

This detail from a 1732 map shows the sequence of meanders Iberville described in his initial expedition up the Mississippi River in 1699.

On Ash Wednesday, March 4, Iberville progressed “8½ leagues, coming to several bends the river makes to the west-northwest and north-northwest,” meaning the Jesuit Bend stretch past Empire and Sulphur.

## Approaching Belle Chasse?

Fog slowed the expedition on Thursday, by which time Iberville noted how meanders that had previously “shifted from west to southwest” were now leaning “northwest and north,” implying the present-day Alliance and Woodlawn areas of Plaquemines Parish, approaching Belle Chasse.

Conditions worsened Friday, March 6, when “all morning there was fog and no wind,” and the Badine progressed “with great difficulty” amid uprooted trees and strong currents. The expedition reached “the first bend the river makes east-northeast,” meaning the Braithwaite area, then headed east, “at the end of which I made camp on the right side of the river,” around Caernarvon. “Today I made 6½ leagues.”

The twists kept coming on Saturday, March 7, when an exasperated Iberville summarized “that the river bends a great deal from northeast to southwest, through the north and the west. Over a distance of 2 leagues it will make two and three bends.” This is clearly a reference to English Turn, a name for a sharp meander coined later that summer, when Bienville bluffed an enemy British corvette into retreating.

It's tough to say exactly where the men spent the night of March 7, but the sequence of bends indicates he had completely circumnavigated English Turn, up to where the channel pointed to “the west,” putting his campsite around today's Chalmette.

Strong headwinds on Sunday, March 8, meant the Badine “made only 4½ leagues and camped on the right side of the river. My

men are getting very tired.” This important entry puts Iberville in today's Uptown New Orleans on Sunday night — past the future French Quarter site, and its Bayou Road portage.

## ‘A rather good road’

Which brings us to Monday, March 9, when Iberville wrote that “two leagues from the place where we stopped for the night,” he saw where “the Indians make their portage,” and went on to describe that “rather good road, at which we found several pieces of baggage owned by men that were going there or were returning.”

So let's add another 6 river miles (two leagues) to our Uptown campsite, and that puts Iberville in the vicinity of the Elmwood/Harahan area — well upriver of where researchers had presumed the portage to be.

So where, exactly, was Iberville's portage or, more accurately, the portage pointed out by his Native informant?

I will readily acknowledge that, given the margin of error in estimating our waypoints, and the imprecision of the league measurements, one could piece together an itinerary that puts Iberville closer to the French Quarter/Bayou Road site on March 9, as researchers have previously surmised.

But it's a stretch — or rather, a compression. That is, you have to compress Iberville's distances, meanders, campsites and other clues to “force” him to hit that target on that date.

More likely, I believe, the portage he saw involved a shortcut to the Metairie Ridge, which also gets you to Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain.

The Metairie Ridge is a slender natural levee created by a former channel of the Mississippi River, which subsequently shifted into its current path, leaving diminishing amounts of water to continue

to flow along what is now Metairie Road, City Park Avenue and Gentilly Boulevard.

Around the time of Iberville's expedition, that former channel had become an abandoned distributary, that is, a narrow and sluggish bayou (Bayou Metairie, parts of which still exist in City Park) whose upraised banks allowed for passage through the swamps. Following that footpath got you to Bayou St. John and “the back of the bay,” as Iberville described what turned out to be Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Borgne, and the Mississippi Sound.

## But how to get there ...

How to get from the river to the Metairie Ridge? Depending on seasonal conditions, you had two options. One is shown clearly on the 1749 Saucier Map as a dashed line emerging from the “Chapitoulas Coast” near Elmwood, and connecting with the Metairie Ridge near today's Metairie Cemetery. Here, the backslope of the river's natural levee nearly merged with the upslope to the Metairie Ridge, such that, during dry conditions, one could walk from river to ridge.

A second option could be found where the abandoned distributary had forked off from the Mississippi, just upriver from Harahan in today's River Ridge. Here, travelers carrying pirogues and baggage (“portage” in French comes from “porter,” to carry) could walk from the riverbank onto the Metairie Ridge and onward to the bayou and bay (lake), exactly as that Native informant described.

That same Saucier Map depicts yet another such portage farther upriver, at “Bayou Tigoutou” (likely Bayou Trepagnier) in today's St. Charles Parish.

The dashed lines on the Saucier Map illustrate the larger historical significance of what the French had learned from Natives:

By using these portages, you could access the river without going up the river. These back-door shortcuts were so important that Natives had a word for them in the Mugulasha tongue: “imashaka,” meaning rear entrance, and the origin of Bayou Manchac — itself a back door, into the Baton Rouge region.

Iberville ascertained the portage he saw in March 1699 when he sailed into Lake Pontchartrain in early 1700. “I got to the mouth of the stream,” he wrote of Bayou St. John on January 17; “it is 20 yards wide, 10 feet deep, and 1 league long.” The next day he “went to the portage, which I found to be 1 league long, (traversing) a country of canes and fine woods, suitable to live in.” He had his men carry three canoes over the portage, today's Bayou Road, and arrived “at a spot where the Quinipissas once had a village, 1½ leagues above this portage” — likely a reference to the area he visited the prior March, now the Elmwood/Harahan area.

In 1717, long after the death of Iberville, Bienville was charged “to establish, thirty leagues up the river, a burg which should be called Nouvelle Orléans, where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain.” In spring 1718, Bienville established New Orleans where the French Quarter is today — a decision traceable back to that cross-cultural geography lesson first made 325 years ago this week.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Draining New Orleans,” “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” “Bienville's Dilemma,” and “Bourbon Street: A History.” Campanella may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.*