



entertainment  
LIVING

NOLA.COM | SUNDAY, JUNE 8, 2025

1D



When Canal streetcars returned, scofflaws cut line for first

How can you tell if an event is going to be of extraordinary historical importance? Well, there are many ways, but for this discussion, it would be if it happens at 3:10 a.m. on a Sunday morning on the Canal Street neutral ground, and there is a large gathering waiting to experience it. An extra touch is if two guys from Morning Call unexpectedly come



by, set up a table and serve free beignets and coffee. Historians will note that the date was April 18, 2004. The weather was cool but pleasant. Ahead would be a moment of redemption. An urban planning mistake implemented 40 years earlier, on May 31, 1964, when the Canal Street streetcar line had been shut down, was now, mercifully, being reversed. Many cities had abandoned their trolley lines by the mid-’60s as automobiles took over the streets. General Motors and others had done their part by promoting gas-guzzling, road hogging buses in place of streetcars — energy efficient, pollution free, “light rail” cars that stayed on their own tracks.

New Orleans once had 28 streetcar lines run by six private companies. By 1964, there were only two lines left: St. Charles and Canal, consolidated under RTA, the public Regional Transit Authority. The Canal line was being closed, but only with the promise that the St. Charles line, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, would survive. Today, St. Charles and Canal lines carry passengers all day, every day. The on-and-off Rampart Street line, shut down by problems from the Hard Rock Hotel collapse to wire theft, returned to full duty last Sunday. Jack Stewart, an urban expert and streetcar buff, who had founded a rail preservation group called “Streetcars Desired,” was on the last ride on the Canal line in 1964. He recalled to reporters that the somber experience was like “torture, as though your insides were being torn up.” Riders, he remembered, had “dour faces.” But four decades later, he anxiously awaited the new

➤ See **STREETCARS**, page 7D

Plaquemines Parish’s largest community was a microcosm of New Orleans



The Balize in 1853, from Harpers Weekly, courtesy of Southern University

PROVIDED PHOTO

IN SEARCH  
OF  
THE BALIZE

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
Contributing writer

Ships anchoring. Cargo in transit. Sailors milling about. A diverse population, with more than its share of taverns and cabarets. Ah, New Orleans, right? Not quite. This was the Balize — or La Balise, meaning seamar



or beacon in French. Located in the low-ermost portions of Plaquemines Parish on the extreme fringes of the North American continent, this windswept shoal was a place of many names, various spellings and frequent reconstructions across at least three different sites. But it had only purpose: to guide ships in and out of the Mississippi River, thus enabling New Orleans to become a world port. Its need came as a bit of a shock to French colonials who, from initial descriptions, had surmised that the Father of Waters would offer smooth sailing. It did not.

**Sandbars clogged delta complex**  
The first impediment was “the



Map of Balize as of 1720, made by Thomas Jefferys in 1759

bar,” a series of sandbars clogging the delta complex at the river’s mouth. Next came the shallow drafts within each of the passes leading to the main channel, where vessels met the full force of the contrary current, along with logs and masses of mud-caked debris. This being a century before steam propulsion, ships could proceed upriver only by sail. Contrary winds required difficult tacking maneuvers, whereas favorable winds reversed at the

next meander, and no wind meant you were dead in the water. It could take weeks or even months to sail the 95 miles up to New Orleans, making the trip at times more arduous than the voyage across the Atlantic. Thus the need for a beacon-marked relay station. The idea for La Balise came from Adrien de Pauger, the same engineer who had designed the street grid of today’s French

➤ See **THE BALIZE**, page 6D

How did Saint Katharine Drexel get around?

Katharine Drexel was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2001. Drexel used her inherited wealth to found Xavier University in New Orleans but also traveled to Carencro to establish Catholic schools for Black children.

