

# History of St. Tammany Parish



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When one looks at St. Tammany Parish Louisiana today, it is difficult to visualize the troubled historical background that has characterized development in this territory along the northshore of Lake Pontchartrain. From Slidell to Covington the region is alive with the progressive development that has transformed the region from a neglected backwater to among the most prosperous areas of the state. The St. Tammany of today, which some regard as New Orleans north, was not always a model of progress. Indeed it can be argued that St. Tammany snatched success from the jaws of despair.

Like the surrounding regions of the Florida parishes, St. Tammany's pre-history was characterized by several phases of indigenous Native American development. The original nomadic hunters who traversed the region in the decades following the last ice age gave way to a more sedentary mound building culture as life changed from the constant hunt for large paleolithic animals to reliance on the types of wildlife we recognize today. With the mound building culture came not only the great temple mounds which can still be found in certain areas of the modern region, but also more productive farming techniques that allowed for permanency in residence.

By the time the first French explorers intruded into the region, the legendary petites nations of Muskegon peoples were firmly established in the area. Included among these tribes were the Bayougoula who resided along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain - surviving by relying on seafood harvested from the lakes, the Acolapissa who lived primarily along the Pearl River, and the comparatively large Houma who often served as the dominant tribal group in the area. Evidence exists to suggest that the Chitimacha also resided in the region at times amid the shifting territories common to the tribes of the period.

As European settlement advanced along the eastern seaboard, more numerous tribes began to migrate west in search of territories free from the European intrusion. Among the tribes that eventually migrated to, or through, St. Tammany were the Biloxi, Koasati, and most importantly - the Choctaw.

The first European contact with the region we know as St. Tammany came with the explorations of Pierre le Moyne, Sieur de Iberville. In March of 1699, after finally determining that he had indeed relocated the great Mississippi River claimed for France by his predecessor in exploration La Salle, Iberville divided his party into two groups sending the larger portion, under the direction of his brother Bienville, down the Mississippi while he attempted the challenging east fork of the Mississippi known today as Bayou Manchac.

Iberville's diversion was prompted by his desire to make the upper reaches of the Mississippi more accessible. In pre-steam engine times, and before the arrival of horse and mule teams, ships were

forced to move up the great river through the tedious process of throwing an anchor forward and then pulling the ship up to it before repeating the process. Iberville's venture into Bayou Manchac, which was briefly known as the Iberville River, was an effort to identify a pass to the Gulf of Mexico that would avoid the dangerous and swift currents at the mouth of the Mississippi.

After successfully traversing the Bayou, Iberville followed the Amite River into the two large lakes which he named Maurepas and Pontchartrain for his principal financial backers the French minister of marine and his son. On the first night of his voyage to the lakes Iberville recorded in his journal, "The place where I am is one of the prettiest I have seen, fine level ground bare of canes. The land north of the lakes is a country of pine trees mixed with hard woods. The soil is sandy and many tracks of buffalo and deer can be seen." As he continued seeking the outlet to the Gulf, Iberville exited into Lake Pontchartrain via South Pass eventually, according to tradition, making camp at Goose Point about 30 miles from Pass Manchac and 12 miles from the Rigolets. Iberville offered a less than flattering first European appraisal of St. Tammany Parish proclaiming "the water of the lake is too brackish to drink, we camped on a treeless, grassy point, pretty bad, having no water to drink and many mosquitoes, which are terrible little animals to people who are in need of rest." Ultimately Iberville concluded that the land of St. Tammany was too low to accommodate settlement - one can only imagine what he would think were he to see the region today.

By 1725 a regular commerce in foodstuffs (primarily meat) had developed between the Acólapissa in St. Tammany and the emerging city at New Orleans. Among the first permanent white residents of St. Tammany was Pierre Brou who recorded himself as a resident of the Colapissas. The French crown encouraged the residents to secure naval stores (tar, pitch, turpentine and resin) from the forests and the great virgin pine stands of St. Tammany offered a bounty. By the late 1730s enterprising businessmen such as Claude Vignon, known as Lacombe, had established tar works and other ventures to provide the naval stores.

Slave labor was imported into the region to work at these emerging enterprises. Not surprisingly, many of the slaves chose to run away rather than endure the hard work associated with such ventures. By the 1740s, the dense forests and swampy regions of the northshore had established a reputation as a haven for runaway slaves.

