



# entertainment LIVING

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Eads Jetties under construction, Harper's Weekly 1883 | PHOTO COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

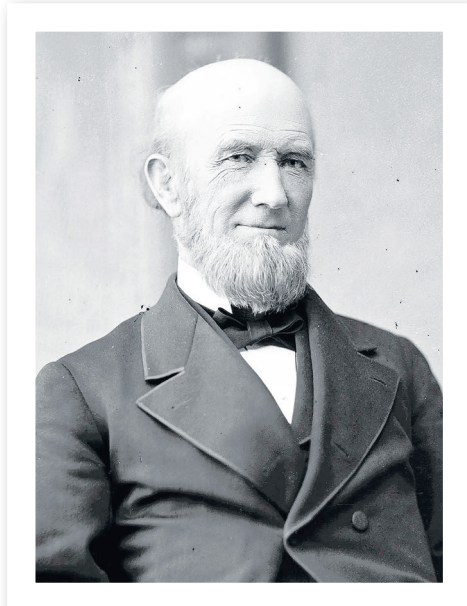
# Setting the **BAR** high

**MEET THE GENTLEMAN FROM ST. LOUIS WHO SAVED THE PORT OF NEW ORLEANS, 150 YEARS AGO THIS SPRING**

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
Contributing writer

**F**ew words distressed navigators more than “the bar” — referring to the sandbar that regularly obstructed the mouth of the Mississippi River — until a remarkable engineer from St. Louis solved the problem, starting 150 years ago this month.

Sedimentation had vexed river navigation since the founding of Louisiana, but the 1870s saw the worst of it. “The Port of New Orleans,” wrote historian Walter M. Lowrey, “was almost hermetically sealed for months.”



PROVIDED PHOTO FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
James Buchanan Eads

## Richard Campanella's **GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS**

The product of natural processes exacerbated by deforestation and poor soil conservation, immense quantities of sand, silt and clay particles settled to form shoals and sandbars in the three passes connecting the main river channel to the sea. Historically, much of this sediment would have been dispersed across the deltaic plain, beneficially shoring up the coastal wetlands. But the construction of artificial levees along the lower Mississippi redirected that increasing sediment load to concentrate within the river channel. Now, oceanic vessels, ever-growing in size and weight, found their hulls at greater risk of running aground among the shifting shoals.

Ships awaited the right conditions to “jump the bar,”

explained one traveler in the 1870s. Positioned “at the shoal of danger,” the pilot would lay on the steam and strike “the bar full speed ahead,” until passengers felt “a jolt, a scraping, a grinding on the sand.” Some ships cleared the bar; others got stuck; all lost time and money. “A landlubber cannot imagine what it means to be a pilot.”

### Maritime logistics

Navigators had tried everything from digging to dredging to solve the problem, but ended up learning to live with it, by building an outpost named La Balise (“sea beacon”) where sailing ships could transfer cargo to smaller boats to be rowed upriver. Others took soundings to feel out a safe passage, or contracted with tow boats, later powered by steam, to be dragged upriver.

In 1832, Louisiana state

► See **GEOGRAPHIES**, page **8D**

# Is there a cemetery where graves face the wrong way?

BY ROBIN MILLER  
Staff writer



Blame it on the gravedigger.

As the story goes, he's responsible for the incorrect layout of the St. Joseph Catholic Church Cemetery at 401 S. Adams Ave., in Rayne, which caught the eye of “Ripley's Believe It Or Not!” in 1997.

Ripley's featured the cemetery in its syndicated newspaper comic panel on July 24,

1997, declaring that not only did the gravesites' north-south placement

buck the cemetery tradition of east and west, it was also the only cemetery in the United States with graves facing the wrong way.

### 'Wrong Way Cemetery'

This may account for its local nickname, the “Wrong Way Cemetery.”

A Louisiana State Historical

Marker standing caddy corner commemorates the cemetery's incorrect layout, concluding that no one really knows why or how this happened.