FILE PHOTO



BY ROBIN MILLER  
Staff writer

The Our Lady of Assumption Catholic School in Carencro is just a wood-frame building, nothing fancy. It’s not even in use, but it’s still standing in the same spot where Katharine Drexel founded and funded its construction at 410 N. Michaud St., next to Our Lady of Assumption Catholic Church. Perhaps its longevity is a testa-



ment to the resilience of the canonized saint’s work, who used her inherited fortune to serve Black and Native American communities throughout the United States. She followed a calling from God to become a nun and founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. This ministry eventually landed her in Carencro, where she established Catholic schools for Black children. The

schools were later consolidated into Our Lady of Assumption Catholic School. And it was this story that prompted Carencro resident Clara Arceneaux’s question about the school. “Do you have information on St. Katharine Drexel being escorted by Sosthene Arceneaux in a buggy to locate property to build a school for Black children

➤ See **CURIOUS**, page 7D



# THE BALIZE

Continued from page 1D

Quarter. A man of many talents, Pauger understood river hydrology and concluded that good engineering could resolve the shoaling problem. He argued forcefully that the capital of Louisiana should not be at the coastal ports of Mobile or Biloxi, but rather at New Orleans, gateway to the Mississippi Valley.

La Balise would be the key to that gate. In a communique dated Dec. 23, 1721, officials in Paris ordered the establishment of La Balise, and in the very next passage, made New Orleans the capital of Louisiana — just as Pauger recommended.

## A transshipment station below N.O.

Located on a fork of Passe de L'Est (now Pass a Loutre), La Balise would serve as an entrepôt — that is, a transshipment station, a miniature version of the same role New Orleans itself would play. Here, oceangoing brigs, barques, and frigates could anchor, lighten their load to rise above the bar, and take soundings to determine a safe route through the pass, usually with the help of a “bar pilot.”

If conditions were right, large ships could proceed upriver. But all too often they would have to unload their cargo and passengers at La Balise and reload them onto longboats to be rowed upriver.

A 1731 map shows La Balise as a veritable town of a hundred or so inhabitants. It had an 800-foot-long loading dock connecting to a brick fort, inside of which were a chapel, lodges, garrisons, a commissary, bakery, water tanks, warehouses and sheds. Outside were powder magazines, a brickyard, a forge, and on a separate island connected by a boardwalk, two dozen cabins for enslaved workers.

Survivors of the Middle Passage, these Senegambian laborers handled freight, rowed longboats to and from New Orleans, and often found themselves assisting brethren as they too arrived on slave ships from West Africa.

For the next 30 years, La Balise remained in constant operation as a nexus between the global foreland and a vast hinterland. Problem was, the fluvial delta on which it was based had prograded — that is, shifted outwardly — leaving it ill-positioned for shipping.

## Another governor, another name

As France ceded the Louisiana colony to Spain, the new Spanish governor Don Antonio de Ulloa decided to build a new facility on an island where Balise Bayou flowed off from what is now Southeast Pass. It gained the name San Carlos, alternately Fuerte Real Católica, though most people continued to use the old



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

Mouth of the Mississippi River by JHB Latrobe

French name, else the Spanish La Baliza. In 1766, a peculiar episode illustrated the outsized importance of La Baliza. A man of science who was unenthused about his administrative assignment, Gov. Ulloa abruptly departed New Orleans and took up residency at the windswept island, supposedly to oversee the building of its new fort. One gets the distinct impression that Ulloa really sought to return to his passion, peering through his telescopes and writing to fellow scientists in Europe.

But French Creoles in New Orleans, most of whom resented the incoming Spanish regime, read Ulloa's absence as a snub. They further fumed upon learning that Ulloa held his wedding — to a Peruvian noblewoman sailing in from Lima — at that godforsaken isle, instead of the sacred confines of their St. Louis Church (now Cathedral).

Making matters worse, Ulloa in 1767 decided he would take official possession of Louisiana from French officials at La Baliza — until he reconsidered and saved some of the formalities for another time.

The ambivalence made it unclear exactly who controlled Louisiana, and from where. “Why didn't the ceremony take place in the capital, rather than on a mud lump?,” asked historian Lawrence N. Powell, giving voice to indignant colonists. “And what was one supposed to make of the fact that the flags of two nations were now flying over Louisiana, one at La Baliza, and the other at (New Orleans)?”

The next year, emboldened French partisans ousted Ulloa from the colony, triggering an angry response from Spain and resulting in the firm establishment of Spanish dominion over Louisiana in 1769. Thus ended La Baliza's brief moment as the geopolitical envy of New Orleans, though it remained the navigational necessity of its port.