Other than these small efforts at economic development, the French period did not herald much progress in the territory. The French defeat in the Seven Years War marked the arrival of a new order in the region. As part of the Treaty of Paris, in 1763 Britain secured control of all of West Florida. In an effort to encourage migration to the area the British offered substantive land grants to settlers willing to locate there. With the outbreak of rebellion in the Atlantic colonies in 1775, the trickle of settlers migrating to West Florida increased substantially. Among the new arrivees were scores of British loyalists escaping persecution at the hands of the American rebels. West Florida served as an important refuge for these people as one of the closest locations that remained outside the control of the Americans and St. Tammany received its fair share of new arrivals. Most of these settlers secured land grants near Bayou Castein, or near the Pearl River and adjoining regions of the lake front.

With the exception of Bernardo de Galvez's expedition up the Mississippi River in support of the American rebels, history records that little activity occurred in what is now St. Tammany during the Revolution. There was, nonetheless, some activity in the lakes near St. Tammany. To prevent the British from reinforcing Baton Rouge it was necessary for the Spanish to secure control of the lakes. Britain maintained one armed sloop in Lake Pontchartrain appropriately named the "West Florida." In September 1779 a patched together ship of war commanded by Captain William Pickles engaged the West Florida and in a sharp and violent firefight captured her - ensuring that Glavez's expedition need fear no British reinforcements from Pensacola.

By 1783 Britain was forced to accept defeat in the American Revolution - the resulting treaty transferred all of the territory captured by Galvez to Spain. St. Tammany now entered her third territorial period under Spanish governance. It was during the Spanish period that marked development arrived in St. Tammany. Like their British predecessors, the Spanish were eager to encourage settlement in the territory - they accordingly offered large land grants to those wishing to settle in the territory. Among the newcomers were increasing numbers of British loyalists who now found themselves at the mercy of the American victors along the seaboard and sought refuge in any region not controlled by the United States. West Florida served as one of the closest territories that remained outside American control.

The potential for both progress and disaster soon proved apparent during the Spanish period. The growth of settlement to the north in the Mississippi territory proved an impetus for development as market trails, many built upon older native American trade paths, soon traversed St. Tammany en route to the South's one great metropolis at New Orleans. Development proved especially promising near present day Madisonville, which would soon emerge as an important terminus for cattle drives and other commodities transported overland and loaded onto schooners for transport to New Orleans. The increasing commerce naturally attracted increasing numbers of settlers determined to establish commercial enterprises along the market trails.

But Spanish control also proved problematic in St. Tammany. Essentially, the Spanish exercised no realistic authority over the territory. Spain employed no police force in the region and, although they tried to keep a small garrison on the north shore, concerns for the security of New Orleans ensured troops would be based there only temporarily at best. Such a situation proved attractive to scores of desperadoes and army deserters who fled to the region in order to avoid more established systems of justice in neighboring American controlled regions. By the eve of the Louisiana Purchase a condition of near anarchy prevailed in St. Tammany as thieves and desperadoes roamed the territory virtually free from molestation by the law. The prevailing circumstances led the first American governor of Louisiana William C. C. Claiborne to comment, "civil authority remains weak and lax in West Florida especially in the region near the Pearl River, where the influence of the law is scarcely felt."

Troubled by the absence of effective authority in the region and eager to seize control of valuable lands in the area, in 1804 a group of disgruntled settlers in the Mississippi Territory launched an abortive uprising to overthrow Spanish authority. Though the first effort was unsuccessful, by 1810 rebellion was again brewing in West Florida. Most of the support for the West Florida rebels was concentrated in the Feliciana District. In the district of Tangipahoa and Chifoncte, which included St. Tammany, little overt evidence of support for the rebels proved evident. When a delegation from the Feliciana district called for a convention to discuss the region's relationship to Spain, the delegate from the Chifoncte district was William Cooper, a former British loyalist from North Carolina and a staunch Spanish loyalist. Like most of his neighbors, Cooper opposed the later actions of the West Florida rebels even going so far as to organize a militia company to support the Spanish. But the power of the revolt proved unstoppable - for his efforts in support of the existing government Cooper was branded a traitor, his home and all outbuildings were burned and, before order was restored in the region, he was murdered by the rebels. Whether willingly or not, St. Tammany found itself a part of the West Florida Revolt - the region was included in the territory that formed the original Lone Star Republic.

After enduring for only 74 days, the fledgling Republic of West Florida was annexed by the United States. The Americans quickly made their presence known and the strategic location of the territory was highlighted when the British sought to capture New Orleans during the War of 1812. St. Tammany played a crucial role in the fighting during that conflict as Andrew Jackson marched south to defend New Orleans cutting a new trail through the region that would later emerge as the Jackson

Military Road. Fighting also erupted in the waters off ST. Tammany as Thomas ap Catesby Jones tiny naval flotilla engaged the British in Lake Borgne near the Rigolets as they advanced against New Orleans.

