The Borgne Identity

In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

Or, as they say in France:

“Au royaume des aveugles, les borgnes sont rois.”

*Une borgne* in French, you see, is “one who is blind in one eye.”

And so it is with the historian, the truth often being murky and not all that easy to see.

In the case of the naming of Lake Borgne, the large lagoon connecting the Gulf of Mexico with Lake Pontchartrain, what follows are just a few of the explanations, that have come down through the ages.

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, on May 18, 1895, printed the following:

“Dingy” or “shady” is another definition apart from “one-eyed.” *Un hôtel borgne* is a “shady hotel,” while *une fenêtre borgne* is “an obstructed window,” or one not in plain view.

Louisiana historian (and grandson of Étienne de Boré) Charles Gayarré (January 9, 1805 – February 11, 1895) had this to say about Lake Borgne in his *History of Louisiana* (1867):
“From Lake Pontchartrain, Iberville arrived at a sheet of water which is
known in our days under the name of Lake Borgne. The French,
thinking that it did not answer precisely the definition of a lake,
because it was not altogether land-locked, or did not at least discharge
its waters only through a small aperture, and because it looked rather
like a part of the sea, separated from its main body by numerous
islands, called it Lake Borgne, meaning something incomplete or
defective, like a man with one eye.”

Clare D’Artois Leeper, writing in the Baton Rouge Sunday Advocate,
February 18, 1968, after repeating Gayarré’s explanation, offered that
it was “possible, however that Lake Borgne may have been named for
some French official, as were nearby lakes Pontchartrain and
Maurepas. Until the name of a M. Borgne can be rediscovered on
some archival document,” she suggested, “we must accept the present
theory as to why Lake Borgne was so named.”

The Ann Arbor, Michigan, Daily Argus, on February 4, 1907, presented
the possibility of a cyclops, or one-eyed “wonderful monster”:

The Boston Journal, dated May 11, 1909, stated, “The name of Lake
Borgne, or ‘One-Eyed,’ has never been explained. Gayarré, the
historian of Louisiana, gives it up, after some discussion, and it
remains an unsolved conundrum to this day, unless it alludes to some
unknown prehistoric Indian cyclops who once dwelt upon its shores.”

So, was it named Borgne because its waters were dingy, dark and
murky, or because it was it was found to be somewhat “defective” as a
full-fledged lake? Then again, we can never rule out the political
official or the prehistoric cyclops. Politicians, it must be observed, are
often one-sighted. What’s more, those waters must have seen a few
borgne-again pirates, eye patch and all.

Lake Borgne is one of three bodies of water (the others being Lakes
Maurepas and Pontchartrain) that make up 55% of the Pontchartrain
Basin. A brackish marsh land bridge, along with Lake St. Catherine, separate Lake Pontchartrain from Lake Borgne. The Chef Menteur Pass and The Rigolets or the two connecting waterways between Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne.

Due to coastal erosion, Lake Borgne is now a lagoon connecting to the Gulf of Mexico, but an early 1759 map (based on a 1720 survey by Pierre Le Blond de la Tour) shows it as a lake largely separated from the Gulf of Mexico by a considerable expanse of “Low and Marshy Meadows,” aka “wetlands,” which have largely disappeared.

Lake Borgne was the subject of one of the earliest articles published in *The New Orleans Picayune*. George Wilkins Kendall and Francis Lumsden were compositors and printers who met while working in Washington, D. C. They both moved to the Crescent City in 1835. Together they set up shop on Gravier Street and on Jan. 25, 1837, shortly after midnight, the very first edition of the *Picayune* went to press. Deriving its name from the Spanish coin, it sold for approximately six-and-one-fourth cents.

Just a few short months later, the *Picayune*, in an article dated June 23, 1837, reported that readers of the day deceived themselves into believing that northern retreats such as Saratoga were the only sensible escape for the summer. Instead, the paper extolled the joys and virtues of Lake Borgne:
"As for company, too, where can you find prettier women than consort yearly along the 'Coast' – the sylphic Creole brunettes, with their large black eyes and pretty little feet, all animation and hilarity, beautiful creatures that they are – as well as the more sedate, although not less lovely Yankee girls. Beaux, too, lots of 'em – the billiard rooms, the ten-pin alleys, and the shooting galleries, resound with their industry during the day, while they 'vex the dull air of night' with music or the dance. Do you detest mosquitoes? Do you eschew sand flies, and abominate bile? To escape from these galling discomforts of a summer in New Orleans – from its heat, dust, stench and listless flatness – from its nimble mosquitoes, and its thousand annoyances – lose no time in making your arrangements to pass the summer at one or all of those lake retreats open during the warm season. The shores of Lake Borgne are comparatively free from fever, and the southern malaria is unknown. The frequent breeze is impregnated with salubrious exhalations from the sea; and to borrow a puff from a London perfumer’s soap label, 'possesses all the coolness of the cucumber with the fragrance of the rose' and 'not by no means' to sacrifice sense to sound, it may be called the 'Borgne from which no traveller returns' without a renewed system and a renovated brain, fitter for re-assuming the cares of the counting room and the tedium of the study."

By 1853, the Picayune described “A Trip to Lake Borgne,” as one taken by rail aboard “the Mexican Gulf Railroad.” Several “gentlemen in quest of game” were sighted with “their guns, pointers and setters.” Lake Borgne “and its vicinity” did then abound “with a great variety of wild fowl.” Today, as then, it is also a popular spot for fishing.

In 2012, Brian Landry, former executive chef at Galatoire’s, and famed New Orleans chef and restaurateur John Besh, who both grew up fishing on Lake Borgne, opened Borgne, a New Orleans restaurant that is a celebration of Louisiana coastal seafood.

