

# Bayou St. John: Strategic Waterway of the Louisiana Purchase

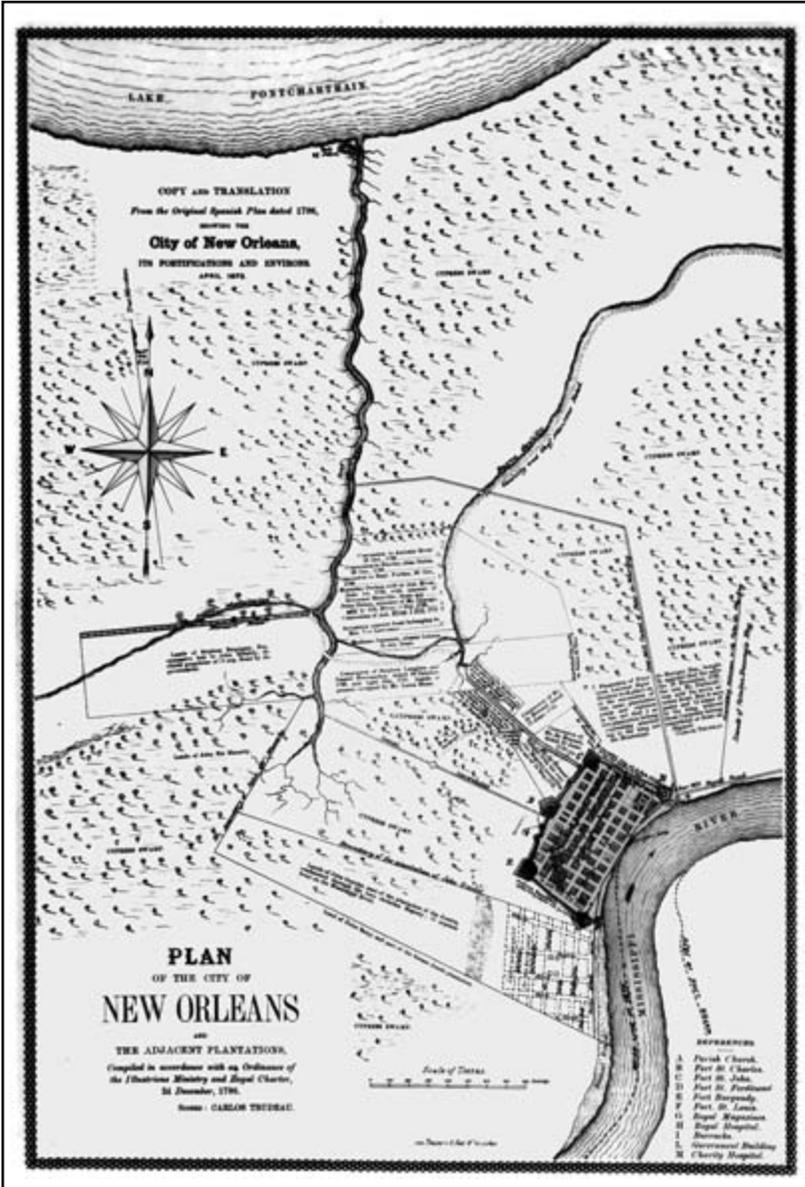
*Craig E. Colten*

The Mississippi River sweeps by New Orleans in a giant arc carrying ocean-going freighters that tower above the old Vieux Carré, more commonly known as the French Quarter. Noisy tugs share the river as they push strings of barges against the mighty current. Docks, shipyards, and river-dependent industries line the busy waterway trafficked by these craft. The “Crescent City,” an oft-used nickname, bespeaks the river that has, quite literally, shaped the riparian settlement. About two miles behind the riverfront are the headwaters of a lesser stream known as Bayou St. John. Its headwaters are encased in a concrete bank from where it flows down an imperceptible gradient through a landscape of mixed creole houses and craftsman cottages, by the entrance to New Orleans’ City Park, curves northward between a golf course and lavish homes toward its mouth in Lake Pontchartrain. Ducks alight on its calm waters and occasional paddlers propel their kayaks over the placid surface. Although very different, these two waterways were vitally important in New Orleans’ initial establishment and they have remained important in the city’s development. Without the Mississippi, there might be no New Orleans, but without Bayou St. John, the entrepôt to the Louisiana territory might have been built somewhere else. This geographic fact made Bayou St. John a strategic waterway in the development of both the Louisiana Purchase and the city of New Orleans.<sup>1</sup>