American control did not herald the emergence of prosperity in the region. The soil of St. Tammany proved poor in comparison to the fertile bluffs along the Mississippi. Initial effort to grow the great cash crop of the South, cotton, proved unsuccessful until a Siamese black seed variety of cotton was introduced from the Caribbean that finally allowed the cotton economy and accompanying slave system to expand into St. Tammany and Washington parishes. Despite such advances, by 1850 St. Tammany ranked 40th in per capita wealth among Louisiana's 47 parishes.

Like much of the remainder of the South, the Civil War period proved devastating for St. Tammany parish. Union raiders prowled the territory as Confederate cavalry desperately sought to maintain control over crucial river ports, especially Madisonville and the crucial entrance to Lake Pontchartrain near modern day Slidell. By early 1862 Federal Order number 100, which was designed to starve the region into submission was proving effective. Local residents groaned under the burden of ceaseless warfare that destroyed crops and livestock and the added dilemma of scores of refugees from New Orleans who were forced out of the city for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to the Federal government. These refugees were literally dumped on the north shore with little more than the clothes on the back. Local resident Annette Koch lamented, "there is hardly enough food to go around for those of us already here, the new arrivals are certain to soon starve." By the summer of 1864 Federal authorities curtailed incursions into the interior of St. Tammany Parish due to repeated reports that there was little left to destroy. Adding to the prevailing misery in the region were the scores of deserters from both armies who found refuge in the Pearl River swamps. Desperate to survive themselves, these renegades preyed upon the people of the region murdering and stealing with impunity and generally adding to the despair of war.

While the war may have represented a low point in the history of ST. Tammany - the problems destined to confront the region were far from over. After enduring a painful period of Reconstruction, characterized by corrupt governance and widespread violence that would leave a painful legacy in the area, in 1877 St. Tammany found itself forced to confront a shattered economy, war ravaged infrastructure, and painful wounds associated with nearly 20 years of sustained violence. The overthrow of the Carpetbagger government of Louisiana created a power vacuum that revealed a series of simmering problems destined to confront the residents of St. Tammany Parish. Like many areas of the rapidly advancing frontier of America, the expansion of democracy had been restrained in St. Tammany. Residents had become accustomed to governance at the hands of powerful others. The tragedy of defeat in war and the painful consequences of seeking to rebuild with no possibility of assistance from the Federal government, caused many in the region to acknowledge the mistake of blind adherence to the powerful pre-war elite. In the regional elections of 1878-79, local residents rejected the authority of their pre-war masters and instead elected new men to office. But the suspicions of the war and Reconstruction era remained - many had come to believe that violence solved problems permanently. Like the surrounding parishes of Washington and Tangipahoa, St. Tammany descended into a dark chapter where anarchy reigned and feuding served as a primary means of societal regulation.

The violence that consumed St. Tammany was aggravated by disputes over conflicting land claims that had long been dormant in the face of the perceived common enemies evident during the war and Reconstruction periods. Each of the colonial powers: France, Britain, Spain, and finally the Americans had offered land grants that often conflicted and overlapped. While some of the feuds that emerged centered on strictly personal disputes, others related directly to these conflicting claims. The long enduring Jolly-Cousin feud originated in a dispute over a piece of land that an ineffective

legal system never properly adjudicated. The feud, which lasted more than 13 years, climaxed in 1897 with a pitched battle involving pistols, shotguns, and clubs, that left four dead and two wounded. At the turn of the twentieth century, the war weary residents of ST. Tammany longed for stability and the hope for prosperity.

The prayers for relief would soon be answered - a bright future was in store for St. Tammany. Initial efforts at recovery began with the residents themselves. The emergence of significant industrial concerns, such as the Jancke Shipyard at Madisonville, advanced lumbering and forestry policies across the parish, improved cross lake shipping concerns, and finally the tapping of the most basic natural resource - the crystal clear ground water found in St. Tammany, offered outlets to progress. As recovery efforts accelerated, residents in New Orleans who had long looked to the moss strewn oak shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain near Mandeville and Slidell as a delightful vacation refuge, now began to relocate to the northshore in large numbers. The construction of the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway accelerated the migration to St. Tammany while the construction of I-12 placed the region at the epicenter of progress.

St. Tammany today enjoys status as the most prosperous parish in Louisiana, sporting a thriving economy and one of the highest rated school systems in the state. But as with all regions that experience such rapid progress, new challenges that will soon confront St. Tammany are just emerging. Discussions are underway to consider the possibility of yet another bridge across Lake Pontchartrain - a bridge certain to further accelerate the rapid growth characterizing the region. Moreover, the issue of identity has come to fore as long term residents of ST. Tammany struggle to maintain traditions amid the mass arrival of people accustomed to potentially contrary cultural perspectives and political views. If history is any indicator of the future though, St. Tammany may very well serve as a model in confronting the obstacles to prosperity.