

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Higher Ground

To begin this lofty tale it is important to speak diacritically on a couple of issues, which will require some circumflexion. If the reader is somewhat confused, or bent out of shape, it is only natural. It involves everyone's favorite subject: grammar. A diacritical mark is another word for an accent mark, and the circumflex (^), meaning "bending around", often appears in French words where an "s" seems to be missing. Examples are *hôpital* (hospital) and *forêt* (forest).

When the French first came to the area that is now New Orleans, they came upon *crêtes* (crests, or ridges), *chênes* (oaks) and *cheniers* (oak ridges). Alluvial deposits built up these various *crêtes*, or ridges within New Orleans, and they are known as the Metairie, Bayou St. John, Gentilly (Sauvage) and Esplanade Ridges. Also there is the Mississippi River Ridge (the high area built up along the river that first attracted Bienville). The filled-in Lakeshore area acts as another ridge (although an artificially created one). There has been quite an increased interest in the city's ridges and their elevations since Hurricane Katrina.



Metairie and Gentilly Ridges

Over the course of time, when the Mississippi River flooded during most spring seasons, it deposited its coarsest sediment upon its banks, with smaller amounts of more finely grained sediment settling away from the river, known as the backswamp. Before Bienville founded the city, the areas nearest the river, known as natural levees, were the highest - built up over centuries. The word *levee* comes from the French word *levée* (from the feminine past participle of the French verb *lever*, meaning "to raise"). The city has also added miles of man-made levees.

Occasionally, a break, or *crevasse*, would open up in the natural levee, creating an opportunity for a "distributary" to flow into the backswamp. Unlike a "tributary", a "distributary" is an outflowing branch or channel of a river. Distributaries form their own natural levees, or ridges, although smaller than those of the main channel.

The Metairie Ridge was built up along Bayou Metairie, which was formed between five and twenty-five centuries B. C. when the Mississippi crossed its banks between what is now the outskirts of Kenner and Little Farms and flowed into the land between Lake Pontchartrain and the river. Bayou Metairie's ridges are about a mile wide and seven feet high at their beginning but narrow and level off somewhere in the vicinity of the Chef Pass. This and most other bayous in the area are distributaries of the bigger river, but not Bayou St. John (which is believed to have been the result of a fault). Bayou Gentilly (Sauvage) and Bayou Metairie were originally the same connecting body of water, the *Shupic Hatcha*, of the Choctaws. Bayou Sauvage is part of the lagoon located at the corner of Carrollton and City Park Avenue. In French, *sauvage* means wild, savage or untamed, a term also used in centuries past to describe the Native Americans. It could therefore be translated to mean "Indian Bayou".

The ridge on the right of Bayou Sauvage became the Gentilly Ridge (and Road). The ridge on the left was known as *La Crête* Road. Today there is a Crête Street in the Esplanade area of New Orleans, which clearly has nothing to do with the Island of the Minotaur. Earlier, when water from the Mississippi River itself flowed along the trajectory of the Bayou Metairie-Bayou Gentilly-Bayou Sauvage distributary, one of its forks formed the Esplanade Ridge, a slight upland beneath today's Esplanade Avenue.

Metairie Ridge was once an incorporated city in order that its residents could obtain gas service. It even had its own mayor. A gas valve was turned on in 1927 at Airline Highway and the parish line, but the city only lasted seventeen months because the gas problem was ultimately resolved.



"Metairie Ridge Citizens" providing ice and good music in the 1920s

It is important to note that, according to a 2007 report by Richard Campanella and the Center for Bioenvironmental Research, contrary to popular perceptions (especially since Hurricane Katrina), "half of New Orleans is *at* or *above* sea level. Elevated areas, while not immune to flooding, constitute a valuable natural resource for which residential use, whenever practical, should be prioritized."

Cheniers are usually beach ridges composed of sandy material resting on clay or mud. The French called them that after observing these oak tree belts that mark the distribution of ridges in the Mississippi Delta regions. Down in Cameron Parish, as one drives past the stunning roseate spoonbills feeding in the shallow waters, there are *cheniers* along which the roads traverse. The town of Grand Chenier is near Cameron, and there is the Chenier Plain (a muddy strip of Louisiana Coast west of Atchafalaya Bay).

Louisiana is also proud of accordion player Clifton Chenier (1925 - 1987), who brought *zydeco* music into mainstream popularity beginning in the 1950s. Although this Creole-Cajun musical blend was first recorded in 1928 by Amédé Ardouin, it was not known as *zydeco* until Chenier recorded "*Les Haricots Sont Pas Salés*" ("The Green Beans Aren't Salty"). The French pronunciation of "*Les*" before "*Haricots*" puts a "Z" sound in front of "*Haricots*", and the "*ts*" on the end is silent (making the combination sound a lot like *zydeco*). Chenier also created the *frottoir*, the instrument that looks like washboard body armor. With songs like his cover of Professor Longhair's "Hey, Little Girl" ("*Ay 'Tite Fille*"), his music reached new heights.



Clifton Chenier (June 25, 1925 – December 12, 1987)

Another new height (not well known to many Crescent City natives) is the highest point in the city. Most natives sentimentally believe that the highest point in the city (and possibly the state) is Monkey Hill. They seem to forget there are Indian mounds and salt domes (like Tabasco's Avery Island). There are even mountains, and the highest one in the state is Driskill Mountain (Bienville Parish) at 535 feet elevation. It is the third lowest highest elevation in the country. Florida's highest point is 345 feet (that's easy enough), but what other state could have a high point lower than the Pelican State? The answer is Delaware, whose Elbright Azimuth has an elevation of only 448 feet.

Monkey Hill, on the other hand, is much lower than these and not even the highest earthen point in town. An artificial hill fifteen feet high, it was constructed in Audubon Park during the Great Depression with WPA funds to teach the children of New Orleans that the world was not entirely flat.



Audubon Park's "sky-piercing" Monkey Hill a half-century ago

Also in the 1930s, Rene Couturie (a board member of the city's other great park, City Park) provided funds to purchase and plant sixty thousand trees in what is now the 33-acre Couturie Forest and Arboretum. It fronts on Harrison Avenue and located there is what is now the supreme summit in the city, the Laborde Lookout. At 53 feet, the mini-mountain was created from riprap used in the construction of Interstate 610. It is named for Ellis Laborde, longtime manager of City Park.



Near to Audubon Park at the sight of the former Audubon Tavern II is the Monkey Hill Bar at 6106 Magazine Street. No monkey business is to be found here, only sophistication for grown-up kids that once found a nearby hill more fun than a barrel of monkeys.

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