Bayou St. John’s headwaters share no traits with the mountain brooks whose rapids cut through rugged terrain as they tumble from the Rocky Mountains toward the Gulf of Mexico. A sluggish stream once draining the back side of the natural levee that stands only about fifteen feet above sea level, it also served as an overflow for water pooling in an area below sea level within the city’s giant crescent (Figure 1). With very little gradient, it has depended on floods, heavy rains, changing lake levels, or winds to produce any noticeable current. An early nineteenth-century observer

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**Figure 1.** New Orleans, 1798. The Carondelet Canal links the city with the headwaters of Bayou St. John, which meanders northward to Lake Pontchartrain. Carlos Trudeau, Plan of New Orleans, 1798, reproduced with permission of the Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1953.42.

commented that “the bayou has no current beyond that given it by the lake, that is, when the lake rises because of winds or tides, the bayou fills to the point of overflowing and it lowers when the lake does.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the gentle relief, the bayou cuts through the Metairie/Gentilly ridges, the

remnants of a natural levee built by a former Mississippi River distributary, that rise about five feet above sea level. Before European colonization and the forest removal that produced, the bayou passed through a cypress swamp near its headwaters into a grassy marshland along the lakeshore.<sup>3</sup>

It was one of several portages from the river to Lake Pontchartrain and also part of a great hydraulic network that enabled native people to navigate throughout the lower river basin and along the Gulf Coast. This portage stands out as the one indigenous Americans showed to Iberville as he struggled up the Mississippi River in March 1699. Recording his first encounter, Iberville wrote: "The Indian I have with me 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 . . ." <sup>4</sup> Iberville's observations, along with subsequent archaeological discoveries near the bayou mouth, indicate this was a well-used passage long before the arrival of Europeans and was a key route in the indigenous peoples' geography.<sup>5</sup>

When Iberville's brother, Bienville, returned to the region later that same year, he sailed across Lake Pontchartrain to the mouth of Bayou St. John and bestowed a European name on the waterway. It immediately assumed strategic importance as the French established a fort there in 1701.<sup>6</sup> Several years later another explorer named Mandeville underscored the importance of the portage, "It is easy to go from Fort Mobile [Alabama] to Lake Pontchartrain, and from that lake a portage of one league leads to the Mississippi. By this means, the river is reached without passing through the mouth, which lies twenty-five leagues down a very difficult country, because often flooded and filled with alligators, serpents, and other venomous beasts."<sup>7</sup> In 1714, another Frenchman observed that "Trying to take barges up the St. Louis [Mississippi] River as far as the Wabash and the Missouri is like trying to catch the moon with your teeth."<sup>8</sup> Obviously the French quickly realized what the native population had known, that it was far easier to paddle or sail across the lake—either to Bayou Manchac and points upstream or to the portage at Bayou St. John. When the Louisiana company decided to establish a major settlement on the lower river, it chose to situate the city where boats could land either on the riverfront or arrive from the lake.<sup>9</sup> Bayou St. John offered the critical link between the lake and the river.

But the bayou was more than just a link. The first concessions acquired by French settlers in lower Louisiana were not on the banks of the Mississippi, but were near the headwaters of Bayou St. John. A village existed there before Bienville founded New Orleans in 1718; and a 1721 census recorded four European families with thirteen individuals. Slaves constituted an even larger presence accounting for an additional thirty-nine people.<sup>10</sup> Early settlers farmed the slightly elevated lands along the bayou. A traveler in 1766 indicated that the settlement on the bayou was producing rice, even though most of the land along the waterway was

underwater.<sup>11</sup> In addition to agriculture, the portage made commerce possible. Le Page du Pratz, who briefly lived on Bayou St. John in the early 1700s, reported that he acquired property there “with a view to dispose more easily of my goods and provisions, and that I might not have them to transport a great distance.”<sup>12</sup> This account indicates that goods arriving from Europe and those destined for movement upstream entered the colony via the backdoor bayou route. Similarly, a visitor in 1766 reported that legitimate trade from Mobile entered New Orleans by the bayou, along with “all manner of smuggling.”<sup>13</sup> Downstream traffic, of course, employed the river’s current and contributed to the commercial growth of the New Orleans riverfront.