Which prompted Dee Jeffers' inquiry.

“I grew up in Branch, and I have relatives buried in that cemetery,” the Baton Rouge resident said. “We knew the graves were facing the wrong way, but no one ever said why.”

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The gravesites in St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery No. 1 in Rayne are positioned north and south instead of the traditional east and west, which earned it the nickname, the “Wrong Way Cemetery.”

STAFF PHOTO  
BY ROBIN MILLER

# Taking a moment for a miracle just in time for spring

I have my late friend and fellow journalist Relma Hargus to thank for introducing me to cedar waxwings many years ago. You might already know about these beautiful birds, which are most visible in Louisiana in late winter and early spring.

They're about as big as cardinals, mostly olive and bright yellow, with red wing tips that resemble wax and inspire their funny nickname. The most striking feature is the black bandit mask across their eyes, fitting for a bird that loves to plunder.

Cedar waxwings pillage fruit and berries, and they work quickly, often stripping a tree in minutes before moving on. As Relma



suggested, if you see a cedar waxwing, pause and take note.

Its presence is a glancing gift, one to savor precisely because it won't last long.

Relma had a knack for living in the moment, which can be a complicated thing for anyone who works in a deadline-driven newsroom. She saw the frantic hands of our office clock as little more

than a friendly wave. Many an editor sighed in defeat as the appointed hour arrived and Relma's copy had not yet arrived.

She was a woman prone to private reveries, perhaps more interested in the coming of waxwings than the urgencies of daily journalism.

All of this came to mind a few weekends ago as my wife and I were having breakfast on the patio. A busy day loomed, and we were headed inside when my wife spotted the season's first waxwing on our hollies.

If we hadn't lingered that morning, we would have missed it.

I was working from home a few days later when, from the corner

of my eye, I spotted our stand of hollies as they trembled in the afternoon sun. Every tree was alive with cedar waxwings, drawn to the big red berries adorning the leaves. Birds crowded the branches, some upside down as they reached for the best meal.

Fifty or more birds worked the trees in a lively swarm, darting back and forth like bees rising from a hive. The legal pad on my desk included a long list of assignments to finish, messages to answer, meetings to attend.

I hadn't penciled in any appointments with waxwings.

Then I thought of Relma and her advice about waxwings — the notion that their arrival is reason

enough to pause. I grabbed some binoculars from a nearby shelf, training my gaze on a single waxwing within the flock. He was perched near a thick bunch of berries that were mounded like grapes at an emperor's feast.

With astonishing speed, he gobbled them up, each berry sliding down his gullet as quickly as a marble into a sock. I watched it all for a few minutes, then returned to my keyboard, my smartphone, my list of things to do.

I'd made time for a small miracle of spring. Somewhere, I suppose, dear Relma was smiling.

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## GEOGRAPHIES

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engineer Benjamin Buisson proposed digging a six-mile circumvention canal into the Breton Sound in lower Plaquemines Parish. Such a channel would need a lock to connect with the river, putting the canal's \$10 million cost well out of reach. Pilots had no choice but to dodge, dredge or drag their way through the problem, while engineers tried dynamite charges, self-activating scraper dredges and inflatable pontoons, all to little avail.