Alas, Balise Bayou soon silted up, and Spanish officials had to relocate the station again, this time closer to the entry of Southeast Pass. By 1770, Nueva Baliza (New Balize) had a new commanding officer, Juan Ronquillo, who oversaw a residence, a garrison of 20 soldiers, a

station for 24 pilots, and a chaplain.

## Americans set up a private toll station

After Spain retroceded Louisiana in 1800 and France sold the colony to the U.S. in 1803, “the Balize” became busier than ever, even as it fell into exploitive hands. Ronquillo had sold his pilotage rights to two Americans, William Johnson and George Bradish, who turned the Balize into a private toll station.

They made a fortune overcharging for the services of underqualified pilots, among them some unsavory characters. “As a result,” wrote historian Joy J. Jackson, herself a descendant of river pilots, “the Balize became synonymous with murder, drunkenness, and debauchery.”

After the territorial legislature broke the Johnson-Bradish monopoly in 1806, “cutthroat competition developed among (pilots) to beat each other to the ships waiting outside the river's passes,” wrote Jackson. “It was the toughest and the fastest who got the most ships to pilot — not always the best qualified and most experienced.”

By the 1820s, steam power had transformed navigation, and a new fleet of towboats and side-wheelers negotiated the passes. In 1837, the state passed legislation to professionalize the piloting system, requiring that they be commissioned by the governor and adhere to various regulations. One rule required that they return immediately to the Balize after guiding ships upriver, thus preventing pilots from partaking of New Orleans' notorious grog shops and cabarets.

## From debauched to family-friendly?

Merchants at La Balize eagerly opened their own dens of iniquity, making the faraway lair “a scene of barbarous strife and drunken debauch,” according to a state investigation, where “the savageness of man invested the desolation of nature with appalling attributes.” A clause in a later pilot law decreed “no license shall be granted to any person to keep a tavern, grog-shop, billiard house, or any other house of public entertainment at the Balize.”

What civilized the rambunctious outpost was the arrival of pilots' families, whose numbers turned the Balize into the largest and busiest community in Plaquemines Parish.

By 1860, Balize “was probably the most cosmopolitan town of its size on the entire Mississippi,” wrote the historian Jackson; its residents originated from at least nine U.S. states and 18 foreign nations, including most of Europe and Scandinavia and as far away as the Philippines. According to sources interviewed in 1921, the Balize in this era had “prosperous stores(,) a town hall, many fine homes, some of two stories, a church, broad shell roads. River pilots made their headquarters in the village, (and) the laughter of children could be heard in the streets.” The Balize was a microcosm of New Orleans — geo-physically, economically and demographically.

Soon, everything changed. A hurricane struck in 1860, and all the while, a crevasse had been reconfiguring Southeast Pass. With the onset of the Civil War, the Union blockade suppressed all river traffic, and only a trifle returned after New Orleans fell to the Union in 1862.

It was take years for shipping to recover, and in the meanwhile, heavy sedimentation at the mouth of the river stifled traffic nearly as badly as during the war. La Balize was in trouble, and so was New Orleans.

In the late 1870s, Capt. James Eads built jetties at the mouth of South Pass, flushing out sediment and restoring traffic to the Port of New Orleans. Problem was, La Balize was located on Southeast Pass, some ten miles to the north. Ships shifted their routes, and pilots, workers, and fishermen resettled at Port Eads and later at Burrwood.

Once again, the Balize found itself ill-positioned — only this time, New Orleans no longer needed its downstream cousin. Pilots now had other base camps, namely Pilottown, and there were new tools to keep the passes clear, such as jetties and dredges.

By 1893, two dozen or so structures remained at the Balize, most of which would be destroyed by the Great Storm of 1915.

By 1921, “tombs only testify to (the) glory of Balize,” read a Times-Picayune headline. “Death and desolation brood over site of wickedest town and farthest outpost of Louisiana, long smothered under slime of Mississippi Delta.”

Today, even the tombs are gone.

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment, is the author of “Draining New Orleans,” “Crossroads, Cutoffs, and Confluences,” “Bourbon Street: A History,” and other books from LSU Press. He may be reached at <http://richcampanella.com>, [rcampane@tulane.edu](mailto:rcampane@tulane.edu) , or @nolacampanella on X.*