Despite the burgeoning role of river transport, the Bayou St. John entryway remained key to the pre-steamboat city. Early travelers, such as Thomas Hutchins (1780s), noted the bayou’s significance, “From New Orleans there is a very easy communication with West Florida, by means of the Bayouk of St. John, a little creek which is navigable for vessels drawing about four feet of water six miles up from lake Pontchartrain, where there is a landing place at which vessels load and unload.”<sup>14</sup>

With a sandbar near its mouth and a meandering course that conspired to impede navigation, colonial authorities began to tinker with the bayou’s natural configuration.<sup>15</sup> The most significant manipulation was the construction of a canal from the bayou’s headwaters to a point immediately behind New Orleans’ rear rampart. Completed in the 1790s under the auspices of Spanish Governor Carondelet, the canal allowed lake schooners and other craft to bring cargo two miles closer to the emerging urban center and its riverfront.<sup>16</sup> And, by 1809, Thomas Ashe observed that the small agricultural settlement near the bayou’s headwaters had grown into a “handsome village” and that commerce with Mobile and West Florida still relied on the connected waterways.<sup>17</sup>

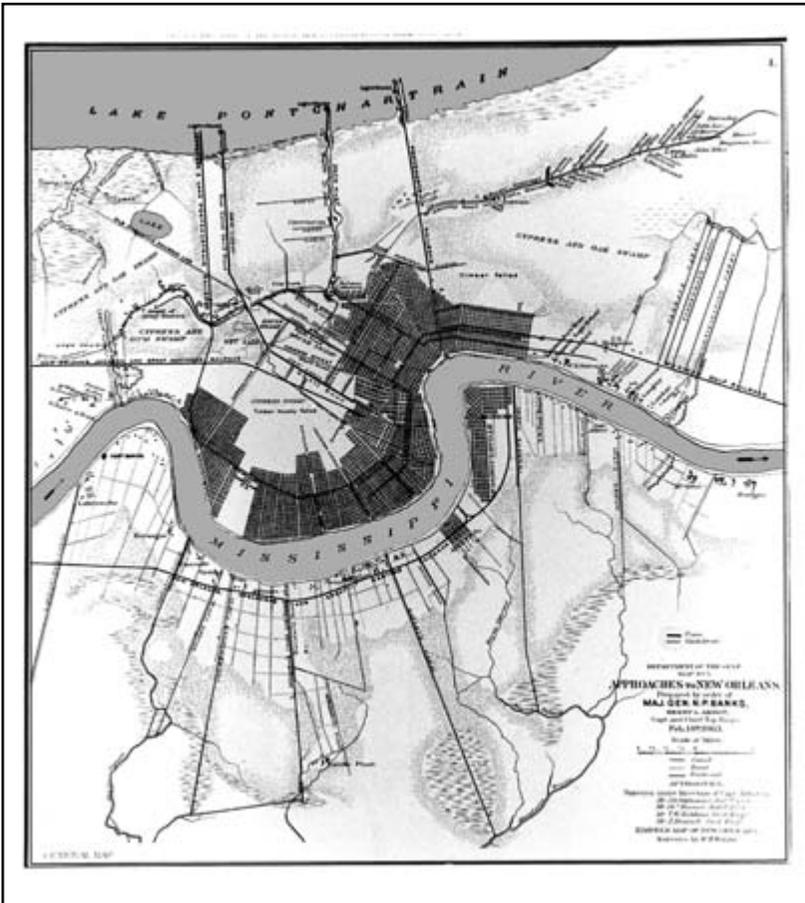
While the canal effectively shortened the distance between the river and the lake, it produced problems as well. In addition to its duties as a commercial route, the city hoped that what became known as the Carondelet Canal would convey sewage and urban runoff to the lake: surface ditches carried all manner of urban drainage into the canal and the bayou. But with insufficient current to transport this new load, most solids settled to the bottom of the channels. By the early 1800s, the canal had become “an unwholesome morass, from which pestilential emanations are continually evaporating” and one observer noted that boats “plough through mud at the bottom, and large bubbles of poisonous gas are seen rising and exploding at the surface.”<sup>18</sup> Although intended to remove hazards associated with sewage, the canal instead became an open-air septic trough, and strong north winds would waft the undesirable emanations back across the city. Further, those same winds also could drive lake water into the bayou and canal and ultimately cause it to overflow onto adjacent property. Indeed, flooding occurred repeatedly in the

1830s and 1840s.<sup>19</sup> Commercial interests and the need for drainage compelled the city to periodically dredge the canal and bayou in order to maintain this vital link.