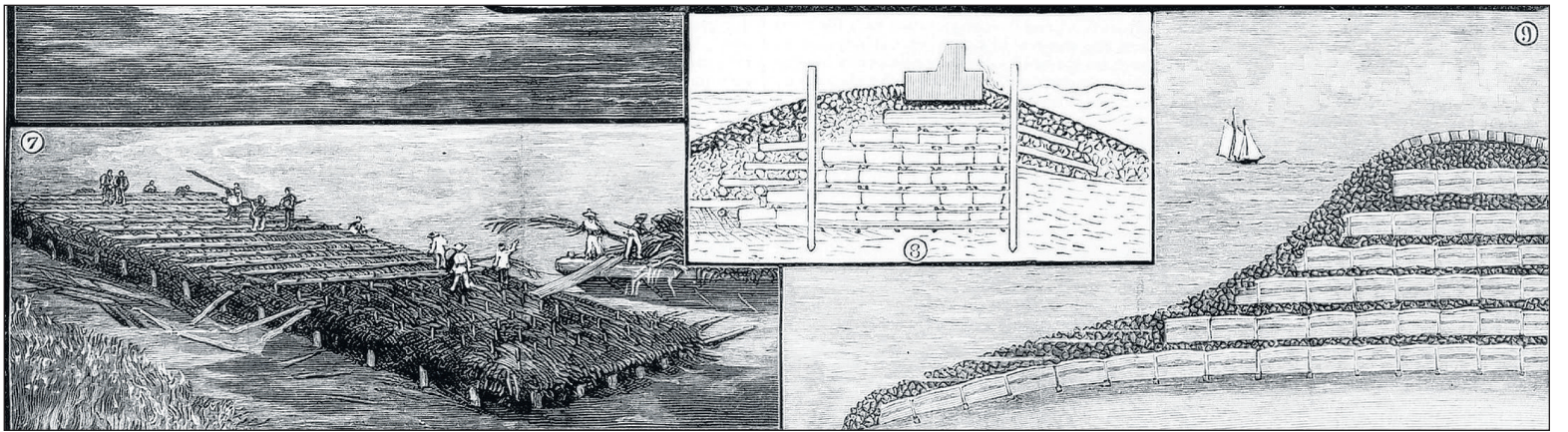
In 1852, the War Department proposed building twin five-mile-long jetties along two passes at the mouth, in the hope of narrowing the flow, speeding the velocity and flushing out the bedload. The jetty idea had been around since the 1720s, but not until now were the resources available for such an undertaking. Officials contracted with a Kentucky firm to drive wooden pilings into the muck at intervals of 15 feet, nail them together with stringers and cover them with planks. Within weeks, powerful currents destroyed half the barricades, and sea worms devoured the rest.

The failure gave jetties a bad name in the local shipping community, even as the sedimentation problem worsened in the 1860s. Entrepreneurs devised various schemes to save the Port of New Orleans. One outfit proposed a navigation waterway cut from Jefferson Parish through eastern New Orleans out to Ship Island, the only lasting result of which is today's 17th Street Drainage Outfall Canal. Another group proposed cutting a gigantic seaway across the West Bank down past Grand Isle to circumvent the clogged river mouth.

By 1872, the idea of a lower Plaquemines bypass channel, first floated 40 years earlier and now known as the Fort St. Philip Canal, became the recommended recourse of the nation's best engineers.

### The honorary captain

About the only voice of opposition came from a courtly gentleman with no formal training and only the honorary title of "captain" in front of his name, James Buchanan Eads. Those in the St.



Eads Jetties under construction, Harper's Weekly 1883

PHOTO COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Louis area revered the charismatic Eads for his astonishing accomplishments and reputation for never asking someone to take a risk he would not take himself. Eads had personally rambled on the bottom of the Mississippi River in a frogman suit, salvaging wrecks while learning about sediment dynamics in the most in-situ manner. He also designed a daring long-arch cantilever bridge in St. Louis that is still in use today.

Eads did not even bother to opine on the Fort St. Philip Canal. He knew plainly that the solution was jetties; they just had to be designed properly for a river like the Mississippi. And he knew precisely how to do it. They had to be designed not just to withstand sediment dynamics, but to benefit from them. They also had to be extended long enough to discharge the mobilized particles off the continental shelf.

Eads' rebuke made him enemies in high places. Chief of Engineers Gen. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys had the backing of army engineers in calling for the Fort St. Philip Canal, while leaders in New Orleans resented the intrusion of a man from St. Louis into their affairs. They resolutely opposed jetties, recounting their failure in the 1850s as evidence.