But back in 1814, Lake Borgne was the site of a significant naval battle. Part of the British advance on the city before the Battle of New Orleans, it was fought between the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy on December 14, 1814, on Lake Borgne.
The failure of the British attack on Fort Bowyer in September prevented the British from taking Mobile, Alabama. Their next expedition was to capture New Orleans, a plan of which they believed the Americans to be completely ignorant. They anchored their fleet in the deep channel between Ship and Cat Islands, near the entrance to Lake Borgne, and prepared small vessels to transport troops over the shallow waters, determined to surprise and capture New Orleans before their presence was detected. American Commander Daniel T. Patterson knew from Lafitte and by a letter from Pensacola of the approach of a powerful British land and naval invasion force.

When the British forces under Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, British Commander-in-Chief of the North American Station, arrived off the Louisiana coast on December 9, the vigilant Patterson dispatched Lieutenant Thomas ap ("ap" is the Welsh term meaning "son of") Catesby Jones (1790 – 1858) to Lake Borgne to intercept and do whatever he could to impede the enemy. The American flotilla was not large, five Jeffersonian gunboats, the schooner USS Sea Horse and two sloops serving as tenders (craft used for transporting men and supplies), the USS Alligator and the USS Tickler.

What were “Jeffersonian” gunboats? During his term as president, Jefferson was of the opinion that a suitable defensive naval force would consist of small gunboats that could defend the nation’s home waters. He had witnessed their effectiveness in the campaign against the Barbary pirates. To accomplish the formation of this new force, he ordered cutbacks in major ships and the construction of a fleet of small...
shallow draft gunboats, typically about fifty feet long and eighteen feet wide.

Vice Admiral Cochrane put all the boats of the British fleet under the command of Commander Nicholas Lockyer, with orders to find and defeat the American flotilla. The British deployed a force of some 1200 sailors and Royal Marines, greatly outnumbering Jones’ 182 men and 23 guns. Once aware that the Americans were acquainted with the British intentions, and had made preparations to meet them, Cochrane immediately gave orders for a change in the plan of operations. It wouldn’t do to land troops while American gunboats were patrolling Lake Borgne. So he prepared almost sixty barges, most carrying a carronade (short, smoothbore, short-range cast iron cannon used by the Royal Navy) in the bow and a sufficient number of armed volunteers from the fleet, and sent them, in command of Captain Lockyer, to capture or destroy the American vessels.

Before reaching Lake Borgne, the British came upon the one gun schooner Sea Horse that fought off two of Lockyer’s longboat attacks but then was set fire to later that night to prevent the British fleet from capturing her.

Once the British reached Lake Borgne, Jones’ boat was attacked by no less than fifteen barges. The Alligator was captured early, and the British gained a complete victory. The battle lasted about two hours, although the actual hand-to-hand combat lasted only five minutes. The British greatly outnumbered the American seamen and forced their surrender, but Jones and his men had inflicted a great deal of damage and the delay gave General Jackson much needed additional time to strengthen his defenses. The British commander Lockyer was severely wounded and several of the British barges were shattered and sunk. The British lost about three hundred men killed and wounded, while the Americans lost only six men killed and thirty-five wounded.

The capture of the American gunboats gave the British complete
control of Lake Borgne, but the Americans did what they needed to do. Jackson was informed of the battle’s outcome on the 15th, when returning from a tour of observation in the direction of the Chef Menteur. He at once perceived the importance of securing the passage of the Chef Menteur Road, that crosses the plain of Gentilly in that direction from the city to the strait between Lakes Borgne and Pontchartrain, and he ordered Major Lacoste to proceed there at once with two pieces of artillery, take post at the confluence of Bayou Sauvage and the Chef, guard the road, cast up a redoubt at its terminus, and watch for and oppose the enemy.

All of these events and preparations played a major part in delaying the British from attacking the city of New Orleans. In spite of losing all of the American vessels engaged in the Battle of Lake Borgne, Jackson and Patterson were given added critical time to shore up the defenses outside New Orleans. In recognition of his part in the defense of the city, Patterson was promoted to Captain, USN, on February 28, 1815, and given command of the USS Constitution, “Old Ironsides.” Thomas ap Catesby Jones was held as a prisoner of war for three months and was later decorated for his bravery in delaying the British advance.

Not all historians viewed the “American defeat” as a positive event. Retired Marine Corps major general and historian Wilburt S. Brown, in The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana 1814-1815 (2002) wrote that the Battle of Lake Borgne was a “classic example of an operation in which the defenders were almost stripped of naval strength before the operation was begun, while the attackers’ naval strength remained overwhelming.” American Commodore Daniel T.
Patterson, he believed, made a mistake by deploying almost all of his naval force to the area of Lake Borgne while he remained in New Orleans. The British captured and renamed the Jeffersonian gunboats HMS Ambush, Firebrand, Destruction, Harlequin and Eagle and proceeded to use these shallow draft vessels to accelerate the landing of troops at their disembarkation point at Pea Island, 30 miles further up Lake Borgne, near the mouth of the Pearl River. Some additional benefit achieved by the American side was the false intelligence the British received from the prisoners regarding the size of Jackson’s army, which they, of course, exaggerated.

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Today, the shallow marshes surrounding Lake Borgne are rich in redfish. Even a one-eyed fisherman or a New Orleans historian can be successful, as shown above. But look for the less murky waters.

Interestingly, scientists believe that the black spot near their tail helps redfish fool predators into attacking their tail instead of their head, allowing the fish to more easily escape. Nature has seen to it that this camouflaged spot resembles “one eye.”

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New Orleans Nostalgia
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