While the bayou served mainly urban functions, it retained certain rural attributes. In the 1700s, du Pratz commented on encounters with alligators at his settlement on the banks of the waterway.<sup>20</sup> C.C. Robin noted at about the time of the Louisiana Purchase that the bayou's "stagnant waters swarmed with reptiles, especially alligators" and its course was shaded by "tall trees which are, however, crowded and deformed and covered from their tops to the ends of their branches with a lugubrious covering of a plant parasite, a kind of greyish moss."<sup>21</sup> Timothy Flint observed in 1826 that "Bayou St. John is through a creeping marshy stream, as sluggish as the 'Cocytus' and the dead swamp around it, and the blasted trees, covered with long moss, have a most disheartening aspect of desolation."<sup>22</sup>

Although the bayou passed through an ominous swamp, New Orleans residents frequented the lakefront at its mouth to enjoy the salubrious lake breezes and partake in various amusements. A resort near the "Spanish Fort" had emerged by 1815.<sup>23</sup> Several gambling halls, recreational facilities, and restaurants clustered near the bayou's mouth by the 1850s.<sup>24</sup> But the Spanish Fort resort district declined somewhat as the nineteenth century progressed. Pollution due to urban drainage, which was particularly offensive during the peak summer season, and competition from the West End and Milneburg districts pulled some pleasure seekers to other locales.<sup>25</sup> In 1870, plans to divert sewage away from Bayou St. John prompted a journalist to comment that "freeing the Bayou St. John from the city outpouring slop waters, [should] deliver the residents from the present infection, we may then fully expect a return to its former splendid career, that is to say, the principal resort for our Sunday popular assemblies, as in olden time."<sup>26</sup> Despite his optimism, however, as the nineteenth century progressed, the canal and bayou received less and less maintenance and decline set in.

Timber from the pine forests across the lake continued to arrive at the old turning basin, but an 1830s canal and a rail line captured an enlarged share of waterborne trade. The New Basin Canal, to the west, was larger and terminated in a spacious basin; plus, "a superb" shell road ran along side the canal (Figure 2). At Milneburg, east of Bayou St. John, the railroad benefitted from a good anchorage. In the 1840s, Bayou St. John investors argued that it was time to offset the competition by dredging and enlarging the bayou and its canal. To justify this expense, they claimed that the new canal was already operating at capacity and that the Pontchartrain Railroad was not as convenient. In their opinion, Bayou St. John's "natural advantage" had been squandered by using the channel as a common sewer for the city.<sup>27</sup> Losing traffic meant losing tolls, and the operators deferred upkeep. Consequently, in 1852 the state filed suit against them charging that they were not maintaining the waterway in keeping



**Figure 2.** New Orleans, 1863. The New Canal and two railroads compete with Bayou St. John for traffic to the lakefront. Henry Abbot, *Approaches to New Orleans*, 1863, reproduced with permission of the Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1974.25.18.122.

with the company charter.<sup>28</sup> A second company soon assumed control, but the heyday of Bayou St. John as a commercial thoroughfare was over. By the 1870s, the newer transportation features had wrested most traffic away from Bayou St. John.<sup>29</sup>

Although commerce declined, the Carondelet Canal and Navigation Company continued to operate the canal until its charter expired in 1908. The company's liquidators, acting without permission from the state, assumed authority of the waterway and began charging pleasure boaters a toll to ply the bayou's waters. To discourage unauthorized use, they stretched a giant chain across the mouth of the waterway. This action infuriated the city's boaters and they instigated a legal battle over whether the bayou was a natural stream or a human-made waterway. The pleasure boaters claimed the bayou was protected as a free and open "navigable waterway" by nu-

merous legal documents. The Louisiana Purchase treaty, the federal enabling act creating the Territory of Louisiana, and the 1812 state constitution all asserted that navigable rivers were to be common highways and free forever. The canal owners, however, responded that the bayou would not have been navigable without prior modifications. They also argued that it did not fall under federal authority because it was merely an insignificant stream, and not one of the “navigable rivers and waters” mentioned in the numerous legal documents. Ultimately, the federal court concluded that the bayou *was* a navigable waterway, forcing the canal operators to drop the chain.<sup>30</sup> This battle over bayou access illustrates its decline in significance as a commercial thoroughfare and its new function as a pleasure waterway.

By the twentieth-century, new technologies had completely displaced the bayou’s function as a commercial thoroughfare. Oceangoing ships could not navigate the shallow Lake Pontchartrain, and therefore, steamed up the Mississippi to tie up at the riverfront wharves. To shorten their river passage, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers eventually dug a pair of huge canals, the Industrial Canal, which linked the lake and the river, and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which provided a shortcut from the Gulf of Mexico to the city. These obviated any remaining interest in Lake Pontchartrain’s role as a commercial waterway. Only the pleasure boaters who filed suit to use the bayou still seemed interested. Indeed, by the 1920s, the city filled in the Carondelet Canal from its turning basin to the headwaters of the bayou, finally closing out that phase of water transportation.