### Winning allies on the army side

Eads' steadfast defense of properly built jetties began to win over allies on the army side. One was Gen. John G. Barnard, who, having the rank and credentials Eads lacked, made the case for jetties using language his colleagues understood, e.g., benefits versus costs. Given the military hierarchy, however, Barnard could not contradict his superiors,

nor could he lobby Congress or persuade the public.

Eads, on the other hand, could do all those things, with aplomb. In January 1874, he wrote a letter to a Missouri senator requesting \$8 million to build his jetties to secure a depth of 28 feet across a 600-foot channel to the sea. Then came the kicker: "No cure, no pay," wrote Eads. If he succeeded, the nation reaped the benefits. If he failed, Eads alone ate the costs.

Army engineers remonstrated. The press scoffed. "One group in New Orleans," wrote historian Harold Sinclair, "pleaded with Congress not to heed the mad Eads, on the ground that the jetties could cause the Mississippi to back up and literally annihilate the helpless city!"

Gradually, the tide turned. Americans became fascinated by the drama. Army engineers defected to the jetty camp. Politicians compared the costs of the Fort St. Philip Canal's complicated lock to the natural solution of Eads' no-risk proposal.

On March 3, 1875, Congress authorized the gentleman from St. Louis to build his jetties on the toughest of the river's three outlets—South Pass, which at the time had only 8 feet of draft. Eads had promised 28 feet.

### Willow trees as mattresses

In April, Eads began building facilities and housing at a place that would be called Port Eads. He dispatched some workers to cut thousands of willow trees and weave them into dense mattresses, and others to secure timbers to serve as guide pilings.

On June 14, barges with steam-powered drivers began hammering the pilings deeply into

the muck, in pairs, as if building 30-foot-wide boardwalks on each side of the 700-foot-wide pass. Within two weeks, the twin rows of pilings extended a thousand feet, and progressed 200 feet per day into the sea.

The willow-brush mattresses were then placed between the piling pairs and weighed down with rocks and riprap until they lodged deeply in the mud, forming a permeable wall of wood.

Herein lay the genius of Eads' design: as river water passed through the mattresses, intricate branches and twigs trapped its suspended sediment and turned the willows into self-maintaining walls of caked mud, which in turn strengthened them and preserved the wood.

The dual pilings became a dike of sorts, and their tops were sealed off with concrete to become jetties, extending two miles into Gulf waters. What resulted was a massive chute through which the accelerated water became the world's most effective self-dredging machine.

Having measured only 8 feet deep in spring 1875, South Pass had deepened to 26 feet by late 1876; a month later, it reached 30 feet. Even as the work progressed, "the largest steamers and ships plying to New Orleans," wrote a government inspector, "(found) a much safer, wider, and deeper entrance than has ever before been secured."

By the time work was completed in 1879, everyone knew Eads had "cured" the problem and earned his "pay."

### Port of New Orleans is saved

The impact on commerce was exhilarating. Steamers carried

26 times more export tonnage in 1880 compared to five years earlier. Exports from St. Louis increased 66-fold, to 453,681 tons, during the same period.

Having dropped to the ninth largest in the nation, the Port of New Orleans regained its position as the nation's second port, after New York. Eads became a national hero, and those who scoffed at him caught collective amnesia about the Fort St. Philip Canal.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Eads embarked on other major projects, wearing himself down to the point of exhaustion. "I cannot die," he wrote; "I have not finished my work."

Indeed he had not, even after his death at age 66 in 1887. Congress in 1902 authorized the dredging of Southwest Pass and the construction of the same jetties Eads had designed for South Pass, which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers carried out in 1908.

South Pass was finally retired as an oceanic ship channel in the 1970s, a full century after Eads' salvation of the Port of New Orleans. Modern jetties built with Eads' design principles remain in service today, and vestiges of his originals, started 150 years ago this month, may still be seen south of Port Eads.

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