In ensuing years, the bayou became stagnant, clogged with sewage and a rag-tag fleet of houseboats. A pair of civic associations took on the job of transforming the bayou from a mosquito breeding pond and haven for residents that some considered undesirable. During the 1920s, the Bayou St. John Commission pushed to expel the houseboat dwellers and also remove numerous half-submerged, derelict watercraft. They met with open resistance from the boat dwellers, but ultimately, the Bayou St. John Improvement Association oversaw the removal of the unwanted residents as well.<sup>31</sup>

Major modifications of the bayou’s hydrology followed. To eliminate the aesthetic problem, the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board diverted urban wastes away from the bayou into its new sewerage and drainage systems during the first third of the twentieth century. This modification left the bayou as a narrow inlet of Lake Pontchartrain. Once again, any current depended on fluctuations in the lake level or wind direction. Stagnant conditions resulted, which did not accord with the desire to use the bayou as an extension of the City Park to its west. The city’s drainage authority, at the behest of the improvement association, constructed a gate at the headwaters of the bayou and allowed water to flow into one of its storm runoff canals. The connection was to carry about 19,000 cubic

feet per minute of water, allowing lake water to replace the bayou's entire contents every 72 hours. In theory, this process was to maintain better water quality and reduce breeding opportunities for pesky mosquitoes.<sup>32</sup>

Work to revamp the lands along the bayou were also underway. As part of its drainage program during the first third of the twentieth century, the Sewerage and Water Board installed pumps to lift water through the ridges and drainage canals across the lakefront wetlands. This transformed swamp and marsh into potential residential neighborhoods. Along the western bank of the bayou, the city acquired a swath of land that extended to the lakefront for an expansion of City Park. In the 1930s, Works Projects Administration (WPA) crews assisted with the removal of the swamp forest and conversion of this tract into park lands, complete with a golf course along much of the bayou's west bank. Residential neighborhoods gradually occupied the eastern banks. With the removal of the unsightly houseboats, the city also began efforts to convert property along the bayou into parkland. At the bayou's mouth, modifications were also underway. In 1926, in order to protect the new lakefront residential areas from hurricane-driven waves, the Orleans Parish Levee Board had begun building a sinuous seawall several hundred feet off shore in Lake Pontchartrain. They pumped lake-bed sediments into the basin behind the wall, creating a vast expanse of new land stretching for several miles on either side of Bayou St. John's mouth. The old fort, which formerly stood at the point where the bayou entered the lake, became an inland relic and housing tracts occupied the new lands bordered by a lakefront park.<sup>33</sup> By the late 1930s, most evidence of the bayou's working history had been erased and replaced with a park-like landscape from its headwaters to the new mouth.

Following a severe hurricane in 1947, the Orleans Parish Levee Board closed the mouth of the bayou with a structural barrier to prevent a repeat of flooding along the bayou caused by storm-driven waves. This action severed Bayou St. John from direct communication with Lake Pontchartrain and left it a narrow meandering lake. Subsequently, in the absence of a water current, foul smells from decaying vegetative matter prompted complaints from residents and visitors. Park crews during the 1950s skimmed scum from the bayou's surface during the summer months, but this did not eliminate conditions that allowed the smell to develop. By the early 1960s, the city appealed to the state to dredge the bayou and to restock bluegills to the waterway.<sup>34</sup> They hoped that by restoring the bayou's ecology, the odor problems would disappear. Gradually, such efforts restored the bayou to a bucolic waterway. New flood control gates near the mouth of the bayou in the mid-1990s<sup>35</sup> superceded the earthen dam, and maintained the separation between the bayou and lake. The flood gates offer one advantage: the lower bayou is not encased in levees and concrete "sea-walls" to prevent lake water from flooding the city and residents can enjoy a view of the waterway.

With environmental conditions much improved since the early twentieth century and its banks now largely devoted to parkland, the bayou is primarily a recreational feature in the landscape. City regulations have banned powerboats, reserving the water for frustrated wind surfers who attempt to fill their sails on the calm waters. Regular outings by such groups as the Sierra Club bring canoeists to help clean up trash along the bayou. Neighborhood residents have hosted a “bayou fest” in the public spaces along its banks. One of the final relics of the bayou’s commercial history, a large factory building, has recently been converted to condominiums. Thus, the bayou now serves as an amenity space in the Crescent City. And this function is not reserved for local residents. Bayou St. John is a common stop for historic tours that deliver visitors to colonial homes near the headwaters, the landmark swing bridge that spans the upper reaches of the waterway, the City Park art museum, and the above-ground cemetery near its banks. Its principal commercial impact now is to attract tourists. In a city that now relies more on tourism than trade, Bayou St. John remains an important feature in the twenty-first-century New Orleans landscape. Its strategic function as a gateway to a colonial empire has disappeared, but New Orleans exists where it does because of Bayou St. John.

## Notes

1. Peirce Lewis suggests New Orleans was the “inevitable” city given its site and situation. Peirce Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976): 17.
2. C.C. Robin, Stuart Landry Jr., trans., *Voyage to Louisiana* (1803-1805) (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1966): 30.
3. Roger T. Saucier, *Recent Geomorphic History of the Pontchartrain Basin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963): 66-71.
4. Richebourg G. McWilliams, trans., *Iberville’s Gulf Journals* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1981): 57. Although the bayou did not empty directly into the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Pontchartrain is connected to the bay where Iberville’s fleet stood at anchor.
5. T.R. Kidder, “Making the City Inevitable: Native Americans and the Geography of New Orleans,” in C.E. Colten, ed., *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000): 9-21.
6. Edna Freiberg, *Bayou St. John in Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1803* (New Orleans: Harvey Press, 1980): 24.
7. Quoted in Marc de Villiers, “A History of the Foundation of New Orleans, 1717-1722,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 3 (April 1920): 153-251, quote on p. 168. A French league measured about 2.9 miles.
8. Quoted in Villiers, “A History of the Foundation,” 168.
9. Villiers, “A History of the Foundation,” 174.
10. Jay Ditchy, trans., “Census of Louisiana in 1721,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 13 (1930): 218.
11. Harry Gordon, “New Orleans and Bayou St. John in 1766,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 6 (1923): 20.
12. LePage du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, trans. by Joseph Tregle Jr., 1774, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975): 21.
13. Harry Gordon, “New Orleans and Bayou St. John in 1766,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 6 (1923): 19-20.
14. Thomas Hutchins, *A Historical Narrative and Topographical Description of Louisiana and West Florida 1784* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968): 37-38.

15. James Pitot, *Observations on the Colony of Louisiana from 1796-1802* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979): 111.
16. John S. Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1922): 565.
17. Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America Performed in the Year 1806* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809): 303-4.
18. "The Canal of Carondelet," *The Louisiana Gazette*, 9 July 1810: 2.
19. E.D. Fenner, "New Orleans," *Southern Medical Reports* 1 (1849): 19; and George E. Waring Jr. and George W. Cable, *History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana* (Washington: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1881): 53.
20. du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 21-22.
21. Robin, *Voyages to Louisiana*, 30. Spanish moss is not a parasite as often reported by early observers.
22. Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (1826, New York, 1932): 303-304.
23. Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, Vol. 2, 758.
24. James P. Baughman, "A Southern Spa: Ante-Bellum Lake Pontchartrain," *Louisiana History* 7 (1962): 7-8.
25. Baughman, "A Southern Spa," 7-10.
26. "Bayou St. John," *DeBow's Review* 8 (May-June 1870): 491.
27. President of the Louisiana State Bank, letter to Orleans Navigation Company, with Reports on the Contemplated Improvements of the Canal Carondelet and Bayou St. John (pamphlet), 1849, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, 6-9.
28. See Hiddleston Kenner, *Bayou St. John and the Carondelet Canal* (New Orleans: Bayou St. John Boat Owners' Association, 1908).
29. Samuel Lockett, *Louisiana As It Is*, ed. by Lauren Post (1874, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969): 126.
30. Kenner, *Bayou St. John and the Carondelet Canal*, 1-20.
31. "Current Flows in Bayou St. John for First Time in 150 Years," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 9 March 1934, 1.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*; Burh and Lamantia, Inc. and Barnard and Burk, Inc., *East Lakefront Flood Protection and Reclamation*, Vol. 1, (New Orleans: Orleans Parish Levee Board, 1962): 8-9.
34. "Bayou Acting Up Again," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 21 June 1952, 6; "Bayou St. John Project Hailed," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 15 March 1961 (n.p.), and "Bayou St. John Fish to Return," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 8 January 1962, (n.p.), Hill Memorial Library, Vertical File, Bayou St. John, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
35. "Improving Bayou St. John," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 25 January 1995, B6.